

DRAMA AUSTRALIA | SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

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In conversation with Dr Paul Gardiner, Director of Research, Drama Australia.

Annie is currently Head teacher CAPA at Castle Hill High School in NSW. I asked Annie to outline her research project...

I am researching the rehearsal practices of an out-of-school acting ensemble program examining their approach to rehearsal, performance and student creativity. To do this I followed rehearsals for two years, following the experiences of eight students in the first year, and 4 students in the second.

In my research I am focusing on rehearsal and ask the question 'What are the creative practices and processes?'

I am looking process using an **embedded model, which has three circles** nested inside each other. **The outer circle is the context of the company.** Due to the practitioner's professional training, their work is embedded in professional practice. This has a huge impact on how they approach the process and how the students respond. Exploring that through the lens of the creative climate (Isaksen, 2007) especially the first element of challenge and involvement, the approach positions the students as artists and challenges them to take the work incredibly seriously and aspire to this high standard.

The second circle is the boundaries of the process. The notion of boundaries came from Ibbotson (2008), a British actor, now in business management. The notion is that boundaries stimulate invention and it is how a director articulates these boundaries that influences how work develops. It explores the interplay between control and freedom, and how a director orchestrates that through the particular boundaries. *The first boundary is the text.* Because of the current emphasis in schools on collaboration and devised work, script based work has been devalued. The ensemble's process was quite different to the processes to which students were used to, and demonstrates that scripts can be hugely important to the creative process and that they stimulate a lot of the creative work. *The second boundary is the feedback process.* The practitioners' approach is to limit feedback in order to foster the students' sense of their own artistic contributions, and to create their own internal feedback loop. They often let the students play and experiment until their own internal feedback loop kicks in, allowing them to achieve Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow. The effectiveness of this process depends on the teacher-student relationship, again suggesting how crucial the personal connection is in all creative processes. *The third boundary is the conceptual boundary – the creative unknown.* There is this assumption that if you are not in the fear zone – you are not being creative. Ibbotson's boundary of *what is known and what is unknown* – an edgy, uncertain and difficult place. However, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) Flow happens when challenge matches skill. So the research is looking at how the practitioners push the students and themselves, and looks at the different phases, where challenge and

skills align, and the process is joyful and invigorating, but also when the challenge is intimidating and when they struggle with it and it threatens to overwhelm them.

I am exploring the three boundaries and the students' responses to them when they are dealing with the challenge of the task and how creative ideas and moments are generated through that process.

The third circle is the actual creative processes of rehearsal. That incorporates the *creative emergence* and *embodied emergence*, where the process they set up lets the students play with the material within the context they provide. They work together as actors and characters and human bodies, and with the space and the tools of the space and props to collaboratively create the embodiment of the text, the staging of the text, and finally the production of the text.

Those are the three processes/circles and each one, while significant in itself, is dependent on the other.

How is your research affecting your practice?

Currently, I am a Head Teacher Creative Arts. One thing [my research] has done for me is, looking at excellence in the arts, is that it has shown the benefit of teachers being artists ourselves. In my Faculty all Visual arts teachers practice their art, most of the Music faculty are practicing musicians, and in the Drama faculty we have trained actors. And the idea is that, with the senior students, we treat them as artists, allowing us to take the work to a more serious level and do more abstract work and it forces them to take the work to another level.

What it has also caused me to do is look at the whole creative process and how that can be applied across the board in the Arts. In particular, I am looking at how it can be applied to the development of the (NSW HSC Drama) individual project, where students are working independently outside the classroom environment. Sawyer (2012), stages of creativity gave me a good framework to scaffold that work, to document that work and help them through it and point them in the right direction.

The other way that it impacted was the whole idea of collaboration and how ideas emerge from discussion and from creatively coming together around an artwork. We have always worked collaboratively but now it is formalised. With assessing the creative works, for instance, we have two examiners. We look at the marking criteria, but then we put them aside and have an open discussion of the work with the student. We have a good old fashioned brainstorm where we talk about the piece and nut it out. And sometimes we include the whole class in that discussion, so the student leaves with a whole bundle of ideas, bouncing off their own. And we also do that in VA and all the kids, every term, have a collaboration with two or more art teachers who again, the process is, first assessment, and then we just get into it and talk about all the places you could go and how you are thinking etc. It is hard to say what works and what doesn't, but I think it has been really effective. The students feel that they are not alone and with a couple of people the ideas bounce. The students are often in isolation when they are doing their projects and the ideas freeze and they feel overwhelmed. But when there is a group of teachers and other kids they get a new lease of life and because we do it regularly

throughout the process, we keep track of them, we don't lose them and we enrich their ideas and enrich the creative process. And they feel that the teacher is on their side you are not the enemy.

We underestimate how as teachers we are expected to be good at everything – teach, direct, help them write a script, design projects and know how to work with self-devised pieces and direct a play all without active training. We underestimate how hard it is and there is this expectation that we can do it all. Directing a play is such a particular skill that we need to empower and enable teachers to direct – they need in-servicing and a mentor/director that looks at what they are doing and talks them through – we need someone who can mentor the teachers so they are not left floundering and feeling inadequate.

References

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