

Developing the Capacities of Applied Theatre Students to Be Critically Reflective Learner-Practitioners

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Introduction

‘Applied theatre’ is an umbrella term for a complex mix of different performance forms and styles operating in a bewildering diversity of social contexts. It encompasses theatre practice in schools, prisons, refugee camps, aged-care facilities, community centres, hospitals, historic sites and museums, housing estates and many other contexts. The term is contested in its naming and in its multiple histories, and contains as many contradictions as it does commonalities.¹ Its genealogies draw specifically on radical performance work in the 1960s in the UK, USA and Australia, and are informed by the achievements of community arts practitioners internationally. ‘Applied theatre’ emerged as a term in the late 1980s as a convenient working title, and, as McDonald notes, was a direct response to the ‘material conditions’ of this period.² In many instances, the term emerged through the academy, as a way to provide an overarching concept which encompassed a wide array of community-based theatre practices. Consonant with changes in other fields, university courses and programmes developed under the ‘applied’ brand, and, in the last two or three years, there has been a promulgation of accompanying texts and academic writing on Applied Theatre as a discipline.

A recent international survey of undergraduate Drama programmes revealed about half a dozen strands focused primarily on Applied, Education or Community Theatre.³ There are also about thirty to thirty-five courses worldwide that have an element of applied theatre/drama/performance as part of a broader undergraduate Drama or Theatre programme. At postgraduate level, there are a number of specialised Masters courses in Applied Drama – for example, those at Exeter University and the University of Manchester – and/or Theatre and Development – such as the University of East Anglia and the University of Winchester. In Australia, one of the pioneer ‘applied’ programmes was established in 2000 by a team of researchers, academics and practitioners at Griffith University. It grew out of the strengths of the team, headed by John O’Toole, with a strong orientation to drama education; it is still part of the Faculty of Education, rather than the Arts and Humanities.

My background is very much embedded in this history, and concerns both the development of applied courses and the familiarity with the procedures and institutional frameworks – and idiosyncrasies – of a number of different universities. These courses have included an undergraduate Prison Theatre course and postgraduate Masters in Applied Theatre (University of Manchester), a Bachelors in Applied/Community Theatre and Media (University of Winchester), both BA and MA courses in Applied Drama (University of Exeter) and, currently, a BA in Applied Theatre and Masters of Drama Education (Griffith University). I mention these experiences because, in each of the different programmes and courses, diverse educational strategies were developed in order to help create meaningful learning for students attempting to ‘apply’ theatre skills to complex social environments.

A common component of these programmes is, unsurprisingly, the opportunity for students to apply theatre to a particular social context. The degree of involvement and engagement varies from programme to programme, course to course, and can involve students working from two to three sessions – usually a couple of hours each – to four to six months, in a particular social context. The range of contexts is as varied and diverse as the field itself: some courses focus on work only in a specific context – for example, a prison; others intentionally give students the opportunity to work in two different contexts – such as a school and an aged-care facility – to contrast their experiences.

Applied Theatre courses present a considerable challenge for students, as they demand the development of competencies in a number of areas, including theatre facilitation, theoretical knowledge of applied theatre, and conceptual understanding of a particular social context – schools, prisons, special needs and so on – and involve preparation for the implicit realities of an institution and/or context. Given the constraints of an average twelve-to-thirteen-week university course, preparation is often confined to training students in a repertoire of exercises and games, contextualised within broad approaches in facilitation and managing groups, and reflective feedback on context experiences. The initial preparation is followed by a specified period in a context, and a final period of assessment; more on this later. As a basic structure, this is fairly sound because it focuses on the practical preparation and implementation of an applied theatre project, but the detail and the level of student learning varies widely, and seems more related to personal epistemologies rather than to a rigorous pedagogic framework. This variation is a concern, for two reasons. Firstly, this structure suggests that there is not sufficient alignment between the learning aims, conceptual knowledge, content, preparedness, support and assessment of students doing Applied Theatre courses. Secondly and, for me, critically, these ‘learning’ experiences for students are taking place in contexts that are often characterised by vulnerable individuals and groups, or, at the very least,

sensitive and marginal spaces. Drama students working in these contexts need not only to integrate practical theatre skills, theory and conceptual knowledge, and sophisticated workplace skills in reading and negotiating complex social contexts. Moreover, they also have to develop meta-cognitive skills in reflecting in and on practice, and this equally before, during and after their contextually-based work experience. This is a hefty demand for a second- or third-year student, and it is not certain whether the frameworks currently in place actually maximise the scaffolding of the student's learning both for the benefit of the student and, importantly, for the impact on participants.

While the kinds of issues are discrete for every subject area, there are commonalities of concern and potential for a range of discipline fields employing practice-based learning as part of an overall student experience. The growth in popularity of work-integrated learning (WIL) in higher education programmes in Australia and internationally marks a demand from government, employees and students for a stronger occupational and work-ready orientation.⁴ Integrating learning through practical 'real-life' experience is a well-established concept that has waxed and waned in the academy for a number of years. In the USA, the co-op educational movement, dating back to the work of Schneider in 1901, employs a number of work-based frameworks, including internships.⁵ In the UK, 'sandwich' courses adopt similar approaches. Regardless of the name, the philosophy of these practice-based educational programmes reflects 'the tripartite nature of WIL' in establishing a partnership between the student, university and workplace in developing an appropriate set of skills for students.⁶ Billett's cross-disciplinary study of WIL programmes asserts a number of potentially beneficial learning outcomes: '(a) access to authentic work activities (i.e., authentic activities, novel and routine); (b) observation and listening – cues and clues (indirect guidance); (c) access to more experienced co-workers (direct guidance – development of heuristics) and (d) practice – opportunities to reinforce, refine and hone'.⁷

The literature which informs WIL provides a useful resource for the types of issues which curriculum designers of Applied Theatre courses/programmes need to consider. One of the key definitions of WIL is the emphasis on the *integration* of practice-based learning with disciplinary knowledge and concepts. The dynamic relationship between different kinds of knowledges – conceptual, practical, contextual, personal – is a key ingredient in how to sift through the multi-modal forms of understanding and learning. The emphasis on integrated learning is important for designing courses and programmes that support and align student experiences – for example, the learning that the student takes into the 'work' or practice context – and, further, how the learning in the context articulates into the next stage of study. The Griffith Institute for Higher Education usefully articulates a definition:

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is learning that results from an integration of workplace experience and disciplinary knowledge and practice. For learning to occur, workplace experience must be interpreted and reflected upon by reference to canonical disciplinary concepts and practices; equally, disciplinary concepts and practices must be re-interpreted in light of their application in the workplace.⁸

This definition suggests that the quality of integration relates directly to student capacity to reflect on the dialogical relationship between disciplinary knowledge and practice-based experience. The development and application of skills are tested out in practice, and then reflected upon during and after practice. Reflective practice is often the critical area for Applied Theatre students. Courses need to be able to focus on the pragmatic skills development in facilitation and group work. Students also need to familiarise themselves with the context: visits, observation, interviews with staff, readings. While journals and reflective portfolios are commonly used assessment strategies, these are often in practice highly descriptive, and demonstrate a lack of ability in integrating conceptual, reflective and observational modalities.

The WIL literature stresses the importance of critical reflection in encouraging students to be more self-aware and in helping them to develop meta-cognition.⁹ Reflective practice is designed to further students' ability in self-assessment, or Boud's idea of future-proofing learning:¹⁰

That is, rather than assessing what the student *can do now*, we need to consider what the student might also *be able to achieve in the future*. Key to this is self-assessment and negotiation, and a combination of formative and summative assessment, which in turn leads to reflective practice.¹¹

While the literature that informs WIL clearly endorses the theoretical significance of reflective practice, as most theatre academics would also, the realities of assessing practice-based experience is a 'thorn in the side' of co-operative education.¹² Yet, while there is broad acknowledgement of the importance of integration through reflection, there is also a poverty of information about how to structure and support students' achievements in this area.¹³ In other words, the literature argues for particular educational purposes – such as encouraging reflective learners – but not process: that is, how to develop this capacity in students.

Gibbs has suggested a useful model for thinking about how to structure not just reflection *in* and *on* practice, but also reflection-*before*-action; for example, how we plan out and re-think about plans before we act. His six-stage approach involves:

- 1 *Description of the event.* A student describes in detail the event upon which they are reflecting – where were you; who else was there; why were you there; what were you doing; what were other people doing; what was the context of the event; what happened; what was your part in this; what parts did the other people play; what was the result?
- 2 *Feelings and thoughts;* the notion of self-awareness. A student tries to recall and explore those things that were going on inside their head.
- 3 *Evaluation.* A student tries to evaluate or make a judgement about what has happened, and considers what was good about the experience and what was bad about the experience, or what did or did not go so well.
- 4 *Analysis.* A student tries to break the event down into its component parts so they can be explored separately. The student may need to ask more detailed questions about the answers to the last stage. Including: what went well; what did they do well; what did others do well; what went wrong or did not turn out how it should have done; and in what way did they or others contribute to this?
- 5 *Conclusion and synthesis.* This differs from the evaluation stage in that now the student has explored the issue from different angles and has a substantial amount of information on which to base judgement.
- 6 *Action plan.* During this stage the student should think forward into encountering the event (or similar event) again and to plan what they would do – would they act differently or would they be likely to do the same?¹⁴

Perhaps a key consideration is how much time is available to students to prepare and reflect on experiences. Applied Theatre courses are usually structured within the normal template of traditional lecture-seminar or workshop-based courses. Within this framework, there is limited capacity to include provision for scaffolding reflective practice, and therefore reflective skills are often considered to be implicit within the student. It may also be that students do not take the time to be reflective, considering such assessments as academically light or ‘inferior’ to a ‘proper’ academic essay. It is clear from our recent research with Applied Theatre students that there is a disconnection between what we understand as reflection – self-awareness and criticality – and what students perceive as reflection – description and documentation.¹⁵ The problems articulated in the literature that informs WIL are also common to Theatre and Performance assessments, which often draw on journals and reflective logs as a supplement to assessing theatre practice.

This is not to suggest that reflective practice is inadequate as a form of assessment – on the contrary, it is vital for students to locate knowledge within their own experience – but as an approach, it is taught, implemented and understood by students in widely varying ways, with uneven results across courses, programmes and universities.

The case for integrating experiences is that Applied Theatre courses and/or other practice-based Drama courses need to create the curriculum space for structuring reflective learning in appropriate ways. This either means re-aligning the emphasis in a course, or exploring the ways in which reflective learning is scaffolded throughout a programme. These concerns are particularly aligned to undergraduate programmes here, because I think that reflective practice is a challenging skill for undergraduates, but similar issues have been encountered in the postgraduate programmes that I have managed.

It is particularly important to emphasise reflective practice in Applied Theatre courses because it helps to make explicit how intuitive and behavioural responses in a social context – whether ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ – can be explained and/or understood by students. For example, the ‘rush’ of experience that a Theatre student encounters when going into a prison for the first time can be overwhelming. Students often suffer from negative preconceptions, judgemental attitudes, contradictory ideologies, nervousness, personal risk, vulnerability, and deep anxiety about the exposure to a new and almost mythical environment. The debrief session after the workshop outside a prison – sitting in a car, in a café, or on the bus back to university – often offers the richest deconstruction of the experience, jumbled as it is between the ‘high’ of doing the workshop – and usually finding out that the participants were ‘just people’ – and the extreme criticality of what went wrong – ‘I fucked up the instructions big time’.¹⁶ Later, when the students come to compare notes with the other groups, there is often a strong and organic richness to their discussion, as they attempt to re-construct meaning from the experience. The inquiring discussion and feedback sifts through the experience, examining what may not have been picked up in the practice. For some reason, there is often a dislocation between the oral and the written in locating the value of this type of reflective discussion. Even if, as a tutor, I remind the students to note these thoughts and ideas in their journals, there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge that their experiences – confused, muddled, instinctive as they are – constitute a kind of knowledge.

King and Kitchener have developed, on the basis of epistemic assumptions, a reflective model that outlines an increasingly complex framework of understanding through which individuals progress sequentially. The epistemic assumptions refer to the degree to which an individual investigates the details of a situation, the tactics that they employ to find out more information, their ability to accept diverse interpretations and

perspectives, and the level of uncertainty they feel about whether an issue has been resolved.¹⁷ Reflective judgement at its most sophisticated relates to Thompson's notion of 'bewilderment' – that practitioners acknowledge that subjectivity is not a given and needs to be constantly constructed, interpreted, questioned and re-constructed.¹⁸ In other words, knowledge is live and needs to be understood in relationship to the context in which it is generated.

WIL practice disrupts the hierarchy of traditional forms of knowing to which students have been taught to aspire, specifically in privileging knowledge that is sought – in books, in experts – rather than found or discovered – in experience. This approach is underwritten by a philosophy that 'knowledge undergoes construction and transformation, that it is as much a dynamic as a static concept'.¹⁹ In Theatre and Performance Studies, alternative knowledge and epistemologies – body, emotion, senses – are inherent or explicit pedagogic concerns, and therefore less radical than in other disciplines. But how these are articulated, trusted and valued are still contentious areas.

Uncertain contexts as learning environment

Molloy and Clarke identify that undergraduate Physiotherapy students frequently feel ill-prepared and anxious about clinical practice.²⁰ The anxiety is caused by students' concern about applying theory to practice, developing professional relationships with staff and clients, and negotiating implicit processes embedded in the workplace. It is precisely these hidden norms, not always made explicit by formal protocols – and sometimes in contradiction to them – that students report as being a major worry. Polanyi's distinction is that 'explicit knowledge is the familiar codified form that is transmittable in formal, systematic language. Tacit knowledge is the component of knowledge that is normally not reportable since it is deeply rooted in action and involvement in a specific context.'²¹

Applied Theatre students are often unprepared for the uncertainties of social contexts, because unlike those in more targeted WIL placements – student nurses in a hospital, trainee teachers in a school, for example – Theatre students have contexts chosen for them that are highly variable and not directly linked to their studies. Moreover, Applied Theatre students are less likely than those in the nursing or teaching disciplines to be supervised or supported by practitioners for whom developing novices is part of their role function. They are disadvantaged because they operate from a more limited knowledge base about a specific context; for example, a prison, refugee centre, or care home for the elderly. Therefore their capacity for reflection needs careful training, to help support students' understanding of the social ecology of an institution or context. Applied Theatre courses need to help students to observe, detect and make explicit expectations and contextual nuances, so that they can be agentic and reflexive to the demands and politics that they may encounter. Critical reflection needs to articulate

not just the learner's perspective, but the ways in which the learner encounters and deals with the participants, and the broader social/institutional context. For example, Drama students working in a prison are often more shocked at the institutional norms and behaviour of some staff than they are of the group of offenders. They are confronted by the contradictions of the system, and how these factors impact on the participants with whom they are working:

Learning of this nature is important to new practitioners for once they enter the world of practice, no matter how hard they try to apply theoretical criteria or use advanced analytic techniques, they confront technical, cultural, moral, and personal idiosyncrasies which defy categorization.²²

Tacit knowledge, by its very nature, is hard to express and codify, but it may be teachable. If it is possible to align the conceptual, experimental and experiential components through reflection, then it is possible for practice-based learning to make tangible that which is implied.

Taylor takes this further, reflecting on a Community Development Masters programme that involved students working in African contexts.²³ He argues that in Development contexts, where students are involved in working with groups and communities to bring about change, a 'sixth sense' is needed to address how politics and power operate in communities.²⁴ Taylor observes that there is a temptation for students to be wrapped up in their role as positive change agents, homogenising and romanticising notions of community, and in the process obscuring 'the realities of diversity, inequity and injustice that are present'.²⁵ He argues that students need to learn about power at the micro and macro levels, not just in conceptual terms but also at the everyday, grassroots level:

It is often assumed, for example, through the notion of 'social capital' that relationships develop within communities in ways that lead to stability and improved livelihoods for all. In practice, many communities resist learning and change, preferring inertia, and avoiding challenges to the status quo which is based often on the inclusion of some, and the exclusion of others. By ignoring the realities of power relations, facilitators, and indeed educators, risk de-personalizing, and depoliticizing the whole process of learning and change.²⁶

Taylor cites Gaventa's framework for the analysis of power, which explores place (global, national, local), relational spaces (closed, invited, claimed) and forms of power (visible, hidden, invisible).²⁷ All these elements translate into Applied Theatre practice, whether it is theatre for development, prison theatre or work with the elderly. Power dialectics are a fundamental aspect of Applied Theatre work, but the broader issue is the way in which conceptual knowledge interplays with reality. As Raelin stresses, 'theory makes sense

only through practice, but practice makes sense only through reflection as enhanced by theory'.²⁸ This is a key formula in aligning and balancing the competing and often contested processes involved with preparing and supporting students in Applied Theatre practice. Importantly, it also provides students with a common language and a capacity for analysis, which, when linked to reflection, promises a stable framework for examining unpredictable and uncertain experiences:

After all, most forms of situated learning occur in situations of unequal relationships between participants. So, the culture of practice is likely to be highly influential, which is either a virtue or a problem depending on orientations of the culture of practice. Consequently, the existing workplace culture and values are likely to play a role in determining the types of knowledge that are constructed.²⁹

The link between the conceptual, experiential and reflective elements of WIL, and Applied Theatre, is the ability of students to try out conceptual knowledge so that it becomes grounded and do-able.³⁰ The opportunity to engage in experiments, such as case studies, role-plays and simulations, provides a critical bridge between espoused theories – theory with which one enters a context – and theories in use – modified theories reflexive to context. In many of the Applied Theatre courses in which I have been involved, experimentation is an integral part of the training in facilitation skills. Students need to know not only about workshop structure – beginning, middle, end – but also about what exercises might work with which groups. The centrality of audience is critical to Applied Theatre, and learning how to read group dynamics is fundamental. The experimental stage is therefore a chance for students to rehearse different facilitation modes, and also to respond to simulated scenarios. For example, students can define the parameters of a group based on their observation of a particular context. The characteristics of the context may then be re-played by other students and can include constraints – individual resistance, physical ability – and possibilities. As examples of the latter, if the natural energy of the group is low, students might think about how to address this; conversely, if the group is highly energised, students might consider how to facilitate concentration and focus. Within this experimental stage, students can play with the intensity of the group dynamic. These kinds of experiments give students an opportunity to bring together conceptual and practice-based strategies and to replicate the nuances and complexities of managing a group-work situation. The function of experimentation is to test out the do-ability of the students' plan, and then to revisit it in a safe environment.

Experimentation provides a scaffolded step for students to learn about the need to think-in-action. However, it is important that students do engage

in actual contexts if they are to translate conceptual knowledge into tacit understandings:

Students need to take real positions, make moral judgments, and defend them under pressure. Dealing exclusively with simulated events risks defusing or abstracting their live conflicts. Cooperation typically is obtained where it otherwise may be impossible, and emotionally-laden and status problems get neatly analysed into solutions. As Brown and Duguid have aptly put it, a critical issue in work-based learning is becoming a practitioner, not learning about practice.³¹

It is important to recognise that students need to make the connection between theory and practice and between explicit and tacit knowledge, and that this form of knowing is located in the tension between context-dependent understanding and personal epistemology.

Billett stresses that in WIL practice, there is a definite shift of emphasis in learning – one from the context of university and curricula, to the students themselves.³² Indeed, this is the point of WIL practice – namely that it is the students who involve themselves, participate and engage with the context:

The point here is that the very qualities needed to be an effective student in higher education – a proactive and agentic learner – are those required for effective professional practice. In essence, the agentic qualities of learners are essential for effective professional practice and rich learning. Consequently, more than attempting to organise experiences for students in educational institutions and workplace settings, there is a need to focus on preparing students as agentic learners, as part of their professional preparation.³³

Billett has developed a useful approach for considering how the learner needs to prepare for the WIL practice:

Prior to the practice experience, it is helpful to:

- establish bases for experiences in practice setting, including developing or identifying capacities in practice settings (i.e., practice-based curriculum, interactions);
- clarify expectations about purposes, support, responsibilities *et cetera* (i.e., goals for learning);
- inform about purposes, roles, and expectations of different parties (e.g., advance organisers);
- prepare students as agentic learners (i.e., develop their personal epistemologies) – including the importance of observations, interactions, and activities through which they learn;

- develop the procedural capacities required for practice; and
- prepare students for contestations (e.g., being advised to forget everything learnt at university).

During practice-based experiences, it is helpful for there to be:

- direct guidance by more experienced practitioners (i.e., proximal guidance);
- sequencing and combinations of activities (i.e., ‘learning curriculum’, practice-based curriculum);
- active engagement in pedagogically rich work activities or interactions (e.g., handovers);
- effective peer interactions (i.e., collaborative learning); and
- active and purposeful engagement by learners in workplace settings.

After practice-based experiences, it is helpful to:

- facilitate the sharing and drawing out of experiences (i.e., articulating and comparing commonalities and distinctiveness, e.g., canonical and situational requirements for practice);
- explicitly make links to what is taught (learnt) in the academy and what is experienced in practice settings;
- emphasise the agentic and selective qualities of learning through practice (i.e., personal epistemologies); and
- generate critical perspectives on work and learning processes in students.³⁴

The design of Applied Theatre courses needs to consider these kinds of practical stages for students, whether in a one-off elective or in a more substantial strand embedded in a Drama programme. A recurrent issue in the courses in which I have been involved is how to develop specific pedagogies that enable and assess *integration*, and how to effectively scaffold student capacity in critical reflection. Apostolides and Looye suggest that integration is best fostered through making the concept explicit to students, to counter ‘*ad hoc*’ learning by actively and directly linking together the tripartite elements of WIL.³⁵ Integration needs to be central to the curriculum, and certainly needs to be addressed through assessments that explore the interconnections between different factors, such as disciplinary knowledge and practical application; critical reflection of the experience and its relationship to theory; and self-reflection on the meaning and relevance of students’ learning to themselves. Types of assessment can include learning contracts, industry evaluation forms, logs and reflective journals, oral presentations, written critical reflections, a project proposal, and a final

written report. Bates has created a highly responsive approach to assessment that gives the student the added responsibility of a negotiated learning plan, developed in accordance with individual, academic and professional goals. Development of this plan requires negotiating the weighting of each learning goal, and deciding what the emphasis of the assessment should be.³⁶

Poor integration of the conceptual, practical, experimental and experiential elements of an Applied Theatre course can result in students being confused about what an assessment is for and how it measures the rich learning that they have experienced in a certain context. This confusion can lead to dissatisfaction with a course because of a perceived focus on written assessments, and ultimately poorer student learning outcomes.³⁷ The tension between traditional modes of assessment – an essay reviewing theoretical and conceptual knowledge – and a purely practical descriptive response – a personal journal – need to be aligned in order to alleviate the tension between the two forms of assessment. This alignment is not as easy as it sounds, as students can find hybrid forms of assessment equally incoherent. Therefore aligning theory, practice and experience is not just about designing a single assessment but needs to be part of a broader and deeper pedagogical strategy.

Despite the growing interest in WIL practice, it would be easy to reduce its rationale to context-led skills and competencies. In relation to Applied Theatre, there is an important need to help students to be critically reflective of contexts, in order to be more efficacious in their ability to apply theatre in the most imaginative and appropriate ways. Equally, in relation to programmes where Applied Theatre is a strand within a broader study of Theatre, I think it is important to acknowledge the multi-focal characteristic of the student group, and to highlight that the learning is not just about Applied Theatre as a disciplinary area, but that it is also about learning about ‘the self – one’s identity and capacity – in social contexts’.³⁸ This proposition leads full circle to the notion of the significance of meta-cognition, and the development of student capacity for reflection. It underlines the emphasis on reflection generating knowledge about knowledge, and relates to not just *what* is learnt but *how*.

NOTES

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