The 'relationship managers': Towards a theorising of the Teacher-in-Role / student relationship

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Abstract

This paper considers how arts practices (in this case drama) can invigorate learning and teaching across the curriculum. It explores the potential of the 'teaching-in-role' strategy to generate experiential learning environments and allow new assessment and management possibilities to emerge. The paper does this by comparing teaching-in-role with the relationship between theatre makers and audience members, in the process identifying the creative tensions that emerge when the theories and practices of arts education are compared with those of the arts industries.

Tensions inevitably arise when drawing parallels between theatre and classroom drama, particularly process drama (not intended for an audience). While the goals of theatre and classroom drama may be very different, it is reasonable to argue that teaching-in-role, like theatre performance, is posited on a relationship between two parties. This relationship requires a shared understanding of social, behavioural and aesthetic conventions, and an agreement on how power will be shared. By scrutinizing teaching-in-role and theatre through a common lens of 'relationship' new resonances emerge, which usefully inform pedagogical practice in the classroom.

The focus for this paper is the pedagogical strategy of teaching-in-role. It is acknowledged that teaching-in-role can be hugely valuable for both

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teachers and students in a classroom situation (see, for example, Bolton & Heathcote 1999, O'Toole & Dunn 2002, Bolton 1998, Edmiston 2003 and Neelands & Goode 2000). As one commentator argues, 'If used appropriately, [teaching-in-role] is one of the most powerful techniques available to the teacher' (Fleming 2003:111). By going into role, the teacher can generate experiential learning environments, share in the children's learning from within, shift normal status and knowledge patterns within the classroom and allow new assessment and management possibilities to emerge. The strategy allows the teacher to model creativity and risk-taking and demonstrate their own commitment to the imagined world. It can also be great fun.[i] If a key question for education is 'how can arts practice and pedagogy stimulate innovative and creative learning and teaching across the curriculum?' one answer is 'teaching-in-role'.

Put simply, teaching-in-role works by transforming the relationship between teacher and student. This paper suggests a way to theorise this transformed relationship, arguing that the relationship between teacher-in-role and student can be usefully compared to the relationship between theatre makers and audience members in theatre. It must be acknowledged, however, that any attempt to align drama in education and theatre in this way is fraught with tension. The paper begins by discussing why this is so.

The chart shown in Figure 1 has been adapted from Fleming's *Starting Drama Teaching* (2003:18) and shows his summary of the history of drama in education since the latter half of the twentieth century. Fleming suggests there has been something of a division between two camps within drama education over this period, with practitioners of 'theatre arts'

on one side (including such figures as David Hornbrook)[ii] and advocates of 'process drama' on the other (influenced by the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and others).[iii]

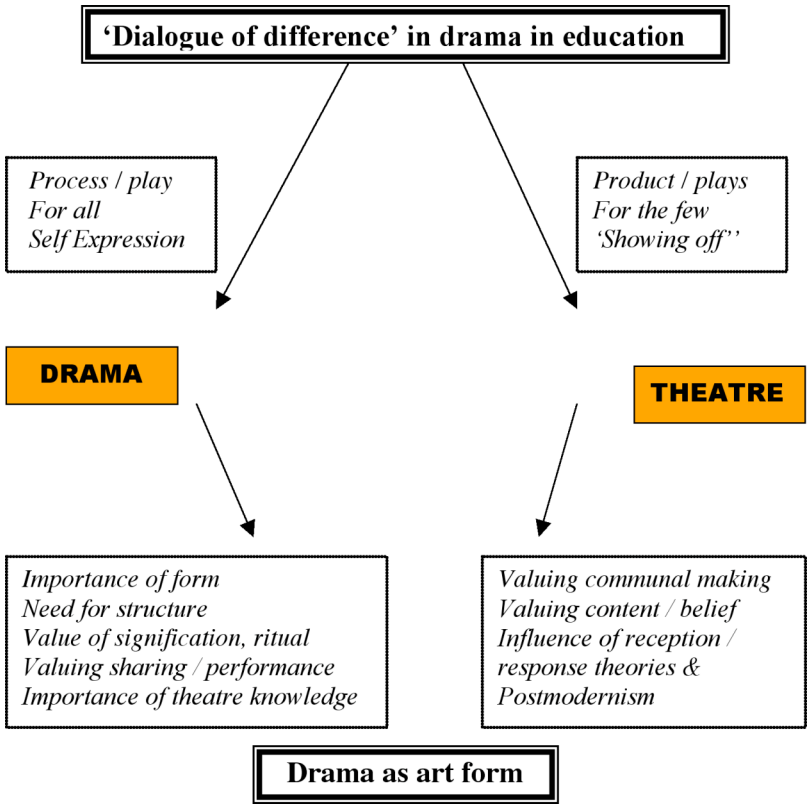

Figure 1. Dynamics of Theatre versus Drama Education (adapted from Fleming, 2004:18)

Fleming's chart shows the two camps moving apart as they define themselves by their differences, followed by a more recent move back together as the they re-define themselves and begin to value what the other side has to offer: theatre arts practitioners conceding the value in the levels of engagement, belief and commitment found in good quality process work, and process practitioners increasingly identifying the need

for structure, polish, refinement and opportunities to share work. These are the features of theatre arts at its best. Fleming suggests that in 2007, we are approaching a more inclusive definition of drama education where striving for excellence emerges from interrelationships between both approaches.

The repositioning of theatre arts and process approaches has been reflected in some significant theoretical work in drama in education in recent years, including Gavin Bolton's *Acting in classroom drama* (1998) and Judith Ackroyd's *Role reconsidered* (2004) in which the authors looked at the significant aesthetic similarities between teaching-in-role and acting. In discussing these parallels, neither Bolton nor Ackroyd suggest that process drama and theatre arts are the same thing. As Ackroyd insists, the two can have quite different goals and outcomes and the pull away from each other was a necessary part of drama's struggle for status within the education world (Ackroyd:28-9). Bolton, Ackroyd and Fleming were attempting to move drama beyond a polarised dialogue of difference, to an exploration of the commonalities that also existed.

In this more mutually accepting research environment, it may be that models developed for the study of theatre performance may prove useful in theorising of the practice of teaching-in-role. The remainder of this paper introduces a model of theatre developed in my recent PhD studies, and argues for its usefulness in a drama in education context.

Aitken (2005) posited the idea that any theatre performance is founded on a relationship between two parties; theatre makers on one side and the audience members on the other (of course these are collective terms and somewhat 'slippery' but useful to describe what is essentially an

exchange between two parties). We might add that this relationship is experienced within a space, or context. This definition of theatre as a relationship recalls Peter Brook's well-known definition of theatre: 'a man walks across (an) empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to take place' (Brook 1997: 9) or Eric Bentley's suggested formula 'A impersonates B while C looks on' (Bentley 1965: 150). However, the theatre relationship must be consensual between both parties, as is emphasised by Maria-Martin Kohtes' addendum to Bentley's statement: 'A impersonates B while C *aware of that quality* looks on.'(Kohtes 1993: 87).

Aitken (2005) goes on to emphasise that theatre relationship relies on a set of shared understandings about how a particular performance is to be organised. Three key areas of this can be identified: realities, aesthetics and behaviour. In terms of reality, for theatre to work successfully both parties need to have shared ideas about how they will decide what is part of the fiction and what is part of the external social reality in which they operate. Reality can be organised very differently in different types of theatre. For example, if we consider a naturalistic performance, the relationship in place asks the audience to pretend that what is on the stage is real, but not real enough to intervene, while the performers also pretend that what is on stage is real, but the audience is not. Compare this to a Pirandellian performance where the edges of reality and fiction are deliberately blurred and we can see that specific performances can organise realities in different ways. What matters, for this discussion is not that all performance organises realities in the same way but that they always need to be organised in *some* way.

The second thing that the theatre relationship must organise is the matter

of *aesthetics*. Aitken (2005) suggests that for performance to work, both parties need a loosely shared sense of how the performance will be read, what the codes will be and also what will be valued, or considered 'good quality'. As before, the aesthetic values might be very different in different circumstances; a schools' Shakespeare competition and a piece of avant-garde performance art in an Off-off Broadway studio may have very different set of understandings.

Thirdly, according to this model, parties in the theatre relationship need a shared understanding about the behaviour of participants; what behaviours will support and sustain the event and what will not be appropriate. Once again, these depend on the conventions of a particular genre. For example, British pantomime expects the audience to cheer and boo and call out while such behaviour would be unsupportive in another genre.

Finally, Aitken (2005) suggests that the theatre relationship depends on a shared understanding about how power, particularly the power to perform, will be shared. As before, the ways in which power can be shared may be very different: in some performances audiences will be physically passive while in other relationships, they may intervene and participate. Sometimes, as with Augusto Boal's work, audience members are granted the power to become active participants in the performance and Boal acknowledges this by his use of the term 'spect-actors' (1992). Again, what matters is not *how* the power is organised, as this can be different on every occasion, but that it *is* organised.

This, in simple terms, sums the notion of 'relationship' presented in Aitken (2005). When assessing the balance of control within that

relationship it becomes evident that whatever the understandings in place for a particular performance, the terms are always under the control of theatre makers. Even in the most liberal form of theatre with high levels of audience participation, or loose framing devices where audience members are free to behave as they wish, this is so because theatre makers allow for that. The ultimate 'say' over the relationship lies with theatre makers, as they are the relationship managers.

The question is whether we can apply the same model to teaching-in-role? I would suggest that we can. Whenever a teacher takes on a role it is akin to what happens in the theatre relationship. Once again there are two parties in this relationship: the teacher 'in role', and the students.[iv] The teacher is akin to the theatre maker; note here that I have chosen the term 'theatre maker' rather than the word 'actor' used by Ackroyd. The teacher-in-role is akin to an actor but the role can also encompass functions of director, designer and author of the drama, as Ackroyd herself suggests (2004:31-46). On the other side of the relationship are the receivers of the drama, in this case the students. Once again, as in the theatre, the exchange takes place in a context. In this case, this is usually an educational setting, and this is significant because the parties may already have a relationship with its own ground rules and expectations.

Once again for the relationship to work, students and teachers need a loosely shared agreement about what is happening, based on a shared understanding of how the fiction is to be distinguished from reality, what is to be considered of value, the behaviours that will support the relationship and, finally, who will have the power to perform. As in theatre, varying educational dramas may organise these things

differently. For example, as in the theatre, a teacher may well give students substantial power to perform. Indeed most classroom drama, particularly the process approach described earlier, depends on active participation of students. It is fair to say that they become fellow 'actors' in the drama alongside the teacher, but I would argue that they do not become theatre makers. This is where the distinction between theatre maker and actor is important. Students (like audience members) may be entitled to, or expected to participate in the drama, they may have a good deal of say over the direction of the drama but it is the teacher who maintains the ultimate say over the relationship; he or she is the one who grants the students their power within the relationship. So, once again, the management of the relationship is in the hands of one party, in this case the teacher. Teachers, like theatre makers are relationship managers.

If we can accept that teaching-in-role, like theatre, is posited on a relationship, and that this relationship is managed by one party, then we can turn to some of the ways it is managed and the implications of this on the other people involved. First, we can ask how the 'managers' in each case impart the terms of the relationship to the other party.

In theatre there are many signals used to let the audience know 'this is a fiction' and 'this is how to behave and what to expect'. As ever, the particular signals chosen will depend on the genre. Where Elizabethan theatre used a prologue, modern theatre may use a ticket, advertising or a program. All of these can be used to send messages to audience members about the nature of the relationship on offer. Once audience members arrive at the theatre, the communication of terms continues. If theatre is taking place in buildings, theatre makers may signal the divide

between reality and the fiction through the use of space (perhaps using a proscenium arch, tabs or fixed seating). Those not operating in buildings might draw a chalk line on a pavement, or may display signs or slogans. Performers might be distinguished from audience members through use of costume, props or the use of voice. In short, the theatre maker hooks into the conventions of the genre in which they are operating and uses them to transfer information to the audience about the rules of the relationship.

In just the same way, when a teacher takes on a role, he or she draws on the visual, verbal and symbolic aspects of drama to signal that role. The signalling may be done from outside the role, with a statement like "I'm going into role now" could be said to be akin to a prologue. The teacher may also draw on a symbolic prop or a costume item in order to signal the role. "When I'm holding this clip board you will know I'm in role". Such props or costume items are part of the drama world, a microcosm of what would be used in a theatre performance. The teacher can also hook into the conventions of drama teaching (such as role on the wall, conscience alley, freeze frame, thought tapping) to let the students know the terms of the relationship. So, teachers *in role*, as relationship managers, use the same languages to set up and sustain the terms of the relationship with their students as their counterparts in theatre do with their audience members.

Once the relationship managers have decided what the terms of the relationship might be, and offered this to the other party, how do participants recognise the relationship and opt to join? One answer is offered by the frame analysis of Victor Turner (1982), Erving Goffman (1986) and others, who suggest that people behave in social situations

by selecting a 'frame', a way of understanding the event.[v] Having 'framed' the situation, the individual then adopts a set of behaviours they think will be most fitting to support that frame. Turner's description of this is appropriately 'theatrical' in its metaphors: 'When we *act* in everyday life we do not simply react to indicative stimuli, we *act in frames* we have wrested from the genres of cultural performance' (Turner 1982:4 - my emphasis). The image of 'framing' could be used to describe the process by which people learn to be audience members in the theatre and also how students cope with a teacher going into role in a classroom. The recipients of a drama relationship adopt frames of understanding built from prior experiences. In the case of students, especially children, the 'cultural performance' they draw upon may be their spontaneous socio-dramatic play, and their prior experiences in classroom drama as well as any live performance experience. Students and audience members will also learn by watching their peers, for in a new or unfamiliar situation frames can be learned (Goffman 1986).

If the notion of 'framing' is useful for describing how students respond to teaching-in-role, it may also be useful to consider what can block this framing process, both in the theatre and in the classroom. For example, Aitken (2005) found that a successful relationship between theatre makers and audience could be inhibited when audience members attended theatre as part of a pre-existing group. For example, in 1999 a group of boys from a local high school in Christchurch, New Zealand disrupted a Shakespeare performance by talking amongst themselves and throwing objects onto the stage.[vi] In this case the director of the play concluded that these young people did not know how to behave. He commented "obviously they hadn't been primed about the play very well . . . these people are not ready for live performance".[vii] This suggested that

the behaviour was attributable to an error in framing. However, even if they were unsure how to behave, these young people could have modelled appropriate behavioural conventions from other audience members around them. The issue arose because they attended in a group and chose to give priority to the behaviours consistent with 'success' within that group, rather than behaviours that supported the relationship with the theatre makers. Aitken describes a number of other occasions where audience members (children and adults), who attended theatre in groups, disrupted the performances in similar ways (Aitken 2005).

If the theatre relationship, and successful framing of the performance can be inhibited by group attendance at the theatre, this has important implications for teachers-in-role where children are part of a very strong preformed collective; that is, the class. Like audience members in the theatre, students may prioritise behaviours that make them feel 'successful' in that group and these may not be the ones that support the success of the drama. It is perhaps sobering to realise that every teaching-in-role experience is like playing to a block booking in a theatre! The teacher must recognise the importance of captivating children so that they are willing to frame the teacher-in-role experience in a new way, rather than falling back on unhelpful behaviours carried over from the classroom context. With this knowledge in hand, the teacher-in-role can plan ahead by adopting new and surprising tactics, such as a low status role or a transformed space. There would also seem to be a good argument for arranging children into unfamiliar groupings.

Having considered teaching-in-role by comparing it to how participants in theatre 'opt in' to the relationship, and issues that can inhibit this

process, it is necessary to consider how audience members 'opt out' and compare this to the classroom context. Aitken (2005) looked at the degrees of opt out behaviour in a theatre context and suggested that these could be seen as ranged along a scale from slipping out at interval (a minor disruption, a private act) to staying to protest (a much more major disruption, a social act) to full scale takeover of performance power (a subversive overturning of the event, a political action).

In general, students in drama lessons have much less agency than audience members in a theatre relationship. Not only have they had the relationship foisted upon them, they do not own the right to opt out, something that is normally extended to audience members in theatre. If it is not possible for students to 'slip out at interval', then this limits the possibilities for private withdrawal and any opt out behaviour on the students' part moves directly to being social action, such as misbehaviour or refusal to participate, or political action such as attempts to take over the drama. This is a real challenge for teachers for whom the loss of control over the class and/or the direction of the drama may be a frightening prospect. Perhaps by seeing the drama as a relationship and being aware of the lack of agency students have in comparison to audience members, teachers may be able to predict, diagnose and understand misbehaviour as part of the fabric of the relationship. Teachers may need to look at how they can factor in 'opt out' options for students, perhaps coming out of role, pausing the drama and discussing the student's options.

In all the situations discussed so far, it has been assumed that participants are aware they are in a relationship with the theatre makers, or the teacher-in-role. The situation becomes even more problematic

where participants are not aware that what they are watching or participating in is a fiction. It can happen that the relationship managers (theatre makers or teachers) generate relationships where the role, or the frame of the drama itself, is not made explicit. This paper will conclude by discussing the issues that can arise in this instance.

Examples of non-signalled, non-consensual theatre relationships are uncommon but they do occur. Perhaps most notable is Augusto Boal's 'invisible theatre' where actors impose a performance on unwitting passers-by (Boal 1992). For example, actors may stage an argument on a street corner or in a restaurant in the hopes of motivating political action in the real world. Passers by may never be told that what they had witnessed was a theatre performance. Indeed Boal stresses the importance of keeping them in the dark: 'One should never explain to the public that Invisible Theatre is theatre lest it lose its impact' (Boal 1992:16) As a child I personally experienced two examples of such 'invisible' dramas. Both happened when I was in the Girl Guides. Once, on a hike through a forest I led my group round the corner to find a man sitting on a tree stump with a small hatchet embedded in his leg (in fact a realistic mock up of a wound complete with fake blood). On the other occasion our group was told that we were going to a house where a burglary had taken place, to look for clues. On neither occasion did I realise that these were fictional events. Only years later, when I read about Boal for myself, did I recognise that what I had experienced was a form of 'invisible theatre'.

Similar experiments can, and do, take place in classrooms. Indeed, in many ways it is easier for 'invisible' drama in the classroom context because the parties are already operating within a highly structured

relationship where 'social roles' of teacher and student are both ongoing and potentially fluid (see Edmiston, 2003 and Carlson 1996). For the teacher to convince the children that something is 'real' all he or she needs to do is to leave the drama, or the role unsignalled. It is possible for this to occur even if the children know the teacher well. Where the teacher is unfamiliar the apparent reality of an unsignalled role may be even more compelling. Furthermore, in a classroom context where students attend day after day, it is possible for teachers to sustain their unsignalled role or 'delusion tactics' (McKeogh nee Aitken 1993) for quite long periods. One striking example of this is found in a program called *Holland New Town*, performed by UK based M6 TIE group in 1973 (Schweitzer 1980). During the program, which lasted for a day and a half, a group of young people was led to believe they were on a town planning course, whereas in fact all the adults (including the janitor) were teacher-actors enacting a complex corruption scandal. The young people became very caught up in the fiction. Here, one of the company explains the outcome:

> At the end of the first performance the Company was faced with an unforeseen problem. The pupils had gradually become so absorbed by the events that they believed the Town Planning Course and the corruption tale to be absolutely real. It left the teacher with an awkward situation, maybe restraining pupils from reporting the story to the police or the local paper. If they were left to discover the fictitious nature of the events for themselves they might feel 'conned' and dismiss the important learning experience together with their hurt feelings. Therefore, subsequent performances ended with a chat with the theatre ... and the sympathetic characters. If necessary, the fiction was explained

and parallels were drawn with current corruption cases described in the news media. (Schweitzer 1980:127).

It seems amazing that members of this company should not have foreseen these young peoples' reaction. The teacher who does not signal the fiction, or their role, to the students can expect frame confusion, and the consequences that follow. I have described the drama 'relationship' as being founded on understandings about realities, aesthetics, behaviour and power. If the understandings about realities are not made clear, then the relationship manager can expect repercussions on every other level of their relationship with the students.

Aesthetically, the teacher's action assumes that 'real' world is more important or has more status than 'imagined' world; by assuming that 'they will take it more seriously' if the action is set up to be framed as a part of reality, the teacher denies what drama is about; creating safe places in which participants can explore possibilities and options not necessarily available to them in the 'real' world. As O'Toole remarks, 'the teacher who trusts the power of drama does not need to use deceit' (O'Toole 2002:6). In terms of behaviour, if the frame is not signalled, almost inevitably, there comes the time when participants need to be informed 'it's *just* pretend' (with all the implied diminishing of the fictional world inherent in that word 'just'). At this point the teacher may find him or herself working with unhappy, mistrustful students, as the teacher-actors in *Holland New Town* discovered. Or, if students do catch on to the fiction, they are likely to spend time trying to confirm their suspicions rather than getting on with exploring the drama world. Put simply, if the teacher tells the children the rules of the game, they can get on with playing the game.

It is in terms of power, that perhaps the most significant implications in unsignalled role arise. Certainly, the teacher may find students get caught up in the drama, take it seriously and behave as they would in real life, as was Boal's aim. However, in the case of children and young people, they tend to be much less empowered in 'real life' situations, so the teacher actually reduces their options. In my own case, as a child faced with the scenarios described earlier, my response like those of the other young people around me was to stand still and do nothing, waiting for the adults present to react to the apparent emergency. We were simply mystified. We framed the situation as reality and behaved within the limited powers we had in that world. We would have been much more empowered if the adults had told us they were in role, and even more so if we had been put into role ourselves, perhaps as detectives or St John's Ambulance workers.

An important ethical issue also arises where teachers do not signal their role. If participants are unaware they are operating in a fiction then they are denied the 'safety' of the frame - the sense of security that gives young people the permission to go places they would be unable to go in reality. As adults working with children, I would suggest that to deny this security is something of an abuse of power and trust. Surely, as with theatre makers and their audiences, teachers as relationship managers must take seriously their obligations to the other party. Several commentators have argued that without consent, Boal's invisible theatre cannot be described as 'theatre' at all but rather 'guerrilla action with theatrical characteristics'.[viii] By the same token, we could say that without informed consent, teaching-in-role becomes guerrilla action with the characteristics of teaching. Teachers need to ask themselves if this is an

appropriate way to conduct their relationship with students.

This paper has covered a lot of ground. It has examined the strategy of teaching-in-role through a theoretical lens previously used to theorise theatre practice. The questions and issues it has raised deserve greater examination than has been possible in this short paper. What is clear, however, is that it is valid and fruitful to explore the commonalities within drama in education and theatre studies.

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Notes

[i] For a fuller exposition of the possibilities of teaching-in-role see Edmiston (2003), Heathcote (1988:128-146) or O'Toole (2002:8-9).

[ii] See, for example, Hornbrook's *Education and Dramatic Art* (1998) in which the author argues that drama education must focus on teaching the customs and practises of theatre, and that the neglect of these has led to the aesthetic impoverishment of drama as a subject in schools.

[iii] See, for example, Bolton's *Drama as Education* (1984) where he argues that drama in education is 'an art form in *process* not product' - quoted in Morris, David (1998:18).

[iv] I may seem to be making some broad assumptions about the teaching-in-role situation here – a teacher-in-role is not always in a classroom situation, not always with young people and not always in a class of students who know each other. However, I would suggest that whatever the circumstances, as with theatre, teaching-in-role is essentially an exchange between two parties.

[v] See, for example Goffman (1986), Turner (1982), Watson (1997) and Carlson (1990 & 1996).

[vi] This was a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* at the Court Theatre in March 1999, directed by Elric Hooper.

[vii] Elric Hooper made this comment when he was interviewed on the *Arts Week* programme on National Radio shortly after the event.

[viii] See Kohtes (1993) and Aitken (2005)