

Looking at paintings: Talking to people**A Theatre in Education project which explores the dramatic world and the stories behind paintings**

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Abstract

This paper traces the process and presentation of a Theatre in Education project for children, developed to coincide with an art gallery exhibition of Victorian art. I sought to introduce the children to selected paintings, then to create the imagined world behind them. I wanted to observe whether children would sustain belief in the fictional drama world and whether this experience would motivate their learning. The report is contained within the parameters of Cecily O'Neill's discussion of dramatic worlds.

The Project

The Theatre in Education project *Looking at Paintings: Talking to People* was designed to utilise the exhibition *Love & Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria* showing at The Auckland Art Gallery¹. It was planned as a learning experience for children in Years 4, 5 and 6, in which they were to visit the Art Gallery, view the exhibition under the guidance of gallery staff, and then, in a drama episode drawing on process drama methods, explore the issues and imagined lives of some of the people in the paintings.

Knowing that a number of the Victorian paintings would have strong narratives behind them, I was confident of the potential of the project. This was supported by my memories of taking my children to the gallery and sitting them in front of the huge Bramley "*For of such is the kingdom of heaven*", which depicts a Cornish child's funeral, and telling them stories about the children in white in the funeral procession.

¹ *Love & Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria*. 2002 August – November 2002. Auckland: The Auckland Art Gallery.

I selected four paintings that offered likely story openings that would appeal to children:

- *The Pinch of Poverty* (1889)
T. B. Kennington (1856-1916)
- *Evicted* (1887)
Blandford Fletcher (1858-1936)
- *For of such is the kingdom of heaven* (1891)
Frank Bramley (1857-1915)
- *The immigrant's ship* (1884)
J. C. Dollman (1851-1934)

From these paintings, characters were chosen, named, and a fictional brief developed for each. Researching the works of art and their context was interesting and gave me access to a new imaginative universe for myself – a very Victorian, if rather poverty-stricken one. What did Mrs Jenkins dream of beyond the bleak dampness of the railings? That, instead of selling daffodils, her daughter Flora might one day have a future as a real lady in a flower shop. Authenticity became important - Mrs Mayhew, the researcher/teacher-in-role in the drama was named after Henry Mayhew, a Victorian journalist whose writings and observations did in fact highlight the need for reform. Preparing the drama work also involved finding and making artefacts with which we could recreate and depict the paintings – an eviction letter, a toy horse, the basket of daffodils, chrysanthemums, and old hymn-books.

I devised the plan and gathered actors, a group including two experienced colleagues and four final year student teachers, who took the roles of the people in the paintings. They gave their time cheerfully – they read and thought about their characters, rehearsed roles, and prepared the background information to be able to speak as poverty-stricken evictees or funeral watchers.

The Research Question

The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2000) endorses collaborative arts projects where arts disciplines operate together to give students opportunities to extend knowledge, skills, and experience. In the curriculum the concept of literacies in the arts is a central unifying idea, and students are held to be developing literacy in each discipline as they respond to and investigate art works in relation to their social, cultural and historical context. Art works are thus to be regarded as social and historical texts. This research set out to observe and reflect on how drama, by activating a dramatic world which opened up the human experience and the imagined lives behind the paintings, could help children engage more personally with visual text.

Following the experience, students' written reports indicated that they retained significant detail about the historical context that had been communicated by both the paintings and the drama. Their comments during the drama indicated that in that moment they were engaged in both thinking and feeling with the imagined world of the drama. Their reflective comments later indicated that they took the experience back into their own lives and linked imagination, thought and feeling in a memorable experience of art and drama.

Specifically, in the field of drama education, I set out to consider the notion of the drama world. O'Neill says "*Every work of art gives access to a self-contained imaginative universe, a dramatic 'elsewhere.'*" She refers to theatre and drama creating "*temporary worlds existing within the everyday world and...dedicated to the performance of an act apart*" (1995: 45). This paper is framed by O'Neill's work.

Our task in the drama work was to create a "dramatic elsewhere", to give it immediacy and authenticity, and then engage the participants in the world, letting them interact with role, place, time and action to access details of the imagined human lives behind the paintings.

The project provided rich material for reflection and writing on many topics, and further research will follow. For example, a moment in one of the sessions sparked the

motivation for the research. In discussion with Mrs Jenkins, some children struggled to comprehend their concept of money compared to hers – “tuppence” was unknown to them. One tried to explain that they were from “the future – it’s out that door!” Through art and drama the students had gained, as O’Neill says, “access to a self-contained imaginative universe, a dramatic ‘elsewhere’” (O’Neill, 1995: 7).

The Process

The classes came to the gallery and viewed the four paintings under the guidance of gallery staff. The attention of the class was held by the direct gaze of the figures in the painting, as well as by groupings, notably in the Bramley painting, a feature later enacted in the guided depiction. The children noticed the pallor of faces – they looked for expressions, for the signs of the seasons, for detail in figures in the background, and they noticed ragged clothes. The paintings made clear comments on class – but twenty-first century Auckland children found this concept hard to grasp.



Frank Bramley, *For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven*, (1981).
Oil on canvas. 1829 x 2540mm. Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1913.

We then moved to the art gallery auditorium and before entering the students were prepared for the drama. Reflecting on the paintings they had seen, they were asked who

they would like to talk to, and who they remembered most clearly. In this shift from the detail of the paintings towards the stories behind them, it was *Evicted, The immigrant's ship* and "the funeral procession" (Bramley's *For of such is the kingdom of heaven*) which were most frequently mentioned. They were told that, in the coming drama, they would be in role as researchers - and were asked what skills would be needed. Finding information, remembering, looking for clues were all suggested – and when someone listed "reading", we talked about how they had in fact "read" the paintings, and how that information would be the basis for the next work. I asked them to agree that when we went into the drama, that we would go back in time and place to Victorian England, to the time of the paintings.

The props established the setting, having been laid out on the stage area at the front of the auditorium for the children when they entered. It was a rewarding moment to walk in with them and to hear them exclaim, "Those are the daffodils from the painting! And that's the horse..."

They had stepped into the dramatic world.

We moved inside to the sounds of barrel organ music and the set with daffodils and the wooden toy horse lying on the stage, and as I had told them, when I put on the apron, the drama began.

The "dramatic elsewhere"

Before the dramatic world can happen, there has to be an agreement to accept that world.

Both theatre and process drama depend on the temporary acceptance of an illusion – a closed, conventional, and imaginary world that exists in the voluntary conspiracy between audience and actors. Both require the participants to engage in active make-believe with regard to objects, actions, and situations; they occur within their own frontiers of time and space; they involve the adoption of roles, demand a degree of interaction, and are firmly set apart from the reality of everyday life. They are temporary worlds

existing within the everyday world and are dedicated to the performance of an act apart (O'Neill, 1995: 45).

In the negotiation outside the auditorium, the children had accepted that they would be researchers and that they would be going back in time and to a different place. The entry into the auditorium used theatrical effects (light, sound) and exhibited artefacts to make connections with the paintings. The facilitator signalled going into role by putting on an apron and reading a letter. As Mrs Mayhew (researcher), flustered and distressed, she told the group that the letter from Mr Gladstone the Prime Minister was making too many demands on her. The information he needed her to gather, in support of the reform legislation he was drafting, was too hard a job for her to carry out alone. It was a job for researchers and while she knew of some potential interviewees, and she did want to help Mr Gladstone, she was overwhelmed by the task.

The facilitator then came out of role (removing the apron) and talked to the class about the task that Mrs Mayhew faced. Out of role, the class recalled the four categories of information needed (children and education; health and housing; money and jobs - people emigrating), split into four groups, looked at some suggested questions and talked about them in preparation for the arrival of the people who would be able to answer the questions.

The dramatic world was re-engaged. Anticipation, surprise and excitement were aroused with the entry of the actors from the back of the auditorium – calling out to each other, and to Mrs Mayhew as they appeared, establishing their identities, and pre-setting enquiry points.

“Oh Mrs Mayhew I’ve just been talking to Mr Blackmore here and he’s off to the other side of the world – he’s taking his family – to New Zealand – did you ever...?”

Group questioning was the next stage, each group rotating through the characters:

- Mrs Jenkins – the woman in *The Pinch of Poverty*

- Jessie Adams – the girl in *Evicted*
- Lily – Jessie’s friend
- Mrs Harper – onlooker in “*For such is the kingdom of heaven*”
- Joseph and Lizzie Blackmore – couple in *The immigrant’s ship*

Working From Within the Drama – and Working Within the Rules

“The dramatic world cannot happen without agreement to complicity in the creation of that world” (O’Neill, 1995: 57). Drama, being social and interactive, requires rules. We were in the game of finding information, governed by rules (the questions), and motivated by the need to assist Mrs Mayhew.

O’Neill notes the tension generated in any drama between freedom and necessity, spontaneity and structure. The students, interviewing the actors, started with their set questions and the skill of the actors in dropping hints, setting up the questions, offering new fragments of information, moved them into a more spontaneous discussion, deeper inside the character’s dramatic world.



Mrs Jenkins: “*I’m worried about my William – that big broom he has to use, it’s too heavy and it’s bigger than he is (he’s got a dreadful cough).*”

Child: “*Why don’t you take him to the doctor?*”

Mrs Jenkins: “*Doctors aren’t for the likes of me – I couldn’t afford a doctor.*”

Child: “*Well you could save up for it?*”

Mrs Jenkins: *“That would take ages – on what we get for Flora’s daffs? No...”*

Child: *“Well what about the chemist?”*

Mrs Jenkins: *“Chemist? There aren’t any of those around here.”*

Child: *“Maybe if you got a little bit of honey – a teaspoon – and put it with some water – it would help his cough.”*

The students met six characters. The actors manipulated the way the rules operated by applying a slightly different atmosphere or tension at each encounter. The team discussed what emotion should drive each character – and at each meeting the children had to assess and respond differently. The development of Mrs Harper was interesting. In the painting the figure is an onlooker at the periphery – chosen for the drama because she has the imagined potential for knowing the stories of the people in that place. The actor made her a somewhat higher status figure to add challenge for the students. She became “parson’s wife” and village woman, gossipy, knowing everything. This role grew and deepened in an unexpected and thoroughly rewarding and successful way.

When they first met strict Mrs Harper, one group of students was visibly quite awestruck and spoke most respectfully and politely – and as confidence grew, they took a more sparring, challenging line of questioning. They had watched, experimented, and then exercised their interviewer role with increased involvement.

Mrs Harper: *“It’s my opinion that children should be seen and not heard – and more of them ought to be at school, getting some reading and writing. You look a strong, strapping boy...”*

Child: *“But Jessie said that they have to work long hours in the factories...”*



Jessie Adams, on the other hand, was closer to

their age (nine) and elicited strong sympathy from most groups for her homeless and uneducated plight. This was reflected in the written report to “Mr Gladstone” by a year 4 student.

I learnt that the children worked from about the age of six from 7.00am to 7.00pm. They are not paid much money and are getting weary. Some children are so tired that they are getting hurt at their job. People are living in very small houses with too many people in them, so when someone gets sick the whole family does...Kids are not getting any education because the schools cost too much. Families are getting evicted for not paying off their rent but it's not their fault. I hope you can help these problems. (Year 4 student)



The play in the drama here was about concealment and disclosure. The roles and the situations were revealed bit by bit – the student/interviewers were enticed with pieces of clues, and were prodded into asking more questions. Just as in the theatre, the playing out of roles is a process of gradual disclosure and discovery of the story, so in this situation the stories and lives behind the people in the paintings were revealed step by step. Role-playing gradually drew out the themes and stories.

On Role, Experts, and Expertise

The role of researchers for the students in the drama was a straightforward choice, but a frame to give them an investment in that role presented more of a challenge. To do this we established their sympathy for Mrs Mayhew, who was so overwhelmed by the task of gathering information for Mr Gladstone the Prime Minister, that the (student) researchers' skills would be of great value to her.

A second reflection on role, however, reveals how thoroughly the actor's role has to be developed. When working with teacher-in-role in the classroom, we use the role often in a very conscious manner to prompt thinking, to elicit reaction, and to present attitude. The actors in this case were taking on a full role, and this required – in this situation especially – a well-grounded understanding of Victorian social history.

The Future – a time and space “betwixt and between”, and outside the door

Mrs Jenkins: *“My Flora – she sells her flowers for tuppence.”*

Child: *“What’s tuppence?”*

Mrs Jenkins: *“Tuppence? Why, it’s tuppence – you know, money.”*

Child: *“What sort of money’s that?”*

(Discussion follows about £:s:d)

Child: *“We have different money – we’re from a different world.”*

Mrs Jenkins: *“Different world? What do you mean – this is the world.”*

Child: *“No, we’re from a different world – the future.”*

Mrs Jenkins: *“Future? What’s ‘future’? I just know what’s here. Where’s the future?”*

Child: *“The future – it’s out that door – if you go out there...”*



The child in this extract seems to be holding in balance several worlds – and juggling the meaning and roles in each. She was in a role, and from that role was striving to find a connection with another (unfamiliar) role. She was between in time and space – between her 21st century student-seeking-information role, and the drama world of the paintings and Mrs Jenkins who talked of tuppence for daffodils. In that moment the familiar

becomes unfamiliar, and some see the function of all art as defamiliarising in order to see anew. The student researcher knew she was speaking to someone who was from the past and she strove to make sense of the 19th century world and the present in order to communicate, yet she could still recognise the boundary that marked the dramatic world she had entered – “that door”.

Artistry – the Guided Depictions

We used a series of guided depictions after the interviews which were ostensibly for the characters to let the researchers see just how it was for them in their other settings. This section had a strong sense of audience, as the paintings were re-composed. The students drew on visual memory to recall the paintings – and the actors “stage managed” the depiction from within their roles. Each depiction was managed a little differently and it was an opportunity for the children to be active and to step onto the stage space. The slides of the paintings were projected on the rear wall behind the recreated scenes with a moment of reflective silence.

Mrs Jenkins talked through her railings scene – and broadened it a little to coach a child to show how “*the gents, they come along and they doff their big tall hats to my Flora, just like she’s a real lady*”. Mrs Harper recreated the procession – the children were eager to join the group with hymn-books, and a bunch of yellow and white chrysanthemums. Joseph Blackmore led a spirited recreation of a wharf scene as the ship was leaving with loved ones on the wharf shouting “*God Speed!*” and never knowing whether they would see their friends again as they left for the other side of the world. The *Evicted* depiction was created last, and presented the opportunity for manipulating dramatic tension with considerable impact. Jessie began hesitantly, remembering how it was the day she and her mother were thrown out of their house. Her sympathetic role could believably enlist Mrs Jenkins’ help to stand “*here where my mother stood, with our bundle...*”

Mrs Jenkins: “*That’s not very heavy at all is it Jessie – and that’s got all your belongings in it?*”

Children were coached into the roles of Lily and May, her friends. Jessie's horse, her only toy, trailed behind her. Mrs Harper found some eager "villagers" to help her provide the chorus of whispers and gossip and mean comments that Jessie remembered when she and her mother crossed the village street. An added artefact, the eviction letter - seen in the painting under the landlord's arm - was given to Mr Blackmore and he was placed at the rear, leaning against the wall, smirking. This final moment brought all the characters into one depiction, and worked with effective artistry as the moment was created. Jessie remembered Mr Grimes, the landlord, shouting at them and as Mr Blackmore shouted across at the two figures, berating them for laziness and not paying their rent, mother and daughter visibly shuddered and cringed. The moment had immense impact.

At this point Mrs Jenkins "had to be getting along". Flora, she hoped, would be back from watching the organ grinder. With credible reasons, the actors left. The negotiated drama space that, over that hour, had been inhabited by a varied and varying cast of actors, Victorian people, emigrants, researchers, and school students, now had to shift its context. As they had moved from their own real world into the fictional world, the context building process had to be mindful of the way children would gradually accept the fiction and become more secure. This was shown as they became more confident, curious and engaged in their questioning. At the end too, the passage out of fiction and return to reality was protected and careful. The children moved back to a more defined audience role.

Mr Blackmore: "You make sure you tell that Mr Gladstone - you tell him - I was promised some land and all I've got it is a map!"

Mrs Harper: "You tell Mr Gladstone - cholera is no respecter of men. You make sure you tell him!"

Mrs Mayhew thanked them for their help. In borderline role as researchers, the group summarised some of the points they wanted her to pass on to Mr Gladstone. She gave them forms for them to write their findings - a task that would be done in the classroom - and, removing the apron, we shifted back from imagined to the real world.

Findings from Written Work Completed Later

Prepared form letters were given to each group for follow-up writing, and were returned by four of the five classes. These were individual research reports for the Reform Association, presenting information gathered from the interviews to assist Mr Gladstone in his discussions with Her Majesty about possible reform legislation. The letters recorded the facts they had heard, and many adopted a formal advisory tone, often admonishing:

- *I also recommend you do something about the contaminated water (Yr 5)*
- *I also suggest that rent drops so that people can afford to pay but still be able to buy food...and live life to the fullest...(Yr 6)*
- *Another thing I discovered was that there is very poor sanitation. I have a couple of suggestions...(Yr5)*
- *The children don't get an education, but they are forced to work in a factory or sweeping the roads...I think that's dreadful! The water...carries sewage and deadly diseases. I hope something can be done about this. Good luck with your meeting with Her Majesty. (Yr 6)*

During the drama they had interviewed four characters, with four sets of focus questions. Their reports showed factual recall for the most part but also, as extracts show, appropriate tone and register. As a language outcome, they have gathered information from two sources and have presented it in written report form. Although in objective reporting style, the children's references to characters and human details suggest that the human and interactive experience of the drama had made the "facts" more memorable and real.

- *Flora sells flowers so they can get some money (Yr 4)*

- *I don't think it is fair they work twelve hours a day. Please cut their hours back to 5 and increase their payment, and put up signs for jobs. (Yr 4)*
- *Mr Gladstone the rich people are treating the poor people like slaves. I say you should tell those rich people to at least give them 2 or 3 shillings. (Yr 4)*

Another child recorded a persistent memory:

The painting was of a little girl selling pretty daffodils with her sad looking mother. Anywhere I moved around that room this young girl was staring at me with eyes of beauty as though she wanted me to help her and her family. I moved again but still she stared at me with those eyes. When we moved out of the room I could not stop thinking about the painting and I felt how the painter must have felt when he painted this picture – thankful for all the things I have in life. (Sarah – Yr 4)

And the linking of thinking, feeling and imagination appears in this child's reflection:

There was one magnificent painting that I saw. It was a little girl holding a basket of daffodils. There was a mother with a son leaning on her shoulder. I think they were selling flowers for money because they were poor. The mother's face looked pale. The little girl had ragged clothes. In the background was a grey fence and inside was a mini forest. This painting was 100 years old. I wanted to help but I couldn't, it was only a painting! This painting was made in the Victorian age. (Stephanie – Yr 4)

Another teacher summarised some of the reflective comments from her Year 4 class:

This experience has helped me to:

- develop an appreciation of art
- think about how it might have been for lower class people in England during Victorian times
- be active in drama

- read the paintings and understand them
- understand Victorian times by researching and questioning
- learn how much information you can get from an art gallery.

That same class used a cooperative learning method to construct a class letter of reply. They identified suitable language, recalled ideas, and then by a process of selecting, combining and grouping sentences, created the final copy. The letter is reproduced in Appendix I. It demonstrates that from the art and drama experience and the follow up classroom work, they have learned about Victorian life and social history, and have learned to use appropriate language register and conventions in an authentic context.

Findings for the Educators

The project was small scale in that we were only able to involve five schools. The actors gave their time generously, but the demands on the student teachers and lecturers meant that only a limited number of sessions could be performed.

A key problem in the process was that although the students were very keen to question the actors, and the task did give a united purpose, their emotional investment in the role was not as strongly established as would have been desirable in a longer process drama situation. The result was that at times children slipped to and fro between being students, being interviewers and being student/interviewers. This became obvious when they began interviewing the actors, and found it difficult to hold in balance their 19th century researcher role with their 21st century curious questioning role. In fact, the imbalance between these roles did lead to some situations where the actor could deliberately withhold information and spur the students on to think and question more searchingly, but it also led to conversations between roles rather than interviews between purposeful researchers and actor roles. This does not discount the fact that the students did uncover knowledge from a new perspective and were able to learn a great deal about Victorian life, as evidenced by their later writings. Considering role in drama, their authenticity as researchers and of the task to be carried out could have been more thoroughly established.

Reflecting on the experience as educators, it is a reminder of how essential, and how long and careful, the preparation of the role should be in order to embed belief.

Looking back, we could have prepared ourselves with more historical detail and accuracy. The question of “dirty water” and “cholera” came up and while those are factually correct, we could have researched further the sanitation conditions, illnesses, treatments, and numbers of deaths.

In this project all of the characters developed in depth, interest, humour and vitality as we worked through five performances, and as they sustained their roles with increasing relaxation and humour. The drama educators had experience of process drama, but this undertaking pushed them into the world of theatre in education where emphasis shifts to performance. They learned a lot about working together and making the drama work. They learned a huge amount about making a theatre in education piece – about the need to get the participants to invest their role with belief and responsibility.

The benefits to the students came through in their follow-up writing, which indicated that the experience was significant. They sustained belief in the drama world and gained content knowledge, motivation and involvement, which transferred to their writing. During the process the students were moved to ask deeper questions and to take an engaged and empathetic interest in the lives of the characters – in other words, to absorb the context. The experience has shown all concerned types of learning that may be gained through drama for, “Once these worlds and acts have been generated, they persist as creations of the mind, treasures of the memory” (O’Neill, p45).

References:

- Ministry of Education.** (2000). *The arts in the New Zealand curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- O’Neill, C.** (1995). *Drama worlds*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

APPENDIX I

The Victorian Research Committee
Cobblestone Lane
East End
London

29 March 1842

Dear Mr Gladstone

In the interest of improving living conditions for the common man, we would like to point out the following for your consideration:

According to a significant number of people, it is becoming increasingly difficult to live in England at this time. Many are suffering from appalling hardship in relation to employment, health, education, food and housing. Jobs are scarce, wages low and working conditions harsh. Those unable to find work cannot afford to pay rent on their already over-crowded, ramshackle homes, and are forced to live on the streets by uncompromising landlords. Those fortunate enough to have a roof over their heads are living in small cramped buildings with several other families.

Hygiene is poor resulting in the spread of diseases such as cholera. Water supplies are unclean and drainage systems failing miserably.

The availability of nutritious food is limited.

Children are made to work in factories, coalmines, and workhouses, clean chimneys, clear crossings of animal droppings, and sell flowers on street corners. As a result of sub-standard food, hard working conditions, dirty environments and lack of shelter, many do not live to see adulthood.

Education for the lower classes is non-existent. Very few have the skills to read or write and published material is not readily available due to the prohibitive cost of such items.

It would seem from the results of our research that people are leaving our great country in the hope of finding freedom from the drudgery and most terrible conditions they are forced to endure at this time.

May we recommend that procedures be put in place forthwith to alleviate the misery and poverty faced by a large proportion of England's population.

We trust that this information will assist you in your meeting with Her Majesty. Our Reform Association is very concerned that more Reform Bills be passed in Parliament and we hope that you will be successful.

Yours most sincerely,

The Victorian Research Committee