

## Rehearsing for Change: Freire, Play, and Making It Real<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the process and impact of building an ethnodrama in a Higher Education classroom. It examines the ways in which play, image theatre, and improvisation are used to invite students to explore their individual and collective narratives in order to develop professional identity and personal agency. This work is based on Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. An example class in which students analyse the key concepts of privilege, opportunity, knowledge, democracy and education is described and located within the process of building the ethnodrama. Student responses to the experience of participating in building an ethnodrama are examined. In particular, their perceptions of the enactment of change in the process of making the play, and*

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<sup>1</sup> This work has ethics approval from Victoria University, Melbourne, number 0000024773. Students' names have been changed; dates accompanying student names indicate the year of the student's study. Participating students signed consent forms.

*playing within the play, highlight their understandings of themselves as changed people, and their sense of collaborative and community empowerment.*

## **SETTING THE SCENE**

Drama is used as a tool to introduce students to each other, and to ideas, in the introductory unit, Academic and Professional Learning, as it is taught in the Diploma of Education Studies at Victoria University, Melbourne. It is embedded in the practice and the assessment for the unit; but it is also developed to critique systems and find alternative ways of engaging with learning. We have taught this unit in this way since February 2016. On average 200 students undertake this unit each year. They learn about the processes, expectations and culture of higher education, through Drama. Between 2016 and 2019 the teaching team conducted a research project, gathering data from student journals, reflections, and assessments, to investigate whether this change in practice—teaching a traditional ‘introduction to university’ style of unit through Drama—made a difference to the type or quality of student learning, and the students’ engagement and motivation within the course. We have now read and analysed more than 1000 student journals (these captured students’ responses from the first session to the last week of class), and close to 4,000 additional reflections, written in response to specific prompt questions. I will draw on those journals and reflections to investigate the student experience of this unit. This paper is a narrative account of the experiential change that students report while studying the unit, and asks what we did as teachers to facilitate and support that change.

In this paper I will describe our aims in the unit; outline a class which introduces students to Freire; and narrate ways students then develop their learning into ethnodrama. Almost all students observe changes in themselves, their communication, their collaborative processes and their connections to learning through their experiences in building the ethnodrama. I seek to untangle whether it is the process of building an ethnodrama which influences students’ thinking, their ways of engaging with learning, and their perceptions of themselves and each other. In this context, it is important to note that claims for ‘transformative’ experiences through applied theatre projects have

been challenged by Snyder-Young (2013) and Balfour (2009). They question how 'change' can be measured or understood. Snyder-Young asks whether theatre is a powerful enough tool to generate the transformative change that is often claimed, or whether this is primarily an affective response which dissipates after the performance. The students in this unit do claim to experience change in themselves and in their relationships with the world. I will explore whether it is something in the process of the unit that prompts students to report these changes. Can we identify moments and experiences where shift in perception of self and others takes place? And if that is possible, can we also identify what factors impacted on any shift?

***Let me first tell you a little about our students.***

About 90% of our students enter our course because they want to be school teachers but have not met the minimum requirements to enter the Bachelor of Education (the remaining 10% want to become Early Childhood teachers, teachers' aides, or are unsure of their plans). Many of them have experienced disrupted educational backgrounds. Due to family circumstances, migration, social environments, or disengagement, most of our students have had a negative or broken experience of schooling. Most are also the first in their family to attend university, and many speak English as an additional language (Gilmore, Welsh & Loton, 2018). Our course is a pathway into the Bachelor, depending on the students' grades, and their success in a Federal government test of Literacy and Numeracy. Our first few classes focus on students' motivations for doing the course. Overwhelmingly, they provide two main reasons they want to be teachers: to be the teacher they never had; or, to be the teacher they had once, who cast a light of inspiration across their lives (student reflections, 2017). Reading their reflections, in class discussions and activities, and in their ethnodrama, it is apparent that most of these students come with real strength in critiquing a system in which they had only limited success: they have the capacity to make insightful observations of a broken system that replicates itself. They come with the imagination for something better. They are excited by the idea that their actions as teachers can create change, and they are seeking a bridge between their identity as students and the agency and knowledge to act as teachers.

Students in this course are often initially resistant to risk-taking. Lack of experience in the Arts means that they don't feel confident they can get good grades in arts-based assessments. They would rather safely gain a pass, than take what they perceive as a high-stakes risk (student journals, 2016-2020). Consequently, the teachers in this unit are carefully selected. They are all arts practitioners as well as academics. They bring their arts practice to the classroom, explicitly modelling risk-taking in their teaching. Part of this is the process of releasing control to the students. It is important that the teachers work with the students in these classes, acknowledging that they are capable and can express their own stories and build their own narratives (Glarin, 2020). Teachers ask the students to share an aspect of their story that responds to the questions: why me? why here? why now? They step back as far as possible while students struggle, negotiate and massage a narrative into place. Sometimes this narrative is the development of a single story. More often, it is the conglomerate of several stories, built on common themes and tropes from within the class, and then reimagined into a dystopia, the future, a fictional location, or relational spaces. Nicholson calls this the triangulation between narratives of identity, of others, and of the drama itself (Nicholson, 2005). The teacher's job is to facilitate the unpacking and contextualising of students' narratives of life and learning, and to prompt and guide the making of these narratives into performance. Our underpinning philosophy as teachers comes from the work of Paulo Freire (1970), and we enact this through many strategies Boal developed for *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979). There are two major challenges. One lies in working with students enculturated to an education system where their 'success' is determined by their ranking against other students (Wright, 2015), and in which there is a separation of mind and body (Robinson, 2006). The other challenge concerns our practice as teachers. Nicholson (2005, p.70) observes that 'narrative structures of workshops are never innocent; they lead the participants' imaginative journey.' The tension between releasing creative control to students, and yet guiding them in the process, leads to ethical considerations of how far we are filtering or influencing their thinking, and what values we are transmitting through this process (Nicholson, 2005; Gallagher, 2014).

In order for students to embrace the making of the ethnodrama, they must be prepared to embody their narratives (Nicholson, 2005).

Consequently, we invite our students to explore the idea that learning that engages students in and through the body opens up possibilities for seeing the world differently; that embodied learning develops skills in problem solving, collaborative thinking and imagination. This unit is carefully scaffolded through games, activities, playing with ways of thinking and communicating, introducing learning theories, class conversations and debates on educational systems and processes, and experimentation with different theatre styles, with the aim of building critical thinking and performance skills sufficiently so that every student can be part of devising, and performing in, the ethnodrama. Early in the unit many students question the use of drama as a pedagogy. However, at the conclusion of the unit students fill in an anonymous, university organised, end of unit survey. In this survey, no student has ever said the unit or the final assessment—the ethnodrama performance—was a waste of time; no student has ever suggested a better way to do the unit. In their journals, every student has commented on the learning that emerged from the experience of the ethnodrama. Can it really be this good an experience? Are they just telling us what they think we want to hear?

## **PLAY AND PLAYING ROLE**

To teach is to perform (Pineau, 2005; Falter, 2016); to perform in the world is to be an activist (Boal, 1998). With this understanding, and with the belief that all actions are political (Mouffe, 1992; Mouffe, Deutscher, Brandon & Keenan, 2001), we invite students to explore what political action means as a future teacher. We place emphasis on confronting the interconnected meanings of the word ‘active’. We invite our students to be ‘active’ in their learning. This is not only an intellectual process, but a physical one. We use embodied learning as our primary pedagogy (Darder, 2016). The students are asked to literally move into learning by ‘acting’, by ‘acting out’, and by being ‘active’ (McLaren & Welsh, 2020). To teach is also to engage politically—every choice as a teacher results in maintaining or challenging the status quo (Sachs, 2003). In the ethnodrama the students play a role; in the classroom they take on a role; as teachers they have a ‘role’ to play in shaping the future. In a previous article, the teaching team for this unit concluded that the students’ engagement in drama games and

their role-playing as students and professionals, facilitates their growing recognition of themselves in these roles, and supports them in finding their identities as learners and as future teachers (McLaren, Welsh & Long, 2020). If that is the case, how does it happen?

Gallagher (2014) argues that drama spaces allow ‘for social relations to be reproduced, disrupted, suspended’ (p. 119). She draws out the ways in which dramatic and improvisational work may bear a relationship to the social imaginary that ‘challenges order’ (p. 120). In drama classrooms, therefore, we might experience both the possible and real simultaneously, and work in the space that lies between the two, as a space of critique. Consistent with this thinking, we have purposefully designed this unit to challenge students to engage with learning at a profound, and what we hope will be, a transformative level. I acknowledge the difficulties of this word: ‘transformational’ (Gallagher, 2014; Balfour, 2009). Notwithstanding, our institution drives an explicitly transformational agenda (Dawkins, 2017). Our student cohort does not come from traditionally privileged groups, and this is particularly the case in this course. The university’s ‘transformational’ claim stems from the provision of tertiary education opportunities for those students usually denied access due to socio-economic, cultural, and geographical restrictions, or due to their secondary school results. As participants in this ‘transformational agenda’, it is important that students understand the ways in which power works in educational constructs. This led us to use Boal’s work as an underpinning for much of which we do in this unit. As arts practitioners as well as academics, the teachers in this unit share a belief system that values the arts. Our students, however, are not drama students, and many of them do not share this belief system. This establishes a potential clash of understandings of the nature and purpose of learning. We need, therefore, to foreground the work of the unit philosophically and also to build drama skills and understanding. We introduce the idea of the ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2016) early, and use Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992) in every class. Each class begins with the invitation, ‘Let’s play’. We use play to develop skills and open conversations, although we do not begin devising the actual performance until just under half way through the unit. The first few sessions of the unit are often tough. In their journals, some students express confusion or concern: what is the point of this? As David writes, ‘I really don’t want to do this play. How does this help us

become a teacher?’ (student reflection, 2018). They are inclined to wonder ‘What on earth am I doing here?’ or dismiss the learning activities as ‘stupid’ (Student journals, 2019). Play is, however, both serious and joyful; it is intrinsically driven; it is process rather than outcome focussed, and it involves active engagement (Rice, 2009). Once we reach adulthood we tend to dismiss play as the work of children; adult play is usually via sport or video gaming and is a distraction from ‘real’ life. In contrast, Boal knew that the way to self-discovery is through play (Boal, 1992). As we enter the middle sessions of the unit, the student engagement with play frequently changes: students begin to comment in their journals that through play they experience both flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and a sense of self actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Bill writes:

Personally, I had a feeling of “self-actualisation” (Maslow 1943). I drew confidence from watching others perform and had a feeling of excitement prior to starting. I felt I came out of my shell a bit. (student reflection, 2018)

It is at this point, almost half way through the unit, that we shift from the concepts and content of the unit to the ways these might be explored and expressed through creating an ethnodrama, developed in groups, based on their educational stories.

In developing their ethnodrama, we encourage students to continue to ‘play’, and to experience the fluidity of the improvised playfulness they engaged in as children (Momeni, Khaki & Amini, 2017; Fleer, 2021). For many students there are two definable challenges: the first is uncertainty about purpose which results in hesitation; the second is a lack of confidence or experience in risk-taking, which results in resistance. We try to address these uncertainties and anxieties with clear explanations of our ideas and aims in inviting students to participate in play, in order to make a play. While this results in the students increasingly taking intellectual risks, the greater risk for many students is social. One particular student, Sally, summed this up, when she expressed concern about how she would look, and how she would be judged by her peers (student journal, 2018). The turning point for Sally came when she sat out to watch others, and she noticed that those students who committed to the process looked far less foolish (in her eyes) than those who did

not. She then pushed herself to commit to playing. She took a significant risk and allowed herself the freedom to fully engage. Her journal reflection on this moment of shift in her understanding indicates that for Sally the experience of playing, and of watching others play, was powerful in shifting her initial resistance to embodied learning. As the unit progressed, Sally explored the idea that learning comes from within the body (Nguyen & Larson, 2015), and that knowledge can be playfully built.

Over time, most students start to see the connections between playing and learning. We talk about what is learnt in our playing. We talk about ‘playing a game’; ‘playing a role.’ We ask: what role will you play in the ethnodrama? What role will you play in this classroom, in your community, in the world?

In building the ethnodrama, we want our students to have theoretical understandings of what they are doing and why, in order to facilitate their sense of self and communal agency. We offer them a range of ways to make meaning in the context of their own lives, and in the context of the world. Through Drama we explore how educational paradigms are constructed, how their ‘roles’ within these paradigms have been constructed by others, and how they can reconstruct these roles through their actions. One of the most powerful classes introduces students to the work of Paolo Freire. We use Augusto Boal’s image theatre (Boal, 1992) as a way into understanding key concepts of knowledge, privilege, democracy, education and opportunity. This two-hour class uses and teaches about constructivist orientations to learning (Bruner, 1996). The aim is to explore the knowledge individuals bring to class, and to acknowledge the knowledge of others by doing rather than by learning about. The purpose of the class is to provide an intellectual and dramatic basis to the work students will do in developing their ethnodrama. On the whole, these students have little experience of drama, and must learn the basic building blocks for making theatre. Their collective story must be uncovered, unveiled and untangled. It takes time to find this collective story in the body of the group.

## **TEACHING FREIRE**

The lesson plan for our class exploring the underpinning concepts of Freire occurs early in the process of developing the ethnodrama. It

provides a jumping-off point for exploring ideas physically, working collaboratively, engaging with new or reconceived concepts, and beginning to work with dramatic skills. It highlights some of our practices in the classes for this unit. This class embraces the knowledge students carry in their bodies, and challenges them to take a chance, engage deeply with ideas, and explore concepts of identity, agency and process. I have chosen to outline this class here, because across the four years during which we gathered data, it was consistently the session in which students claimed to have changed their thinking. Almost all students identified this class as containing a moment where they began to understand both the concept of embodied learning, and the privilege embedded in our education system in Australia. The lesson outline looks like this:

***Let's play!***

**Warm up game:** mirror circle. Everyone in a circle. Each person looks at the person opposite to them and one to the right. Ask people to stand there and not move. However, if the person they are looking at does move, they must exactly copy what they see. It is important to watch very carefully and copy everything they see and hear. If they start to laugh, make sure the laughing is also copied. What happens: each action becomes accentuated as it passes around the circle.

**Purpose:** Observation, noticing change and exaggeration, no one has the power and yet everyone's role is critical—if someone isn't fully engaged, the whole thing ceases; engages the group as a whole.

**Second game:** group think—no talking. An object is called and everyone must contribute, without speaking to making a representation of that object. Objects: pineapple, gorilla, sailing ship, bunch of grapes

**Purpose:** working together; communicating without words; trusting each other; contributing in making something bigger

**Key words for exploration:** Opportunity, Knowledge, Privilege, Democracy, Education

**Main activity one:** The following is an extended activity to explore the meaning of the key words while also introducing image theatre as a teaching and learning strategy.

**Circle images:** Students in a circle, all facing out. Explain that this is so they can't easily see each other—the idea is to reduce their sense of inhibition about this because we are going to ask them to use their bodies to find meaning. Then ask students to find a pose in their bodies that says something about each of the key words.

**Use image theatre strategies to explore each of the key words:**

- How does this word make you feel? —use your body
- Think of a time when this word had specific meaning for you—use your body
- What does the secret part of me say or think about this? Show me in your body
- What do I believe about this? Show me in your body
- Find one position in your body that captures some or all of your feelings and thoughts about this word
- Move from the pose for one word to the pose for the next, as if this is a dance of these words.

This is about connecting experiences, feelings, inherited thinking and personal thinking in order to find meaning and understand how that has been constructed.

**Move the class into five groups**

Each group is given one of the key words to work on. They must devise a series of movements about their word—the aim is to really drill down into what these words mean. By students exploring the word in their bodies they will also discuss and contest their understandings of the word.

Ask them to talk about:

- the ways we use their word
- ways in which we enable or limit people by this word
- ways we apply this word.

After discussion and experimentation, each group shows an image (or a series of images) that captures the essence of the word. They 'perform' their images to the rest of the class.

Watchers (Boal's spect-actors) call out the images they see or words they think of as each group performs their image/images. They can walk around the images and see them from different angles. Initially, they are calling out only what they see. After these ideas run dry, they may also call out what they understand this image to mean. Write their words/interpretations on the board.

Only after all the observations have been made can the class ask the group performing to tell us what they understand the word to mean. This leads to discussion about the shades of meaning in the word.

We do this activity for each of the key words.

**Purpose:** for students to think more deeply about the meaning of the word; to experience affect in response to the word; to experience the body as the site of learning and as the site of knowledge; to stimulate discussion within new constructs for understanding; to purposefully break from traditional definitional understandings of these words; to equip students with an understanding of image theatre.

**Connecting main ideas:** Freire saw content transfer as oppressing citizens because it aims to maintain and sustain privilege. Freire's thinking can be summarised:

- students bring knowledge into the classroom from lived experiences
- students build knowledge together and connect it to world knowledge
- by acknowledging the two ideas above, oppression can be overcome
- knowledge is power (literacy is power), noting that knowledge is socially constructed so power is also socially constructed.

**Main activity two:** The following is to develop understanding on Freire, and to hear his words spoken aloud, with conviction, in the students' own voices.

Give students a collection of quotes from Freire's works (Lyons, 2001).

In small groups students find quotes from Freire connected to the key word they were exploring in activity one.

As a group, students devise a way to declare these words to the others in the class as if they are speaking to 1000 people and trying to win an election. The small group must make an image to support the words—placards can be used; any form of doing this is okay—one voice, many voices; one action, many actions—but it must include declaring the words and embodying the words.

**Debrief:** a conversation drawing out meaning and reflecting on the nature and purpose of the class

- What does it mean to know?
- How does enacting impact learning?
- How does embodying an idea influence our understanding of that idea?
- How does affect impact learning?
- Does acting something out give us control over its meaning? If so, how?
- What are the aesthetics of image theatre? How do bring aesthetics into our playing and learning?

The introduction to Freire, outlined above, gives students the opportunity to explore theoretical thinking through the body, while also synthesising, problem solving, contesting ideas, and creating. Students use language, but move beyond it, to mediating understanding through their bodies (Kang, Mehranian and Hyatt, 2017). This activity asks students to learn with, and through, the whole body, aware of the power of place, space and self. In doing so, it also challenges accepted ways of engaging with learning at university, and accepted views of what teaching and learning are. By the action of participation

in this class, students are at once learning about the underlying principles that maintain privilege, and challenging those same principles. They experience their capacity to change educational constructs through the process of doing in the class. The students take the learning from this class and apply it to their emerging ethnodrama—contemplating the social, educational and cultural structures that have supported and hindered their learning through life.

## **THE ETHNODRAMA**

There are about 200 students, divided into eight classes, in each student cohort for this unit. Each class devises and develops their own ethnodrama based on the prompts: Why me? Why here? Why now? Through drama games, storytelling, story writing and improvisation over about 25 hours of classes, each class group discovers the common and distinctive elements of its story as a group, and of the stories of individuals within the group. The development of their stories as dramatic narrative is intertwined with an increasing awareness of learning theories. Such learning theory is introduced by teachers, but explored by students, through activities, conversation, self-observation, and metaphors (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2014). As they develop the story that underpins their ethnodrama, students often seek to express their meaning through symbol. As a teacher, I watch as they take ownership of ideas and weave and unweave narratives of empowerment and disempowerment. So doing, students begin to ‘trespass’ in the spaces of learning that have often previously been closed to them, or which they have previously rejected: personal agency in educational choices; images of themselves as capable learners; self-determination; and emotional responses to learning, to name a few. My observations, and my reading of student reflections, suggests that the interaction of this ‘trespass’, embodied learning, and critical thinking generates a new freedom in the way that students identify themselves as learners. It reminds me of Boal’s words: ‘If we do not trespass in this we can never be free’ (Boal, 2008, p. xxii).

Aesthetics are also addressed as part of the process of communicating meaning. Sallis (2007) writes at length about the processes of developing an aesthetically pleasing ethnodrama, and we draw upon his thinking in working with our students. Consequently,

beautiful, and often deeply moving, stories emerge of the struggle to engage with education, the desire for learning, and the aspiration to bring about change in the world.

Towards the end of the unit a festival of ethnodrama occurs where each class performs their story to the other classes. For many students this is the first time performing before a large audience; for some students it is the first time performing in front of anyone at all. This movement into performative action appears to provide another critical moment for a shift in students' self-perceptions. While developing the ethnodrama, students tend to worry about narrative sense and the quality of their performance. They expect other groups to 'judge' them and they worry that they will not come up to standard. One of the students, Evan, writes in his journal, 'There was a general feel that "we weren't going to be as good" as some of the other classes' (student reflection, 2018). This is the uncertainty with which most students enter the performance of the ethnodrama. The true meaning-making for this experience occurs during the performance itself, when many students realise that their success in this task is reliant on collaboration, and that the stories of different groups are not in competition, but together form a narrative of identity. David, who is quoted above questioning the purpose of the play, concludes his reflections, after the performance, with a very different mindset:

All our dreams link together and it was great to see how many people share the same goal; we might not all want to teach the same subject or teach at the same school, but we all want to educate the future generations. (student reflection, 2018)

He identifies what we might call a 'community of practice' (Williams, 2013) that has been developed through the ethnodrama process. This is a space of shared ideas, enacted and critiqued, in the process of shared doing. In this, David demonstrates a shift from the idea of students being in competition with each other, or judging each other, to sharing values and aspirations. Moreover, he identifies the way in which shared goals and values create bonds that support embodied learning, and the individual empowerment that results (Pettit, 2019).

Analysis of student journals tells us that the doing of the ethnodrama simultaneously enacts learnings about collaboration, and creates a shift in students' understandings of their own experiences.

The students use a range of vocabulary and expressions to describe this shift—but the sense is clear: they are identifying something in the doing of the performance which marks a change in their sense of self as both learner and social being. The acting of the play becomes part of the change these students aspire to. After the performance students articulate the experience as one of empowerment and agency derived from the engagement of the body in action. Overcoming fear is a significant part of this. Emma writes:

I also think that it helped me that when I saw the other people performing then I was just like “I can do it” and you need to do it because if you want to become a teacher then you would have to leave the fear of talking in front of a lot of people. (student reflection, 2018)

Emma took confidence from watching others; their risk-taking provided her with some impetus to shift in her sense of identity from student-doing-a-play to teacher-who-needs-to-talk-in-front-of-others.

Shelley writes about her feelings prior to the performance:

The performance was really daunting.... Everyone was feeling really nervous about performing in front of 200 people.

However, her journal entry after the performance concludes:

Coming off stage from the performance I felt great. I was relieved and really proud that we were able to come together as a group and give it our best. It was a great reflection of who we are as a group. (student reflection, 2018)

I find it interesting that Shelley’s reflection here does not focus on her personal performance, but on the performance of the group. In contrast, Miriam takes this lesson very personally:

Being a part of this play allowed me to have some personal control and boosted my intrinsic motivation to embrace my overall learning. (student reflection, 2018)

She identifies agency and empowerment as significant outcomes of

the play experience for her.

As a teacher guiding students through this process of playing, exploration, and community building, to performance, I see the most important skill developed through ‘playing’ as the capacity to improvise: to listen to and connect with others; to be responsive; and to direct action through interaction, rather than to be submissive to an imposed action. These are also themes that the students pick up. However, the most broadly expressed value from the play, according to the students, is the sense of belonging, and the creation of shared identity that emerges from it.

## CONCLUSION

The question of whether, and how, change occurs, is fraught. As teachers our aim is to introduce students to university study and challenge their expectations of what Education is. We articulate that the unit is designed to support them to become more confident as learners, and to challenge some of their ideas of how learning occurs. Snyder-Young questions the degree of change that can take place in response to theatre experiences, writing that ‘Mainstream culture is bigger and more powerful than theatre’ (Snyder-Young, 2013, p.136). As teachers we do not indicate that ‘change’ is an aim or an outcome of their participation. Nonetheless, students tell us in their journals that they have experienced ‘change’ (frequently they call this ‘growth’) through the process of doing the play. They talk about observing changes in themselves around confidence, self-awareness, empathy, a sense of belonging, and an understanding of collaboration. For these students, the change they report is within themselves, in terms of confidence and their interface with educational structures, systems and ideas. This change is both personal and collaborative. It does not change the world; but it may change the individual student’s engagement with their world—the way they connect with, critique and challenge the systems in which they operate. When the students position themselves within the storytelling, they appear to confront, change, or expand their narratives of themselves as learners. Whether or not this is ‘transformation’ can be debated. However, it does appear to be the ‘small change’ that Balfour speaks about (Balfour, 2009). They use action as a way of developing or expressing insight. By acting together in the creation of drama, students experience

themselves as enacting change, and alter the self-narratives with which they have entered the course.

The uniformity of student responses across many classes and several years is striking. Perhaps they are responding to the ways we have framed reflective prompts and the values we bring to the classroom. Mindful of this, we locate the reflective process within a democratic educational context; we have increasingly tried to be explicit in seeking their engaged responses to the experience, not an answer that they think we want to hear. If they are humouring us in their responses, they are doing it in a remarkably organised way. The movement from resistance, hesitation, struggle to commit, and then involvement is replicated in many students' accounts of their experiences. They acknowledge with stark honesty that they are not actors, and yet they claim that the action of performance makes them actors for this brief period. Moreover, they claim that the performance of the drama is an acting out of the change they seek to make. The action of doing transforms the 'actor' into the message bearer and change-maker. There seems to be something rich and significant in the quality of experience shared by these students which allows them to feel equipped as students and future teachers. Notably, this sense of confidence in their capacity continues through this course. The 2020 Student Experience Survey, a national survey conducted by the Australian Federal government, found that 92% of students completing the diploma claimed to be satisfied or extremely satisfied with the quality of their teaching and learning experiences (QILT, 2020).

A consistent theme in students' journals and reflections is the students' aspiration, when teachers, to bring about major change. A large majority of students want to change schooling from what they experienced to something better, something that genuinely caters for all children, that does not pigeonhole, label or discard the young people in our communities (student reflections, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). It requires imagination to picture an education system which is based on democratic power structures rather than authoritarian structures (Pearl and Knight, 1999); one which creates a just future, rather than one which replicates the injustices of privilege and power that exist in schools today (Smyth, 2012). Creating their ethnodrama is not a rehearsal for the revolution (Boal, 1979), but carries in it the seed of the revolution itself. By the action of doing the ethnodrama, the students find themselves changed, they see themselves differently, are

prepared to take on new 'roles', and are ready to 'act' differently. Boal's observation (1992, p.160) that theatre 'can help us build our future instead of just waiting for it' may align to what is happening here. Although Snyder-Young's claim that 'applied theatre projects do not always resist dominant power structures' (p. 137) may provide a counter-balance to Boal's optimism, we must not underestimate the students' capacity to understand the dynamics of power in which they operate. Students know that they are engaging with dominant power structures as students, and that they will continue to do so as teachers. They cannot individually reframe socially embedded educational values. What they claim emerges from the experience of the ethnodrama is a way to understand themselves within these dominant power structures; to critique these structures; and to locate themselves as both learners and teachers within them. In other words, they are developing an understanding of both the real and the possible, and experiencing a pedagogy of possibility (Giroux and Simon, 1988). Our teaching in the Diploma, through the development of the ethnodrama performance, invites our students to take back their power, to empower themselves, and as powerful people, to work toward changes to support equity and opportunity in education.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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