

Diversity, Discretion and Distinction in Drama Learning

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Abstract

In this Keynote address from the *World Conference 2009 on Drama and Education in Chinese Communities* (19-21 December, 2009) Hong Kong, Madonna Stinson unpacks the title of the conference “Embarking on a 3D Journey - Search Diversely, Think Discreetly, Use Distinctively” in terms of questions relating to curriculum in general, and with particular reference to the current context in Singapore. She encourages the drama education community to be open collaboration as we engage in the curriculum “conversation” with awareness that we have no definitive answers to the big questions that shape our journey.

Keywords: Curriculum; Drama/Theatre Education; Singapore; Gatekeepers; Content

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. I am delighted to be here and wish to begin by expressing my gratitude to TEFO for the invitation; by offering very special appreciation for those who have assisted with the organisation of this conference and my attendance; and by acknowledging those who have stood on this ground in the past. I hope I step lightly in their footprints.

I come to you as someone who has been a drama educator for many years and in several countries. For the seven years prior to my recent return to Australia, I was worked at teaching and researching drama education for the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore. One of the challenging (but positive, I think) things about changing the country in which you live and work, is that one is forced by circumstances to “see things anew” or “see the familiar in new ways” and that is, as Maxine Greene, Gavin Bolton and others have pointed out, a vital aspect of art making.

I would like to start by talking about the words used for the title of this paper. I was asked to talk about “Diversity, Discretion and Distinction in Drama Learning” and to draw on my work in curriculum development in Singapore and Australia. When taken individually the words in this title may be interpreted in a range of ways; when considered collectively new meaning emerges. But let’s start with each word individually:

“Diversity” means a range of single things or variety. It comes via *Middle English* from the Latin: *divertere* “to turn in separate ways”. I rather like the notion of turning in separate ways in relation to drama. The turning in separate ways brings to mind a range of viewpoints, a range of gazes, a range of directions, and, because we work in role in drama, the possibility of a range of perspectival understandings (Greeno & van de Sande, 2007) because we see *and feel* the perspective of the diverse roles in which we are working, while at the same time, being aware of the feelings and beliefs of our own perspective: the personal stance we bring to the role.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the notion of diversity has great

currency in educational discourse, particularly in relation to differentiation (e.g. Tomlinson, 1999) of curriculum, instruction and assessment, and importantly, an awareness of the very different teaching and learning contexts that we work in, even in schools that are very close to one another, and even in different classrooms in the same school. More of this later.

Now to “Discretion”: this word is more troublesome. While pronounced the same way there are two meanings and spellings. The origin of both words comes again via *Middle English* from Latin: *discretus*, meaning separate. Therefore discrete means individually separate and distinct, however there is another meaning (and slightly different spelling): discreet, meaning to behave in a way that is intentionally unobtrusive, or careful and circumspect; to act with discretion. Surely this is not the meaning we should ascribe to drama work! We do not hide intentionally or our intentionality, and the work of dramatic artists is not careful and circumspect. And a third, additional, meaning applies when we talk about doing something at our “discretion”, which implies that we have a choice about what and how and when we engage. This third meaning raises the question of how much discretion (i.e. choice and student agency) do we permit our drama students, when planning curriculum and pedagogy that, of necessity, concerns them and in fact is (or should be) as relevant and important to students as it is to those who teach.

The third word in the title is “Distinction”. This comes from the *Old French* and signifies the notion of excellence that sets someone or something apart from others. And, we notice more and more that this, too, is an important issue in contemporary educational practice.

Each of the issues of diversity, discreteness and distinction in terms of school-based drama has resonance with what is happening in Singapore.

Distinguishing the Singapore Context

To say that Singapore is unique is to state the blindingly obvious. A city-state that is also an island, located in the middle of the Asia-Pacific region,

the Republic of Singapore has one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world. It is a highly mediated and constructed society. A capitalist/socialist democracy with one opposition member. An 'air-conditioned nation' (George, 2000) relishing both comfort and control.

Much has changed in the life of Singaporeans since independence from Malaysia on 9 August, 1965. Today's Singapore is an affluent nation with a population of nearly five million. The population is proportionally Chinese (76.7%), Malay (14%), Indian (7.9%) and Other (1.4%). Additionally there are more than a million foreign workers living in Singapore. While the focus in the early years of the Republic was almost solely on economic survival and social stability, today the Singapore Government has changed from being concerned primarily with "what is in the rice bowl" and is looking beyond its previous technocratic focus towards the arts for creativity and entrepreneurship. Singapore wants to become a "Renaissance City" (MITA, 2000), a global city of the arts where Singaporeans can be "creative and well-rounded individuals"⁽¹⁾, and the new performing arts complex, the "Esplanade: theatres on the bay" is iconic in signalling this focus.

Diversity

In line with the move towards a "Renaissance City", more than ten years ago the Ministry of Education (1998) flagged some positive signals for arts and drama educators. The paper, *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* stated:

With the shift towards more creative thinking, teaching methodology has to incorporate more creative approaches. There must be a greater degree of tolerance for 'divergent thinking'. The shift towards increased emphasis on critical and creative thinking skills means that curriculum and assessment must move in tandem with each other to create a conducive environment which encourages creativity.

Statements like these were encouraging to drama educators, and their

optimism has proved to be well founded because the circumstances of drama education have changed considerably in the last ten years.

When I arrived in Singapore in July of 2002, several colleagues at the University were bemused as to why I had come. "There is no drama education in Singapore," they stated unequivocally, "and no chance that there will be! You would be better off getting a job back in Australia." I am delighted to report that those nay-sayers and sceptics have been proven wrong. The Advanced Post-Graduate Diploma in Drama and Drama Education, which I had travelled so far to teach, has guided many teachers through the processes of teaching drama. It has morphed into the Masters in Education (Drama) and the fact that there is a growing pool of trained teachers in Singapore, together with an increasing emphasis on diverse pathways in the education system, and the results of a lot of hard work, fine teaching, and local research by many people has meant that drama now does exist in the curriculum in Singapore, and with an increasing foothold. Even since I left in August the government has publicly stated that drama is on the increase: a friend of mine, recently in Singapore, rang to say that he was watching the news and the Minister for Education had reported that drama was seen to be very important in the new directions in primary education.

Let me describe what was happening in Singapore at the time of my departure.

My colleagues at the University had been a little harsh in 2002 when saying there was no drama education in Singapore. There was, and is, a vibrant and ongoing program of drama artists working in both primary and secondary schools as part of the Arts Education Program (AEP), supported by the National Arts Council, and as part of the Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) program, supported by the Ministry of Education. Drama accounts for more than 50% of take up from the AEP and many schools run a drama club, as a CCA, facilitated by teachers within the school, who either teach the "club members" themselves, or who hire in individuals to work on specific projects, or companies who provide packages, often developed or modified for individual

school needs.

In 2004 the, then, Minister for Education, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, announced that O-level drama was to be introduced into Singapore schools. Following consideration of a range of possible curriculum documents, the MOE decided to offer the Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) IGCSE syllabus and eight schools were selected to begin this course of study. The schools were required to guarantee continuity of staffing, support, and resources for the successful implementation of the curriculum. The schools were advised to strengthen their lower-Secondary drama curricula in 2006 and to begin the implementation of the O-level syllabus in 2007 or 2008, depending on the readiness of the school and the staff. I, and some colleagues from the Curriculum Planning and Development Division and a prominent drama school in Singapore were commissioned to write a curriculum framework for Secondary 1 and this was provided to all eight schools to assist in developing their lower-Secondary drama programs. It was intended that we continue to write a similar framework for Secondary 2, which would segue into the O-level curriculum at Secondary 3, but changes at senior management level meant (as is often the case in curriculum innovations) that the Secondary 2 framework did not go ahead.

The Ministry organised and funded two rounds of training from Cambridge International Examinations in 2006 and 2007. These focused on assessment and the “accreditation” of the teachers in each of the eight schools that are offering O-Level drama.

At the same time that the O-Level syllabus was being implemented, interest and investment in drama learning was growing elsewhere. Victoria Junior College had a long history of offering A-Level drama, and now other Junior Colleges were beginning to offer the same subject. And, in 2006, Singapore Polytechnic commenced the development of a Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology, in reality an Applied Theatre course. The Singapore Poly course is currently under revision but the staff and students of this program impress with their passion, energy and commitment to quality

work. Between 2002 and 2009 a number of primary teachers had graduated with drama qualifications and were making inroads into the primary school curriculum. For the most part, drama in the primary school focused on drama as pedagogy and integrated drama learning with the learning of communication skills, life skills, or emotional well-being. I believe it is the fine work that has been done by a number of committed primary drama educators that has led to the recent announcement by the Minister, that drama will be an important part of the new primary school curriculum.

Another vital influence on the health and development of drama education in Singapore is the Singapore Drama Educators Association. Established towards the end of 2002, this organisation has matured and grown into a dynamic collaborative of drama educators throughout the Nation. SDEA is both inward and outward looking. Their mission is to enhance and support quality teaching of drama, thus they provide regular professional development sessions for members; and to be alert to contemporary drama education practice, thus they support international connections, “searching diversely” for example by attending conferences such as this.

So the diversity of offerings is growing in Singapore. With the increasing opportunities for students to access drama learning, it is worth using the frames of the other two words in the title of this paper to consider the extent, depth and complexity of drama learning available.

Discreteness

One of the challenges we face in the construction of any curriculum is the delineating of the field. When curriculum is centrally planned we also need to acknowledge that we are talking about the curriculum-as-plan as opposed to curriculum-as-lived. In most cases, what comes to mind when we consider a curriculum is a text that we find in printed or pre-prepared documents such as the syllabus produced by a ministry or department of education. This is curriculum seen as a noun, as fixed, determined and determinable; what Ted Aoki (2005, p.419) describes as:

the world in which the measures that count are preset: therefore ordained to repeat the same – to dance the same, to paint the same, to sing the same, to act the same – a world in which proper names of students tend to be reduced to “learner”, psychologically enframed, where learning is reduced to “acquiring” and where “evaluating” is reduced to measuring the acquired against some preset standardized norm. This metron, this measure and rhythm, is one that, in an overconcern for sameness, fails to heed the feel of the earth that touches the dancing feet differently for each student.

How does this connect with valuing and acknowledging diversity, I wonder?

But by claiming a discrete space in the curriculum for drama, we are separating it out. We are claiming that there is something called drama that is worth studying. What is this and how can we describe the “discreteness” of the area? This involves making decisions about the selection, organisation and sequencing of content, and these decisions are essentially about inclusion and exclusion. They are epistemological and ontological decisions about what we value in drama learning. What can we say are the essential content areas of drama? When can, and should, they be offered in the sequence of schooling? What learning underpins other learning? And how can we identify what the students have learnt as a result of the teaching/learning experiences undertaken?

In the case of Singapore, the O-level curriculum offered has been purchased from an organisation based in the United Kingdom. To a large extent this decision was influenced by the fact that this curriculum was a highly regarded package from an internationally recognised institution and thus the “results” were recognised as transferable. It will be interesting to see how the primary drama curriculum (if there is to be one) develops, and whether it develops with an awareness of the specificity and diversity of the local context.

I will jump across the planet for a moment as this particular issue is

much in the forefront of Australian drama educators minds right now as we work and consult towards a National Curriculum, which will include drama. Drama educators in Australia are grappling with what Murray Print (1993) calls fundamental questions underpinning curriculum development i.e. what to teach; how to teach; when to teach; and what is the impact of teaching? For Print, curriculum designers consider and make decisions about what content is valued, what pedagogy is the most appropriate for that content, the sequence in which the content is offered to students and, finally, assessment and evaluation.

Let us consider for a moment the work of Michael Apple, a critical curriculum theorist, who positions such decisions in a broader context. Apple (2004, p.5) claims that schools “act as agents of cultural and ideological hegemony” and curriculum developers must be conscious of the political, economic, social and cultural implications of their selections. Apple’s questions are: “Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organised and taught in this way? To this particular group?” (ibid, p.6). This is a particular challenge for national and systemic curriculum, which tends to reproduce the median and the status quo rather than allowing for alternative viewpoints and varying standards that are responsive to localised and specific contexts of schooling.

Some time ago I read an article by Maja Ardal (2003) and her use of the term “cultural guardianship” struck me as worth exploring. Ardal was writing about children’s access to children’s theatre and pointed out that, while a show may have been prepared particularly for children, it is adults (parents and teachers) that are the gatekeepers to access the performance. The adults select the play the children will attend, buy the tickets and organise the transport. Thus children have access to their culture only through the adult facilitators of this admittance.

It occurs to me that we, as drama educators and drama curriculum developers, also act as cultural guardians or curators. We select and control content, access and locations of learning. So what may be the role of the drama artist-educator in the multicultural context of Singapore? Is it perhaps

the role of cultural developer who plays a part in the nation-building and national identity, the rhetoric of which is so familiar? Does the role operate as a curator of the culture, selecting and presenting chosen aspects in an informed, informative and enticing way? Lucilla Teoh points out:

The last ten years has seen rapid developments in English Language Theatre in Singapore as directors and playwrights have become more experimental and confident in developing material that was recognisably Singaporean. However what has happened in tandem with the rise of English Language Theatre is the gradual disappearance of ethnic art forms. This has been caused in part by the lack of new apprentices in these traditional art forms and in part by the downplaying of one's ethnicity by the government in its promotion of a national identity. (Teoh, 1997)

Perhaps the role, at least in part, is to find a way to assist young people to access the 'ethnic' art forms, the loss of which causes Teoh such concern, but in such a way they can contribute to the development of new and diverse material that is recognisably responsive to the local cultural context.

It is clear that we are all cultural stakeholders in the future of our countries. In Singapore the Arts Council flags this strongly with its 'audience development' section. Funding for the AEP programs illustrate the specific commitment to work in schools to develop the audiences of the future. It is vital to acknowledge that we also act as gatekeepers, giving access to those individuals or groups we choose to admit, and to those areas we choose to be appropriate.

What does this inclusion or exclusion mean for drama? Towards the end of the last century, Bruce Burton pointed out a significant challenge for *drama* curriculum writers, stating:

We do not have for drama an accepted body of content or subject matter, such as you find in maths or science curricula around the

world. There is still disagreement on the nature of the basic skills required for drama, unlike other performing arts subjects such as music or dance, where there is an accepted foundation of skills.
(Burton, 1991, p.1)

So, how do we go about answering the questions: what is *important and valuable* for all students to learn in drama; what is the most appropriate *framework* for drama learning across the years of schooling and in a range of contexts; *how* and *when* will that learning take place; what learning must *precede* other learning; is there one particular *sequence* of learning that will apply to all; and how can we (validly and authentically) *identify* the learning that has taken place?

These are important questions and are best answered collaboratively and in discussion with key stakeholders in drama education, particularly teachers and, though they are often left out of the curriculum “conversation” (Doll, 2002), students. As an international community we are in need of research that draws on the experience of a diverse range of local contexts to help us answer these questions.

But now to the third term, distinction.

Distinction

There are three pathways of distinction in Singapore: 1) “niche” areas in regular school contexts; 2) the SYF (Singapore Youth Festival); and 3) the School of the Arts (SOTA).

In 2005, Singapore’s MOE published the *Handbook on the Offering of New ‘O’ Level Subjects* which encouraged schools “to develop and build on their existing niche areas” (Ministry of Education, 2005, p.4), an initiative which allowed schools to cater to students “who have the interest and aptitude in specific areas of study” (ibid). Following this initiative, some schools have begun to further expand and develop drama as a “niche” offering within the

school program. Niche schools are not required to conform to the O-level syllabus discussed earlier, and instead may devise programs that build on the expertise and interests of their staff and with specific cohorts of students in mind. It is hard to know exactly how many drama “niche” schools are operating effectively, since much of the work done in these locations is dependent on the expertise and commitment of one or two key teachers and the “niche” is difficult to sustain when the staffing pattern changes.

Schools may acquire niche status due to their (awarded) performance in the Singapore Youth Festival, a competition organised by the Co-Curricular Activities section of the MOE. The SYF is organised for primary schools in even numbered years and for secondary schools and junior colleges in odd numbered years. The SYF aims to encourage participation and raise standards in arts education. SYF continues to grow in popularity with well over 90% of all schools (primary, secondary and JC) participating on a regular basis. All submissions are judged against centrally set benchmark standards for gold, silver and bronze. Each school’s entry must be a drama performance in English (no Singlish⁽²⁾) which lasts for thirty minutes in total, including five minutes each for bump in and bump out. Entries are judged in four areas: staging, script, performance and production. The students perform for a panel of judges but to no other audience during the competition.

The most recent example of distinction in drama and arts education can be found in the Singapore, School of the Arts (SOTA). Under the stewardship of Principal, Rebecca Chew, SOTA, is a dynamic and exciting new school, established in 2006. Until recently they have been operating in temporary facilities but, from the beginning of the new school year in 2010, will be housed in a brand new purpose-built facility very close to the centre of town. Each year, SOTA holds at least one set of auditions for “talented” students to enter the school. From personal experience, what strikes you when you enter the school grounds is a vibrancy, a sense of excitement and energy, and a very particular and personal relationship between teachers and students. However, I will allow the school to speak for itself. This description comes directly from the school’s website (School Of The Arts, 2006):

In March 2004, the Singapore Government accepted the recommendations of a Committee on Specialised Arts School to set up Singapore's first independent pre-tertiary arts school to nurture youths talented in the arts, with the vision to groom the next generation of artists, creative professionals and individuals who are passionate for, and committed to the arts in a multi-cultural society.

The School of the Arts adopts a 6-year connected arts and academic curriculum. Students audition for a specialisation in music, dance, theatre or the visual arts. However, students are exposed to the basics of all four arts disciplines and continue to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach even as they develop in their chosen discipline.

The average class size of approximately 20-25 students provides exposure to the high standards of a rigorous academic and arts programme. The School of the Arts believes that instilling curriculum core concepts in a supportive arts environment will cultivate greater clarity of insight, critical evaluation and creativity.

The School of the Arts offers its students a curriculum committed to excellence in the arts. Under the guidance of its distinguished faculty of outstanding arts specialists and experienced educators, it offers an exciting new pedagogic environment where students can achieve the highest possible artistic and intellectual standards as individuals and responsible members of the community.

Excellence in the arts not only emphasises performance and technical skills but also critical theory and history, composition and choreography, and the incorporation of technology and digital media – all with the end in mind to nurture and develop deep critical thinking, heightened creative awareness and lifelong inter-personal skills.

A complex and comprehensive brief.

Final Thoughts

Now, where do we end up, in relation to diversity, discretion and distinction? Rather than finishing with definitive statements I would like to make some deliberately tentative comments, and raise some questions under each of the headings I have discussed.

Catering for, acknowledging and valuing diversity is a particular challenge when we work in circumstances constrained by a centralised curriculum-as-plan. It behoves us to look critically and carefully at curriculum documents prepared by centralised bureaucracies and to consider whether they allow us to cater for the diversity that is present in our schooling contexts. Can we support and value the full diversity of students that we teach? Does our inclusion of diversity *include* students with *dis*-abilities as well as those with abilities and to they all feel valued and valuable in the drama classroom? Do we cater only for the “talented” students, and how might we identify them? Does this diversity extend to assessment? This is a particularly challenging area for drama educators in our bid to ensure that assessment is both authentic and able to make judgements about student progress that results *from being taught*.

I feel confident, in this venue and on this occasion, in saying that we all would agree that drama is a *discrete* area of knowledge, with particular content (including the development of practical skills in making and presenting drama; and analytical and reflective skills in responding to drama). However this does not preclude harnessing the discreteness of drama in a pedagogy which transforms learning in other “discrete” areas of knowledge into the embodied and multimodal form that is drama. But the challenge to identify, describe and agree on what makes up this discrete area remains (Stinson, 2009). What can, does, and might constitute a drama curriculum? I believe this is an area that is in great need of research.

Distinction offers particular challenges. Certainly one of the objectives

of a drama education must be to cater for and support those students who display talent in the area. We value and strive for excellence. However there is a possibility that, in our drive to be “niche” and “set apart” from others we can be overtaken by competition and the goal becomes more important than the journey. We must equally strive to ensure that the pathway to “excellence” is not littered with the remains of those who do not meet the prescribed standards, or who travel the path more slowly, or who would choose a different path.

Finally I asked some of my friends and drama teachers in Singapore to share with me some of their thoughts on drama teaching there. All of them talked a good deal about the importance of the teacher and that drama was an important subject in its own right. Most felt that drama is best taught by trained teachers who specialise in drama; that the learning that takes place in the drama classroom transfers into other areas of the school-lives of their students, especially in terms of ability to concentrate and in developing self-confidence. They pointed to special qualities they felt were important for a drama teacher to hold: enthusiasm; withholding of judgment; being open to diverse and different ideas; patience; self-reflection; passion for drama; sensitivity to students needs; bravery and risk-taking; and all wanted more and ongoing professional development for drama teachers. They pointed too, to some of the challenges that they face in Singapore: misconceptions of drama (that it is *fun* and not intellectually challenging learning) and, thus, teachers and students capacities and competencies; the results-oriented “examination culture”; the high emphasis on “professionally staged” performances; and that traditional values of respect for status and authority can mean that it is difficult for students to take risks within class.

So, it is clear that we are on an interesting path. I offer you my thoughts today. They have ranged *diversely*; I hope I spoke with *discretion*; and that you will have some *distinct* memories of a few thoughts raised.

Notes

1. Speech by Minister Lee Yock Suan, Minister for Information and the Arts, 9 February,

- 2000, Budget Debate.
2. English is commonly spoken by many Singaporeans in informal settings. There has been a concerted effort by government agencies to minimise its' use.

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此為上文摘要中譯

集思廣益、慎重判斷、適時應務 —— 戲劇教育課程的籌劃

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摘要

在 2009 年香港舉行的「世界華人戲劇教育會議 2009」裏，Madonna Stinson 的主題演講是「著手戲劇教育課程的要點：集思廣益、慎重判斷、適時應務」。內容雖然取材自講者在新加坡從事戲劇教育課程的經驗，但對其他的地區亦應該有所啟發。講者指出當籌劃戲劇教育課程時，應該廣納多方的參與，亦應該謹記這開墾之旅本來就沒有任何既定的答案。

關鍵詞：課程、戲劇教育、新加坡、把關者、內容

