

## **Towards a drama therapy pedagogy: an a/r/tographic study using dramatic improvisation.**

### **Abstract**

*This article explores the role of the art form in both research and teaching practice for the delivery of an MA drama therapy programme in the UK. A/r/tography as the chosen research methodology makes central the artistic process to inform teaching and research through ongoing reflexivity using dramatic improvisation. Seven phases (renderings) illustrate the development towards formulating a drama therapy pedagogy. The authors explore disseminating the research through performance as another form of praxis.*

### **Keywords**

*a/r/tography*

*drama therapy*

*teaching pedagogy*

*dramatic improvisation*

*reflexivity*

*arts-based research*

## **Introduction**

The intention of the study is to explore the researchers teaching practice on a UK based MA drama therapy programme in order to clarify, understand and develop a teaching pedagogy to enhance and improve teaching and learning. The paper may be of interest to drama therapy educators and students as well as arts-based researchers.

A/r/tography is a research methodology which uses the artistic process as a vehicle for reflection on teaching practice (Lea, Belliveau, Wager, & Beck, 2011). A/r/tography allows one to simultaneously explore multiple roles of artist, teacher and researcher and the inherent tensions between them (Springgay, Irwin & Kind: 2005). By utilizing dramatic techniques such as improvisation, the researcher is able to explore the tensions between holding different roles: in this case being both a drama therapist and a drama therapy educator. By exploring dominant themes in the dramatic reflexivity alongside core principles and values in teaching and learning, a new drama therapy pedagogy began to emerge. Illuminated in this study is how the artistic process facilitated the formulation of such a pedagogical approach.

## **Methodology – A/r/tography**

Winters, Belliveau and Sherritt-Fleming (2009: 5) assert that ‘the a/r/tographer not only moves between the identities of artist, researcher and teacher.....[but] also continually shifts positions within the social context’. In similar fashion Holmwood (2014) explores his dual roles as teacher and drama therapist and the shifting identities and intersections of these positions. An arts-based methodological approach, needs to be rigorous, whilst also allowing for artistic endeavor. Arts-based research in drama therapy practice is well-suited to playing with uncertainty and risk through dramatic improvisation which can aid discovery (Sajani, 2013, 2015). Such research approaches offer containment for the ‘chaotic nature of artistic experimentation’ without hindering it with rigidity and inflexibility (McNiff, 2013:6).

A/r/tography has its roots in art-based enquiry and action research, utilizing researcher reflexivity to explore the multi-faceted and interwoven roles of teacher, researcher and artist in the art making process (Bickel et al., 2011).

Similarly, action research utilizes practitioner led reflection to improve understanding and enhance competencies (Hult and Lennung 1980; Lomax, 2007). Reflexivity helps to develop ‘a critical gaze’ about one’s experience as a teacher which can be enhanced by employing the theatrical art form as a central component to the research (Finlay, 2003:3).

## **A/r/tographic Renderings**

Renderings often feature within a/r/tographic research as a means of communicating and encapsulating the key themes and pertinent areas of exploration that have arisen as a result of the study. They are not intended to be fixed descriptors or seen as criteria but are instead regarded as openings through which the artist/researcher/teacher can both engage with the

material and disseminate it in an accessible and meaningful way (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005). As there is not an exhaustive or conclusive list as to what can be classified as a rendering, a/r/tographers are encouraged to develop and create their own as the reflective process unfolds.

### **The Artistic Process**

Our approach to exploring teaching practice was adapted from action research methods which employ a cyclical process that includes experimenting with practice through feedback, and modifying the experiment (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). The authors met every three weeks for a period of eight months to develop the research. After each dramatic improvisation by the authors, the video recording of this was watched, followed by verbal and individual written reflections. The author's noted any emerging questions or curiosities which became the impetus or starting point for another cycle of improvisations. In this way dramatic improvisations mirrored the devising process used in experimental theatre which is not outcome based (Etchells, 1999), but process orientated, in line with the ongoing discovery of a/r/tography. Each improvisation lasted between ten to twenty minutes: as they began to take form, the motifs were shaped and developed into a more scripted narrative.

At different stages in the research a third person, an arts therapies academic/ researcher, would witness the emerging drama, helping to bring about new perspectives. An outsider to the research process aided triangulation, as different standpoints and multiple perspectives offered increased confidence regarding claims to knowledge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007).

#### ***Dramatic Improvisation Vignette***

One improvisation involved crouching in a small cardboard box with the performer's head stuck out at the top. The idea of ventriloquism emerged, whereby the head in the box became a voice that was operated and controlled by another. The dynamics between the head and the operator offered us a dramatic metaphor and a glimpse of how we 'operated' as teachers within the teacher- student dynamic, instilling in the students 'our voice', rather than students finding their own. The idea of ventriloquism informed our thinking and helped us to build confidence and trust with our research approach. What began to emerge from this enactment was the feeling that we had dissociated from our more embodied and physical experience, tending to over rationalize with our heads instead of engaging our bodies.

We frequently revisited the scene with the head in the box, but the sense of aliveness seemed to desert us. We tried to capture the earlier energy we'd discovered by going through the motions of resurrecting a prior theatrical experience. However, this could not be found. This longing was in essence the kind of theatre Brook warned about: a dead theatre (Brook, 2008). What we struggled with, but became more accepting of, was the notion that being in the present was the most important place. An awareness of the physical body helped with accessing emotions which had been neglected in favor of the intellect (Sangharakshita, 1990).

We introduced another prop, a decorator's dust sheet. There seemed no logical reason why a dust sheet, we were just responding and surrendering to our artistic impulses, aware of our tendency to over rationalize (Johnstone, 2007). Each of us in turn covered up ourselves in the sheet and explored the dynamic with the prop, whilst the other witnessed and recorded the movement with a camera. The dust sheet acted as a mask, both concealing us and enabling us to move more freely. Perhaps we had felt inhibited in our play together, but the invisibility offered by the sheet helped us explore our physicality, without thought or intention. By focusing on the body we were becoming more present with the fear of not knowing what we were exploring, unleashing energy and creativity.

## **Research Findings as Renderings**

### ***Space***

It can be argued that surface-learning approaches to teaching do not facilitate autonomous student engagement (Biggs & Tang 2007; Fry & Ketteridge 2014). A didactic approach to teaching encourages passivity in students as receivers of knowledge rather than co-creators of knowledge. Creating space offers opportunities for deep-learning, whereby students construct their own meaning and knowledge and thus be less dependent on teachers' expertise.

An empty space can facilitate learning and meaning for students, much like Peter Brook's approach to theatre employed space to engage and develop the audience's imagination. He talks about an empty space being more alive than one that is crowded with dramatic tricks and prescribed meanings (Brook, 2008). When one is faced with an empty space, there is the potential for new meanings to grow and emerge. An empty space can offer uncertainty and can be anxiety provoking at times, but so much of learning is about being able to be comfortable with not knowing (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000). John Keats considered uncertainty and mystery as being optimum creative states (Ou, 2009), whilst cultural essayist Rebecca Solnit (2005) regarded uncertainty as a requisite for discovery because it allows one to transcend the familiar and all its conditioning.

Becoming comfortable with uncertainty in the classroom setting potentially prepares students for clinical settings as 'not knowing' is so often what is worked with in practice. Working with uncertainty therefore helps the student to prepare for future practice as a drama therapist by providing an empty space where the client is free to bring whatever they want to work with.

### ***Rediscovery***

When reflecting on our rediscovery of our identity as drama therapists, there was a sense of how this could be harnessed for teaching practice. It was as though there was a re-acquaintance with parts of ourselves that were hidden or untapped. It occurred to us that we had possibly been suppressing these aspects of ourselves in order to align with the dominant culture of a higher education environment.

Challenged here, was a tendency to submit to the prevailing cultural force of a higher education framework, one that demands putting aside one's own values and beliefs in order

to be subservient, good citizens of the cultural norm. Jean McNiff (2007) explored in her research narrative how, as an educator, she felt disenfranchised by the education system and used her research to empower herself by developing her voice.

Often during the improvisations, familiar themes would re-emerge or return changed in some way, whilst at other times certain dramatic motifs might be discarded altogether. Here, one can also recognize some of Grotowski's ideas, particularly his model of 'via negativa' which calls for a stripping away and simplifying in order to illuminate and reveal untainted truths (Grotowski & Barba, 1975). Grotowski's approach allowed us to re-connect with our more theatrical identities and consider his thinking in the context of education. In this manner learning is less about acquiring knowledge and more about uncovering and activating dormant, tacit knowledge. In this way unconscious knowledge is made conscious and thus re-discovered. Re-learning what is already known resonates with heuristic inquiry that argues that we know more than we realize (Moustakas, 1990).

### *Uncertainty*

Atkinson & Claxton (2000) refer to uncertainty within education, stressing the importance of not 'always' knowing what one is doing. Feeling certain or assured can be dangerous as you are potentially shutting down any avenue for new learning. Hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson, argues that confusion is an ideal learning state (Walker, 2002). Certainty about something can be a dead end, where there is no scope for development to occur: meanings have become fixed, static and immutable. However, by embracing uncertainty, we set up the conditions for discovery to happen, for the unexpected to arise (Solnit, 2005). Opening to the uncertainty and ambiguity is not without risk. The very nature of dramatic improvisation embraces 'not knowing' and instability in order to go beyond the familiar and by coming up against the limits of one's knowledge (Sajnani, 2013). Johnson (1991) argues that the world we live in is unstable and is a flow of changing perceptions, experience, feelings and never ending transformations. By creating a space and embracing uncertainty there is the potential to change our fixed notions and move beyond habitual patterns of being. This encourages autonomous learners to take responsibility for what they learn, developing their own theories and ideas, honing a healthy relationship with uncertainty which can also increase individual criticality. Staying with the chaos of uncertainty and letting meaning emerge is also at the core of drama therapy practice (Jennings, 1987).

### *Embodiment*

The research highlighted a struggle to address the balance between body and mind, becoming aware of an over reliance on mental reasoning and cognitive processes. One can be confident of theoretical understanding but completely disconnected from emotional affect (Sangharakshita, 1990). It was as if we were learning this again for the first time (Eliot, 1944). We were re-discovering our physical bodies, bringing a new level of engagement. Here, one is reminded of the image of an over intellectualized academic who only sees their body as a means to carry their head to another conference (Robinson, 2010). We had

forgotten our bodies as a tool and resource for our own learning and become too localized in our heads. We thought things out rather than working through ideas in our bodies.

As researchers we need to consider our total experience, not just thoughts, but feelings and physical sensations. Using the body as a site for exploring brings a different dimension to experiences (Jones, 2007). Additionally, by engaging the imagination one is able to go beyond the known, creating a deeper understanding (Moustakas, 1990; Rennie, 1998; Sajnani, 2012). For us, it was apparent that these embodied occurrences seemed to be carved into our memories, whilst verbal reflections were more forgettable. This was crucial learning in helping us recognize the importance of experiential and embodied learning processes. Within arts-based research, there is the notion that ‘in moving creatively into our practice we are fundamentally concerned to develop new knowledge, to challenge old beliefs and to speculate on the ‘what ifs’ of our concepts and processes’ (Barham, 2003: 5).

### *Acceptability*

Jean McNiff (2007) explores the dilemma of teaching practice as research and how this can conflict with traditional research and what constitutes ‘acceptable’ knowledge. Questioning the acceptability of our practice was informed by the dramatic improvisations that enabled us to explore this tension in an uncensored way, one that was not bound up with our usual limitations. In this sense, we became more liberal and playful; taking the kind of risks we would not normally permit ourselves to do with regards to everyday teaching practice.

Playing dramatically with the tensions of what we imagined to be ‘permissible’ and ‘impermissible’ teaching practice felt boldly refreshing and energizing. These conflicts reflect what we felt about drama therapy as a fringe subject that does not always fit in the dominant culture of higher education. This feeling of marginalization can mirror drama therapy practice, where its nature as a unique psychotherapy is frequently misunderstood and sometimes relegated to ‘drama’ in favor of more ‘acceptable’ approaches to therapy and patient care (Johnson, 1994). In many ways we were familiar with being on the periphery as practicing drama therapists, but we also recognized that we have a responsibility to share with others the nature of drama therapy so our practices can become more understood and integrated. Holloway and Seebohm (2011) explore the importance of coming into communication with other health care professionals to share practice and find a common language to enable collaborative approaches that benefit patient care. Similarly, as teachers, we also wanted to find a common language or overlap between drama therapy and teaching practices that could be more widely recognized by colleagues from different backgrounds in higher education.

### *Imagination*

What emerged as a developing theme is how teachers could enable students to release their imagination in order to develop their learning. As discussed, for the imagination to become

activated it requires space. Here, there is an acknowledgement that teaching practice does not leave enough time for student responses, as teachers can be so intent on sharing their own knowledge. One wonders what impact this might have on student learning and whose narcissistic needs are being met here.

Koshik (2002) comments on teaching practices where teachers would deliberately offer incomplete comments or sentences to encourage responses from students. The 'unfilled' space activated student interest and curiosity by developing their imagination. Likewise, Wagner (1995) suggests that cognitive growth is dependent on projecting oneself into imaginary situations.

In theatre, Brook (2008) developed work that created intentional space for the audience's imagination by limiting and simplifying the storyline so they could fill in the details. In this way, both audience and actors were co-creators in the development of story in theatre. Both Boal (2002) and Saldaña (2005) developed forms of theatre that encouraged active audience participation in the theatre making process to empower the audience in the co-creation of the staged drama. These theatre forms are therefore not reliant on the actors, but audience contributions, so the emerging drama is a shared venture. Drama therapy encourages active participation and, similarly, learning happens when students are fully engaged. Within an educational framework, this shift can be seen as a move towards a more equal partnership in learning, encouraging students to be more empowered and less oppressed, taking responsibility for their learning, rather than being reliant on the teacher (Freire, 2007).

### ***Laddering***

The induction of drama therapy techniques in a careful and gradual way is called laddering and helps to work with clients' inhibitions (Mitchell, 1990). By building the scaffolding, drama therapy approaches and structures slowly, helps to keep individuals' fears in check.

One can contend that laddering is also an important aspect of learning, perhaps akin to the theory of 'scaffolding' used within education (Hogan & Pressley, 1997). Students may potentially be fearful of teaching and learning methods using theatre based approaches which they are not familiar with or ready to adopt. Drama therapists may adapt their approach to different client groups such as adults with mental health difficulties, older people or young people with learning disabilities. Likewise, drama therapy educators may need to develop an awareness of the abilities and vulnerabilities of their students and make necessary adjustments accordingly. Such an approach mirrors Yalom's (2003) idea of creating a new therapy for each client group, albeit in a different context.

Whatever the client or cultural setting it is important to consider how people might respond to ideas and find ways to enable their engagement by making the modifications to the approach. What we re-discovered is that we had the skills to adapt and be flexible and find an approach that suited different people whatever their experience or background.

### **Dissemination of Research as Dramatic Performance**

The presentation/performance debuted at the 2015 European Consortium for the Arts Therapies in Education (ECArTE) Conference in Palermo, Sicily. The authors felt that the conference theme of ‘Cultural Landscapes in Arts Therapies; Participation, Diversity and Dialogue’ fitted with the tensions encountered teaching drama therapy within a higher education culture.

The presentation/performance started with a reading of a paper like the traditional lecture, whereby the teacher is center stage and actively imparting knowledge. As the presentation/performance evolved, a second performer wheeled onto stage a large object covered in a dirty decorator’s sheet. The audience was teased with the covered object, as the performers threatened to unveil it, but in order to sustain the mystery and curiosity it remained covered throughout the piece. Using the object in this way the audience became more engaged, interested and animated as we played with the object, using physicality and music. Towards the end of the presentation/performance, both performers developed a range of embodied poses with the covered object for imaginary photographs. In the final tableaux, one performer lay seductively on the floor, the other upright leaning on the covered object. A pre-recorded script was played through the sound system. The performers remained in their poses throughout the recording, struggling to sustain their façade throughout. The following text was developed from a technique employed by Forced Entertainment Theatre Company, whereby personal confessions are used to develop potentially shocking revelations, aware the audience might never be sure if the confessions are fiction or not (Etchells, 1999). The devised text was recorded by both performers, each speaking one line alternatively. The duologue offered a dramatic creative synthesis of the research that captured the key themes, motifs, developments, tensions, paradoxes and processes encountered (Moustakas, 1990).

### ***Script Excerpt***

*We’re guilty of trying to fit in and smile between references.*

*We’re guilty of being nervous of dressing up and engaging our bodies.*

*We’re guilty of disorientating students with our wild extravagant learning.*

*We confess to trying to slip through the University doors unnoticed*

*We’re guilty of trying to reason our way through another presentation.*

*We confess to encouraging flagrant use of the imagination.*

*We confess to doing less and less and leaving huge gaps in our lectures.*

*We confess to more and more nonsense and less and less sense.*

*We confess to another missed opportunity for an empty space because we don’t want to look stupid.*

*We confess to trying to be researchers who look pretty in their professional attire.*

*We confess to feeling shame because we want to be seen as having all the answers and we don't.*

*We confess to crimes against education.*

*We confess to encouraging students to think for themselves (if this agrees with our views).*

Following the audio recording of text, one of the performers began to deliver the lecture again, starting it as if for the first time. After a few minutes loud music began to play, drowning out the performer who continued delivering their lecture unaware the audience could not hear them. As the music and lecture continued, images replaced the lecture slides projected at the back of the stage. Seven photographs of the presenter's bodies covered in the dust sheets offered different shapes and sculptures throughout the remainder of the music. As the music faded the performer concluded their lecture, and the performance, with the comment 'I'll think we'll end it there'.

The presentation of the research in dramatic form was in keeping with the spirit of a/r/tography. Belliveau (2015) notes how researchers exploring arts based approaches to research tend to present at conferences in more scholarly forms using the written form. In some ways this paper is a compendium piece to the initial dissemination of research on practice that was more theatre based in its presentation. The tensions of how best to present one's research becomes another context for the drama played out in the research process and the overreliance on cognitions to fit in with dominant approaches to research dissemination. However, by engaging the body theatrically in the presentation helped foster congruence by not being over reliant on the written word. In this way the presentation addressed the balance between mind and body; between teaching practice and drama therapy practice. The dramatic presentation at the conference mirrored notions of ritual theatre, whereby the performance prepares one for the change one wants to make, in this case, developing teaching practice.

### **Limitations of the study**

The conference presentation/performance would have benefited from audience feedback as co-researchers to develop the research data as this would have widened our perspective and understanding. The changes and developments in our teaching practice as a consequence of the research would also benefit from obtaining student feedback as to how these changes have impacted on their learning as drama therapy students.

### **Conclusion**

The renderings that have emerged from this research have (re)taught aspects that have long been core tenets of our drama therapist identities and helped to reimagine these phenomena within an educational paradigm. By engaging openly with space, rediscovery, uncertainty,

embodiment, acceptability, imagination and laddering, a new frame for aiding teaching and learning on a drama therapy training has started to evolve.

The research helped realign values that have been hidden, create new knowledge and reassess future practice (Irwin and de Cosson, 2004). These alterations and shifts have been rediscoveries of ideas and beliefs pertaining to drama therapy that were already present consciously and unconsciously. The research helped reconnect to tacit knowledge by exploring and understanding intuitive impulses through dramatic improvisation (Polanyi: 1967).

Confronting the preoccupation with ‘filling space’ allowed us to challenge entrenched habits by taking risks and doing less. This did not mean being any less prepared for teaching, but more receptive to students’ learning needs. Time with students in the classroom has become significantly less concerned with the imparting of factual information that can be studied in independent learning time, instead adopting what is often referred to as the ‘flipped classroom’ approach (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

This study has reinforced the importance of the art-form as a central component to both research and teaching practice, alleviating the tendency to become over-reliant on cognitions. There is scope to develop these emerging ideas further in future studies by collaborating with students as co-researchers, in line with the pedagogical approach proposed here

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