

TEACHING DRAMA IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

JON SUFFOLK

Jon Suffolk shares insights into teaching Drama in high school...

BACKGROUND

My journey into the world of Drama Education developed over many years. As a student in a regional high school Drama was an extra-curricular activity and one in which I was heavily involved. I performed in school musicals and student plays, and community productions involving professional artists and secondary and tertiary students. I loved every single experience, and engaging with like-minded individuals.

After graduating from Newcastle University with a Bachelor of Music Education I was appointed to Kiama High School as a music teacher. After attending a community meeting at which a new theatre company was to emerge, I was again entrenched in the world of theatre as a musical director, composer, actor and a board member. The ten years I worked with the Roo Theatre Company were the formative years in which I developed my deep understanding of drama and theatre and the skills to work with children, youth and adults, all the while maintaining classroom teaching in various settings.

I eventually moved to Sydney and was offered a part-time music position at Fort Street High School and, when Drama was introduced to the curriculum, I was offered the opportunity of teaching the subject given my extensive experience in community theatre and education. I became a Senior HSC Drama Practical Marker for several years as well as marking the written examination and the design and video projects.

CROSS CURRICULA PROGRAM

The teaching program that I am most proud of was a cross-curricula program that I established at Fort Street High School with my friend and colleague John Ockwell. We both recognised that the teaching of music composition seemed at times irrelevant and discussed over drinks one Friday afternoon how we could make it more

relevant.

At the time I had chosen a play called ‘Our Country’s Good’ by Timberlake Wertenbaker for the Senior School Production. The play was adapted from the Thomas Keneally novel *The Playmaker* and was about the first play performed in the colony of Australia, ‘The Recruiting Officer’ by George Farquhar. The historical context of the play, its setting in early Sydney and its rich literary basis was a perfect choice for the students at ‘The Fort’.

John and I designed a music composition task for the Year 10 class that included the students writing the music to underscore the action. They had to play it live during the performances. I would divide the script into sections, sometimes according to the listed scenes or significant sections of an act. There were usually 10 to 15 script sections distributed to groups in the music class. They would have to read and analyse the text to establish the contexts of the section of the script they had been assigned. What was happening in the scene? Was the action intense, emotional, a climax point in the play? Where was the action taking place? How was the music enhancing the action and answers to all these questions? The music class would then develop three or four note motifs that were to be used as the basis for their sections of the score. They were encouraged to manipulate the keys, rhythms, tempos, harmonies, textures, and other musical elements to enhance the sections of the texts they were assigned using only the instruments played in the class. Once the individual musical sections were composed, the music students combined and developed a completed score. This was a collaborative process, often developed in rehearsals with the actors, guided by the expertise of the teaching staff.

Similarly, the Yr 11 Drama class took on the production roles as part of the Elements of Production unit. They

were divided into pairs with each pair being responsible for set design, costume design, publicity and promotion, lighting, stage management, dramaturgy and directing. Some of the costumes were hired from the Australian Opera, Newtown High School of the Performing Arts or were purchased at opportunity shops. The set designs were to be digital and included footage of the Australian bush and water lapping at the piers at the Rocks. These images were used in the opening moments of the play and gave authenticity to the play. Other images included Creative Commons images of interiors of historical Sydney buildings, landscapes, and goal cells.

Overall, this cross-curriculum project was rich, dynamic, and meaningful learning with sophisticated outcomes. I believe that elements of it are still being implemented over 20 years later.

INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CAREER

After 11 years at Fort Street, I moved to Malaysia and taught Drama at the Australian International School (AISM) and introduced the NSW Drama syllabus to the school. In this context, I was instructing students from diverse cultural and language backgrounds and had to work hard designing units of work that were inclusive and challenging. Moving on from Malaysia after five years I landed in the United Arab Emirates as Head of Performing Arts, Design and Technology at the Victorian International School of Sharjah.

I returned to Malaysia and again was tasked with building a Drama program. It was interesting working across the MYP (Middle Years Program) I found many similarities to the NSW Curriculum. The devising of units of work that had intense elements of inquiry and allowed students to explore their own and collaborative creativity are the keys to any good Arts curriculum.

BENEFITS OF DRAMA PROGRAMS

There are so many benefits for students in participating in curriculum and co-curricular programs. Through explorations of, and research into the development of Drama through history, they learn how different theatrical traditions hold a mirror up to the people and places in which the traditions evolved and how theatre was used to express social, cultural, political, and cultural issues. Topics such as Greek Theatre, Elizabethan Theatre and Shakespeare, French Restoration Comedy, Melodrama,

Expressionism, Absurd Theatre and many more styles teach students about the place of drama in society at a particular time, often informing them of how dramatic techniques are used to reflect on the world at that time, the political and social contexts of a particular time and place.

Students love creativity, freedom, learning new skills and working with their friends in the classes. The secondary classroom can appear noisy and chaotic but by establishing routines and expectations it becomes a place of safety and expressive freedom. The drama teacher needs to have strategies in place to control the classroom environment. My classroom routines include students standing in a Drama circle on arrival so that learning intentions and expectations can be voiced and then straight into a drama game to develop focus and energy for the tasks ahead. As students are working on devising and rehearsing, I use a variety of different classroom management techniques to return their focus to the teacher for feedback or clarification of concepts and ideas. These can include sound cues, such as clapping or the use of a small drum or other percussion instrument.

DRAMA GAMES

Drama games are used at any stage to develop performance, improvisation and focus skills. Games such as Space Jump, Word-at-a-time Story, Death in a minute and Expert Double Figures are commonly used by drama teachers when wanting to develop focus in the classroom, improvisation skills and confidence in front of an audience. The games are played in teams of four encouraging collaboration and cooperation. Improv Australia states “Improvisation is a valuable communication and self-awareness tool that can dramatically increase one’s ability to act confidently and decisively on impulses and seizing the moment. When you gain skills in improvisation, you gain skills in assessing and reacting to a situation quickly, identifying the subtext of conversations, building rapport, and speaking confidently in front of a group of strangers.” (**Improv Australia**)

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Here are some reflections from the students I teach at St George Girls High School.

“I’m a very expressive person and I love playing different characters and working with my friends” (Maya, Year 8).

“Drama has allowed us to learn certain skills that not only support our learning in the creative arts, but they are skills we can use in our daily lives as well. It has been a confidence booster for many people. (Dishani, Year 8)

“I can be loud and expressive and angry and sad and that all adds to the fun of the drama classroom.” (Chandra, Year 8)

It is the observations that the students have identified about their experiences in the drama classroom that keep me motivated to stay in the game. Using Drama teaching techniques to engage students in the exploration of their worlds through engaging practical and research-based activities are rewarding. Watching the development of students over several terms, or years, as they expand their performing skills, ability to recognise and control the elements of Drama and develop confidence in their own ability through collaboration is fulfilling.

USE OF MASKS

Another area of drama and theatre that I have used throughout my career is that of the many different mask traditions and conventions. Masks encourage students to embody characters and focus on their physicality and movement skills. I have carried sets of Basel and Commedia masks with me wherever I have taught.

The Basel masks originated in Europe and are a set of full-face masks that are designed for actors to explore their bodies to create distinctive characters. The characters include Charles, Fatso, Lizard, Sloth and Military Man.

The Commedia Masks originated in Italy and are used in Commedia dell Arte improvisation. The specific characters of Commedia include Arlecchino, Dottore, Pantalone, Brighella and many more. Each character mask encourages the actor to move, interact and speak in a particular way. Students get a real thrill out of donning the masks, creating improvisations and performances with them and developing an understanding of why the masks developed in diverse cultures.

THE FINAL TWO YEARS

As students mature and hone more refined skills, the drama classroom becomes an exciting place. Working with

complex historical and contemporary texts, workshoping in distinctive styles and genres and exploring their expanding worlds enables students to prepare themselves for a world outside of the school and classroom.

In the HSC year, students are required to develop performances using the texts that they study. This can include excerpts from Contemporary Australian plays (e.g. ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ by Laly Katz, ‘Norm and Ahmed’ by Alex Buzzo) and devising performances using specific drama and theatre techniques developed by practitioners such as Le Coq and Meyerhold.

So many students I have taught have considered drama as their ‘favourite’ subject even if they had no intention of continuing in the field post high school. They loved the physical nature, the collaboration, the analysis and discussion, the theatre visits, the workshops with visiting practitioners, shared playbuilding days with other schools, participation in regional and state festivals and creating performances for their own communities. Many students establish lifetime friendships through their involvement in drama.

There are many workshops that can be delivered at schools or by our major theatre companies. Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir Street Theatre, Parramatta Riverside Theatre, Bell Shakespeare and many more have student workshop programs. State and regional drama festivals allow students to meet, perform and recognize the diversity of dramatic styles explored in schools. State and Regional Drama camps are an excellent opportunity for students to engage with other like-minded individuals with a passion for drama within a safe and inclusive environment. The NSW Arts Unit now conducts Drama Camps for Years 7 and 8, 9 and 10, as well as Preliminary Course students, with priority given to rural and remote students. I have been a tutor at these camps many times. Students undergo an intense workshop program, work in groups to devise a performance for the final day and observe performances by visiting performing arts groups or attending professional production in Sydney.

As I am near the end of an extensive career teaching in many different schools and contexts, I am proud of the work I have done and the thousands of students I have had the pleasure of introducing to the world of drama and theatre. Some have gone on to professional careers in theatre, film and television, some in design, publi-

cation, and journalism with the influences of having participated in drama at school as a major contributor to their futures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Suffolk commenced working at Kiama High School in 1985 as a secondary music teacher.

Jon retrained as a drama teacher while working at Fort Street High School from 1996 - 2007. He spent 10 years working in international schools in Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates before returning to Australia in 2018.

He now works part-time in schools in the Sydney region, conducts regional workshops for HSC Drama students as part of the NSW Arts Unit's Outreach Program, directs productions in schools and tutors Drama Education Methodology at Sydney University.

Jon is a passionate advocate for arts education in schools and brings that passion to his classroom, workshop and extra-curricula work.

