Making a difference in learning through arts-rich pedagogy

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In the areas of English, literacy and the arts, Robyn's research and writing has particularly focused on the use of educational or process drama with literature to develop students' imaginations and critical literacies. Since 2009, she has worked in partnership with the Sydney Theatre Company on School Drama™, which is a professional teacher learning program. Her other research interests include innovative teacher education, the experiences of early career teachers and the role of mentoring; sustaining curriculum innovation; and reflection in professional practice.

Abstract

There is unequivocal evidence that arts-rich pedagogies enhance student social and emotional wellbeing and, consequently, academic learning outcomes across the curriculum. Yet many primary teachers report they lack the expertise and/or confidence to embed quality arts processes and experiences in what is increasingly described as an overcrowded curriculum. This presentation reviews the research findings about the impact and sustainability of School Drama™, an initiative developed through a partnership between the Sydney Theatre Company and The University of Sydney. An innovative co-mentoring (Ewing, 2002, 2006; Le Cornu, 2005) teacher professional learning program and drama-based intervention, the program aims to develop primary teachers' professional knowledge of and expertise in using drama with contemporary children's literature to enhance student English and literacy outcomes.

Introduction

Given the regulatory contexts of a number of Western education systems, overcrowded syllabus documents and an increasing emphasis on high stakes testing, many early childhood and primary teachers report feeling an overwhelming pressure to compromise their pedagogical expertise and understandings to concentrate on technical and reductive approaches to curriculum and assessment. Despite the rhetoric in policy documents that 21st-century learners must develop their creative potential to cope with accelerating change, teachers frequently comment that they do not feel empowered to focus on imaginative and creative teaching and learning.

Yet a growing body of national and international research and scholarship documents the transformative potential of embedding quality arts processes and learning experiences across the curriculum (e.g., Bamford, 2006; Biesta, 2014; Catterall, 2009; Deasy, 2002; Ewing & Saunders, 2017; Martin et al., 2013; Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013). Aprill, Burnaford, and Weiss (2001, p.2) assert that 'an arts-rich curriculum can help transform a school into a dynamic learning community in which educators and students are more likely to think critically, express themselves creatively, and respect diverse opinions'. All art forms are disciplines with distinctive knowledges, skills and understandings and therefore are different kinds of literacies, different ways of making and representing meaning. Given that each art form involves processes that include play, design, experimentation, exploration, communication, provocation, use of metaphor, expression or representation, and the artistic or aesthetic shaping of the body or other media (Ewing, 2010a), they can play an important role in fostering our imaginations and creativities.

This paper reports ongoing research that focuses on the potential that two arts disciplines; educational or process drama and literature; can play as critical, quality pedagogy to foster literacy learning. It builds on a rich literature that documents the relationship between drama, literature and literacy (e.g., Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; Ewing, 2010b; Ewing, Simons, Hertzberg, & Campbell, 2016; Miller & Saxton, 2004, 2016; O'Mara, 2004; O'Toole & Dunn, 2015). The following sections explore the concept of drama as critical, quality pedagogy as it has been developed in the School Drama™ program since it commenced in 2009. The program's methodology and research findings are then briefly discussed.

The School Drama program

School Drama is a co-mentoring teacher professional learning program for primary teachers developed by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) and The University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work (Ewing & Saunders, 2016). It initially aimed to enhance primary teacher knowledge, confidence and expertise in using drama-rich pedagogy with quality literature to improve student English and literacy outcomes. The program began in 2009 and over the last nine years has grown to reach more than 22 000 teachers, pre-service teachers and students. It is now one of the largest arts-based professional learning programs in Australia. More recently the program and pedagogy have been adapted for work with secondary English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) students, history students, adult migrants and refugees and students in juvenile justice centres.

A co-mentoring professional learning model

Instead of using the traditional concept of a mentoring relationship as *the expert* providing guidance for the novice, the program reframes the mentoring process as one of co-learning that positions the participants in a non-hierarchical or reciprocal relationship (Ewing, 2002, 2006; Le Cornu, 2005). STC pairs each participating classroom teacher with a teaching artist and together the pair co-plan, co-mentor and co-teach the seven-week program. Initially all participating teachers are involved in professional learning workshops. A professional actor or teaching artist then works alongside the class teacher throughout a school term, to plan, model and explore quality literature using drama to focus on English and literacy skills (the key focus areas are oracy, description, imaginative writing and inferential comprehension). The teacher chooses the English or literacy focus and benchmarks six to eight students as case studies both before the program begins and after it concludes.

The teaching artists initially model the use of educational or process drama strategies with authentic literary texts but over the time frame the teacher assumes more responsibility for this pedagogy. The model works most effectively when the teacher is able to consolidate their learning through working with another class on the drama devices introduced. It is also useful when the students' complete follow up activities in preparation for the next session.

The School Drama program is thus dependent on the development of a respectful partnership between each educator and teaching artist as they team-teach using drama and literature to work towards improving student achievement in English and literacy in a particular classroom. Both must work to ensure this trusting relationship develops: one that appreciates the expertise of the other and can weather rigorous discussion about differences. The School Drama partnership is thus a significant departure from conventional artist-in-residence programs. The different participants have different knowledges and understandings to share and

each respects the expertise of the other. The teachers learn about the use of drama in enhancing English and literacy while the teaching artists learn about adapting their professional theatre skills to a particular literacy focus in specific classroom and school contexts.

In addition, the students benefit from the teachers' learning and ongoing use of drama strategies with literary texts to deepen their understanding and improve the identified literacy outcome. Building on Vygotsky's (2004) work on drama, language and the imagination, Ewing (2015) argues that dramatic play with literary texts can help students co-construct knowledge with peers as well as teachers and teaching artists. She asserts that a collective zone of proximal development (Moll & Whitmore, 1993) is established where students, teachers and teaching artists alike use the fictional spaces of quality children's literature to build on what they already know while exploring more about their worlds.

Our research over the eight years of the program suggests that teachers, teaching artists and students all benefit from the program.

Research findings

As part of the partnership, STC and the Faculty of Education and Social Work (FESW) designed and implemented annual evaluations of the School Drama program. Along with these evaluations of the pilot phase of the program (Campbell, Ewing, & Gibson, 2010; Gibson, 2011, 2012, 2013) a meta-analysis was completed (Gibson & Smith, 2013). Gibson and Smith's report analysed information gathered from participants, including: teacher pre- and post-program surveys, teacher and teaching artist post-engagement interviews, student pre- and post-program benchmarked work samples, and some student evaluations and focus groups.

In addition five case studies in participant schools have been undertaken to investigate various aspects of the program including the sustainability of the creative pedagogy and the impact of the program on student outcomes, both academic and non-academic (Hankus, 2016; Robertson, 2010; Saunders, 2015; Smith, 2014; Sze, 2013). Multiple data collection methods have been employed including artefacts (for pre- and post-program student benchmarking as well as sample student work), focus groups with students, reflective interviews with the class teachers, and observations from the teaching artists and researchers. A further five case studies are currently underway and will add to this portfolio later in 2018.

In summary, analysis of the data includes the following findings:

- Very strong evidence from teacher pre- and post-surveys and interviews of powerful teacher professional learning that has resulted in significant shifts in teachers' reported knowledge and understanding of process drama strategies, their confidence in using these, and to positive changes in classroom practice during their engagement with the teaching artist.

- Unequivocal evidence from teachers and teaching artists confirming the efficacy, effectiveness and impact of the co-mentoring model between teacher and teaching artist (actor) that is unique to the School Drama program's artist-in-residence approach. Smith's (2014) case study demonstrated the sustainability of the innovation in a school where those teachers who had undertaken the program mentored other teachers in the school. In addition 15–20 per cent of teachers choose to undertake further professional development in their own time with additional School Drama Hub twilight seminars.

- Schools frequently choose to sign up for School Drama over a number of years. Several schools have stayed with the program since it began, with different teachers participating each year to build a community of learners. Fifty-six per cent of schools have participated in the program for at least two years and 11 per cent for five years or more.

- There is strong evidence from benchmarked student work samples of increased student learning in relation to teacher-identified literacy outcomes. Despite the short time frame, teachers report almost without exception that student literacy outcomes in the focus literacy area are enhanced. Saunders' (2015) case study with a Year 6 class found that this improvement was most marked for students who were 'less able'.

- In addition, teachers consistently highlight the increased confidence of their students both in being prepared to actively engage in drama strategies and across the primary key learning areas (Gibson & Smith, 2013, p.1). For example one teacher commented: 'Drama allows students to take risks, express themselves orally, use their bodies and emotionally connect to the text. These are all important to deep learning …' Importantly, the case study data also suggest a range of non-academic gains for students through the intervention, including increased motivation and engagement in learning, and shifts in empathy and *a lot more confidence to express an opinion, to have a go at something that's outside their comfort zone*. Saunders' (2015) case study, has also explored student development of empathy.

- Participant teachers report that using one art form (drama) to delve more deeply into another art form (literature) has contributed to their students' development as confident, creative, engaged literacy learners. They also assert that the program develops their own confidence to use drama strategies as creative pedagogy across the curriculum.

- The teaching artists who work with the class teachers report that the program is just as valuable for them, citing both an understanding of the educative process and a heightening of their own skills in a different context as outcomes.

- The 'student voice' also confirms the impact of the program. In focus group discussions (Saunders, 2015; Robertson, 2010) they have demonstrated their understanding of the intervention as well as articulated the value of the drama pedagogy for their learning. As one student comments: *'And putting yourself in the character's shoes, its like, when you are in character you feel a better prediction of what could happen next … because you've been through what they have been through … kind of …'* (Saunders, 2015).

Conclusion

The role drama can play in enhancing student social and emotional wellbeing as well as English and literacy outcomes has been highlighted in this paper. Making art through drama and literature enables students to move into transformative spaces in which they can play with possibilities that take them beyond their own perspectives to encourage openness and mindfulness towards the others who share their worlds. Creative arts-rich pedagogies enable students to develop communicative, collaborative and critical literacies (NEA, 2013) that go beyond surface and literal interpretations of literature. Students' worldviews can be broadened to embrace an understanding of the vast diversity of cultures and approaches to living (Neelands, 2010). If we truly want to develop children's creativities and help them become resilient and flexible thinkers we must embed arts-rich pedagogies at the heart of the classroom experience.

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