

Title of article:

But that's not right, is it Miss? Colonization and conscientious objection through drama.

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Abstract:

This article gives an account of a short research project in which two primary school teachers and the researcher collaborated to design drama work to help their students navigate challenging journeys. A short case study of practice over four to six months, it was documented and considered reflectively in order for the practice to be of use to other teachers. From safe New Zealand classrooms, the two teachers, one with year six students, the other with year eight, used drama to look at the tyranny of colonization and at resistance by conscientious objection.

The research followed a case study process over four to six months, in two schools. Data were gathered by observation of lessons, photography, and recorded interviews after the teaching with groups of six to ten students each), and with each teacher. The researcher was present in the classrooms (permission having been attained through proper procedures), and documented and photographed the session. These were later assembled as accounts of the learning experiences, and returned to the schools for sharing with students and staff, and later as recall prompts during interviews.

Drama we know has the capacity to help students imagine another's predicament, expand critical understanding, and support development into informed democratic citizens (Miller and Saxton 2011 :119; O'Connor and Aitken 2014 :13.) The two teachers in this study let their students imagine colonization and resistance, and helped them see with new eyes. The students were challenged to question different perspectives on right and wrong and to navigate their own direction with critical thought and empathy. The teachers and the researcher worked together in the classroom to teach, reflect on, and theorize the drama work. Interestingly, the geographic settings in each case had distinct implications for the theme of distance.

A research journey, even in a classroom, can have unexpected turns (Dunn 2016:130). In the class who looked through literature at the rights of others in another age, having a rigorous lens turned on their drama work heightened their awareness and responsibility for their own work, and in turn deepened their responses to ideas. In the other class, though colonization had been the original commendable theme, the students made their own connections to their own lives and community, and revealed a degree of perception and insight that holds promise for the way those students will participate and balance responsibilities as citizens.

Introduction:

This is the story of two teachers who wanted to challenge their students' thinking about social justice, and who chose to use drama to confront their students with themes distant from their immediate experience but significant in the history of their country. It is the story of two groups of young people who gained an unexpected view of themselves, their place in the world, and their learning, and who, in the course of the drama work, revealed an impressive sense of citizenship and responsibility. **One of the great benefits for drama education with elementary classrooms is to enable** students in classrooms to shift their thinking perspectives. Those perspectives

can shift in revealing new directions, to show us as teachers unanticipated insights into the children in front of us, and to give the students a liberating and transforming sense of their own capabilities.

This is an ordinary story in a way - the schools were regular **public schools**, the teachers were planning for their ordinary classroom programmes, one with year eight (12 – 13 years old) and one with year six (10 -11 years old), and they were regular classroom teachers though undoubtedly experienced and expert in their practice of drama. **I had located them initially through a research survey I had carried out in 2016. Using the online drama community, I had attempted to gauge the extent of drama teaching in primary classrooms, and those two teachers had responded. Building on that research, I approached the teachers and their schools to seek permission to work with them. The two teachers who took part were notable because they had articulated their teacher determination to use drama to challenge their students' thinking. Discussions early in the year showed that they both had units planned which were aligned in being challenging in content, and yet were part of their planned year programme. This dictated the timing of the research, and in partnership, we developed sessions, content and reflection. I was able to be present in the classrooms to observe and document the sessions, and later, to interview both students and teachers. The data (interview transcripts, photographed accounts of sessions, researcher notes, teacher notes gathered immediately after sessions) were analysed by repeated close examination, reading and re-reading, searching for emergent themes and frequent scrutiny for consistency. The themes were shared with teachers in follow up emails to check for agreement and accuracy. As researcher, I hoped that the teachers would use their skills and leadership in the field of teacher professional development in primary drama education, but principally I wanted to document how the teachers used the affordances of drama to engage students and encourage them to deal with the complex issues in the stories.**

The teachers used drama to get students to interrogate their perspectives on challenging concepts that were cognitively distanced from the students' lives. One used a young adult fiction story set in New Zealand about conscientious objectors during the first World War, in which a young man stands against his community and family and chooses not to go to war. **The book, *My Brother's War* (Hill : 2012) is a New Zealand book written for young adults, and in this country where ANZAC is of such national significance, that the topic is a regular part of Social Studies and English programmes.** The other teacher used Marsden and Tan's (1998) sophisticated picture book *The Rabbits* to explore children's thinking about colonization and the impact of outside invader forces on a land and on those who were there first. **In New Zealand, the "sophisticated picture books" are aimed at older readers, often weave many levels of meaning or multiple narratives, and, as in the case of works by Shaun Tan, rely on visuals to convey story and subtext. The use of the text chosen, with its complex art work and layers of meaning, was, as the drama work and the research will show, successful in engaging student interest and in prompting them to engage with realistic and complex issues.**

Reflection on the analysis and documentation of the episodes have revealed three themes which I use to shape this account of the drama teaching and learning processes. First, it was clear that the teachers had carefully selected material and approaches to connect to their students' lives. Second, their implementation of specific drama affordances was planned and designed to assure valued outcomes. Third, both teachers built into their work a future focus which had the potential to help students look forward to possibilities and to develop a sense of social responsibility. **It was the third theme that produced most noteworthy insights, demonstrating that valued outcomes had been achieved for the students through their drama work. The school with a local connection to the theme of resistance to war translated their knowledge into real action. The other group of students, after their involvement in drama work, voluntarily and genuinely shifted their thinking about occupation of place from the story context, to the impact that occupation was having on their own place in their contemporary context.** Each theme will be discussed in turn.

1.1. Selection of material and approaches to connect to students' lives.

I never knew that even if you didn't want to go you had to (Year 8 student)

It's kind of what's happening here..... (Year 6 student)

A story about a young man refusing his country's orders to go to war and being shunned by family and community might seem to be a conceptual distance for a class of thirteen year olds in a rural school two and a half hours north of Auckland – but the geographical relevance and the local connection was known to Marsha the teacher, and was purposeful in her selection of material. She had played in the local pipe band at ANZAC services alongside a man whose family members had been conscientious objectors at the time of the First World War, and had heard families' stories. In her words –

I wanted the kids to learn what their ancestors did for our freedom – and I wanted them to be proud- I wanted to educate them about their history without them knowing it – I wanted them to understand the past

The students readily engaged with the book used as part of their English programme. *My Brother's War* (Hill: 2012) , New Zealand novel for young adults, is about two brothers in a small town probably not dissimilar from their own, and tells of the brothers' decisions and the war in Europe and all that conscientious objectors endured. Drama strategies were incorporated throughout the unit of work, from images capturing key moments to choosing and narrating text to accompany mime. Perhaps in classroom terms, a tribute to the teaching and the drama work with the book was that attendance improved – boys were coming to school because they wanted to see what happened , they wanted to hear and do more. They said

It really helps doing drama with English – it helps with understanding the book and you understand the characters' feelings and going through what they're going through

Creating and seeing the moment when Edmund the objector brother was led away to imprisonment made an impact the students remembered vividly, and connected to their own lives:

I never knew that even if you didn't want to go you had to

Like it said – you're not made to kill people...and now we have rights to make our own decisions...

Their words indicate that they are considering the human condition, thinking critically about making decisions, and challenging assumptions. The *New Zealand Curriculum (2007)* identifies *Thinking* as one of the Key Competencies, defined as capabilities people use "to live... work and contribute as active members of their communities." (p12.) The curriculum has a vision for learners who will be actively involved, with a sense of belonging in their society, and the group drama experience where they listened, watched, and talked together afterwards made the process a social act where they saw themselves as part of their community. Daniels and Downes (2015 :103) refer to identity formation as a social activity and call upon Vygotsky's notions to support the idea that a school culture is the setting for collective working and creating. Lave and Wenger (1991) too stress involvement and participation as means to social identification. While the authors mentioned refer to wider institutional settings, the experience for the students in the class was still a step towards figuring out where they belong. In fact, the teacher carried the experience through to real and purposeful action. Having talked about the families and the stories, and made sense through the drama work of what it meant to be willing to sacrifice a life, she had her class make commemorative crosses They planted them in a bright green part of the school grounds, and the photo of the students remains in the school's website photo gallery. In translating thinking and ideas into real world action, the teacher embedded a connection to lives and to a collective social memory. The concept of conscientious objection had a lived link to that rural community. The teacher's decisions and drama initiatives gave the students the opportunity to shift their thinking and see themselves and their place's history in a new light.

At a primary school on the outskirts of Auckland, Nikki used Marsden and Tan's (1998) sophisticated picture book *The Rabbits* over six episodes. It was one of the later sessions, one which provided for whole group dramatic play, with props and costume items to choose and wear, and Teacher in Role used to question the basis for their actions that stuck in their memories – it clearly made a connection for them.

Oh yeah I loved that one - my favourite – when we dressed up and we sat round in a group and Mrs D was in role too – and she got to be strict – and remember – Mrs D flipped it round and she said “We’ll go and invade another country...”

Over the six session process, the teacher carefully built belief in a drama world where invaders took over and exploited land. Bit by bit she nudged the students’ story sense with increasingly uncomfortable questions, scaffolding towards the big question about whether might was necessarily right. The real world connection to lives emerged most decisively in the reflective interview at the completion of the drama work and will be discussed in detail under the third theme of this paper. As a coherent and carefully paced sequence, the work conforms to Dunn’s (2016: 128) recent discussion of process drama, and may serve as a model for other teachers, an intended outcome for the research from the outset. The teacher’s planning was meticulous and reflection constantly permitted slight shifts in direction. The process illustrated a capacity to challenge thinking through a structuring of a range of strategies, providing for recursive thinking, and adapting, and shifting perspective. Connecting the material to the lives of a diverse group of students needed slow steps and time for reflection, but the episode which, when I interviewed them later, seemed to have made a lasting impression was one where they **were involved in the whole group play with the teacher in role**. It occurred towards the end of the entire process, and belief in the situation had been progressively built. In the interview, photos were used to prompt recall, and the moments of this dramatic playing episode were seized delightedly with the words quoted above.

The session was enthusiastic. Ewing (2015) writes of how the pace and pressure of contemporary life and classrooms often dissuade teachers from providing for longer collective learning opportunities which can encourage children’s language and literacy learning, but in that session the children’s pleasure in play had been prepared for (props and costumes laid out on one side, one piece each) and the teacher allowed for time, talk and pretend. The students (10-11 years old) had made the Rabbits’ (the Invaders’) camp and had taken on roles as scientists, soldiers, business people, and settlers, role positions they have experimented and alternated with in previous sessions. Once their spaces were set up, they conversed about their activities (identification of plants, construction of defences for the camp) until the teacher (in role as the commander of the operation, called them to order and required reports from them on the success of their take over. They recalled -

And we were soldiers and we had to report because she heard that the possums had resisted

We talked about the possums trying to take back part of their land and we were talking to each other shall we kill them or what shall we do with them?

In her interview, Nikki acknowledged that her personal and educational background had firmly established her belief in children’s play, regretting though that logistics and time constrained her from using the strategy more often. When she planned, she knew that the students would delight in dressing up and imagining the place, and knew that the previous sessions had built sufficient belief for them to slip into the fiction quickly. She spoke of the enjoyment she had from watching the dramatic playing episode, stepping outside themselves during the dramatic playing episode and conversing with authority as soon as they put on a lab coat to examine botanical samples from this new land. Asked in her interview for three main things she aims for in her drama teaching, she said

It has to be enjoyable- not too much sitting around talking – I like to get them involved...imagining themselves in worlds that aren’t their own – it lets [them] step outside themselves...and then people ask for their opinions and treat them with respect...and they can step into that world more fully.

Baldwin’s (2012) discussions of children’s dramatic playing confirm the benefits observed by the teacher and the researcher during that session. Safely in role and in the fictional context of the story about colonizers, the students explored roles and relationships they had touched upon, but now developed in greater depth. They were, as Baldwin says, internalizing the narrative and making it a part of their thinking.

However, plotting the long view of the drama's direction, a shift in dynamic was needed. The teacher now moved to present a new challenge, and brought into play another layer of drama strategy. The rabbits, allowed to play out their moments of relaxed enjoyment, were shaken out of complacency when the leader informed them that ... the next potential target country for invasion and colonization lay ... just across the Tasman Sea. Dramatic playing, close as it was to the students' lives, now launches into the next theme.

1.2 The implementation of specific drama affordances to assure valued outcomes

and then I realized that what actually was happening was kinda the opposite –(Year 6 student)

I remember her face when she was reading – it was really touching her- (Year 8 student)

Discussion of this theme grows directly from the former one, because it illustrates the teacher's deliberate layering of convention to drive the drama forward. To put distance and tension between the fun of whole group dramatic playing and the confrontation of the coming bigger ideas explored in a structured convention, Nikki had progressively established three contrasting attitudes for three role positions– that of the invader, the invaded and the profiteers. The dramatic play built momentum towards the commander (Teacher in Role's) announcement of the next target for colonization. Howell and Heap (2005) refer to the dynamic process through which teachers organize the building of a multi-layered drama as action progressively unfolds. The teacher in this instance observed the activities and measured the time for intervention and a shift of strategy. She chose now to use a conscience corridor to allow the thoughts of the groups of colonizers to be articulated, the role of the Commander Rabbit being taken this time by one of the students. That girl later remembered and described how she moved between the lines, hearing the voices, and making sense of her own ideas. Her words describe what is known as *metaxis* (Boal [1979], cited in O'Toole 1992:76), as she voices how she was in role and behaving in the way the role demanded...

I was the head rabbit and I had a hat and a stick –

..while the distance enabled her to hear and consider the views she heard...

I heard the rabbits' point of view – like I don't wanna do this or keep going don't let them get in your way – and the possums were like what did we ever do to you – you came and invaded us and they were asking what are we gonna do – and the soldiers were like ...what's the next group of possums that we're gonna kill...and it made me think about the story....

Her discussion continued as she thought more:

First off I kind of thought the possums were being annoying...and the rabbits were like this is our land so get out of the way – and then I realized that what actually was happening was kind of the opposite – the possums were living where it was their land and then the rabbits came along and just kicked them out...

The degree of perceptive and insightful reflection achieved by those students after their engagement in the drama work is a valued outcome. They had made their own connections to their own lives and community, they had thought beyond with an awareness of others and their place in the world – and that holds great promise for the way those students will participate and balance their responsibilities as citizens.

The implementation of the work based on *My Brother's War* (Hill: 2012) and the feature they responded to positively, was of a different nature, but nevertheless combined the affordances of drama with straightforward thorough teaching, which together produced a valued outcome for this class in particular. What proved successful - and a message we take to teachers from the whole experience – was the value of prompt and specific feedback to students. Not exclusively specific to drama teaching of course, but along with the selection of engaging content and the practical task oriented work, prompt feedback proved effective in maintaining engagement and spurring the whole class on to improved effort and better outcomes. We were fortunate to have a second person in the

classroom able to photograph then give an account of the work. The students liked getting the documentation the next day - it validated their work, it named explicitly what they had done, made links to the story and to historical detail, and encouraged them to think about how they could improve next time. The effect was noticeable – they recalled the previous session easily, and were motivated by pride in their work to make a start and focus promptly in the next session. Feedback however did not work on its own. The multi modal ways in which the students worked - moving, talking, regrouping, imagining – was effective in the brain compatible ways that Miller and Saxton (2014) discuss, and this continually motivated engagement. They were shown what they had done, remembered, saw that their work had been valued, and tried the skills again- which met the brain’s need for variety, and physical and mental movement. The classroom practice thus used the affordances of drama purposefully, documented achievements explicitly, and lifted motivation. While such a finding states what we know about teaching, it can also be concluded that the drama teacher’s success worked at an intersecting point between story, drama’s fictional world, and teaching pedagogy.

1.3 Provision of future focus and future possibility thinking

It’s kind of what’s happening here – two years ago I looked out of my window and I’d see hills over there – but now it’s just houses. (Year 6 student)

It is stating the obvious to say that the world our students inherit is ever changing, ever more complex, and this is too easily followed by an assumption that proficiency with technology may be a preparation. Yet dealing with uncertainty and risk and awkward ideas is possible in a supported, collaborative environment where relationships are secure. Education, as Dewey (1934) reminded us, is for living **now**, and drama, by working in an “as if” setting, allowed students to try out possibilities in a low risk situation then reflect on the “real world” relevance for their own lives.

The provocation for the IDIERI conference held in 2018 and this subsequent publication of papers mentioned the tyranny of distance, and both teachers in this study chose ideas distant from their students’ experience to challenge their thinking. Both used the affordance of drama known as distancing to get them to use the detaching effect of the drama lens to see things differently, and then, as the year six girl said, to “flip it around” to look closer to home, to compress the distance, see it up close. If we want to prepare students for a future, then drama offers a conditional dimension which wonders, considers options, looks to what might be. As Saxton (2015) reminds us, it pushes for thinking “What if...?” Teaching with an element of the conditional opens spaces and slows thinking. Role, and taking another’s perspective, enabled the students in the dramas to access that conditional thinking. The boy who took the role of the fruit shop owner who employed the conscientious objector brother spoke of his distress when the young man was taken away, and his words have been used in the title to this article. Conditional thinking speculates about the future, imagines possibilities and dreams for the future. The students who worked with concentration on the text of *The Rabbits* over six episodes, were able in their interview to engage together in collective thinking about the future.

We sat in the staffroom with the photographs from the drama sessions and copies of the book illustrations in front of them. The group of 10- and 11-year-olds remembered sessions, recalled terms that had been used (“invaders”), and looked again at the book illustrations. Any distance from the ideas of colonization disappeared when they made a real connection to their lives, and thought about what was happening to their own part of New Zealand right outside the windows.. One girl grabbed the book , finding illustrations and turning pages -

Here are the pictures here – here it’s all friendly, and at the end there’s a picture of sewers and empty lands and machines – so it went from this to that – the world used to be like this – but it’s turning to be this – and it happened so quickly when the rabbits came – it makes me feel sad- like the possums having a good time and then the rabbits came and wrecked their land.

Wrecked their land is the key.

It's kind of what's happening here – two years ago I looked out of my window and I'd see hills over there – but now it's just houses.

Their school sits at the northern edge of Auckland's urban expansion – and it won't be the edge for much longer, as green fields are taken over by housing developments. There was a very personal connection for one girl

I used to be able to bike down the road and see farms and now I only see houses – I have four younger brothers one only five months old and by the time he's old enough to bike it'll all be buildings.

Another student spoke about the drama

When she [the teacher] read it first I was really confused. I kinda got it but it was just a story but then she made us be the characters and I felt what it was to be a possum and how that would be...

Together the students made other colonization connections as they remembered what had happened in the drama –

She asked us for comparisons between the story and the real world and I thought that it was like. ..wars and big countries take over little countries like the queen of England she came to be the queen of NZ...

They turned the telescope round and saw the ideas upfront and immediate, in connection with their lives and their streets and beaches and green field horizons. **They saw now what the drama and the story had been about something bigger.** Using Freebody and Finneran's (2013 : 48) analysis of drama's pedagogy for teaching for and about social justice, this work **then** conforms to their reference to drama *about*

...drama that explores issues of social justice in order to broaden participants' awareness of sociocultural issues, to learn about social justice, or to develop a deeper understanding of ...the impact that these issues have on the lives of the participants. (p.48)

Education must empower children to grow into responsible participants in society. In New Zealand, the vision of the curriculum conceptualizes a set of key competencies as capabilities for living, with the potential for infusing curriculum and teaching with a purposeful, forward looking and holistic direction. Hipkins, Bolstad, Boyd and McDowall (2014) address the curriculum on a wider scale and look to make it more open and flexible. This small study has illustrated ways in which purposeful work in drama can connect to lives and to thinking for the future. Gilbert (2005) advocates educators, if they are to prepare children for life, to work for a capacity for *knowing*, rather than mastering bits of *knowledge*. Contemporary models of thinking involve social process and the making of connections, something that has been essential in both the drama processes described. The colonization unit encouraged in those students an eagerness to learn from each other and to improve their work, and developed what Gilbert would call *knowing*, being more fluid, flexible and shared in nature. Students made connections between the concept of colonization thinking and the changes they saw in their own place and land, demonstrating a knowing, or "doing" something with what they understood. We can look too to Craft's (2005) **description of four Ps vital for a future focused education-** plurality of identities, possibility awareness, playfulness and participation – **all four of which** were encompassed within the drama works discussed. Looking to the changing landscape of education and twenty-first century life, we might conclude that, if the thinking and knowing generated in the activities of the dramas can bring out the social responsibility displayed by those eleven year olds, then there is hope that their generation will find solutions. In a chapter designating arts education as a way of "Being Awake in the World", O'Connor and Aitken (2014:13) set out a key value of Arts education as its potential for building democratic citizenship. They refer to Dewey's (1934) insistence on the value of active art making and the nurturing of the imagination for that end. **In the rich Arts and drama experiences the two classes were engaged in, they were able to question and connect to a wider world. In doing so they considered the balancing of rights, roles and responsibilities, contributing to a developing a sense of citizenship.**

1.4 Conclusion: Distance, direction, and horizons

The conference for which this presentation was prepared talked of distances, places, and locations far from this end of the world. We have all had some similarities- some common coordinates if we take a geographical metaphor. The study reported here, located in two New Zealand classrooms, took themes significant to the story of this country, yet with a distant point of reference- people who two centuries ago travelled half a world to claim land for themselves; and young men who a century later travelled half a world and fought for rights. The teachers negotiated paths for their students towards new understandings. By bringing together story, the drama world, drama's pedagogical strengths, and concerns for wider issues, the teachers opened new perspectives for students which enabled them to view their lives and futures differently, and oriented them towards a collective social responsibility. It is the teacher's role, I think, to stand and occupy that middle distance – watching as students and ideas emerge from the landscape, recording and mapping the journey, noticing new directions and turns, and sending them off prepared towards their next horizon.

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