

CONFERENCE REVIEW

Heathcote Reconsidered: National Drama International Conference 2013, Greenwich University, London, England, 4-7 July 2013

Overview of the Conference

Set in Greenwich University in London, the National Drama International Conference 2013 encompassed practitioners and academics worldwide together with their remembrance and perspectives on an influential figure of drama in education – Dorothy Heathcote. As the title shown – “Heathcote Reconsidered”, the four-day conference was being organized with an astute focus on the practice and the influences that Dorothy left us to learn, to reconsider, and “to dig deeper” as Gavin Bolton reminded us in the opening keynote of the conference.

The keynote on the second day was delivered by Cecily O’Neil, who brought us a close-up of Heathcote’s journal manuscript of her drama practice – an intimate interaction with her thoughts and reflection as an incomparable drama practitioner always being aware of the context of others in her practice. The excerpts that Cecily selected and her presentation led us to the experience of Heathcote’s thinking and beliefs. Heathcote was definitely there among us.

The third keynote was completed by John O’Toole with moments of laughter and tears among the audiences. It was a quick catch-up of the historical development of drama in education, and recent issues and challenges in the field framed in a dramatic context of Dr. Phil. E. Stein giving a clinical educational talk with a question and answer session. What an effective demonstration of teacher-in-role! In that space of shared knowledge, the moments have left resonance for us to amaze and to wonder. For half a century, drama in education has reached so far to different corners of the world with tremendous effort by many others we always know

and remember. Yet, the marginalized position of drama and the resistance resulting from misunderstanding, under-knowledge and tension urge us to ponder how we as a community can bridge the discourses from the local context to much broader and wider contexts and audiences.

David Booth drew the curtain of the conference with his speech on the potentially of drama to answer the big question of 21st century education. The five Cs he identified are:

- Collaboration;
- Critical thinking/ Problem solving;
- Creativity/ Innovation ;
- Career/ Life skills;
- Connections such as moral and empathy.

He also raised a big question that the field needs to address – “what are we not helping them (i.e. policy-makers and other stakeholders) to hear about drama?” He appealed to everyone to talk outside our discipline and to collaborate, “not to be afraid of research” and to work with the younger generation in the field.

Assembly of Ideas for Transformation

The conference thrived with presentations, workshops, roundtables, and posters each day. Its programme depicts a worldwide representation of projects continuing the legacy of Heathcote, ranging from England, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, Norway, Finland, Turkey, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, South Africa and South East Asia like Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Themes were categorized under seven areas including:

- The relevance of Heathcote's work in the 21st century;
- Key aspects and interpretations of Heathcote’s methodologies in research and practice;
- Heathcote’s place in the development of drama in education –

influences on her work and her positioning in relation to the work of others;

- The Heathcote diaspora: the reach and legacy of her work internationally – how and where has it travelled?
- Adapting Heathcote’s methods to the digital arena;
- The challenges of applying Heathcote’s methodologies in different educational, cultural, political, social and economic contexts;
- Beyond mythologising – alternative perspectives and considerations;
- Proposals outside above.

In this assembly of thoughts, we share a sense of agency in the hope to bring transformation on our practice, profession, and community and society throughout the conference. This sense reflects on widely divergent types of projects. To name but a few, Helen Cahill’s workshop exploring alternative practice of mantle of the expert, using a range of surrealist drama conventions to “dis-mantle” stereotypes in dominant stories and foster critical thoughts. Sarah Mario shared with us in her presentation titled, “Mantle of the expert is threaded through my life” about how her profession including teaching, writing, and research has been transformed by Heathcote’s legacy. Kennedy Chinyowa’s case study of using Heathcote’s for managing conflicts in African context and Anita Grünbaum’s model on using drama inspired by the work of Heathcote and Bolton to transform daily forms of everyday racism into understanding and peaceful actions in European contexts are examples of using drama to bring forward social transformation.

Cross disciplinary research and proposals are widespread in the conference. Drama researchers/ educators have been conducting studies not merely on the happenings of drama in education, but investigating happenings of drama in other disciplines. For instance, Muriel Law’s PhD thesis on the use of drama in Liberal Studies, Dora Pratley’s research on drama as pedagogy in second language acquisition for the educational disadvantaged, Michael Finneran’s analysis on Heathcote’s work and the implication on teacher education, Michael Anderson and his colleagues’ project on adapting Heathcote’s drama methods for digital spaces. The

marriage of drama education with other disciplines is enriching and expanding the repertoire.

From Heathcote's Practice to Teacher Education Practice

A young researcher like me has never met Dorothy face-to-face. Attending National Drama International conference provides me opportunities to gain more insights on her practice from multiple perspectives, and revisit what I have learnt from my study and so to reflect on my classroom practice.

Particularly intrigued by O'Neil's presentation which I could experience Heathcote's thoughts while reading her journal, I revisited "Dorothy Heathcote – Drama as a learning Medium" edited by Betty Jane Wagner (1999) again. It was about five years ago when I first read it during my pursuit of MEd degree in Drama Education. The book is well-written with substantial documented records of Heathcote's classroom practice and Wagner's elaborated explanation to Heathcote's drama in education approach.

As much as I enjoyed reading the book again, this time my attention was drawn to the discussion on how a person should prepare her/himself to be a teacher and to teach. This part is written in chapter three, prior to many other chapters followed which are about how to plan and facilitate the drama. The title of this chapter is "Edging in". In Heathcote's sense, there is no such a clear and clean starting point for one to start to use drama as a teaching tool. One has to start wherever s/he stands (Wagner, 1999). What fascinates me and refreshes my mind is Heathcote's suggestions on examination of one's own conditions as a teacher and the importance of determining her/his own "threshold of tolerance" (Wagner, 1999, p.26). Although this book is about drama in education, I reckon the six conditions suggested by Heathcote, namely:

1. Decision-taking;
2. Noise;

3. Distance;
4. Size of group;
5. Teaching registers or stances;
6. Stature as teacher

to be the prerequisites that whoever work in teaching industry should consider seriously. These conditions are self-reflective guidance for teachers to dig deeper and understand their inner selves. Knowing ones' own limits involves conversing to their values, beliefs and even identities that may influence the interactions, dynamics and pedagogical approach of teachers in their classrooms.

This chapter recalls my experience of being trained as a qualified teacher in a tertiary institute. Besides equipping us with professional knowledge and teaching methodologies, there is a lack of something in my training of being a teacher – something essential to nurture a person to be a teacher of other lives. The missing part, in my opinion, in hindsight, is to understand who we are, what we are, where we are from, and how we are constructed. This idea echoes with Heathcote's reminders made in a course for teachers. She stated:

...it is the quality of our lives that determines the quality of our teaching, when we take time to access and look clearly at our values, we have a clue as to why we teach. What is central in our personal lives will probably be the underpinning for the most important thing we want our students to experience when they are with us. (Wanger, 1999, p.226)

In Wanger's record of Heathcote's course with teachers, Heathcote demonstrated an empowering approach to work with teachers for their professional development. Instead of transmitting tricks and strategies to manage through a lesson, she

...helping [helps] them come to know why they're doing ... to learn to be vital, alive, tolerant, patient, observing people who trust themselves and are capable of creating a good working relationship with others... to be aware of both the potential and the limits of personalities and values... to be able to put aside any anxieties so

as to be free to respond freshly and capture the possibilities of any teaching moment. (Wanger, 1999, pp. 226-227)

What Heathcote did is to build up teachers' capabilities so that they are able to face and deal with any possibilities in their work contexts and embrace what they are capable and incapable of doing. Lecturing will not be effective to achieve this aim. She co-worked with teachers through drama to help them explore themselves. She also lived with her own beliefs and attitudes in her practice.

The reading has left me lots of residue and thoughts to ponder. For Heathcote, taking care of a whole person comes far more important than skills and knowledge. How she approached teachers as "truly" humans and values the importance of "becoming" rather than "being" contrasts to what I received in my teacher training as. There is often an inner voice questioning the recent structures and the delivery of teacher training programmes in Hong Kong.

My personal experience in the teacher training may not paint the big picture of Hong Kong. There could be evolution of programme design after almost a decade. Driven by curiosity, I searched online about postgraduate diploma of education programmes held by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Institute of Education for a glimpse of the reality.

Surprisingly, I could hardly see any content on guiding teachers to be self-reflective or on the formation of oneself (looking inward of oneself to understand her/his own practice-to-be) in the pre-service or in-service teaching training programmes. Only CUHK's programme offers a course called "Values and Moral Education", which aims to "help teachers to reflect on their own values and on the ways they teach values, especially moral values" (Faculty of Education, CUHK, 2013). However, it is an elective only and emphasizes on moral education. As for the other two institutes, it seems that focuses are mainly laid on subject curriculum, teaching and learning, and

educational psychology. I have no intention to deny the importance of the mentioned focuses. But I cannot convince myself that developing a person to be a teacher without taking care of her/his own formation will result in empowering teachers who are able to empower students to learn and grow.

John Dewey (1897) states precisely the purpose of education is “to prepare him[learners] for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities”. To enable this learning, there need re-imagination of the role of teacher in the learning process. Teachers should not be transmitting knowledge; they should play a role of a facilitator and a guide of learners’ learning. He further elaborates that

The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these. Thus the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, guiding students to independently discover meaning within the subject area. (Dewey, 1987)

If these are all what teachers are expected to become and to do to achieve the purpose of education, I would assume teachers would learn to be an agent who will understand themselves well enough to fully and readily use of their capacities developed throughout the programme. I would also assume that teachers need to learn to assess themselves and their positions in relation to their upbringings, values, and beliefs as Heathcote would do. I wonder if simply addressing subject matters, curriculum and teaching methodology in teacher education would nurture a group of knowledge transmitters or a group of facilitators.

What Heathcote demonstrated in the book is an example of how she used drama to prepare a group of teachers to employ drama to teach and her belief of being a teacher. That reminds me of Michael Finneran’s presentation, “Heathcote’s Lessons for Teacher Education” in the conference, in which he

discussed the significance of Heathcote's work on contemporary practice of teacher education and offered a debate on the implications that some of the less successful Heathcote's work may make on teacher education. He also employed the practice of drama in his own institution in Ireland to conduct teacher education programme. Indeed, Heathcote's practice and her philosophy towards education leave a fertile but unattended land for teacher education practitioners to cultivate. How can we make use of drama as pedagogy to help teachers to understand how they are formed and to sculpture their own identities and practice? How can we develop teachers' sense of agency so that they can bear agentive minds to work with their students in classrooms? How much do we understand our own conditions before we approach the teachers?

It almost comes to cliché to hear teachers in Hong Kong criticizing nowadays students as unmotivated, passive, fear for making mistakes, inconfident, uncritical etc. As drama educators/ researchers in Hong Kong, we certainly know that these students are desperately in need to be empowered in their learning but not be stereotyped. To see this transformation on students lies in the empowerment of teachers first. If teachers are depowered, so are students. If teachers are only blind followers of the system, so are their students. If teachers are the oppressed, so are their students. If teachers are lack of opportunities to build their own capabilities, students will be capability-disabled too. In the 21st century, not only do we need to re-imagine how learning process should take place for students, but we also need to re-consider, review and re-imagine how teacher education should be structured and what paths drama as pedagogy may offer us in teacher education.

Wishes to the Future

Heathcote has left her valuable ideas and practice for us. They have been spread and flourished around the world. She would never want us to peddle on her ideas and follow what she had done. Originated from western traditions, drama in education has landed in Hong Kong for decades, how

ready are local drama educators/ researchers to reflect and synthesize what we have received from the western practice and transform it to be sustainable in and compatible to our own culture and needs. To do this, we must always ask hard questions of ourselves and our practice as Heathcote often did to David Booth.

To draw an end to this review, I would like to quote Heathcote's wish to Booth, which he shared with us in his speech, to all of the drama educators/ researchers in Hong Kong and other Asian contexts:

"May your [our] paths be always of your [our] own making and not copies of others."

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