

## DRAMA AUSTRALIA | SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

Mary Mooney, in conversation with Paul Gardiner, Director of Research

Associate Professor Mary Mooney is Deputy Dean – School of Education at Western Sydney University.

She was the recipient of the Drama Australia President's Award in 2015.

### *I asked her about her current research focus:*

Key current and recent projects align to practitioner research working with teachers, artists, students, pre-service teachers and others in the field of education. I'm interested in applied research. In some of the cases the teachers are part of the research process itself, not just research participants. We so often see the researcher-participant divide but on some occasions, there is an intersection.

The Fair Go Project, which was an exciting and energising study of effective teachers of students in poverty, involved the practitioners and researchers working together. This Fair Go for effective teaching in NSW disadvantaged schools study was a joint initiative of Western Sydney University with the (then) NSW Department of Education and Communities over a five-year period 2008-2012. Here the effective teachers, who were nominated to participate, and the researchers, worked together; teachers teaching and researchers observing and then at the end of each day we analysed the data together. I researched English and Drama teachers. At the end of the project, all the effective teacher/researcher participants came together from across the state to analyse the common themes in the research material. (Here is a link to the book – and all the teachers are co-authors <https://www.routledge.com/Exemplary-Teachers-of-Students-in-Poverty/Munns-Sawyer-Cole/p/book/9780415531573>)

One of the things I like best about the research that I do is working in a team. Often when we teach only some aspects involve team work. And research works best when you have people with different expertise and interests and backgrounds.

In another project, Chris Hatton, from Newcastle University, and I are researching the New South Wales' Artists-in-Residence program known as Fresh AIR which is an Australia Council funded project managed by Arts NSW. Here we are looking at Artists-in-Residence (AIR) in NSW schools over a three-year period. As researchers we are gauging the impact of the artists' involvement on the curriculum in a school environment, on the teachers' practice and professional learning, and on student learning. It's quite a wholistic way to investigate the impact of artists-in-residence program that has been going on in schools for decades. There are events where the artists and the teachers and the arts organisations intersect and analyse some of the data –so the findings speak to those who are involved. But more importantly, if it speaks to them in a contextual way, it speaks to other artists, teachers and arts organisations who are keen to engage in and promote creative practice with young people. So, this is research where we work on the ground, in the schools, working with the artists, the teachers, the students and their parents.

Findings indicate that there are a variety of AIR models and the benefits for the stakeholders are different depending on what model is being used and what process is being emphasised. And it's interesting to see how some of the AIR models have shifted over the three years of the research. It's an emerging intervention through the process of practitioner research and reflexive practice. As researchers we are happy to work in a messy environment because we are analysing the impact and change of the interactions between artists, teachers and students so as to build on the findings from each year. Now we are into the third and final year of the project. (And here is the website <http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au/index.php/about-us/our-work/resident-artists-in-schools-initiative-for-2014-2016/>).

Another classroom study was the international Water Reckoning project, which was both practice-based and research, adapting Dorothy Heathcote's rolling role drama. We did this by using a digital platform that connected the five classroom sites in cities around the world all located on waterways: Athens, Singapore, Seattle, Noosa and Sydney. In this international project, researchers were sometimes the teachers, sometimes they were researching the teachers and, like in Sydney, the researchers were also teacher-researchers. Lots of people were involved – Jenny Nicholls, Chris Hatton, Julian Kennard, Sue Davis, Glenn Taylor, Prue Wales, Xenia Simou and Jen Kulik. We presented the project at the National Drama Heathcote Reconsidered conference at Greenwich University in 2013.

At the Sydney site it was an extended drama over four long periods as part of a Year 9 - 10 playbuilding unit; a drama inside the curriculum. We used rolling role as an authentic learning experience to focus on an environmental water disaster in which the students were engaged in deciding, in role, how they could respond to the crisis as active citizens. One drama site would post online their response to the water crisis so that another classroom could continue the roleplay or creatively use the digital artefacts as pretexts, some of which were prepared by the teacher researchers and some were developed as part of the drama. So for instance when the drama students from another school posted their video of walking out of the sea, this was used in the Sydney drama as a sign that people elsewhere survived the water disaster. What was important was the curation of these scenarios and artefacts that rolled in the drama from another site to the classroom in Sydney, with intercultural connections and an emphasis on place. We considered the significance of place in the real world such as, how students responded in different cities, in Athens, say, then Sydney, and the imagined places creatively explored in the dramatic fiction.

This Water Reckoning project was a distinctive learning and research experience because it involved classroom practice from five global sites, online and digital drama and participant-researchers. We planned the drama by hanging out on google from the five locations around the world. We did this every fortnight on a Sunday night creating, modelling, theorising. It was intense professional learning for all the researcher-teachers. This has been a very exciting and we are still analysing the data.

The resulting benefits were multilayered –learning through playbuilding and process drama using improvisation, roleplay, and digital artefacts within a dramatic narrative

focused on an environmental water crisis. Another benefit was learning how digital and social media platforms can be employed authentically in a drama. These online intertextual and inter-site recordings offered an opportunity for the Sydney research team to construct a new inquiry framework to analyse the rich drama data. We have named this a geodramatic inquiry of a drama dealing with an environmental disaster across global sites. (And here is the link to the website. (<http://www.water-reckoning.net/about-this-project.html>))

Another classroom-based research that has been significant for me over recent times is the Australian Research Council project researching Positive Behaviour for Learning in Western Sydney schools. This PBL intervention has been rolled out across NSW and Australia.

### ***Why is research so important to teacher practice?***

Reflexive practice helps to grow a practitioner's response to their own teaching so that it is always evolving and doesn't stagnate. So we can all inquire into our own work using a research framework and research questions. Often when someone starts out on a research degree, I ask, 'What questions do you want to think about your practice?' 'What interests you?' There is a tendency for us to begin by asking questions that require a 'yes/no' answer regarding what we want to explore and critique. In pre-service teacher education we begin this reflexive approach by asking, 'How are you going to evaluate your lesson?' 'What are some of the reflexive practices to do this?'. This can be the start of a reflexive journey of making complex observations of learning interactions and analysing them. And to do this a dialogic approach is best, either in a teaching context or a research context. This is the practice of a reflective practitioner adopting an inquiry approach to teaching.

### ***What areas do you think are rich for further research?***

One of the areas that would benefit from further research is work that links different areas of the drama education field: curriculum, artistry and policy, and the way they impact on classroom learning and engagement. Sometimes it's good to have research that looks at the bigger picture.

As part of classroom practice, teachers are required to demonstrate evidence of impact of their classes on student learning and in teacher education the impact of pre-service teacher programs. Research that explores how Drama educators collect evidence of impact on student learning will be important in the future. The reality is we could explore these ideas in the current teacher education environment and to do so in collaboration with each other. This exploration could be framed by Freire's pedagogy of hope whose work has been theorised by many of us. Let's collaborate within this current situation without being hopeless about the future. And who better than drama education researchers to be hopeful about the future.