

POINTS AND PRACTICE

Environmentalism, stories and science: exploring applied theatre processes for sustainability education

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Introduction

The 2012 *Research in Drama Education* (RiDE) themed edition on Environmentalism (Heddon and Mackey 2012) and the response by Forgasz (2013) draws attention to some of the issues and dilemmas that arise when considering how to work with Applied Theatre practices to explore human/environment relationships, climate change and sustainability issues. This response shares initial findings from a pilot programme that has involved undergraduate students participating in a study abroad programme with a particular focus on sustainability education. Some of the dilemmas faced include balancing the provision of 'scientific' and environmental learnings within site-specific experiences and those that aim to provide a sense of connection to place and environment. Other issues for consideration include the purpose of using fictional frames when the real-life frame is already quite powerful. This is particularly so when working with students who are not drama or arts students. Issues familiar to educational theatre in general also emerge, such as audiences becoming critical of and alienated by work that appears to be too didactic. These issues are discussed in relation to models and learnings from a pilot programme that drew on applied theatre practices to develop a sustainability education programme for tertiary students. It has provided some possibilities for further development and investigation and ongoing consideration of the role of applied theatre processes for environmental awareness and sustainability.

Sustainability, environmentalism and applied theatre

In the RiDE themed edition on Environmentalism edited by Heddon and Mackey (2012), they repeated concerns raised by Kershaw (2007) and Bottoms (2010) that the 'Applied theatre sector has been relatively slow to pick up the ecological baton' (Bottoms 2010, 121) and developing ways to deal with it. They do make the point later in the article that while there may be limited research about this field, in fact there has been a growing body of theatre work and drama practice that has picked up the baton. This includes previous applied theatre studies cases and also site-specific processes including workshop weekends and environmental walks (Allen and Jones 2012; Bottoms 2011; Heddon and Mackey 2012). A number of books have explored different approaches to drama and theatre practice involving environmental concerns such as

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performances and participatory workshops exploring climate change, human/nature relationships, performative walks and so on (Arons and Mays 2012; Kershaw 2007).

Some of the points raised by Forgasz (2013), especially in regard to her struggle to overcome her disinterest in all things 'science' actually raises a very important matter and one we have also been deliberating over. She is much more at ease with work and ideas that focus on considering her connectedness to environment and other people and life forms. That seems to be an area some of the other writers of the special RiDE issue also feel sits more readily with drama and theatre practice. This type of work is important and potentially offers the pathways to empathy building. The notion of 'inquiry' and informed scientific understanding cannot be sidelined, however, and so the challenge therefore is to find ways to meld these two realms together in a valid and credible form or approach.

The specific pilot study context and group

We offer an example of how human–environment connections can be fostered by embedding Applied Theatre techniques in a global education programme. This is based on the development of a programme that has been offered as a component with the University of Georgia, Athens (UGA) Global Programs in Sustainability (see www.DiscoverAbroad.uga.edu). UGA offers interdisciplinary, faculty-led, study abroad programmes for students from various study majors to destinations throughout the South Pacific, including south-east Queensland in Australia. Students who enrol receive academic credit towards their degree and engage in a learning programme, which typically includes educational travel, field trips, active participation, lectures, seminars, and applied exercises. Pre-departure and post-departure assignments are required, as well as a number of assessment items submitted throughout their time abroad including oral presentations, essays and exams.

These UGA programmes feature active experience and encounters with different natural environments. The teaching and learning components are often based on fairly traditional models of delivery, with guides and speakers presenting information to students, who engage in discussion to elaborate on ideas. The Noosa programme has been developed to provide students with an engaged learning experience within the UNESCO endorsed Noosa Biosphere Reserve (see www.noosabiosphere.org.au) and has capitalised on the expertise of one of the authors who is a drama educator and the other who is a sustainability educator. The Global Programs in Sustainability staff saw the potential to develop more innovative pedagogical models, and were open to developing a model drawing on approaches and techniques from Applied Theatre including scenario-based work, role-play and storytelling. Subsequently, we have developed and trialled a four-day programme.

A major consideration in the planning for this pilot has been how to combine the 'science'-based learning required by their university courses and the experience of place. It has also been difficult to work out how 'fictional' aspects could complement the existing strongly experiential component. In a more typical learning context, the incorporation of role-play and applied theatre processes might be used to create an engaging 'life-like' context that might increase the interest and involvement of the participants. In a situation like the study abroad programme, participants are being exposed to stimulating natural environments and a range of people who have different perspectives, so what can the addition of fictional frames available through

applied theatre and role-play contribute? Are the outcomes that emerge for participants different in any perceivable way?

Considering a different framework – Scientific Simulation Investigations (SSI)

A further addition to developing the 'Noosa model' was introduced by the second author who had experience with an approach he had used previously, known as Scientific Simulation Investigations (or SSIs). This model had many features similar to applied theatre processes such as role-play or the 'town meeting'. This includes the creation of a life-like (but fictionalised) scenario with the development of roles that represent different perspectives and the need for participants to engage with a dilemma and propose solutions. The SSI process had been trialled in several other previous programmes and locations (such as bio-prospecting in Antarctica). The Noosa model could therefore be designed using knowledge from these earlier debate-oriented learning experiences.

The SSI model was seen as having the potential to nurture learning by helping students understand the ways to present, listen to, and critically evaluate and respond to scientific arguments underpinning community decisions (Hodson, 2011). Moreover, by engaging in SSI debates in safe, shared simulated environments, students are able to recognise that differences of opinions arise from different interpretations of data and theoretical perspectives.

The pilot programme

Cognizant of the aforementioned discussion, the pilot programme that has since been developed has had a number of components – including site-specific and classroom experiences. There is an overarching scenario and dilemma 'The Noosa Spit Development' that frames all the experiences and this concerns a fictional (but historically valid) proposal to build a marina development on the Noosa Spit. The applied theatre style components include students experiencing a type of invisible theatre, meeting characters with different perspectives in context as they walk from the Noosa River to the Noosa National Park and their final participation in a scenario-based role-play (or SSI) at the conclusion of their three- to four-day experience. The programme has been offered now three times, and components have varied but generally include the following:

- Drive to Laguna lookout to be able to get a sense of place and geographic features including the river, the river mouth, the woods, national park and different types of development.
- A classroom-based introduction to the Noosa Story. This includes showing historical images of the development of Noosa spit and woods.
- The SSI is introduced and the roles allocated. Short descriptions of a wide range of roles have been created including residents, business owners, environmental groups, community groups and so on.
- Students spend half a day at a market area interviewing people about their opinions regarding development in Noosa.
- Students spend most of one day engaged in the 'walk'. This goes from the mouth of the river, through Noosa Woods, down the street near the main beach and to the National Park. A central feature of this walk is meeting

several 'characters' embedded within the landscape. The characters interact with students playing particular attitudes towards development in Noosa.

- Preparation for the SSI – which includes students accessing folders of articles and readings about the history of Noosa, its environment, ecologies and development issues.
- The SSI presentation – six students are enrolled as regional councillors who will make a decision about the development. Other students present their perspectives in role. They each have two minutes to present and one minute to answer questions. After the presentations the councillors have time to debate and make their decision, this is then shared with all participants.
- A final debrief asks students to identify issues raised and if their decision would be 'realistic' for this community. They are also asked to consider what alternatives might be possible and applicable in their home contexts.

One of the highlights of the pilot has been the introduction of three character roles. These have been created in collaboration with the people who have played them, who are long-term residents and who are very knowledgeable about the area, two of whom are drawn from a local theatre group. The characters present information but also emphasise different perspectives. The three characters we have worked with to date include: a fisherman who the students encounter in Noosa Woods and talks about the history of the Spit and previous proposals for development; a business owner who students meet at the end of Hasting St and believes a new major development is needed to kick-start the local economy; and finally, a surfer in the National Park who talks about the history of the park and why it is special.

Reflections on trials to date

More formal data is being collected and analysed, but in the interim we have recorded verbal feedback from students who have been asked to comment on what they liked or did not like and what could be developed further. Some key points students have made include:

- They valued the interaction with local people ('real' and in role) as a significantly different departure from other work.
- They enjoyed learning 'on location'.
- They felt they had learnt a lot and felt committed to Noosa even though they had only been on location for a few days.
- They enjoyed the interactive aspects of this module and this type of learning.
- They found presenting their learning through the SSI presentation was a much more interesting form of assessment than writing an essay or doing an exam.

In general, it seems that the combination of the classroom-based and site-specific experiences works well. The power of experiencing the natural environment is enormously important, however, and meeting the characters *in situ* makes what students are learning very immediate and relevant. It also helps frame their experience, causing them to look at what they see through different eyes. Finally, it

is the requirement for them to take on role and argue a case that ties the experience together and takes the connection to another level again.

The trial continues, with two more groups visiting this summer, and after that we intend reviewing the programme and developing a new iteration. The dilemmas raised at the start of the article have not disappeared, they still remain, but we feel that we have gone some way to developing a model that meets the twin demands of learning that is 'scientific' and rigorous, and also connected and empathetic.

Notes on contributors

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