

Human Acts of Imagination: Drama and the Culture of Education

Chris Cooper

Drama Rainbow, Beijing

Abstract

The “subject” of educational drama and theatre is what it is to be human, our focus is on the self. The self of course is socially constructed and as drama and theatre are social art forms, the relationship between self and society and society in the self is at the core of what we do. Form and content is indivisible, meaning making is paramount. How we learn, the philosophy and pedagogy that underpins the art form of drama, and the culture of education that nurtures it is therefore critical to everything we do. The point of any story explored through drama is to use a fictional other in order to know ourselves, the world that we are part of and is in us, in order that we can be active agents in our own lives based on our understanding. Drawing on the experience of Drama Rainbow over the last decade, this article explores the role that drama and narrative thinking can play in creating a culture of education that challenges fixed and conventional notions of what knowledge is, and offers a radical perspective on the kind of meaning making needed to enable children and young people to meet the environmental, socio-economic and political challenges of living in the 21st century.

Keywords : Drama Rainbow, imagination and drama, self and society, story and narrative thinking, the culture of education

- * This text provided the basis of Cooper's Keynote address to Drama Rainbow's Facing the Gap 10th Anniversary Conference, 17-18 August 2019. Due to the limitations of time and the speaker's desire to respond in the moment to the Conference, this text differs from the keynote delivered.

Email: chris@accident-time.co.uk

Before I get into the substance of what I want to talk about this morning, I'd like to preface it by saying how humbled and privileged I feel to be given this platform today. I also want to take a minute or two to pay tribute to my colleagues and friends at Drama Rainbow.

Firstly, I would like to thank Wang Wei for her financial and spiritual commitment to Drama Rainbow. Her financial support, and that of her sister Jessica, has been critical. Without it we simply would not be here today. But this has only been possible because of her spiritual commitment, her belief in Drama Rainbow, its core values, and what it has come to represent. I, like many others, owe her a debt of gratitude for the freedom she has given us to be creative in our work.

I want to acknowledge and thank Cao Xi too for his outstanding contribution to organizing Facing the Gap 10th Anniversary Conference at Drama Rainbow (the Conference, thereafter) and the inspiring collaboration we have developed over the last ten years. His creative leadership, especially during this 10th anniversary year has been remarkable.

And I also want to thank the Teaching Department and all members of staff at Drama Rainbow, not only for making this event possible, but for all that they do, every day, for our Company.

When we were planning this Conference, we discussed how important it was to put Drama Rainbow's development in Drama in Education (DiE) in a wider context, the culture of education. We also wanted to share our approach to teaching and learning through drama and the transformation from a School to a Centre it has brought about within the Company. We wanted to share our experience in the hope that it might give others on a similar journey some insight into the struggles we have faced. The other day, Cao Xi talked about how in China there is emphasis on "Finding the right answer in the shortest amount of time". I think this is a very useful characterisation of the culture of education. I have previously described our struggle to survive as "swimming upstream". It is very hard to do, but

unavoidable.

The first day I arrived at Drama Rainbow in 2009 it was three months old. It was a School, a performing arts school based on a traditional Eastern European model of music, movement, voice and theatre skills training.

On that first visit I was encouraged by Professor Li Yingning, who introduced me to Drama Rainbow, to “tell the truth” as I saw it. As you learned the other day my assessment was harsh. It must have been hard to take. But Wei had the courage to listen and then ask me to help them start from the beginning all over again. How do you change course completely when a school is already up and running, receiving parents and children every weekend?

My focus began in the classroom – on what and how the children were learning. As my specialism was in educational theatre more than it was in drama, it also meant facing many challenging problems I was less familiar with in a context I knew little to nothing about. We were all pretty much in the same situation. We had to face the gap in our knowledge and then step right into it; feel our way forward together, sometimes groping in the dark. It has been a long, hard journey to arrive at this podium here today.

So, to return to the broader context, the culture of education. Before I go any further I think it is important to confess that I am no expert on education. Or on culture. I only have our experience, our practice and our reflections on our practice to draw on. In making our experience we have drawn on the knowledge of other leading practitioners and pioneers in the field of theatre and drama education and in education.

A guiding light in creating our Centre has been the writings of the great psychologist Jerome Bruner (1915-2016) and in particular his remarkable study *The Culture of Education* which he wrote in 1996. He died in 2016, aged 100, leaving a legacy that will enrich the lives of educators and children for generations to come.

Prior to this Conference I was part of the team teaching on our annual summer school. I was teaching the Theatre-in-education (TiE) course. One of our group members, YiJia, gave a wonderful presentation on the relationship between Chinese philosophy, Confucian thinking and drama.

In the discussion after YiJia's talk, JiaJia, another participant on our course, shared her experience of learning the words of Zhuangzi at school. For anyone who doesn't know, he was a pivotal figure in Daoist thought from the 4th Century BC. One of his parables goes as follows:

Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Zhuangzi. Soon I awakened, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things. (Zhuangzi, n.d./2003, p. 44)

It's beautiful. Subtle, simple, yet complex, like – in my opinion – the best of Chinese culture, “less is more” as we say in theatre. Yet we are left with many questions. I was interested to read an interpretation of the parable by one scholar that stated the butterfly dream is an analogy drawn from our inner life of what cognitive process is involved in the process of self-transformation.

The connection between this aspect of self-transformation and the process of growing through drama is clear here for us to see. But I am choosing to relate this story to you now because of how JiaJia experienced it at school. She learned to recite Zhuangzi to pass an exam without ever having to understand what it meant. She told us about tearing up her study books as soon as she had taken the Gaokao examination and she no longer needed to memorize his words. The subject was Chinese Literature, what JiaJia actually learned was how to hate her culture. Her experience is repeated in schools across China every day.

In educational drama and theatre, the subject is what it is to be human, our focus is on the self. The self of course is socially constructed and as drama and theatre are social art forms, the relationship between self and society and society in the self is at the core of what we do. Form and content is indivisible, meaning making is paramount. How we learn, the philosophy and pedagogy that underpins the art form of drama, and the culture of education that nurtures it is therefore critical to everything we do. The point of any story explored through drama in our Centre is to use a fictional other in order to know ourselves, the world that we are part of and is in us, in order that we can be active agents in our own lives based on our understanding.

This relates to a second story I want to share with you. Over the last five years at Drama Rainbow we have developed a Creative Curriculum for kindergartens and primary schools with cross-curricular lesson plans based around new stories we have created. One of these stories is called *Invisible Me*¹ (Cooper, 2017) for school children aged 9-12 years old. It has also been adapted for drama lessons and dramatised by one of our teachers, Chen Yuan, for our youth theatre.

I'd like to read some of it to you. (Cooper read the following section from a high stool)

Xiao Yi still remembered the first time Xiao Ke appeared. She was... She. Was. How old was she? Probably four or five or something like that. Yes, about five years ago when she was still in kindergarten. It was all so sudden. He just appeared there by her side, unannounced, in the kitchen. Just like that. She'd never seen him before but it felt like she'd known him for ever.

How did it happen? She was sat on the high stool by the side of the counter in the kitchen. Mum used to sit her up on the high stool there to do her maths homework. Even then she was getting extra tuition for maths. The tutor would give her plenty of what he called "puzzle pages" to do at home. It sounded like fun but she soon realised it was

really just maths homework.

So there she was, sat on the stool. She didn't like being that high up from the floor because she felt really unsafe. Asking Mum if she could get down was no use. Mum would say "As soon as you've finished those puzzles". So there was no choice. She had to finish her homework so that she could get down off the stool. And after she'd finished her Mum would always give her the same weird smile and say "See? Being up there helps you concentrate. Focusses the mind." She didn't realise it, not when she was four or five, but it wasn't actually true, because being on the stool distracted her. It didn't matter how hard she tried to do the "puzzle" on the page she couldn't forget that she was on that high stool and worried about falling off it. It slowed her down.

But Xiao Ke just appeared right out of the blue. Right in front her, out of nowhere on the work surface; sat by the sink, legs dangling over the edge, heels knocking against the cupboard door. He had a big smile on his face. "That's easy." he said. "Go on then, tell me the answer." she snapped back. Not "Who are you?" or "Where the hell have you come from?" And he was so sure of himself "Well?" She was waiting for the answers her question but it didn't come back. He had this big mouth closed grin as if he was keeping the answer trapped behind his lips and wouldn't let it out. "Come on!" He shook his head, slowly, provocatively.

"You don't know." he said.

"Do."

"Don't stress yourself. Just saying." he laughed.

"You can't just sit there. I'm trying to work this out without falling off this stool. So if you can't help me, go away!"

"Fall off." He said. Just like that.

"What?"

"Fall off."

"I can't just fall!"

"Can."

“Cannot.”

“Can.”

“Go away!”

“What?” Mum interrupted. Xiao Yi didn’t answer. “Xiao Yi. What did you just say?”

Silence.

“Nothing Mum.”

It becomes obvious to Xiao Yi that Xiao Ke was visible only to her, and it was best not to try and explain his presence. From this point in the story they were inseparable for a time. Xiao Yi and Xiao Ke made mischief together. Then, one day, Xiao Ke disappeared as suddenly as he appeared.

Xiao Ke, the imaginary friend, obviously appeared as part of some inner transformation. But it can be no coincidence that it is in response to what was happening in Xiao Yi’s world. He appeared at a moment of such difficulty as she tried balance herself – her self, her life – on a stool which engendered a kind of emotional vertigo. A routine torture. This central image in the story is a vision of suffering. It reminds me of the traditional Chinese imperial examination system, or Keju, and an old Chinese saying: “For 10 years no cares who you are, studying in a cold windowless room. But the entire world will know you when you succeed.”

This strikes me as a deeply problematic, but surprisingly common view of learning to this day, which infers that learning is not about struggle so much as about suffering. But surely learning should also be a journey of joy and wonder.

Our view of what learning is and its role in society is of course principally a question of the culture of education. Bruner’s view (1996) of education rested upon seeing humans as active hypothesis-generators who construct meaning through their interaction with the environment. This strikes me as the opposite image of Xiao Yi imprisoned on the stool.

Bruner also noted that schooling is only one small part of how society through culture inducts young people into daily life. In fact, he noted that actually, schooling might be at odds with other ways of doing this. I think this is interesting in the Chinese context as it seems to me that schooling is growing increasingly influential in this process and that the system is imposing its own demands more and more on that other great Chinese institution of induction: the family. When I speak to my colleagues at Drama Rainbow about the difference between their education, say 20 years ago, and that of children today in China the response is “freedom”. Today schooling has taken over the lives of children to such an extent there is little or no freedom to play, or just be a child. Young lives are micro-managed by adults in the relentless pursuit of academic success. This pursuit, extremely competitive and stressful alike, overrides all. But what is the human cost? And what does it mean for the culture?

Here in China the education system is primarily focussed on the reproduction of bodies of knowledge transmitted by the teacher within a narrow curriculum. But any educational debate about curricula, standards and testing can only make sense when considered in the broader context of “what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young”. (Bruner, 1996, p. IX) It then becomes necessary to define what knowledge is and how it can be most useful – which in Bruner’s view (1996) is when something is learned through the learner’s own cognitive efforts because then they (rather than the teacher or curriculum) can relate it to what they already know.

At a time of such rapid social and political change, and economic and ecological challenge that threatens the very future of the species itself, answering this question has to be considered within in the broader context of imagining what kind of world we want to live in and the kind of people we want to become. This necessitates an exploration of values as well as, if not more than, learning facts and measuring competences.

The current model of education, however, was influenced by the cultural

context it was formed in. In the West it was contextualised by the socio-political impact of the Cold War. This led to a predominance of mathematico-logical thinking in curricula, with its focus on technological competition. This preoccupation continues today. It has been imported into China and adapted to Chinese culture and tradition, the existing folk pedagogy and its view of children. Alongside the preoccupation with mathematico-logical thinking and competition, the curricula also assumed that children were just as interested in the curriculum as the school was, and that they lived in a vacuum untouched by society. This would be like Drama Rainbow constructing a drama course without acknowledging the impact of the One Child Policy, for example, on families and child development. Which of course that is exactly what we were doing at first with the original conception of the Drama Rainbow school model in 2009.

For Bruner (1996) it was opening his research out from the ascetic confines of the laboratory in the 1960s to the poverty, racism, and alienation in the US which birthed the civil rights movement, that removed unthinking complacency from his work. It led him to consider *how* culture affects the way in which children go about learning. He let the world in! Fortunately, DiE and TiE is practiced based upon such understandings, the central concern in drama is how it connects to the lived experience of children. So in Drama Rainbow we did not have to “re-invent the wheel”.

Of course, the cultural context goes beyond any school of thought or single method – it rests on the shoulders of primatologists, anthropologists, linguists and sociologists – it embraces the entire corpus of human history. This is what in educational drama and theatre we could characterise as the relationship between self and society, and society in the self.

Bruner (1996) contextualises the debates on education by explaining how it has been shaped by two “divergent conceptions about how the mind works”. (p. 1)

The first view is the computational one – the preoccupation with

mathematic-logical thinking I have just described. The second is cultural: the mind is both constituted by and realised in the use of human culture.

Computational models are concerned with information processing: finite data is sorted and stored, retrieved and managed. This is JiaJia's experience of Zhuangzi. The meaning of something, or some process, has already been established because it has to be largely determined, in order to know how to process the information. This is both its strength and weakness – we are dealing with established and comprehensive data but it is not responsive to other input.

In contrast, he states that *culturalism* takes its inspiration from the evolutionary fact that mind could not exist, save for culture (neither of course could any computational device). Culture is “super-organic” in the sense that it shapes individual minds, but that individual meaning making involves engaging in a way of life that has a shared symbolism of a community – developed, preserved and passed on to successive generations in order to maintain the culture's identity and a way of life. So, meanings are in the mind but they have their origins in the external reality of the culture.

Bruner (1996) writes that:

The distinctive feature of human evolution is that the mind evolved in a fashion that enables human beings to utilize the tools of culture. Without those tools, whether symbolic or material, man is not a 'naked ape' but an empty abstraction. (1996, p.3)

He asserts therefore that learning and thinking are always *situated* in a cultural setting and dependent on the utilisation of cultural resources. This brings us close to the *drama way* of thinking and learning.

In 2009 it demanded we reimagined the organisation we needed to be. In changing our approach to teaching and learning at Drama Rainbow between 2010-2012 we were stumbling our way towards a culturalist approach. In 2013 we began to make this process a conscious one and set about transforming

Drama Rainbow from a School to Centre. In 2014 our move from the School at Haidian to the new Centre in Chaoyang made the shift concrete – literally realised in wood and glass and bricks and mortar. We began to focus less on customers and more on building membership – building community. We physicalised in the new design for the Centre this relationship between the individual (meaning-maker) child and our Centre which provides all the cultural resources (teaching, contents, fellow students and space) for the meaning to take place. So what does the culturalist approach ask of us?

For Bruner (1996), the culturalist approach deals with both:

The macro – culture as a system of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities, power.

And

The micro – how the demands of a cultural system affect those who function within it.

It concentrates on how individual human beings construct ‘realities’ and meanings that adapt them to the system, at what personal cost, with what expected outcomes. (Bruner, 1996, p. 12)

And because individuals construct meanings in order to adapt them to systemic or institutionalised concerns it is also a social process. This means the culturalist approach is also much concerned with *intersubjectivity* – how human beings come to know “each other’s minds”. The meeting of minds necessarily engages feelings and emotions, they are *present* in all processes of meaning making and in our constructions of reality. Emotion has to be dealt with particularly in the construction of self in schooling. As previously noted, construction of self is perhaps the centre of drama. This is what dramatising human experience amounts to. This has serious implications for self hood. We know self from our own inner experience and we recognise others as selves. A pre-condition of “self-awareness” requires recognition of the “Other” as a self and the interaction between them is the substance of dramatic engagement.

This is the dynamic of the relationship between Xiao Yi and Xiao Ke and their social world in *Invisible Me*.

According to Bruner (1996), there are two aspects of selfhood that are universally important.

The first is *agency*. Selfhood is built upon the belief that one can initiate and carry out activities on one's own. Whether this is actually true is not the point – Bruner is making the critical distinction that this is the *belief*. Selfhood is encultured in language. Even the simplest narratives are built around self-agency.

The second universal feature of selfhood is *evaluation*. We evaluate our agentic experience and our ability (efficacy) to achieve our aims and these are increasingly integrated into our self-formation. Bruner calls this combination of agentic efficacy and self-evaluation, self-esteem.

Pedagogically speaking, then introducing this sense of agency and focussing on self-esteem as part of a social process as Bruner defines it (rather than egocentric self regard) has been at the heart of our approach to drama and learning. This is why I believe that we in Drama Rainbow and the wider field are “swimming upstream” against a flood tide of educational orthodoxy that has become so preoccupied with “performance”, individualism and competition, with the demands of education as an institution, that we have seriously neglected the person centred dimension. It has abandoned many Xiao Yis of this world to the pressures of performing to pass endless tests, culturally de-contextualised, psychologically precariously balanced without taking account of the cost which is traumatic.

In drama we cannot do this because the art form is rooted in a way of thinking and feeling that helps children (everyone) create a version of the world in which, psychologically, they can envisage a place for themselves – a home in the world. Story-making, narrative thinking, is needed for this. Narrative is important as both a *mode* of thinking and a vehicle of meaning

making.

Drama is human experience imagined and we use story to explore all the fundamental aspects of what it is to be human it creates the imperative to be at home in the world.

At Drama Rainbow, like Socrates, our injunction is to “Know yourself”. We understand that a child who does not know who they are cannot be at home in the world and take responsibility for themselves. And if you can’t take responsibility for yourself, then you can’t be responsible for others – really enter into society with agency. We view children not as adults in waiting but human beings in their own right with experiences that go to the centre of what it means to be human. Which is why we choose the stories we do, to explore the self in society and society in the self.

In mainstream education narrative is treated as decorative or extra-curricular. Bruner (1996) is at pains to point out the error in this way of thinking. Narrative structure is reflected in how we frame every personal experience. And how we represent our lives to others. He points out that psychoanalysts recognise that personhood itself implicates narrative and that neuroses is a reflection of either an incomplete or insufficient or inappropriate story about oneself. Stories frame and nourish identity.

It is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one’s culture. Schools must cultivate it, nurture it, cease taking it for granted. (Bruner, 1996, p. 42)

The power of narrative is its ability to make the ordinary and recognisable, at least for a time, extraordinary and unrecognisable. This breach of legitimacy has to be filled with explanation.

Narratives, for all their standard scripts about life, leave room for those breaches and violations that create what the Russian Formalists used to call *ostraneniye*: making the all too familiar strange again. So while

the “storying” of reality risks making reality hegemonic [predominant view or authority reflecting the interests of a ruling group], great stories reopen it for new questioning. That’s why tyrants put the novelists and poets in jail first. That’s why I want them in democratic classrooms – to help us see again, fresh. (Bruner, 1996, p. 99)

A similar process occurs in our drama when we forge what the playwright Edward Bond (2011) calls “the relationship between the kitchen table and the universe”. We need the familiar or ordinary (the “kitchen tables” of experience) in order to get to the universal (what it is to be human) and vice versa. And in order to do that we need to transform the all too familiar by making it strange again. So in *Invisible Me* we go from the high stool to the universe. But in our drama unlike the Russian Formalists we do that from *inside* the story, not deconstructing it from the outside. “We see again, fresh,” through the experiential.

And it’s worth noting that it is not just drama that benefits from narrative thinking. It benefits all modes of knowing the world. And Bruner (1996) doesn’t disregard any of them, not the computational model of mind or mathematic-logical thinking, he argues that narrative thinking enriches it; makes it more situated, more historical, more human.

Narrative is also at the heart of what creativity *is*, which is intrinsically fed by narrative because it requires that leap into the unknown rather than a repetition of what is established as fact – whether interpreting a story or establishing a previously unknown fact. Disciplined intuition arises from creativity which Bruner (1973) characterised as going beyond the information given.

This process of narratising self and going beyond the information given is at the heart of *Invisible Me*.

To go back into the story: Xiao Ke had disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared after being so close together. And he reappeared once more just

as suddenly. Years later when Xiao Yi was at primary school.

Mum had been ill for quite a long time. Although it wasn't clear to Xiao Yi what exactly the illness was. "She's not very well." Dad said while Mum sat in the armchair with a thin smile on her face. "OK?" And that was it. It wasn't really. But Xiao Yi knew they wanted her to say "OK," so she did.

Mum stopped working and that was causing problems. Money. The extra maths tuition stopped. It was like Dad was ashamed about that. Dad was under a lot of pressure. And Mum was really sad about it too. She'd never thought how she felt about extra maths before because no one had ever asked her. It was a big thing between Mum and Dad. But if they had just bothered to ask she could have told them she was fine about it, in fact she was more than happy about it. It's not like she missed doing extra maths on top of all the maths she was doing at school. And she still hated sitting on the stool. OK, the ground was a lot nearer because she was taller but she still didn't like it and she was having to spend way too much time sitting on it because of all the homework they gave her to do. She tried to explain but they didn't listen. It was like she was invisible. That's when he came back.

Mum and Dad were shouting at each other and she was on the stool trying to concentrate but she couldn't. It was taking ages for her to finish question 15. It was taking Dad even longer to leave the apartment for work. He would slam a door or a cupboard and then shout. Mum would wearily shout "Stop shouting" back. Question 15. Slam. Shout. The same question. It was like a scratched DVD that never moved on.

In frustration her hand went from trying to write the answer to question 15 with the pencil it was holding, to scribbling it out. "Go on." His voice came out of nowhere. She caught a glimpse of Xiao Ke out of the corner of her eye. He was at her shoulder. "Go on." he said again "Why not. They won't notice." He didn't say much but it was really clear, and there

was power in his words, in the way he said it and it made her feel very strange. [Cooper enacted the moment with the pencil and the tearing of the book as he related the story] She dropped the pencil with a clank on the kitchen counter. It seemed loud. Louder than the slamming and shouting that was still going on. "Go on." He said and she scrunched the paper up. "Yes." he approved. He didn't raise his voice but it carried force. Xiao Ke was close and she stopped hearing everything else. She was still tearing the page of the book up, slowly, deliberately when Dad finally slammed the door and left without saying goodbye. One long strip after another. She liked the sound. She liked the feel of it. She could feel Xiao Ke nodding approval as she shredded the paper. When she was finished, it wasn't just the page with question 15 that was in bits, it was the whole text book.

After that, there was incident after incident.....

The role of the imagination in creating self then is paramount and how we use it is critical to our development. It is the source of the human in us. But it's a very contradictory relationship. According to playwright Edward Bond (1996) the imagination is either creative or destructive, and there's no passive state in between. He argues that while facts still have meaning, without imagination they do not have value, which is why imagination is the basis of a human education.

The tension between the creative and the destructive use of imagination is at the heart of *Invisible Me*. It is certainly true that Xiao Yi uses her imagination at times to hurt both herself and others, in the struggle to know her self and society. And the injustice in society is certainly manifest in her self. This is because the power of the imagination can be corrupted. We cannot take altruism for granted in any self. This is why I have called this talk Human Acts of Imagination, to differentiate between acts of imagination that can make us more or less human. Humanness has to be created.

According to Vygotsky (1980), the dynamic of the personality is a drama, or struggle and continuous change internally and in tandem with the

environment. And the stage on which this drama unfolds is the individual mind within the cultural-historical context. In educational theatre and drama that struggle is externalised and made social – the individual interacting with the environment. Bond (1996) is saying values are acquired only through the imagination. It is the source of both self-knowledge and the human in us. The imagination is a specific form of human consciousness and therefore a form of reality. In this sense drama is the imagination in action. In drama imagination animates the “other”, it makes us socially and personally engaged too. This is how we meet ourselves on the “stage”. The engagement is felt and it is through this felt connection that ideas have a concrete felt connection to our own person and we take responsibility for ourselves and for others. When we are working in this way there is no message, no right or wrong answer and participants use another’s situation in order to learn how to be themselves.

Invisible Me takes a significant turn when Xiao Yi publicly embarrasses the family at a wedding when, prompted by Xiao Ke, she pulls the table cloth food, drinks and crockery off the table and crashing to the floor. Xiao Yi is dragged away by her furious and humiliated parents.

Later, Xiao Yi sat stunned on the high stool in the kitchen where her Dad had unceremoniously plonked her with a strength that surprised and scared her a little. Her bottom was stinging from a furious slap, but she didn’t dare wriggle on the seat. It all combined to make her feel very high up and very small, just like she when was five years old. The floor seemed miles away and she was beginning to feel dizzy. Xiao Ke, of course, was nowhere to be seen. She couldn’t look around for him. It was the best she could do just to try and keep calm and control her breathing. So she gripped the sides of the work service and watched her knuckles tighten. In the living room Dad was really ranting. Xiao Yi screwed up her eyes and tried not to look at the floor. One door opening from the living room. Mum followed by Dad. Door to the bedroom closed. One voice shouting. Another crying. Eerie silence. Bedroom door open. Dad leaving the apartment dragging a flight case out to the car. He was gone. He was gone and she knew they were all blaming her.

She didn't dare to turn her head for it was spinning. The door from the kitchen to the corridor was open. Xiao Yi couldn't turn to look. But out of the very, very corner of her eye Xiao Yi could see a smudge of Mum's orange dress slumped in the bedroom doorway. Air was rushing in her ears.

Then Xiao Ke appeared, in violent red, crossed legged on the kitchen counter almost face to face with Xiao Yi. She blinked at him. He grinned back. But the grin was mirthless and his face looked older than time.

More air rushing, buzzing. Her stomach in knots. Trapped high above the earth on the seat of the stool.

"Fall." he said. There was no mischief in the smile. "Let it go."

"Let it go." she repeated with just enough breath to mouth the words.

She swooned.

"Fall." He insisted once again. And he loosened the grip of her fingers on the counter.

"Xiao Yi!" her Mum was calling. "Xiao Yi!" But she was falling. Falling back to earth. Backwards from the stool. Loose limbed falling.

"Xiao Yi!"

"Mum?"

Darkness.

When she finally came around, the smell said hospital and her bleary eyes confirmed it. Xiao Yi was wired up to something. She tried to sit up and her skull exploded. A gentle hand on her arm persuaded Xiao Yi to ease her head back on to the pillow. "It's OK darling." The voices and the words it used startled her a little. Xiao Yi's eyes found some focus by clenching one eye. Dad. Dad was there. Dad was cupping her hand in his. "She's awake." he said softly, so softly to someone else in the room. Another hand, this time tenderly touching her bandaged tightened brow. "Mum?"

"Sh. Not now."

“But-”

“Shh. You have to rest. You’ve had a nasty bang on your head.” Mum said.

Another reassuring squeeze from Dad’s hand followed by “Doctor says you must rest.”

Xiao Yi turned slightly towards Dad and squinted at him. His face was like a still sea after a storm. It made him look quite handsome.

“I’m sorry.” Xiao Yi said. “Drove you away.”

“No. I’m here for you.”

“Really?”

“Always.” Dad bit his lip when he said that.

Xiao Yi blinked and looked away. She felt like she had a lump in her throat bigger than the one on her head. It was then she realised that a subdued Xiao Ke was standing at the end of the bed too. Mum kissed her on the tip of her nose. Xiao Yi strained to focus on Xiao Ke’s face. The effort was too much. “Let it go.” Xiao Yi whispered. Her parents tightened their hold on her hands, one each, joining them up right there and then. Xiao Ke nodded and with a shrug of a shoulder slipped away into the shadows.

So the story ends, Xiao Ke disappears because Xiao Yi has no need for him anymore. Xiao Ke was an act of self creation through the use of the imagination.

Put at it’s most simple, our form of drama uses stories, like *Invisible Me*, that engages children and young people emotionally and intellectually, physically and psychologically, connecting reason and imagination. The stories relate to their own lives leaving gaps for them to fill with meaning, and that is why they matter to them. This felt understanding points us towards the need for a different culture of education, one that will meet the needs of the 21st century:

The answer has to lie in building “school” cultures that build “mutual communities of learners”, involved in jointly solving problems, contributing to the process of education. We need to create spaces for

the praxis (rather than proclamations of it) of cultural mutuality – which means making children aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it and why? The culture of the group strikes a balance between the needs of the individual and the group; the needs of particular ethnic or racial identity of the group and the wider culture they are part of, and creates a division of labour which more reflects the needs of the individual talents with the needs of the group. Because in these cultures being individually good at something implies helping others get better at it. (Bruner, 1996, p. 82)

This is a praxis embedded in our Core Values, which consciously aims to enable children to develop the following attributes: *Agency, Reflection, Collaboration, Culture (Shaping/making)*.

A Centre by definition means both a physical space around which to gather (a point that is equidistant to all points on the circumference of a circle) and the point from which an activity or process is directed, or on which it is focused – in this case the centre lies in Drama. So if we begin to grasp Drama Rainbow as a centre for Drama (or DiE) we have to realise this in every aspect of our everyday conduct and practice – the culture of the company as a whole. So it is so much more than a name, a form – Centre has a real content which we want to bring to our teaching and interaction with children and adults – our membership community. Thinking in this way changes every aspect of what we do, how we think about what we do, and therefore the culture we are striving to create.

I want to finish by looking at another act of human imagination.

and “uniform” five times and then added “what are I’m doing on Eath!”

I was informed by Chen Yuan that Steven, the 9-year-old who drew the picture was describing the Father in the story of *Invisible Me*, and the pressures he lives under. His “uniform” is the suit and tie he must wear to go to work as (what the children during the exploration have decided is his job) as a salesman. His uniform gives him an identity he does not want. It is society in the self. Steven has used narrative interpretation to forge the relationship between a fictional other and his own life. It was no surprise to learn that he was having a difficult time at school when he drew that picture as an interpretation of the story he was part of dramatising. Or that he felt squeezed into the culture of education that like the Father’s “uniform” didn’t fit him. And in doing so the drama has taken him from the familiar “kitchen table” experience to the edge of the universe; he asks the most profound question to be asked about what it means to be human: Why? What am I doing on Earth? He was part of exploring a drama and creating a culture of education that enabled him to engage in a creative and human act of imagination that directly addresses who he wants to be and how he wants to live in the world.

Notes

- 1 *Invisible Me* is a short story written by Chris Cooper for Drama Rainbow’s Primary Level Creative Curriculum for schools in 2017.

References

- Bond, E. (1996). Personal communication.
- Bond, E. (2011). Personal communication.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Harvard University Press
- Bruner, J. (1973). *Beyond the information given: Studies in the psychology of knowing* (J. Anglin, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Cooper, C. (2017). *Invisible Me* [Unpublished story]. Drama Rainbow
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1980). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press

Zhuangzi (2003). *Zhuangzi: Basic writings* (B. Wastson, Trans.). Columbia University Press
(Original work published no date)

此為上文摘要中譯

人類的想像行動：戲劇與教育文化

Chris Cooper

北京·抓馬寶貝

摘要

教育戲劇和戲場的「要旨」，是生而為人是怎樣一回事，我們專注自身。自身固然是由社會建構，而戲劇和劇場是社會的藝術形式，自身與社會及自身中社會的關係正是我們的工作核心。形式與內容密不可分，意義建構至為重要，因此如何學習戲劇藝術形式所奉行的哲學和教學法及孕育藝術戲劇形式的教育文化，是我們所做一切的關鍵。任何透過戲劇探索的故事，重點都是利用虛構的他者來了解我們自己、我們身處的世界和我們內在的世界，我們從而可以憑藉自己的理解主導自己的生命。借鑑抓馬寶貝過去十年的經驗，本文探討如要建立一種教育文化挑戰「何為知識」的傳統固定觀念，戲劇及敘事式思考在當中可以擔當的角色，並且就孩子和青年人生活在廿一世紀面對環境、社會經濟及政治挑戰所需的某種意義建構，提供一個徹底不同的觀點。

關鍵詞：自身與社會、抓馬寶貝、故事及敘事式思考、教育文化、想像與戲劇

* 本文闡述 2019 年 8 月 17 日至 18 日「抓馬寶貝十週年直面鴻溝戲劇大會」上 Chris Cooper 的主題演辭。由於時間所限，加上講者當時希望回應大會討論，本文與該篇主題演辭不盡相同。

電郵：chris@accident-time.co.uk

(翻譯：馬家瑩)



