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Reflecting on the Body in Drama Education

by David Wright (Australia)

Abstract

Advocacy for drama education has generally taken the form of an argument for dramatic literacy. This is an argument for what can be 'read' into drama, hence drama as a tool for, or a demonstration of, social insight, understanding and action. Insufficient reference has been made to the 'embodied learning' of the drama participant. Through considerations of embodied learning, drama can be appreciated as a means for the generation of understanding for participants in the drama. Augusto Boal works with this in his 'theatre of the oppressed'. This work draws on a broader systemic analysis concerned with bodily interaction. The biology of cognition and self-organising theory, both of which stand behind this paper, offer additional and valuable insights that deepen considerations of the body in drama education. These insights into the process suggest means for its more effective incorporation and understanding.

Extrait

Le plaidoyer en faveur de l'éducation théâtrale a généralement pris la forme d'une discussion à propos de 'l'alphabétisation' en art dramatique. Cette discussion porte sur ce qui peut être 'lu' dans l'art dramatique, donc l'art dramatique comme un outil pour, ou une démonstration de, un aperçu, une compréhension et une action sociales. Un manque de références à 'l'apprentissage exprimé par le corps' du participant au théâtre ont été faites. En prenant en compte l'apprentissage exprimé par le corps, l'art dramatique peut être apprécié comme une méthode pour la création de la compréhension des participants dans l'art dramatique. August Boa travaille avec ceci dans son 'théâtre des opprimés'. Ce travail tire sur une analyse systémique plus large, centrée sur l'interaction du corps. La biologie de la cognition et la théorie de l'auto organisation, qui sont toutes les deux sous-jacentes à cet article, donnent des aperçus additionnels et de grande valeur qui approfondit l'étude du corps dans l'éducation dramatique. Ces aperçus dans ce procédé suggèrent des moyens pour une meilleure incorporation et compréhension.

Resumen

La promoción de la causa para la educación del drama se ha adoptado en forma general de argumento en apoyo a la redacción dramática. Esto es un argumento en apoyo de lo que puede 'entre leerse' en el drama, como consecuencia el drama es como una herramienta para, o una demostración de la apreciación social, la comprensión y la acción. Referencia insuficiente se ha hecho al 'aprendizaje incorporado' del participante del drama. Por medio de las consideraciones del aprendizaje incorporado, el drama puede apreciarse como un medio para la generación de la comprensión de los participantes del drama. Augusto Boal trabaja con esto en su 'teatro del oprimido'. Este trabajo se apoya sobre un análisis sistémico más amplio preocupado por la interacción física. La biología de la cognición y la teoría de la auto organización, las cuales ambas apoyan este documento, conocimientos adicionales y valiosas que profundizan las consideraciones sobre el cuerpo en el drama educativo. Estas apreciaciones sobre el proceso indican medios para su incorporación y comprensión más eficaz.

Author's biography

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Introduction

My interest in embodiment comes as a consequence of my own experience. In this respect, I don't pretend to be a detached observer. I am, as Heinz von Foerster would say, a crucial element in the observation (von Foerster and Poerksen 2002). It is not simply my observations that are my concerns here. To these must be added the second order experience of my observations of my observations: my reflective consciousness. This fundamental critique of 'objectivism' is one of the prime legacies of self-organising systems theory and the biology of cognition (Maturana and Varela 1987; Maturana and

Poerksen 2004). This work has had considerable influence upon the thinking contained in this article.

A critique of objectivism of the kind described above carries implications for both the researcher who offers it and the audience that responds to it (whose reflective consciousness is engaged). Each of us becomes involved in the project. Through our participation in such an inquiry, each becomes — consciously or otherwise — a participant in a dynamic akin to Boal's construction of the 'spect-actor' (Boal 1992). Each becomes a participant in an epistemology of 'emergence'. According to N. Katherine Hayles (1999):

Emergence implies that properties or programs appear on their own, often developing in ways not anticipated by the person who created the simulation. Structures that lead to emergence typically involve complex feedback loops in which the outputs of the system are repeatedly fed back as input. As the recursive looping continues, small deviations can quickly become magnified, leading to complex interactions and unpredictable evolutions associated with the emergence. (1999: 225)

Some of the best forms of drama education generate emergence of exactly this sort. The structure of learning in drama is such that the emergent cannot be anticipated or known in full beforehand. Furthermore, it cannot be generated simply because it is (or is assumed to be) known. 'It' arises in the complex feedback systems that comprise communication between mind(s) and body(ies). It is a consequence of the recursive processes of reflection and improvisation. These processes can generate challenging and unpredictable results. Drama teachers work with this sort of 'unfolding logic' day in and day out. It is here that teachers, as much as students, must consider themselves 'participants in' something they can only partly know (and/or determine). This is at odds with conventional pedagogic practice. Boal's celebration of this in his 'theatre of the oppressed' is timely and welcome. It also points to one of the principal conflicts facing drama educators.

Despite the importance of 'the performing body' in drama, there is not a lot of discussion of embodied learning in the drama education community. This is ironic — first, because of the centrality of the body to drama and second, because of the way in which processes and practices in drama education challenge conventional assumptions about the body in pedagogical settings. Pierre Bourdieu argues that pedagogy relies upon submissive bodies and that pedagogy's demand for respect is political. He argues that this 'respect' is a remarkably visible, yet at the same time hidden, manifestation of submission to established order: 'The concession of politeness always contains political considerations.' (cited in Hayles 1999: 204) Effective drama education cannot work through a pedagogy constructed around submission any more than it can through one of politeness. As stated, important in an education in drama is a capacity to work with emergence — to improvise.

In *Improvisation in Drama*, Frost and Yarrow (1990) assert that:

Where improvisation is most effective, most spontaneous, least 'blocked' by taboo, habit or shyness, it comes close to a condition of integration with the environment or context. And consequently (simultaneously) expresses that context in the most appropriate shape, making it recognisable to others, 'realising' it as act. (1990: 2)

This is not submission. Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' — a key methodological reference for many in drama education — directly challenges the politics Bourdieu points to. It does this through embodiment. Central to Boal's (1992) work are embodied processes designed to 'dynamise' the senses. Exercises have been developed to 'feel what we touch', 'see what we look at' and 'listen to what we hear'. These are designed to prepare the body for the emergent consciousness accessed through improvisation. Boal's assertion that 'theatre is a form of knowledge' and 'a means of transforming society', and his argument that it 'can help us build our future rather than just waiting for it' (1992: xxxi) goes some way towards explaining — if Bourdieu's analysis is correct — the present marginalisation of drama in many schools and education systems. When bodies are encouraged to 'know' in ways not in accordance with prevailing systems of knowledge, systems either change or alienate that which encourages the dissent. If the benefits of drama education are to be made available to increased numbers of students, there is a need for those who want this to happen to reflect more upon the systemic dynamics of embodied learning. This is a field of inquiry ripe for more extensive discussion.

Reflection and participation

In this article, my interest in embodied learning extends beyond political considerations. Embodiment and embodied learning are personal encounters as much as they are political ones. 'I am part of the process. I am and I encounter the body and I am and I encounter the learning. I reflect upon it and I participate in it. I 'feel' it and its impact upon 'me': my body–mind (Hocking, Haskell and Linds 2001) and its feedback systems. Accordingly, I include *my* body as part of *my* knowledge system. I respond to it via creative forms of representation. It is crucial to my experience as instinctive actor and reflective theorist. In effect, it constructs the ontological base of my knowing (this ontology cannot be known without it).

George Lackoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 1999) argue: 'human reason is a form of animal reason, a reason inextricably tied to our bodies and the peculiarities of our brains' (1999: 17). They maintain that, because the language(s) — or metaphoric systems of representation — through which we arrive at our reason are structured from an ontological base, *our bodies are our source of reason*. This is most especially significant in dramatic encounters. As acting teacher Joseph Roach (1985) says, 'the immediate presence of the body to itself' is among the most startling discoveries of young performers (1985: 16).

Any discussion of 'the personal body' as a knowledge system (combined with variabilities, particularly the emotional variabilities attached to that system) is not easy to negotiate. It is by definition self-reflective. As such, it creates perturbations in the experience of the participant. These are especially prevalent among students contained in an educational domain, with a tradition of submission to rationality and objectivism. A variety of people have written of this. It has been addressed in systems theory (see, for example, Luhmann 1995; Plas 1986; Wheatley 1992). It has also been the subject-matter of a number of researchers in the social sciences, especially feminists. These scholars invariably place themselves at the margins of mainstream inquiry. Here I want to make mention of the work of educationalist Patti Lather (1991), sociologists Susan Krieger (1991) and Laurel Richardson (1997), and that of anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996). In particular, I celebrate Behar's statement, in her book *The Vulnerable Observer*: 'Anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore.' (1996: 177) And, much as I can respect this observation and admire the courage that stands behind it, I am drawn also to the recognition that this is not such a problem in the creative arts. The creative arts are more comfortable — or less uncomfortable — with such perturbations. There is no need in the creative arts, as distinct from academia, for a writer to state her position so defiantly. The creative arts are constructed through research that consciously and continually employs and explores the body and its feeling system via its intersection with consciousness. They do not need to justify this.

In an analysis of the work of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, N. Katherine Hayles (1999) tries to summarise Dick's creative process: 'As a writer, he passes messages through his fiction into his own heart of darkness, hoping that somehow they might prove efficacious.' (1999: 188) I admire this summary. In my own strivings, I have found the creative process very difficult to summarise. I experience it as a deeply embodied negotiation between consciousness and established language systems. The representative form that is generated differs according to the language systems that I am working with and the audience I have in mind. The discipline of the exercise is integral to its accomplishment, but no less so is the intent or the ambition. Embodiment — closely linked to feelings, as I will indicate — is central to the process. My personal desire to understand the relationship between embodiment and creative expression was elevated several years ago during a heightened experience of embodiment. A strong emotional experience led me to a heightened awareness of the power of creativity and a greater desire to appreciate its transformative qualities. This experience is summarised below in an extract from the personal writing that emerged in association with that understanding:

A relationship that meant a considerable amount to me ended suddenly. First I was told, 'it's not working for me anymore', then, 'I need more time on my own', then, 'actually, there's someone else'. Within the loss and grief I felt, the shock, the hurt, I encountered also the death of my father. Curious, this. It was completely unexpected. It was as if I had been prepared for the depth of that encounter by the depth of the other. One afternoon I saw a photograph of him and something that happened five years earlier was triggered again for me, in a way quite different to its original occurrence. Within this grief I connected with that grief and I found myself howling for me, howling for him and howling for her. I also found myself taking notes, writing things down, leaving myself messages and struggling with a pen and haphazardly gathered pieces of paper to find words that somehow did justice to my feelings. I wanted to feel it and know it. My growing fascination with my own feeling seemed also natural, right and real. Grief deserved my howl and it was a wonderful thing to howl at grief too.

This is not only my experience. Anyone who can identify with this piece of writing — relate to it emotionally and/or phenomenologically — can claim it equally. It is, however, an awareness that I discovered through creative exploration. The discoveries contained in the creative process are manifold and attested to regularly. Here I am reminded of Bertrand Russell's assertion that, compared to creative thought, 'intellect, except at white heat, is apt to be trivial' (cited in Davies 1997: 337).

Feelings and emotions

As arts educators, it is our responsibility to inquire into and become familiar with the dynamics of the creative process (whilst remaining naïve, in many ways, to the variety of its manifestations). For this reason, perturbation — uncertainty, vulnerability, unpredictability, trepidation, concern — must be admitted as dynamics within any arts-based inquiry. Among the most powerful of perturbations are emotion and feeling. Antonio Damasio (2000, 2003) makes a very clear distinction between these two encounters: 'Emotions play out in the theatre of the body. Feelings play out in the theatre of the mind.' (2003: 28)

Damasio's work is at its most important in its identification of feeling as the stimulus for reflective consciousness. Without feeling, there is no need for reflection — thus without feeling, there is no consciousness. Beyond Damasio a growing band of neuro-scientists are endeavouring to map the processes of emotion, feeling and creativity (among them Ledoux 1998; Edelman 1992; Carter, 1998; Pert 1999). In this work, feeling and emotion are sought within the structures and relationships of the physical body, principally the brain. Here it is clear that feeling and emotion are embodied encounters. Damasio in particular, in documentation of his work with brain-damaged individuals, is able to demonstrate how embodied encounters determine behaviour in significant ways. These encounters are the basis of learning. Damasio (2000: 43–44) summarises one experiment (here I summarise it even more) in which 'David', suffering damage to parts of the brain concerned with learning and memory, is confronted in turn by three individuals exhibiting different forms of human interaction: one pleasant and welcoming; another emotionally neutral; and a third brusque. Despite his inability to recall these encounters, 'David' still differentiates between the three. When asked to choose the individual with whom he would rather interact, David chooses the one who initiated the pleasant and welcoming relationship 80 per cent of the time. The brusque individual is almost never chosen. Damasio says: 'There was nothing in David's conscious mind that gave him an overt reason to choose the good guy correctly and reject the bad one correctly. He did not know why he chose one or rejected the other.' (2000: 46) Damasio concludes: 'His organism, given its available design and dispositions ... honed in on [the] behaviour.' (2000: 46).

The step from unconscious embodied response to conscious feeling occurs via abstraction and language. This is the additional step that reflective practices in drama education seek to construct. It has the capacity to extend the initial encounter and generate an additional form of learning. Drama education, in contrast to other forms of education not in or of the arts, is a field of feeling — and needs to be taught as a field of feeling — as much as it is a field of knowing. Without feeling, drama is of little consequence. In this respect, it can be described as a sensitive and sensitised encounter with personal and social vulnerabilities, undertaken within the domain, and through the discourse, of learning. The sensitive nature of the excursion into feeling is a necessary part of the learning in drama. Creative practices encourage the exploration of these feelings. Again, I quote from a piece of personal creative writing that both reflects and documents a process of this kind.

I remember one time staring at a map of the moon and pondering 'The Sea of Tranquillity'. It occurred to me that this was a very different sort of name for a place. Different to, say, King John Sea or New Florida or Moon Rock Plain. There is no water and there is no sea on the moon and I expect there is a limit to the tranquillity felt by the very few astronauts who, wrapped in high-tech gear and a heady mixture of fear and excitement, actually get to walk upon that 'sea'. But it seems, many years ago an earth-bound astronomer — I don't know who, I tried to find out — gazed through a telescope and was sufficiently moved to identify this distant lunar region as 'The Sea of Tranquillity', and ever since people like me have been drawn to wonder about the moon and that tranquillity. Was it the astronomer, or was it the moon? Could I lose myself in a view that way? What does it look like from here? How does it feel from here? How must that astronomer have felt? The awe in the name enchants me. How wonderful it must have been for him — I assume it was a him — on that occasion, at that time. How remarkable also that the name he offered — Mare Tranquillitatis — has been accepted and the region mapped forever after in this way. It is now the 'Sea of Tranquillity' and we relate to it, in large

part, through that name. The name also gives it an identity. An identity that means nothing to the physical environment that is the moon, but a considerable amount to those who, like me, look on it from afar.

I wonder also how this imagination could work its magic on earth. What would happen, for example, if the streets of our cities were named differently: Happiness Parade, Joy Street, Envy Avenue, Disappointment Road?

This writing suggests that, at a phenomenological level, when I am captured by emotion (for example, grief), the world around me is determined for me, to an extent, by my grief. When I am captured by contentment or happiness or elation, the world around me is determined for me, to an extent, by that too. I encounter the world through emotion (which, as Damasio suggests, is known in and through feeling). It is a significant contributor to what Gregory Bateson calls my 'ecology of mind' (Bateson 1972). It is arguable, therefore, that emotion deserves to be understood as something different to a temporary divergence from tranquillity, if only because tranquillity is itself an embodied, emotional encounter. In this respect, Maturana (1994) argues that we live our lives 'in emotion' and that our ongoing 'emotioning' is integral to our participation in the world through which we 'know'. It is within this inter-weaving of embodiment and explanation that the congruence will be found that constructs both learning and the environment for learning. Maturana and Francesco Varela (1987) refer to this inter-weaving (or 'braiding') of mood and explanation as a form of 'conversation'. They describe it also as the means whereby we 'bring forth our world' — the world within which we participate. Lloyd Fell and David Russell (1994) refer to it more poetically as the 'dance of understanding':

If we say that the flows of *linguaging* and *emotioning* are braided, it follows that, without emotional matching, a semantic connection or congruence could not occur ... Only when we dance in the flow of emotioning of another can we experience understanding. Then we are moving in the same stream — cognitively flowing together. (Fell and Russell 1994: 234)

This dance could just as easily be described as 'play', and the foundations of drama education lie in a powerful recognition of and a respect for the learning contained in play (Slade 1954; Way 1967). My consciousness of the subtle relationship between the embodied experience of dance or play and the intellectual cognition of the same is evident in the way in which my dance steps fall out of synch as I note (and congratulate myself on) my rhythm, or try to remember where to put my feet next. I find it very difficult to dance and think of me dancing simultaneously (at least with any sort of grace). My relationship to myself — the dancer — arises in negotiation between the dance and myself. This is one form of the negotiation between creative and analytical work that is constantly in process. The means whereby this is communicated or socialised is a creative exercise in itself (hence my need for metaphor and imagery).

Exercise 1

In a 2004 class with first-year undergraduate students (enrolled in a Bachelor of Performance, Theory and Practice [Theatremaking strand], in the core unit 'Introduction to Performance'), I invited students to 'play' with nuances contained in everyday language. Inspired initially by the work of Lackoff and Johnson, and latterly by former PhD student Penny Andrews, I led the class through an exploration of the experience of prepositions. This was, in effect, an invitation to embody spatial relationships. Students were drawn into enactments of the experience of such terms (all of which are pre - positional, if not actually prepositions) as 'in', 'out', 'above', 'beneath', 'deep', 'far', 'beyond', 'over', 'inside', 'nearby'. This was done through a brief introduction, followed by a meditative engagement with the resonance of some of the terms (a felt encounter, not then an intellectual construction). Students were then invited to articulate feelings about each term. 'What does it feel like?' was the guiding question. This was followed by an invitation to embody named pre - positions, first as individuals, then in small groups. The final invitation was to explore relationships between random concepts — for example, 'deep' and 'nearby', 'inside' and 'beyond', 'far' and 'in'. The aim was to encounter spatial relationships phenomenologically — to feel them.

Despite initial conceptual and procedural difficulties, the whole class (40 students, divided into two workshop groups) managed to find meaning in the exercise. They discovered that these seemingly abstract concepts are encountered, in action, in deeply personal ways. The experience of *being* 'in' or 'beyond' or 'beneath' as distinct from *knowing about* 'in' or 'beyond' or 'beneath' is profound. If spatial relationships can be appreciated as forms of self-perception rich in learning, emotional encounters — constructed dramatically — can be thought of similarly.

In creating this exercise, my intention was to encourage these students to appreciate that 'depth', for example, occurs in an embodied form before it is cognised; similarly, 'beneath', 'inside' and 'beyond'. In this sense, 'depth' requires that I negotiate my self, my sensitivity and my encounter with that sensitivity. This is quite different to the learning experience of the detached observer. One student described the preposition workshop, through reference to Victor Turner's structural analysis of the performance process (Schechner 1977: 120), as moving through stages of 'breach' (the students had to act out of the norm), 'crisis' (the students weren't sure how to embody ... the word), 'redressive action' (the students negotiated the ... experience... the best way they knew how) (Fabros 2004).

Sue Cataldi (1993), in her extended meditation on embodiment, offers her own perspective on the preposition 'depth'. Citing J.J. Gibson, Cataldi argues that 'if depth means the dimension of an object that goes with height and width, there is nothing special about it ... If depth means distance from here, then it involves self-perception and is continuously changing as the observer moves about.' (1993: 30) Inevitably, 'I — the person in the depth — am part of the observation (and my conceptual 'depth' can be seen as existing in direct relationship to my vulnerability to it). Cataldi's writing on the expression of feeling is worth citing here as well. Describing an encounter with loss, Cataldi writes that 'the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat ... It was a fine cry — loud and long — but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.' (1993: 103). As a piece of creative writing, these words — those circles — draw me into my own encounter: my own barely spoken feelings. This is both a learning experience and an opportunity for expression. The invitation that Cataldi accepts, to communicate *through* the body and emotion, rather than *about* the body and emotion, is profound in its simplicity yet extraordinarily challenging as the basis for an epistemology.

Exercise 2

Later in the same session, the students were invited to encounter and embody negatives. This was introduced with a brief preamble, that actors portraying drunkenness often do so by attempting to portray a drunk acting 'not-drunk' (recognising, of course, that the real-life drunk often tries extremely hard to appear sober). Accordingly, the class were invited to portray 'not-' conditions — such things as 'not-young', 'not-happy', 'not-foolish', 'not-male' (or 'not-female'), 'not-drunk'. This is different to portraying opposites (via a binary construction). The invitation was to embody 'not-young' instead of 'old'; 'not-happy' instead of 'sad'; 'not foolish' instead of 'sensible'; 'not-drunk' instead of 'sober'; 'not male' instead of 'female' (and vice versa). Intellectually, this is not easy. The concept is, in some respects, nonsensical. There exist significant differences between the linguistic conceptualisation of how we should feel if we are 'not happy' and the actual experience of 'not happy'. As said, 'not happy' does not necessarily equate with 'sadness', just as 'not-young' does not necessarily equate with 'old'. In this exercise, students encountered how it may be for a 30-year-old to look in the mirror and recognise that they are no longer young (while not considering themselves old). In a similar way, students looked into their own state of mind and gained cognisance of a state of being that was not necessarily happy (nor necessarily sad). Knowing this requires some measure of appreciation of young and old, happiness and sadness. Within the emotion, followed by the feeling, lies profound knowledge, which is not easily transferred into explanation: hence performance, hence poetry, hence creative representations of human encounters.

Evaluating such experience, assessing it for grading purposes or for discussion in terms of outcomes, is not easy, but it is not beyond imagination. Recognising Bourdieu's comments on 'submission', the will to do so is what is required at first, followed by the vulnerability that is required to take the first step. This is true of primary, secondary and tertiary students. The methodologies might be different, but the underlying principles are the same. In this respect, the learning in such a situation is not confined to the student. It can be the experience of the teacher as well.

Concluding Comments

The conversation about embodiment, emotion and vulnerability is rich and far-reaching. As a writer, this article feels at times like a floundering at its edge. The subject is immense and the means of addressing it beyond the body very challenging. My involvement in it intrigues me as much as does the subject-matter. Inevitably, I find it difficult to separate the two. This implies a relationship, which brings with it responsibility. 'I am now complicit and I have a role in creating the ongoing meaning in which 'I' am participating. By admitting my own participation in the relationship, I take responsibility. I am ethically bound. In Heinz von Foerster's words, 'it is no longer possible to find an excuse ... by referring (or deferring) to an external reality' (von Foerster and Poerksen 2002: 30). In the words of N. Katherine Hayles, 'we make a world for ourselves by living it' (1999: 158).

In summary, the relationship between body and culture is ever-present. Despite this, it remains difficult

subject-matter, if only because it is a feedback system that constructs constantly changing responses both in the body and in the culture. Transferring these insights and the embodied practices that are associated with them to an educational setting long determined by embodied submission is a significant undertaking. It carries major political and ethical considerations. The cognition of the body cannot be realised solely through cultural analysis. Culture does not create bodies, though it does contribute significantly to the knowledge systems that form and accompany those bodies. This co-responsence is a form of articulation demanding of reflection and creativity. Without these qualities it is beyond communication. There will always be limits to its knowing, however, if only because the organism through which knowing is sought is also the organism that knows. Hence the ongoing requirement for creative explorations of the feelings that accompany the creative explorations.

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