

CONSTRUCTIVIST INQUIRY AND LEARNING IN DRAMA

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Abstract

Constructivism is an interpretive approach that emphasises the ‘meaning-making activity of the individual mind’. It is of particular relevance to drama education because learning in drama is based in process. A number of writers and researchers have applied this approach to learning, but only a few have extended this into a discussion of drama and learning. In this article an understanding of constructivism is described then evaluated through reference to two drama projects — firstly, the scripting of a cross-cultural performance work; secondly, a research project on applied creativity for beginning teachers.



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Introduction

Drama is an experience in which individuals create and respond to a network of relationships. It is not an individual activity. A variety of factors determine this network of relationships and the subject matter of the drama is only one (and sometimes not the most significant) factor. These factors are determined by, among many things, physical, emotional, psychological, political, historical and spatial encounters as well as encounters with traditions of practice. The significance of the networks that are created and utilised in drama needs to be more broadly acknowledged. Associated with these networks are the understandings, energies and experiences that participants bring to, meet within and take away from encounters in drama. These comprise, in part, the learning that accompanies the experience. In his book *Learning to learn: towards a philosophy of education*, Jerry Gill argues that ‘learning to learn’ is of ‘primary importance . . . for when one knows this, he or she will always be able to learn more’ (1993:4). Because of its emphasis upon participation, communication, reflection and the negotiation of reason and emotion, the meta-process of learning to learn is made particularly accessible through drama. Consequently, the philosophical and pedagogical processes employed in drama education should be of interest to all education researchers, particularly those in advocacy positions.

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Central to learning to learn is the experience of participation — this entails the evaluation of self-experience within an environment, subject to all the influences that determine that environment. It requires the perspective of both spectator and actor. Boal describes this — the viewpoint of the ‘spect-actor’ — as ‘theatre, the art of looking at ourselves’ (1992:xxx). This sort of self-reflection, which is the basis of post-positivist inquiry, is also Gill’s subject matter. He finds it within the work of Whitehead, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi and argues that each, in their own ways, use it to assert the importance of attunement to sensual, embodied consciousness. While only Dewey displays an awareness of drama as a tool for learning, all four agree on the centrality of sensual, embodied consciousness to learning.

In this article I want to extend the analysis undertaken by Gill through reference to the biology of cognition, systems theory, constructivism and story telling. I then want to describe two projects involving analyses of participation in drama-type activities. My intention is to raise awareness of the significance of participants’ understandings or interpretations of their own experiences of learning and its place in drama education.

The dance of drama

While Gill makes only indirect mention of drama in his discussions of learning, he uses the metaphor of ‘dance’ to communicate a central understanding. Arguably, Gill’s ‘dance’ is akin to the interplay of relationships in drama.

If the knowing process is thought of as a kind of dancing, as an interactive, reciprocal, give-and-take relationship between knowing subjects on the one hand and the physical and social environment on the other, then the resulting pattern of thought and behaviour, the known, may be thought of as the dance itself. (1993:183)

The dance and dancing are things we can neither fully understand nor determine. We find ourselves in them and, in the process, negotiate our understanding through a combination of the sensual flow of experience and intermittently detached analysis. It is within this paradigmatic drama that learning is realised. Invariably, such experience also raises questions about how learning comes to be understood and communicated. These epistemological questions are similar whether the experience is considered from the viewpoint of ‘dancer’ or ‘learner’. ‘What does it feel like?’ ‘How do you understand it?’ ‘What does it mean?’ These questions should be familiar to anyone with experience in drama — that is, with the experience of being ‘in the drama’. This is not solely the experience of the ‘actor’. It is the experience of anyone drawn to feel a participant in the dramatic process.

Humberto Maturana approaches the issue of participation through biology. His work, often undertaken with Francisco Varela (1992), extends systems theory (Laszlo, 1972) through the notion of self-organising (autopoietic) systems. In biology self-organising systems are molecular systems whose sole function is the maintenance their own existence — in effect, living systems (of which ‘the body’ is one)¹. The power of this construction is such that, according to John Mingers, ‘this biological concept has made a remarkable

1. Any discussion of self-organising systems bears consideration alongside ‘second-order cybernetics’, as articulated by Heinz von Foerster (1993) as does the notion of ‘ecological thinking’ (in Gill, 1993). Niklas Luhmann’s (1995) analysis of society as autopoietic on the basis of the ‘communicative events’ that maintain it is also an interesting and relevant study.

impact across widely differing disciplines such as sociology, policy science, psychotherapy, cognitive science and law' (1995:ix). Because of its emphasis upon embodiment, participation, interaction and reflection, Maturana's work has special relevance to drama education. It helps us think about how we, as bodies, interact. While critics, including on occasions Maturana himself, have questioned this breadth of application, the relevance of the work continues to be asserted. N. Katherine Hayles says that its greatest significance lies in the areas of epistemology and research methodology. She argues Maturana's contribution lies in

his insistence on the concreteness and specificity of embodied processes; his insistence that the observer must be taken into account with all the implications this has for scientific objectivism; his distinction between allopoietic (externally organised) and autopoietic (self organising) systems and the ethical implications bound up with making this distinction; and his insight that, in a literal sense, we make a world for ourselves by living it. (Hayles, 1999:158)

The notion that 'we make a world for ourselves by living it' is a singularly challenging one. While argued through biology, it is cultural in consequence and post-modern in form. In drama education it presents the student with the responsibility to understand and identify her own learning. It identifies the student as the constructor of meaning as a consequence of her participation in a sensual embodied experience. It identifies the drama community (or group or cast or class) as a collection of individual constructors of meaning required, by circumstance, to negotiate their feelings and rationality — their embodiment. This is not new to drama education. In the 1970s, Dorothy Heathcote argued that drama education is first and foremost an education in negotiation (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984: 114). These negotiations occur within and beyond the drama. They are both political and personal, in that their ramifications are felt both socially and individually. They raise questions about how social interaction occurs (in the classroom and beyond) and suggest that, when we recognise our ongoing participation in the sort of interaction that drama models, we are drawn to look at the process from an ethical perspective. A key issue here may be, 'How do I sustain myself within the intricately balanced network of relationships (that makes up the drama, in life)?' From his work in biology, Maturana developed a set of analytical tools that can be used to question how we can best think about and live our lives systemically. Prime is a recognition of 'perturbation' — some sort of disturbance to an existing state. This perturbation arises in consciousness and, as a consequence of reflection, emerges in explanation. We become familiar with it in language — the explanations we offer and the stories we tell. It is for this reason that constructivists argue that there is an intimate relationship between the body, language, learning and storytelling.

Constructivism

Yvonna Lincoln argues that the constructivist paradigm has 'as its central focus not the abstraction (reduction) or the approximation (modelling) of a single reality but the presentation of multiple, holistic, competing and often conflictual realities (including the inquirer's)' (1990:73). It is a reporting process that focuses on the various meaningful constructions of an individual mind. It invites us, in Crotty's words, to 'approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new and richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation' (1998:51). This is a powerful challenge to traditions of learning that have long focussed on the effective mastery of prior knowledge.

While a number of writers and researchers have applied constructivism and in particular Maturana's work on biology and cognition to learning, Herta-Elisabeth Renk (1993) is one of a few who have extended this into a discussion of drama and learning. Renk argues that drama's emphasis upon the body as a tool of communication reflects the reality of everyday social life where feelings in combination with rationality, rather than rationality alone, are the basis from which we explain. An increasing number of researchers, across a variety of academic fields and disciplines, are arguing that both sensual and rational forms require recognition in the construction and communication of learning. Feminist scholars working in sociology, anthropology and ethnography have explored this (e.g., Behar, 1996; Krieger, 1991). It is also natural territory for those working in analytical psychology (e.g., Hillman, 1990). Sociologist Laurel Richardson, who has also written extensively on academic communication, defends her own frequent use of poetry and drama in academic writing. In doing so she asserts the need for 'combination genres' in reporting research in the discipline. She argues this is needed to do justice to the nuances in subject matter. Justifying, for example, her use of the dramatic form in academic work she says:

. . . some of the things we want to say . . . might be better communicated through 'showing'. Showing, I submit, can happen when different voices deeply penetrate our texts . . . [when they] become characters in 'drama'. . . when [they] . . . become embodied, take form. (Richardson, 1997:73)

As Richardson suggests, beyond 'the play' in drama education, it is important that the embodied experience be understood as available to the many different participants in the communication process. It can be that of the actor or speaker or writer just as it can be that of audience or listener or reader. Such experience demands reflection. This calls up creativity and herein lie opportunities for even greater learning.

'Formwork'

Some years ago I was invited, as a writer, to participate in 'Formwork', a workshop designed to introduce four Sydney-based actors, trained in various styles and traditions, to the training methods and performance styles of Peking Opera. My role was to create a text arising from the workshop process. While neither the workshop nor the research and writing processes that accompanied this were undertaken in a drama education setting, the process of learning that arose during the exercise is relevant to drama educators keen to develop tools for the development, documentation and representation of learning in drama.

The text I wrote for 'Formwork' materialised only partly through research into Peking Opera. Mostly it arose in and through the workshop process. This was initiated and undertaken by active physical bodies. As a writer I 'worked with' these active physical bodies. Just as another performer might, I watched the bodies, I listened to them, I became absorbed by them and I imagined myself into their experience. Each evening I reflected upon this experience and wrote notes for myself about the process and the bodies and the inter-relationships that manifested. While my physical experience of the workshop was considerably different to that of the performers — I did not enact the process — I responded to it, reflected upon it and wrote for the physicality of the performers. I was required to create sounds and rhythms, as much as words, which the actors could use to generate movement around the stage in accordance with the aesthetic form we were researching.

This meant that both the active physical bodies of the performers employed in the project and my relationship to those bodies became the stuff of my research and learning. This sort of understanding, accompanied by this sort of documentation, is part of the mix in many drama classrooms.

As I reflected upon the various drafts developed during the creative phases of the workshop, it occurred to me early in this project that my creative process could be mapped. It could then be discussed in terms of learning. Each of my drafts could then be seen as representing stages in my learning, signposts signifying direction and depth of involvement in the process: what Howard Gardner refers to as ‘cognitive maps that capture the thinker’s view of his project at various stages of its evolution’ (1982:353). Through this, the influences that contributed to those stages could then be analysed and the learning discussed as subject matter. These were, in effect, attempts to reconstruct my mental life. This led me to reflect upon the development of the text, draft by draft. The following is a sample:

The first draft of the text was written before the workshop began, and influenced largely by presuppositions. It was constructed around a central character whom I called, and who called himself, ‘the anthropologist’. As Levi-Strauss suggests, the allegiance of the anthropologist is divided between two communities. One community he observes and documents, the other observes the documents he creates. Like myself, at the early stage of the process, the anthropologist was detached from the community he sought to document. He observed them from afar with a pretence of knowledge and an abundance of confidence in his authority. ‘I am the custodian,’ he said, ‘Quickly! Their rituals, their secrets, their heartfelt emotions. I must write them down’. ‘Your tragedy, your happiness is safe in my hands’, he mumbled to himself as he constructed a hide from which to observe, ‘Tarpaulin on the roof, insulated, new steel beams. Furniture with cushions, too. Binoculars . . . The view’. (Wright, 1998).

Neither the performance nor the artwork is the sole reward for such work. Much more can be taken away from creative encounters. That which is taken away has a lot to do with the way in which the experience is explained to the self and others. Hence, the construction of learning — an understanding that ‘feeds back’ into the life that follows. This is an integral though often unrecognised aspect of drama learning. Herein lies much of its value as a system of interest beyond the discipline. Communication of such learning is not easy — creativity connotes rather than denotes and suggests rather than documents. The languages used for the purpose need be artfully deployed. The following, written for one character in ‘Formwork’ approaches some of my learning. Arguably, this could not have been contained in a more prosaic form.

Everyday I see them. Reflections in windows. Just over my shoulder. Disappearing round corners, I see them and I smell them. In the stale afternoon breeze, from a kitchen beyond a high wall, from the block of flats next to the bus stop, from the home units next to the store. I smell them and I feel them. Stepping in my front door. Standing between me and the wall. Looking down at me as I lie on my bed and recall. The war. I am the refugee. Get behind me. Memories. The mattress is moulded to the sagging weight of my body. My wife. I recall.

Applied Creativity for Beginning Teachers

In the second research project I want to discuss here I, along with three members of the School of Education in the University of Western Sydney, guided a group of sixteen pre-service and beginning teachers through a semester of creative, experiential workshops. The research was designed to examine a number of issues. These included:

- How creativity and imagination are constructed by pre-service and beginning teachers;
- How specific creative and imaginative practices can be used to enhance pedagogical outcomes for pre-service and beginning teachers;
- How beginning teachers use creative and imaginative practices as they progress in their professional lives;
- How a language based on creative arts experiences enables reflective pedagogical practices;
- How reflective pedagogical practices may be applied within a teacher education course structure.

It is important to note that, while many of the activities employed in the workshops were drawn from practices used in drama, visual arts and other creative arts, the purpose of the workshops was not to teach the art forms. Rather, it was to alert the teacher/participants to learning inherent in the activities. The sessions were designed therefore as models of learning and the role of the workshop facilitators was to model the facilitation of that learning. Beyond this, it was the role of the workshop leaders to use their own experience to assist in the further articulation of learning. In this respect learning was not 'delivered'. In accordance with constructivist principles, participants in the workshop were invited to make their own meaning and to find form or expression for that meaning. Those constructions became therefore the substance of the inquiry. They were the stories through which those involved come to understand and communicate the encounters that took place.

Data was gathered by a variety of methods. The most important was through the workshop sessions themselves. It was through the activity of participating that understanding was made available. The 'evidence' became, therefore, in part consequences that were reported by the participants (deliberately or incidentally) and/or documented and made available to the researchers through questionnaires, focus groups, journals and facilitated discussion. This evidence is varied and its focus ranges broadly, from the personal to the political.

After the first workshop session one participant, let's call her 'Sally', wrote the following:

SALLY: Being in the workshop today really made me focus on myself, my feelings and thoughts, my learning and my present level of creativity. There hasn't been any other subject that allowed me to focus on myself. I really enjoyed the first workshop. It was relaxing yet it made me really look into my thoughts and think. My focus question was: How can I build on my creativity in the future? . . . I know I will find this research project beneficial because previous to doing this I always believed that I had no creative ideas and nothing to bring to the classroom.

Our invitation to participants to reflect upon their own experience during the workshop allowed them to begin building personal stories of substance. One participant spoke of it in this way:

LYN: I found . . . before I started coming to these workshops, there was one way. I felt like my life was very directed in one way, but when I came here and communicated with everyone else and heard their ideas and their ways of thinking, I found there was more that I could offer. In a way, I have different paths going off my tree, with more branches and that kind of thing.

It is not the role of the constructivist researcher to question this account. This is therefore a narrative of significance. It can however be enriched by context. It is, to a certain extent, a response that might have been anticipated. The low teacher-student ratio (4:16), the deliberate cultivation of community, the concentration on fun, the valuing of personal experience, the adaptability of staff and the open acceptance of differences among and between students contributed to an inclusive and diverse learning environment — an ideal teaching environment, one within which learning is valued then examined in an open and respectful way. From one perspective, we offered a model of teaching that was deliberately provocative — it challenged what these students were most familiar with. From another, we offered a model of teaching that was open, communicative and effective — that invited the articulation of previously stifled considerations. The following comments reinforce this:

HANNA: A reason why I think these workshops have worked so well is because we all chose to take part, but I really do think that to be able to bring more of this into teacher education courses would be beneficial. Like if we could do another session of the ‘Profession of Teaching’ and be able to put a lot more thought into ‘what is quality teaching’, not just how you manage a classroom . . . There’s so much classroom management and classroom discipline . . . And [I want to ask], what are other creative ways that we can go about this? [Why not more of] this sort of learning, this sort of sharing of ideas, this small group activity rather than being in a lecture hall [where] a lot of the time [information] is . . . force fed to you.

DONNA: I actually thought that doing these workshops would make me more creative in the art form sense . . . Instead it has made me think outside the square and look at how I can make better lessons for students, to understand how students feel if placed outside their comfort zone. I have a better understanding of what stimulates creativity.

JENNIFER: I think by doing these creativity workshops . . . [I] can allow myself to be open and vulnerable and at the same time strong in that.

Understandings of this kind are the basis for changes in personal practice. Techniques commonly used in drama education were integral to the generation of these understandings. These begin with the invitation to improvise, to trust instincts formed by personal life experience to respond spontaneously to creative stimulus. They continue in the capacity to work with others in an environment where intellect, logic and rationality are only some of the tools required to create and sustain learning. This is the drama experience. It is also, in many respects, the experience of creative communication in settings beyond the drama classroom.

Conclusions

Constructivism is an epistemological form. It emphasises considerations upon the articulation of the relationship between observer and description (Umpleby, 2006). It is not a single research method. Rather, it is an understanding that admits a variety of methodologies of particular relevance to considerations upon learning. However, because constructions of learning occur in a social context, awareness of and considerations upon that context are required to determine the efficacy of the learning. Guba argues, 'Constructivism thus intends neither to predict and control the 'real' world nor to transform it but to reconstruct the world at the only point at which it exists: in the mind of constructors'. (1990:27)

In a similar way, Mingers (1995) works with insights derived from biology to address concerns about solipsism within constructivism. While suggesting that Maturana's position on the construction of reality through language can be seen as anti-realist, Mingers argues that it remains an understanding that can be 'successfully reconstructed in the light of critical realism'. He begins his reconstruction with the assertion that 'there is a single, real, materially existing world'. He continues by arguing that this world has, through evolutionary processes, generated 'organisms capable of creating distinctions, descriptions and constructs, subject only to their own internal structure'. These constructs and descriptions have enabled we human beings to create 'domains of experience . . . free from dependence on and determination by the material world'. One of these domains is science. This is a domain of learning 'in which observers cast their net of descriptions back onto the world itself'. Another of these domains is art. The arts and the sciences are both systems of understanding that share in self-reflectivity. As such, Mingers says, they are social systems united by a form of understanding that human participants contribute to, share in and extend. They are, he asserts, 'free human constructs . . . yet the world they relate to is independent of the observer's descriptions and existed prior to them' (1995:116).

In both 'Formwork' and 'Applied Creativity for Beginning Teachers' the structures that were used to contain the drama contributed to the learning that arose. They channelled specific forms of experience and created a learning environment and a repertoire of language appropriate to the explanation and appreciation of that experience. The experience alone is not enough for the learning to be valued. An understanding of the ways in which the learning is arrived at is integral. This does not mean that learning is predetermined, rather that those observing and/or evaluating the process need to be aware of and open to the variety of meanings that can be placed upon experience. It means that learning can be valued and differentiated through the detail, depth and quality of its identification. It, like creative work in general, is not work that is discussed as right or wrong, rather it is work that is valued because of the way in which it demonstrates the construction of an understanding of the complex network of relationships that comprise the experience. Such learning reaches into the discipline, while appreciating the discipline within a broader environment. It is learning that is, at its best, reflective, relevant and applied. For example, several of the 'beginning teachers' in the research mentioned above identified their greatest learning arising from the project as relating to their home (rather than professional) life. While this was an unintended consequence of the research it was an appropriate consequence. Their explanations arose in direct relationship to feelings generated during the workshop sessions. Constructions of this sort 'feed back' and become practical

understandings and the basis of further action and reflection. They instigate change in life and the division between home and professional life becomes irrelevant. I can attest to this on the basis of my participation in 'Formwork'. The creative construction of a performance text is a demanding process that impinges on all aspects of life and learning. The learning cannot be isolated within a script. As Piaget says, 'it touches everything' (Gardner, 1982:352).

The most interesting part of this sort of research is, for me, the meaning that participants make, the stories they tell as a result of experience. These stories are evidence in themselves. It is through embodied experience, reflection and explanation that cultural knowledge systems are determined. Our 'participation' in and through these knowledge systems is more a consequence of our capacity to recognise and claim knowledge than to plan or pre-determine it. It occurs in the doing and it is known through the explanations that are offered. The relevance of the constructivist approach to research in drama education is therefore extremely broad. The multiplicity of voices that it enables validates the range of learning that can be claimed. These situate the learning in the personal and social environments that have long been the subject matter of drama itself.

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