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Backyards and Borderlands: some reflections on researching the travels of adolescent girls doing drama

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses an international research study that explores the way middle secondary girls manage 'girl-friendly' drama processes. This paper argues that narrative based drama methods offer girls an enactive space to explore their lives through the art form of drama whilst offering opportunities to travel through and play with the workings of culture, gender and identity. Case study narrative research in drama enables the researcher and participants to 'play in the backyard' of their own particular communities, to stage the important stories of real lives in real lived contexts. Through the processes of storying and devising we can invite the lived experiences of participants into the dramatic process and in doing so gain insights into how individuals travel through their worlds. Such an approach can affirm and celebrate the particularities of our lives. The drama classroom becomes an important site for renewal as new ways of seeing, performing and being unfold, where the boundaries between the lived and the possible are blurred, where students use the drama to play at the borderlands of identity and develop a sense of self and gender esteem. The research at the centre of this paper highlights the way dramatic process can give us the space to play in our own backyards and known worlds, whilst venturing to new lands with new vistas and possibilities.

In recent years drama educators and researchers have become interested in tracing the complexity of the learning process in drama and the ways in which drama learning can enable young people to stage and reflect upon their own diverse stories against the backdrop of wider, dominant discourses and cultural iconography. In many countries across the world girls outnumber boys in secondary drama classrooms. It can be argued that adolescent girls are attracted to drama because it offers them the skills, aesthetic space and forums to play with notions and representations of self, gender and culture. They study the art form in order to have access to discourses and modes of representation normally denied them. The study of drama attracts adolescent girls because the nature of the learning experience can permit them to engage in important dialogue about who we are and who we have been, and to be part of the ongoing dialogue about
the nature of human experience and how it can be framed within the art form. Adolescent girls in secondary schools vote with their feet. The paradox is, however, that they are often a silent majority as the drama curriculum and its products are largely fashioned through the lens of masculinity and patriarchy unless the teacher is openly and ethically interventionary in their practice. Girls volunteer to travel on dramatic journeys, but they often travel through the dramas as the ‘other’ or as an onlooker or apprentice to the art form unless the teacher systematically addresses their learning needs. Prescribed secondary drama curricula often direct teachers to give students experience in ‘making’ and ‘performing’ within the art form, however girls’ views, voices and experiences are rarely positioned centrally in these activities. Girls are rarely given a central position in the stories worth travelling through or the role interactions deemed possible. This paper argues strongly for the need to address the particular needs of girls as they learn in secondary drama.

Why Focus on Girls Travelling Through the Dramatic Process?

Despite the fact that women’s voices and perspectives now contribute significantly to theatre theory and practice, drama pedagogues are only just starting to critique the sexual politics at work in the methodologies of classroom drama practice (Nicholson, 1995, 1996). Gender awareness has yet to fully inform the way drama teachers approach role-play, storying, text and performance. In my experience, it would seem drama educators rarely count gender as a real priority in the new ‘inclusive’ drama classroom, suggesting that it is generally seen as part of a bigger landscape of ‘difference’ that any inclusive practice needs to address in the postmodern classroom. All forms of ‘difference’ need to be valued in Drama in Education, however as a drama educator I wonder how this broad promise is used to actually ignore the particular needs of girls doing drama, particularly when they outnumber boys in many Western secondary drama classrooms. In typical drama fashion, I often wonder in ‘what ifs’ … what if the current situation were reversed and boys outnumbered girls in Western secondary drama classrooms, would there continue to be so little interest in the way they learn and what it is they are learning? Despite their numbers, girls are often positioned outside the real action of the dramatic process in the classroom in terms of text, role and performance. Girls are in some ways a silent majority, learning despite us all perhaps! As an educator of girls, my concern is what this translates into in terms of what they learn about being girls as they are continually cast as outsiders in their learning within the art form. This paradoxical situation can send signals to girls that they have permission to ‘play’ in the drama as long as they accept their culturally-defined position as ‘maids in service’ to the dramatic action. Cultural norms and discourses infuse our modes of representation in drama irrespective of our own politics as teachers and individuals. Cultural norms affect the way in which students engage in role in drama, the way dialogue is interpreted and patterned, the way students approach play-making and also the way students experience the learning process. Creating theatre is in itself an act of cultural production. Classroom dramas dwell in, celebrate and sometimes collide with culture. If teachers are aware of the lands they travel through with their students, we can use the dramatic experience to resist and re-author the texts, identity locations and stories of our lives.
The problematic positioning of women in performance and theatre as well as many other fields has been well critiqued (Tait, 1994; Case, 1988; Austin, 1990) yet it would seem that in many secondary drama classrooms girls’ voices, experiences and stories are largely ignored, despite claims of inclusive practice. What are the politics of travel for girls in drama? What drama practices can be developed to help place them at the centre of the art form? What do adolescent girls learn about themselves and others when a ‘girl-friendly’ dramatic process is used?

This paper reflects on a research study that shows that girls still choose to play in such great numbers in drama classrooms, because, almost instinctively, they realise that as an art form, drama has the potential for transformation and for cultural revision; in drama they can stage their own revisions of restrictive codes and sex roles. They sense, even from limited drama experiences, that dramatic processes enable them to participate in important dialogue and practices that could empower them as cultural agents. If adolescent girls in our contemporary post-feminist classrooms can recognise their right to a central position in our dramas, why has drama praxis been slow to adapt to their needs? What are the politics of travel in our drama journeys as teachers and as researchers?

Drama matters to adolescent girls, more than we teachers care to realise. Historically women have been denied access to the stage and its texts. This has been altered over the last century with increased women’s involvement in theatre and we now accept women playwrights and female perspectives and representations on stage. In some countries, secondary drama students may be lucky enough to study female playwrights and directors. However if you were to ask any teacher in a Western drama classroom who teaches mostly girls, they will confirm the daily struggle to find materials, methods and texts that represent the complex terrain that is female experience within the art form we are teaching. This field is limited; this is territory that is still on the margins of the mainstream in drama education as well as in theatre. Both fields tend to favour masculine stories and forms of representation in drama. Some drama educators like myself, try to respond to this ‘girl-less’ desert in secondary drama by reworking existing methodologies to include girls’ voices and stories in the territory that is set for travel in the drama classroom. Austin’s powerful call to action regarding dramatic criticism should, in my view, also be extended to drama educators, to notice the ‘absences, the silences and the short-changing of women and girls’ in Drama in Education (1990, pp. 1–2). The research at the heart of this paper suggests that there is an urgent need to find ways to redress the absence of female voices, stories and perspectives in drama classroom practices if we are to aim to be truly inclusive.

Such issues informed my decision to engage in practice-based research with a girl focus. My purpose was two-fold: to explore a ‘girl-friendly’ approach to dramatic process and performance, and to see how such an approach would engage and impact two different groups of adolescent girls, in different countries and school contexts. As practice-based research, it is also a teacher’s narrative, documenting a teacher’s journey from good intentions to ‘play in the backyard’ of the secondary drama classroom to the realisation that the game of drama-learning can reveal more complex terrain at the borderlands where selves, gender, culture and experience inform the story-making both inside the drama and in continuing life stories as well. The research raises some
important questions for practice. How do we invite transformative learning into the drama classroom (Freire & Shor, 1987; Shor, 1992; Giroux, 1992; Doyle, 1993; Weiler, 1988)? Who is given permission to travel on such important journeys? How do we guide the art-making and meaning-making in ways that respect and value difference and intersubjectivity? How can we embark on drama journeys that matter when the secondary drama curriculum largely favours skills and knowledge of the dramatic arts? How can we find ways of working that really value the knowledge and needs of adolescent girls? I do not claim to know through two case studies what all girls do or experience; I would not suggest these two small groups somehow represent the category of ‘girl’. My research reflects upon what these particular girls did, wrote and said in their particular backyard travels through a narrative play-building process. In my view, their voices and experiences are strong enough to stimulate discussion about who has access to the drama experience, whose art is deemed to be valuable and where practice might need to change in response to girls’ drama needs.

Girls Need Drama

In researching adolescent girls devising drama, I have found that drama as a subject mattered much more than I had previously realised as a classroom teacher. Studying drama can be personally challenging, more demanding than any other area of the curriculum because it requires individuals to stretch their known worlds; through drama they are able to take a closer look at what happens in their own backyard and use the fiction of the drama experience to travel to new worlds where the texts, playing spaces, symbols and roles are shaped by the imaginations of the participants. Learning in drama requires participants to rely on their own personal knowledge systems and resources to fuel dramatic processes. In my opinion, girls are rarely invited to share their knowledge and resources in the broader curriculum of secondary education. What is more concerning is that even when teachers aim for inclusive practice, girls’ worlds and stories can remain hidden and untapped in the drama classroom. The majority of the students in my case studies in two different countries confirmed that drama offered strong and rewarding learning experiences, unlike any other part of the curriculum. Throughout the first case study data was gathered from the participating students in the form of reflective journals where the girls wrote about their learning experiences, tracing each step in the devising and performance process. In order to get a sense of the long-term outcomes of the project, the girls were also surveyed 3 years after the project occurred. After leaving high school one senior student remembers the way drama gave her a sense of critical agency:

I can say without fear of exaggeration that Drama was my saviour in high school. Had it not been for Drama I would probably have been stuck in the safe little world of English and Modern History, bombarded with work but never truly challenged. Drama not only encouraged but forced me to develop and criticise myself and my beliefs. While so much of high school is based on memorising information and the honing of set stock skills, Drama forced me to come to conclusions of my own. Naturally it goes without saying that
Drama also provided me with a creative outlet. (Celina, 2001, 3 Year Survey, response written 3 years after the case study was conducted)

Trisha highlights the sense of personal engagement that was a necessary part of drama learning. For this student, such a sense of comfort in the escape of drama has been hard to match now she has left school and stopped studying drama formally:

Drama was my escape at high school ... it was a very unusual subject; very introspective and when everything else is just regurgitating books (or program code!) to improve in drama is a very personal journey. So it was difficult, but personally it’s probably where I felt, and still do feel, the most comfortable. (Trisha, 2001, 3 Year Survey)

The multiple voices, layers, locations that infuse dramatic processes are, in my view, the same qualities that attract adolescent girls in their droves to study drama. (In the NSW Board of Studies statistics for Drama at School Certificate, Preliminary and Higher School Certificate levels in years 10–12, 1992–2002, girls consistently represent over 70% of the candidature.) Perhaps this also in some way contributes to the absence of boys in secondary drama classrooms, however boys’ drama experiences are not the focus of this particular study. There is a growing interest in drama research into the ways in which masculinities and gender codes impact the way boys engage in the art form (Nicholson, 1999; McDonald, 2000). As gendered subjects, boys are positioned differently to girls within the learning experience in drama. One might also suggest that the restrictive gender codes that adolescent boys learn and experience seriously limit their capacity to participate fully in secondary drama. Girls, it seems, are drawn to drama at a secondary level. My own research with adolescent girls would suggest that the multi-dimensionality of the learning process in drama offers a challenging landscape for girls to travel through as they develop a sense of identity and gender in complex social times. Dramatic process offers them opportunities to play with possibilities and ambiguities in classroom dramas and school-based performances. Carol Gilligan’s research into girls’ psychology highlighted the way girls’ identity development comes under siege in adolescence where girls experience an acute relational crisis (1995, p. 201). Her research showed that girls possess sophisticated relational knowledge in pre-adolescence, where they can deftly manoeuvre and understand the dynamics of complex relationships. With the onset of adolescence, however, there comes a crisis, as they move from girlhood to womanhood. The crisis involves a process of silencing, where a girl must either lose her own voice or ‘find herself in frank contradiction with people who have greater power than herself’ (1995, p. 201). For girls, adolescence can be a constant dynamic juggling act as they work to establish and maintain relationships at home and school and position themselves in relation to that struggle. Dramatic process operates at the centre of these colliding forces, where through the art form students can play with various versions of themselves, giving shape to stories individually and collectively, real and imagined. In drama we can stage possible roles, alternative views and personas, we can imagine different ways of interacting, and create new insights into ways of being or performing oneself in the school-based context or beyond. As Clar Doyle suggests, this is important political work we do in our drama classrooms, when we
consider the ‘intellectual, moral and material power we hold over students’ (1993, p. xv). Gilligan’s research may in some way help to explain the large numbers of girls electing to study drama at secondary levels in Western societies. In my view, drama enables girls to exercise their relational knowledge when manipulating roles and contexts, when understanding subtext and layers of meaning in action. In drama, this type of knowledge is suddenly seen as valuable. Perhaps also girls are attracted to the openness of dramatic learning processes, where the opportunity to speak, to question, to be visible and more importantly to create new meanings through action gives girls playful opportunities to rehearse ideas and values and envisage new possibilities and social roles. Their numbers in drama classrooms suggest that the dramatic activities may, in some ways, help girls to work through that relational crisis, so they are empowered to make connections between their drama experiences and their own lives.

The drama itself can also provide a forum for re-discovering voice and arresting that crisis via the safety of ‘performance’ and in the safety of the collaborative learning context (safety in numbers). The girls who shared this research study found that the drama acted as a space for restoring voice. In my study many of the participants found the drama to be a way of speaking plainly and clearly through the performance itself, blurring the boundaries of private selves and enabling selves to come to light in the performative space made for them. Private language and its connected knowing fused with public expression. Celina recounts this performative tension:

[The project] made me realise that my identity as a young woman is dependent on many factors, not just my own will. I remember having to stand and say, ‘piss’ during one of my pieces and my mum asking why it was that the only swear word in the play had to come from my mouth. This was significant because swearing has never been allowed in my house and it was a kind of public display that my sensibilities are different to that of my mum and family. I’m not suggesting that my identity is based on my ability to swear in public, nor that this practice is particularly unique. What I’m saying is that at the time it was confronting for me and made me realise that I am an individual with my own value structure which is no less and no more valid than anyone else … I guess the project opened the door for me to express myself as an independent young woman while at the same time endowing me with the knowledge that I am also a product of a long line of women. (Celina, 2001)

The devised work then acted as a performative space to frame felt and lived experiences in new ways through the connected and reflective processes of storying and enactment.

My Travel Companions

My research focuses on two case studies—one in a big multicultural girls’ school in Sydney, and the other in a large multicultural comprehensive girls’ school in south London. The first study was completed in my own backyard, my own teaching context, tracing the learning through a performance project conducted with a 30-strong ensemble of girls aged 15–17 from various cultural backgrounds, along with their mothers. This
work explored the mother–daughter relationship from a daughter’s point of view. This troupe was a large one, comprised of girls from different year groups and different cultural backgrounds, such as Italian, Lebanese, Chinese, Tongan, Malaysian, Portuguese, Anglo Irish and Anglo Australian. Devising performance was the focus of the work and it used a narrative approach to capture a dramatic snapshot of the group; their views, experiences and relationships in a multi-vocal collective performance. The first study was conducted over a 4-month period, but my teaching and mentoring relationship with those girls has extended beyond that time and school, and into the present. The second case study was much shorter in duration but used a similar methodology. This time my travel companions were a single GCSE class in a girls’ school in southeast London. Like the first case study the group was culturally diverse, but drew from a whole set of cultural backgrounds unfamiliar to me such as Indian, Ugandan, Somalian, Ghanaian, West Indian as well as drawing from the traditionally white working class communities of the area. Unlike the first study, the terrain set for travel in the second case study was foreign to me in a number of ways. I was an Australian and an outsider, and even though I had taught in this school some years before, I was a new and temporary teacher in this context, working alongside their regular class teacher. Unlike the first case study, I did not know these students until the research project unfolded. Hence the more general thematic focus of ‘a girls’ own drama’ gave us all a ‘way in’ to the devising process as we moved from the known worlds of backyards to the borderlands of storying and performance.

Mode of Transport—Narrative Drama

The methodology used blended play-building and performance processes with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a researcher I was drawn to explore the potential narrative offers to classroom drama. Narrative methods tap into the human need to story ourselves and our lives, to make meaning as we construct the complex layers of experience into our ongoing life stories (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). Polkinghorne (1988) and others see narrative meaning-making as central to human existence. The social and human sciences have shown the potential of narrative methods for healing and transformation. Critical pedagogues (Giroux, 1992) question the infallibility of the meta-narratives that inform the way we experience our lives. Drawing on Bruner’s work (1986), Maxine Greene calls for educators to be aware of how narrative constitutes a mode of knowing, a means of making important personal and cultural connections. Greene reminds educators of ‘the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness’ (1995, p. 186). In recent years, narrative inquiry has impacted the field of pedagogy. Narrative inquiry has been used powerfully to reveal the nature and development of teachers’ practical professional and lived craft knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My own interest in narrative focussed on the potential of narrative processes for girls in the drama classroom and also the potential of narrative analysis for drama research.

In drama pedagogy, meaning-making has long been the focus of classroom practice. Process drama structures focus on student engagement in the experience of a story or
investigation of some kind, often exploring the way humans struggle through and experience events, stories or issues. The learning exists in the identification of students with the issues, dilemmas or roles in the drama, and the new awareness that is generated from the group experience (O’Neill, 1995; O’Toole, 1992; Burton, 1991). In drama practices that are positioned in the art form of drama, students learn through making, performing and critically studying the elements of the art form as they relate to self devised or text based work or particular forms of drama. Classroom dramas of all kinds use stories and storying as starting points and pre-texts for enactment and performance. Stories of one kind or another have a central place in the dramatic process; they may initiate the drama or give it structure or fuel the reflective process. The stories set for exploration in classroom dramas are usually fictional, situated in the realm of ‘what if’. In my own teaching I wanted to turn around this basic question to find out what would happen if we staged our own stories? The longer I taught adolescent girls, particularly girls from immigrant backgrounds, the list of questions permeating my own practice grew and grew: whose stories have been denied or bypassed in classroom dramas or in secondary education? Whose realm of experience is worthy of dramatic investigation? Where do teachers allow the journeys of drama to travel? What stories would girls choose to enact if given permission and what do such stories reveal about them as individuals and as a group? What methods would invite them to travel to such borderlands in the first place? How can the drama space create new meanings, new knowledge and renewed stories for adolescent girls?

The teaching method used in this research was a simple play-building process (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995). The first phase of the devising involved playing in the ‘known world’ or the backyard of the group. We played with images and stereotypes within the bigger landscape of dominant perceptions and culture. It was important to explore what we know or inherit about ourselves as girls or women, in a collective sense. These scenes became the common ground to begin the group play. Then the particularities of the girls’ ‘backyards’ were made the focus of the play-building. Personal narratives were gathered from each of the girls (as well as their mothers in the first case study) in spoken, written and photographic forms, which then became the core subject matter for the devising process. The second case study also used memory boxes to generate stories for enactment. After practically investigating the stories using a range of theatrical techniques, the individual girls then directed their classmates in representing selected vignettes from their own stories. The groups aimed to capture in dramatic form the characteristics of each story as told by its teller. Sometimes a naturalistic or self-narration was favoured, while at other times groups looked for non-naturalistic and abstract ways to present difficult material or a composite or collective story as a group. In individual scenes as well as in each whole play, in negotiation, the groups wove and structured their plays into a collective representation of multiple stories in action at the same time. The plays then became dynamic snapshots of these girls in a particular time and place. Both case study groups devised the work with the intention to perform for other girls. They wanted other girls to listen, see, share and reflect upon what the performance offered. For adolescent girls the visibility of performance in drama is crucial in their sense of agency and ownership of the work.
The Politics of Travel in the Drama Classroom

Drama matters in education and it matters particularly for students travelling through adolescence into adulthood. The learning process in drama is unique; it is shifting, complex, dialogic and experiential. It is dangerous because it is ‘messy’, it is hard to map or catch as it happens. The quality and nature of students’ experience in the classroom is vitally important to us as drama teachers. Drama teachers concoct significant experiences for others; we arrange the landscape of experience to be travelled through for the purposes of learning about the art form, culture and selves. For the most part, teachers craft the fiction and select the action. Drama teachers carefully orchestrate a whole range of phenomenological or liminal elements to make our students’ experiences in drama significant. Whether it is crafting a process drama or an investigative lesson in dramatic arts, for the most part, the teacher charts the journey of the drama. The modes of transport, the route, the lands we travel are largely teacher selected and defined. The teacher defines what students need to know before they travel through the drama, what essential tools or skills are to be practised that will assist them in their dramatic travels and what key signposts for understanding are offered along the way. These are some of the questions teachers juggle as they plan the drama curriculum for their students. The elements of the dramatic experience are moulded, shaped and balanced on a daily basis in drama classrooms, largely in collaboration with students. But who is included in the process? The elements of experience that are selected or permitted by the teacher shape the lands our students travel through in their dramas and define the geography of the landscapes they explore. The teacher selects and sanctions the borders to be crossed and plants or introduces the characters to be met along the way.

These classroom journeys, real or imagined, or even journeys that are a bit of both, are important journeys for us all to take one way or another. Often teachers make such selections without questioning the validity of the fictions or drama journeys we choose to enact or without interrogating whose view we privilege in the action of the drama. Often, classroom dramas, either directly or indirectly, reinforce the dominant or meta-narratives of our society. Teachers allow dramas to unfold that tacitly reinforce the status quo by not questioning the aesthetics and iconography that inform our students’ experiences of drama. Because it’s easier, we sometimes take small journeys in our dramas to comfortable places, places our students know well, where they know the terrain and the rules of play, and together we play the range of parts we all know well. Our social roles infuse our role-taking in the drama. And then sometimes our dramas journey to teacher-selected unfamiliar territories, via exotic tours. Because the teacher is the more experienced and more knowledgeable tourist, our students dutifully follow us down the adult-prescribed path. The teacher is usually well pleased to have led an expedition to such exotic places. Such a journey looks ever so good on the curriculum map. But who chooses this journey? Why are students left out of planning the itinerary? What sorts of power dynamics are at work in this drama-teaching scenario? More importantly, what signals does it give our students about their right to own the experience in drama and the places that the teacher believes are worth travelling to? What do our students learn about themselves in such teacher-led journeys? In these
journeys, our students, for the most part, learn to be good tourists—they travel to the main sights, meet a couple of local characters, absorb the basic qualities of the place and then, to a certain extent, return to the comfort of home, largely unchanged by the experience, after engaging in what Morwenna Griffiths (1995) refers to as ‘cultural tourism’. As teachers of such journeys we commit because of the time it has taken us to get the group there. Often the action we have created for them has in fact only lured them to the edge of real adventure—the lure of ‘teacher-created exotica’ is only partly satisfying because even though the lands look new, the same old immovable land masses seem to reappear, perhaps just in different order. We may think we are in new territory, with different postcards, but the same characters and the same vistas still surface in one way or another and the road pans out to that old familiar rhythm. The girls who were the subject of my research were insistent that such tacky tours with teachers would no longer do. They wanted more dangerous adventures in their dramas.

In this research study, I became interested in exploring methodologies that would highlight the connected themes of voice and agency for girls. So often in their formal studies, girls are positioned outside the learning and are almost never the ‘subjects’ of that learning. In my first case study the girls were acutely aware of the importance of ‘owning their own words’:

There were aspects of the project that were confronting for me, namely the ‘owning’ of my own words and ideas. I had never before been given license to offer my own opinion and for it to be treated as valid, and this was a big change for me. (Celina, 2001)

This student was speaking well after the project. What is surprising about this revelation is that such a comment comes from a student who could be described as a school leader, who frequently gave the impression to others that she was an outspoken, confident individual. Within her school context she had proven herself to be an articulate public speaker, a debater and class representative. But here at the end of her secondary schooling she states she had never been given licence to speak as herself, to offer her stories and to have them valued in terms of her own schooling. This student’s reflection on the devising process begs a plethora of questions … how often are girls left out of the dialogue and made to feel subordinate in word and action in secondary drama classrooms? How often is the female voice or perspective absent from the action of improvisations or in process dramas or play-texts or dramatic forms or theatre theories? How frequently are girls’ voices not only ignored but actually never even called for in the classroom, drama or otherwise? Who is permitted to speak and who listens? There are further driving questions for educators that Mimi Orner draws to our attention … why must the oppressed speak? How are they to speak? How is speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined and stylised by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? (1992, p. 76). In drama learning and performance the authors’ voices and perspectives are shaped and embodied through the signs of the art form. As educators we need to be aware of how girls enter and travel through the creative process, so that the drama can open up new insights and possibilities.
The Transformative Power of Staging Our Stories Together

Travelling with girls as they do drama has highlighted for me the importance of consciousness-raising activities in girls education, particularly when the lands we usually ask them to travel to in class are fashioned through the lens of masculinity. There is still a need to work against the grain of what Mary Pipher (1996) refers to as the ‘girl poisoning’ that exists in contemporary culture and media and conversely, to work to build ‘gender esteem’, so that positive models and constructions can be shaped through our classroom practice. This is particularly important in drama-learning where the learning occurs through representation and embodiment of stage action. Girls need more than ever, to see and celebrate different identity constructions in action in their dramas, so that they can approach critically the task of fashioning their own identities in life in relation to dominant discourses. My first case study tried to address this overtly with some success. Not only did the girls feel the drama could stage their own stories but they learned a great deal from the process of enacting others’ stories:

It made me feel that my experiences were simultaneously unique and common to all women. Hearing stories particularly different from my own opened my eyes to alternate ways of living and thinking, which I had not before been really confronted with. As trite as it sounds, the sharing of stories created a strong sense of ‘sisterhood’ in me, which has not really been challenged since. (Celina, 2001)

For girls doing drama it is also important for them to be seen as well as heard. They want to be seen to be managing the art form in skilful and innovative ways. The girls I worked with were excited by the prospect of performing; they wanted their voices to be heard and their peers and other teenagers to see them working with such complex subject matter. Being visibly ‘clever’ and ‘intelligent’ through the performance was crucial to their belief in the project. They also saw the performances as important opportunities to engage their audiences in dialogue about who they were and the complex issues their stories contained. They wanted their audiences to be engaged with the issues and make meanings from what they saw. Not only was performance important for them as actors, but they saw their stories as important for their girl audiences. So the performance helped to initiate important dialogue by making their personal experiences and collective resistance visible. The girls in my first case study wanted their final play to be seen as significant to contradict mainstream views of vacuous girls and their poor art:

It is important that girls see issues affecting themselves presented in the public sphere as valid and interesting issues. So often these issues are marginalised and trivialised by mainstream media, which means that many girls feel isolated and not ‘normal’. Not only is it important for girls to see these concerns physicalised and vocalised, but it is also important for them to see that girls are capable of creating intelligent and professional work. (Celina, 2001)

For these students the qualities of intelligence and professionalism were necessary in the work. These would enable the work to matter in a public context. In the first case
study early on in the devising, some were concerned that the mother/daughter theme was unworthy of investigation, and that the play might therefore be ‘crap’. The students’ lack of belief in their own stories or indeed in the relevance of the stories of women is clearly evident in their concern that the work would automatically be ‘crap’. The girl poisoning they had already inherited was evident to me as a researcher right from the start of the project. Most of the students involved came to think very differently about the worthiness of the subject matter as the project took shape. This was part of the learning process; my task as teacher/researcher was to give the girls access to a range of skills and methods so they could then find the symbols, language and action to represent a girl-friendly landscape on stage.

The students found comedy an extremely useful representational tool when dealing with the more problematic and potentially troubling parts of the dramas. Many of the humorous parts of the plays the girls created were very dark stylistically, which helped the students to address the way dominant discourses dictate what the category of ‘woman’ is and how lived realities work within such a restrictive frame. In this way the drama became a dynamic means of unfixing the restrictive codes of gender and identity—the comedy enabled them to play with troubling experiences that can fashion female experience. Emma identified this as the most confronting part of their final play:

I think it’s beneficial to the audience to see other girls like them in an empowered position on stage ... it’s encouraging to a girl audience to see other girls like themselves, performing something that they can relate to ... it lets girls know they have a voice in theatre and it doesn’t have to be conservative or traditionally done ... [This piece] was confronting because it wasn’t all glorified (motherhood, womanhood, feminism, femininity). The piece was honest and frank and often the truth is confronting and is much easier to ignore or overlook. Humour is said to encompass the most truthful perspectives on life. I think the most humorous moments of the piece were the most confronting ... they forced the audience to see how young women see themselves or how mothers see their daughters ... and allow them to reflect and perhaps understand an alternative way of looking at themselves. I think people do not naturally want to expose themselves to this sort of mental state, because it allows vulnerability and perhaps unpleasant realisation. (Emma, 2001)

The moment you place girls or women together and place them centre stage it is a dangerous business, for both actors and audience. This is unexplored territory in classroom drama. The dramas the girls created in these case studies captured the complexity of their relationships and the vulnerability that impacts their struggle for identity. Drama’s capacity to suspend time and distil the essence of experience in action was clearly a powerful experience for both participants and their audiences.

Girl-Friendly Travel in Drama

This research has signalled some of the ways that personal narrative used within dramatic processes can offer significant and transformative learning experiences for
Some researchers conceptualise the arts in schools as an ongoing conversation, where new meanings can be created and shared (Burton et al., 2000, p. 43). I like to see the form of play-building I use in my research as an enactive form of storytelling, where the personal, inner stories of individuals can be told, but also are enacted in a collaborative process and then in performance shared again with a wider audience. In doing so we create the aesthetic space for stories to be shared but also re-constructed through giving them dramatic shape and order. In seeking out the personal narratives for exploration in drama, we invite the narrative meaning-making of each individual into the learning process of the group. We allow that meaning-making to become visible, to take shape, to be worthy of enactment. The performance that is created in this way becomes a snapshot of the meanings we make at a particular moment in our lives, of who we were and are, in a particular time and place, in particular company. The drama can capture momentarily the subject in transition, or as Kristeva (1981) suggests, the ‘subject in process’, for in the process of speaking (and performing), a woman’s subjectivity is constructed in language. The meaning-making is not just a shift in personal understanding, it feeds back into the continuous process of our identity construction, informing who we are after this process of telling and staging our story, because it is enacted in performance it is moulded and shaped, told and embodied, shared and received. It is recognised as significant, in a public domain.

Narrative psychologist Donald Polkinghorne refers to the cognitive process of narrative meaning-making as a way of ‘organising human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes’ (1988, p. 1). For Polkinghorne, one’s sense of personal identity is storied; our self is actually a series of recollected selves where ‘identity consists not of simply a narrative self that integrates one’s past events into a coherent story … It also includes the construction of a future story that continues the “I” of the person’ (1988, p. 107). We each have our own stories to live by. One story we may tell currently is only a fragment of the full story; it is framed by memory and context and suggests the turns our whole story may take in the future. If we invite our students to use their stories to frame the drama, we invite them to activate that narrative meaning-making process, to organise in story form what is significant for them, as only they see it. By offering these stories as content for drama, others can not only see into the personal narratives of others, but the collaborative process allows the stories to be retold in new and dynamic ways, thereby allowing a kind of re-vision to take place. In the telling and enacting, we can re-story, we can re-invent parts of the story. Now we have stepped into the borderlands of the learning experience. My research has revealed that the nature of girls’ engagement in the creative process in drama is far more complex than first thought. They play with social selves and fantasy selves as they construct and negotiate with others to create the drama. The dramatic action becomes a staged conversation they have with themselves. This form of drama dynamically recalls lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) and helps them make meaning as they narrate and stage it as a piece of action. In this way the drama becomes part of the process of shaping smaller stories into students’ larger more unified life stories. The performance and reception of those enacted stories continues that dialogue further for each participant—the play from the classroom becomes part of the ongoing storytelling and meaning-making of life for girls.
Drama Teacher as Tour Guide—Some Implications for Practice

Kathleen Berry (2001) reminds us of the need to see dramatic process as a powerful means to explore both personal and dominant perspectives, to suspend cultural and personal discourses in action in the moment, to stage and reframe moments, experiences, beliefs and the complexities of life—to counteract conservatism that flows through a lot of mainstream contemporary theatre practices, as well as plays for and by teenagers in schools. Drama teachers need to be clear about how each drama piece reflects and possibly reinforces cultural norms and how teachers contribute to restrictive identity constructions in all aspects of their drama work with girls. It is possible to use dramatic processes to unfix gender codes and reshape what we know about ourselves, to counteract myths and open up the dialogue about who we are and about what is possible. Drama in education can transform self-knowledge and generate new meanings about lives through the art form. Magda Lewis refers to the challenge of feminist teaching to find ‘ways to make speakable and legitimate the personal [and] political investments we all make in the meanings we ascribe to our historically contingent experiences’ (1992, p. 186). This has relevance for drama praxis. As drama educators we need to work towards returning voices to real bodies in real locations, to consider real relationships and use the drama process to help students to be present in their own lives. We need to be vigilant in our wide-awakeness (Greene, 1995), so we can guide worthy, transformative adventures in our own backyards.

My research highlights the need for teachers to be wide-awake to counteract the way girls are rendered silent, passive and maid-like in education and particularly in the dramatic contexts we permit to take shape in our classrooms. Teachers need to begin to cater for girls in their current dominant numbers in drama classrooms by rethinking the politics of how we as teachers lead the learning. My research experiences have flagged up the importance of listening to girls in the key phases of the drama journey, and of yielding the authority and knowledge to them as they travel through the art-making process. A feminist approach to drama in education requires a significant re-negotiation of the teacher’s position in leading the learning. I have written about this elsewhere (Hatton, 2001, 2002). In terms of practice there are some reflections I have begun to make about how teachers might provide strong drama adventures for adolescent girls in drama.

Content

• Teachers need to offer roles, pre-texts, stories and contexts that stretch, expand, challenge the norms, language and modes of representations in dominant discourses of power, or at least ones that allow for critical analysis of these.
• What roles are presented and why? How are they enacted? How do we investigate the ways in which discourses impact language and the body in drama? What signs are being used? Whose perspective is privileged in the drama and how? How does fictional role-play relate to our social role-play in everyday life? How do we create a gender-sensitive aesthetic space in drama?
Skills

- There needs to be a more expansive approach to the way girls learn drama skills—what is possible and what is awarded within the classroom and school, so there is a continual crossing of performative boundaries so that new vistas are possible. More attention needs to be given to the way girls select and enter into role and the relation this has to their continuing identity formation as situated beings.
- Girls need to be encouraged and supported to take risks ... especially at a time of crisis in adolescence. How do we invite them in particular to make meaning in drama? Do we, as teachers, understand the politics that impact meaning-making for girls? Teachers need to understand the power of drama to reveal and reconfigure subjectivity and enhance identity formation, and understand the importance of the cultural forces that impact the development of girls. These forces are enacted and sanctioned daily in drama classrooms all over the world.

Process

- There is a need to use more inclusive, girl-friendly processes, so they are not the ‘other’ or strangers to themselves. We need to encourage girls’ authorship and ownership of the drama journeys we take in the classroom, allowing them to collaborate, negotiate and lead from within the creative process.
- Teachers need to notice the silences and when these occur in the classroom context. Drama teachers need to value the talk of girls and find ways to listen to girls. They need to be encouraged to participate in the storying. The dramatic processes used need to harness girls’ capacity for multi-layered conversation, so their language patterns are made recognisable in their dramas. Teachers need to value the personal, bodily and relational knowledge girls bring to the dynamics of role and context, so it can be utilised in the learning process. (Most are far cannier than we like to realise.)
- There is a need to develop dramatic processes that explore and frame the diversity of women’s experiences of life on stage (roles and contexts). There is a need to find and use symbols that reflect women’s lived experiences of the world and relationships.

From a teacher’s point of view this research suggests we need to find open structures for classroom practice that include, invite and value different voices, different values and different life experiences, that respect and support students as they craft their life narratives through the dramas and outside them. The dialogue in and out of role that is generated as we listen, frame and perform is important; it can be life affirming and life changing. As teachers we travel alongside our students as they make small or epic journeys in drama. We can guide their selection of route and help their understandings of the landscape to emerge. We help to pack the personal backpack they take on their drama journeys and the journeys of their lives. The drama experiences we share with our students can allow them to recreate and possibly experience moments of epiphany, to imagine new chapters in their own continuing life stories. We can, through the dramatic action, focus the storying on individual or collective stories, hold time, place and characters in the moment so that we invite meaning-making; we can deconstruct
cultural iconography and subvert the masculine value systems we inherit. In the drama frame our students can blur the boundaries of self and play with possible selves. This is serious play for adolescent girls. The dramas that girls create matter beyond what is laid down as ‘essential learning’ in prescribed drama curricula. What they offer for play-making, what they choose and what they do, and why, are all important to the way they manage the journeys of life where personal narratives are played out and constructed in relation to dominant social narratives. When we add the issue of performance this opens out the significance of the performative dialogue even further, offering new possibilities for connection, interpretation, for understanding and community. What girls perform and who for is also more important than we sometimes think as teachers. For adolescent girls, the boundaries between the performance of roles in drama and life are often blurred; the social self informs the choices they make in the drama as well as outside it.

Revelations in Our Own Backyards …

For me, the most interesting journeys worth taking are those that explore the familiar, the particularity of our lives. Here we can find whole new landscapes, to use the Aussie vernacular, ‘right in our own backyards’. In my experience, educating girls in these complicated times, it is more important than ever to rediscover the treasures we have tucked away in the clutter of our own backyards. We need to find the places we know as individuals just as exotic as the far off destinations of our programmed drama journeys, so that we begin to see our own backyards as worthy destinations for our own home-grown adventures. If we allow the drama to dwell in our own backyards as we experience them we can notice and celebrate our differences; what we do, what we like and what we find ourselves in conflict with become part of such important backyard dramas. We can craft a drama that interrogates the games we play in our own backyards and the cultural discourses that inform them. We can begin to see our own backyards as complex but changeable, and perhaps, through the drama, feel empowered to challenge traditional social narratives and norms (Nicholson, 1996). Gallagher argues for drama in education as a place for imagining possibilities:

The point of drama education is not to transmit a particular ideology or to leave unchallenged the things we think we believe, but to see anew, understand ourselves more fully, expand our thinking, and understand how that thinking has been shaped by our social positions. It is an opening-up process that must, at all costs, leave open the possibilities of alternative ways to see or hear or live the story … It is one means of dismantling seductive, stereotypical images, of resisting the limited and limiting discursive and aesthetic representations of self/other. (Gallagher, 2000, pp. 82–83)

Adolescent girls, it seems, seek out drama in order to play with such possibilities. Travelling to landscapes that are both familiar and unfamiliar to classroom tourism can be transformative for students and teachers. Possibly, such backyard adventures in drama can give us the vision to see clearly beyond our own fence line—into other backyards, into the past, into other lands or into a different future.
Many adventure stories have an epic journey at their heart. Repositioning girls to a more central place in drama can be a difficult task, but the journeys they can make, and the borders they travel through and to, require real heroism and courage if the adventure is made possible. Often girls aren’t really ever invited to come on adventures; such journeys are not usually designed for girls, as if educators are only prepared to give them the superficial package tour instead of the real adventure. Today girls have the right to expect more from the learning experience in drama. Women and girls have historically been positioned as ghosts in their own lives, conditioned to doubt their own voices and needs. Historically they have been understudies to the art form of drama. Maxine Greene reminds us to notice ‘the young girls who have hesitated (out of embarrassment, out of lack of confidence) to consult their own ways of knowing’ (1995, p. 191). It is time to find methods in drama that restore knowledge and voice and connect women. I wonder whether it is ethical for educators to continue to deny them their own educational or dramatic adventures. The girls who travelled with me in this research are not going to be satisfied with artificial teacher-selected journeys or the journeys of men. Nor will they be satisfied with drama journeys where all the agency and courage required is automatically the realm of men and they are restricted to roles as trusty servants. Girls want the ‘real McCoy’, the real adventure of doing drama that comes from being central to and in the drama. More importantly, they want to use the drama in order to be present in their own lives.

Notes


References


