

Standards: The Illusion of Comfort

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ABSTRACT

This paper raises three concerns:

- 1. Pedagogy. Effective drama demands a constructivist pedagogy (Wagner, 1998), one built upon questions, discourse, reflection, and, if it is to be transformative, action (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Unfortunately, most teacher education takes place within pre-service programmes and schools that practice the traditional educational model (Windschitl, 2002). When many drama/theatre teachers have little experience with a still anomalous pedagogy and can receive little knowledgeable support for their teaching, what in their drama teaching are they valuing and assessing?*
- 2. The art form. We know of the lack of theatre experience that pre-service teachers bring with them (Miller & Saxton, 2000), and this is exacerbated by the limited courses offered in theatre/drama within generalist teacher education programmes. There are theatre requirements for entry into secondary school*

theatre/dramatic arts pre-service teacher education, but the quality and content varies significantly in depth, extent and practice, depending upon locale and the focus of the degree. Where then is the depth of knowledge and experience to support the application of standards to student work?

3. *Standards application. Given the above, how can standards in the art form become internalized and actualized in our classrooms?*

STANDARDS

The root of the word, "standard", comes from the old French, *estende*, meaning "to extend". We like to think of this root because it changes the meaning of standards from the definition that refers to something that we can see, like a flag, or a stump of a tree (its 12th and 13th century meanings) because those are such static (and possibly accomplishable) images. The original idea of "extend" implies something that is always on the move, always stretching. Standards then become more like Charles Taylor's (1991) "horizons of significance"—changing and reshaping themselves into new challenges as experience and circumstance dictate.

This paper examines three questions in relation to the matter of standards and assessment. The first is the question of the drama and theatre experience that pre-service teachers bring with them.

Many colleges and faculties of education do not ask for any arts experiences or courses as part of entrance requirements, and there are few (if any) courses required within the teacher education programs to fill in these gaps. When teachers are told that they have to teach the arts, they fall back on what they know or were perhaps exposed to--folk dances, colouring, playing percussion and putting on plays. This is certainly true for most elementary generalists in drama education (Wetterstrand, 1999; Miller & Saxton, 2000). These teachers tend to rely on "how to" books, black line masters, and lesson aids that are structured to meet the particular standards that the authors deem to be important. While there are theatre requirements for those pre-service teachers pursuing credentials in secondary school

theatre/dramatic arts, the quality and content within the degrees vary in depth, extent and practice, depending upon the particular locales.

Our research (2000) suggests that the first three to five years of a teacher's career are focused on his/her own survival in the classroom. Add into that all-encompassing drive little or no classroom experience to fall back upon, a mixed bag of content knowledge from their pre-service education, an absence of mentors in arts education within most levels, and it becomes clear that the opportunities for developing practice leading to effective teaching are limited. In addition, for the secondary teacher, s/he is very often the only teacher responsible for the drama programme. This isolation mitigates against the development of a sense of teacher efficacy and the nurture of a passion for the discipline. Bad habits can breed behind closed doors.

The second question relates to pedagogy. Effective drama/theatre education demands a constructivist pedagogy (Wagner, 1998); one built upon questions, discourse, reflection, and, if it is to be transformative, action (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Shugurensky, 2001; Shakatko & Walker, 1999). Five principles act as guides:

- Teachers seek and value their students' points of view.
- Classroom activities challenge students' suppositions.
- Teachers pose problems of emerging relevance.
- Teachers build lessons around primary concepts and "big" ideas.
- Teachers assess student learning in the context of daily teaching.

Key factors in building a constructivist-centered classroom are non-judgmental feedback, authenticity and context (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Unfortunately, most institutional learning takes place within traditional pedagogical structures: pre-service teacher education the schools and institutions and the teachers who reflect that tradition in their classrooms. The question therefore becomes, what is being valued, and how is it being assessed when drama/theatre teachers in the field have had little or no experience with that pedagogy and receive little administrative support for their teaching?

The third question is that of standards and how such a positive concept has been subsumed into standardization, a completely different concept and one that, for the most part, is antithetical to effectively taught programs. What do we learn when we are working inside an effective drama context? How do we hone our "crap detectors", and how do we discover what is effective and affective practice? Debra McLachlan (2001), in looking at a year-long course in devising with her senior students asked them what they felt they were learning. At first, they talked about what they had learned about creating a play, producing, and then performing it. Soon, however, they began to talk about other things like: tolerance; self-direction; focus; self-discipline; the ability not only to generate ideas but to combine them with other's ideas; the capacity to consider numerous possibilities without premature self-censure; and the pleasure in taking risks by experimenting and exploring, thoughts, incidentally, we heard echoed by the Creative Arts Team Youth Theatre in their talk-back (Paul Caplan Centre, Friday, August 1, 2003) as well as by the New York City choir students (NYU Forum on Assessment, Sunday, August 3, 2003).

"What do we learn when we engage in the arts" was the question central to *Champions of Change* (1998), a longitudinal study of some 19,000 low socio-economic status students, K-12. In every case, students who had highly enriched arts programs in school did better than students who had only some arts programming. Students who had only some arts programming did better than those students with none. Students in drama/theatre programs did better at reading and developed a stronger sense of self-identity than students who had not been exposed. The bar graphs are there for those who need to see the "hard data". What the researchers found among a great many very interesting findings were what they call "Habits of Mind" and "Personal Dispositions". Note how similar these are to McLachlan's students' findings. Note also that they offer an excellent set of expectations:

Habits of Mind

- The ability to imagine new possibilities.
- The ability to develop theories that predict the consequences of actions.
- The ability to explore relationships from multiple perspectives.
- The ability to explore ideas, meaning and emotion through

multiple forms.

- The ability to reflect upon, assess and adjust behaviour.
- The ability to sustain coherent collaborative action.
- A generosity of spirit; that is to say, to be forgiving of mistakes through. recognizing that the process is long-term rather than immediate.
- The ability to elaborate detail with infinite patience.

Personal Dispositions

- Persistence and resilience.
- Risk-taking.
- Focus and discipline.
- Respect for authentic achievement; that is to say, "junk" is not easily accepted.
- Deep and active engagement with the arts is seen as comprehensive learning.
- A great sense of joy in the challenges; a delicious sense of achievement in the effective completion of the task.

(Richard Deasy, 2001)

So, to review: the knowledge and experiences of many teachers in drama/theatre education is , to put it kindly, limited. The kind of teaching that effective drama/theatre programmes require is generally not addressed in teacher education institutions. But effective teaching can lead to ways of working that do enhance learning for most students. Let us turn now to the question of standards and their accompanying standardization activities and see how they fit into what we have been discussing.

We are told there is a "national" problem in education for which we must find a national solution. In parentheses, we do feel that we can reflect on what has, heretofore, been an American educational discussion, as it is now in vigorous debate in the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as in Canada. This national problem, suggests Elliot Eisner (2001), leads to the use of highly rationalized procedures. Rationalization means to make logical and coherent by reorganizing in order to eliminate waste of labour, time and materials. Rationalization of teaching practices, therefore, is predicated on the ability to control and predict; it downplays those parts of our practice that do not offer themselves to control and prediction. This means that classroom

interactions in which such things as individual differences, personal qualities, ideas, orientations and temperaments are brought into play, will have less time and attention, if for no other reason than that they complicate assessment.

In an article in *The Guardian* (Monday, July, 14, 2003), the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to education for the UN commission on human rights, suggested that the British government was in technical breach of the convention because of the current policies on testing. Such tests, noted Dr. Katarina Tomasevski, "were designed to fulfill government objectives rather than meet the needs of children." The thing which Dr. Tomasevski finds "particularly intriguing in the United Kingdom is the ideology which underpins the whole movement. . . [it] is about target-setting and delivery. . . [it] comes from a command and control economy [best exemplified by] the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. . . very strange" (p. 7). Put that way and by such a highly experienced officer, it is "very strange" indeed, now that we come to think of it!

Rationalization (or standardization), because it has so much to do with measurement, promotes comparison and comparisons (as we all know) can be invidious, especially when we are comparing test results that do not take into account cultural difference, instructional values or community values, teacher and/or student interests and needs. Standardization relies upon incentives that are designed by someone (or ones) other than those for whom the incentives are intended. When authority lies somewhere else, if the results are not effective, both school and teacher survival may be at risk.

We know the results of national standardization: the curriculum is narrowed; tests come to define our priorities; certain subjects are privileged over others. Those of us who practice in the arts know which subjects are privileged, and it ain't the arts! Eisner (2001) goes on to make three points that tell us what is happening in our schools.

- The pressure to succeed in high-stakes testing means cutting corners, dealing with schooling in ways that may interfere with principled teaching and learning.
- The need to succeed leads to students and teachers confining learning to just what will be needed to accomplish the test. Such things as risk-taking, exploration, speculating, hypothesizing and uncertainty; "the opportunity," as Eric Booth

(1998) puts it, 'to not know things for a while'-- these are activities that have little or no place in the test-driven classroom. As a result,

- The practice of conversation is diminishing and the quality of conversation is dropping. "In the process of rationalization," writes Eisner (2001), "education has become a commodity" (p. 379, 370).

For Eisner (and for many of us, we would posit) the goal of schooling is not what students achieve in the short term but "what they do with what they learn when they can do what they want to do" That is the real measure of educational achievement. In a good education, getting it right for ourselves is the best reward. It is the process of work from which we derive our satisfaction; it is the journey more than the arrival that matters.

If we produce, as we are in danger of doing, a generation of young people who have lost the art of conversation, of self-motivation, who see their lives valuable only in response to some kind of extrinsic reward system which they have had no part in setting up, who have, in fact, discovered through their education that taking time to think about, to question, to fail, to move around an issue and see it from different points of view is not valued; if we allow ourselves to become teachers who no longer have the skills of improvisation, take pleasure in surprise, value a diversity of perspectives and a richness of outcomes; if we allow ourselves to bend to political expediencies and "educational" directives that have little or nothing to do with what we know to be education, then we must accept that our culture will be changed, that our ideas of what is democracy will shift significantly and the brains of the young people we teach will be significantly altered.

Scott Thompson (2001) uses the metaphor of the good and bad twins to describe the educational reform movement. Under the evil twin (aka, high-stakes, standardized, test-based reform) what gets "lost" is precisely that rich, high level teaching and learning that the "good" twin (authentic standards-based reform) aims to promote. Authentic standards-based reform is that under which "all students achieve as much of their creative, intellectual and social potential as possible. . . in a system of learning communities dedicated to developing and refining common learning standards in order to prepare each student to live successfully and contribute actively . . ." (p. 360).

As with any research, write Raths, Pancella and Van Ness (1971), the final question is always about assessment and application:

All other things being equal, one activity is more worthwhile than another if it:

- Permits students to make informed choices in carrying out the activity and to reflect on the consequences of their choices.
- Assigns students active roles in the learning situation rather than passive ones.
- Asks students to engage in inquiry into ideas, application of intellectual processes or current problems, or to examine them in a new setting.
- Recognizes completion of the activity may be accomplished successfully by students at several different levels of ability.
- Involves students and teachers in risk-taking.

This implies to us the kinds of standards that embrace the sorts of learning that drama and theatre education promote and that lie at the heart of good practice and, incidentally, good citizenship.

However, it's all very well for us to prate on about the good things that may accrue through effectively taught drama/theatre education, but we have to accept the fact that many of pre-service teachers have little of our experience in the discipline. How can they begin to talk about (let alone meet and exceed) standards if they have no understanding of the knowledge, skills and understandings being assessed? With all the good research on the power of the arts to enhance learning, it's a bit depressing to face this truth. It does leave us wondering if a discussion on the matter of standards and how they may be applied to classrooms of learners isn't just a little premature when we have yet to put into place that critical mass of competent and confident teachers of the arts.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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