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ARTICLE

Why playwriting? Dealing with the 'big issues' and empowering student voices

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ABSTRACT

Drama education is at its best when it grapples with ideas and makes sense of experience . This article argues that within secondary schools, the often ignored practice of playwriting provides rich opportunities to develop student's perceptions of agency. We argue and that it offers students an opportunity to explore 'big' ideas and to express, develop and generate their views of the world. Based on an in-depth research project, the paper argues that for the students involved in the study, writing a play contributed strongly to their perceptions of agency and encouraged personal growth. The playwriting process also benefitted student agency by encouraging cultural engagement and an ability to understand and critique social life. Informed by concept of critical consciousness, the article argues that playwriting enables students to intervene in their world in order to change it, concluding by encouraging greater engagement with playwriting in the classroom in order to develop student proficiency and to take advantage of these benefits to agency.

KEYWORDS

Agency; cultural citizenship; Freire; playwriting; student voice

Introduction

> Well, rocks and trees and fairies and … leotards – this has nothing to do with real drama – drama is a real man in a mess.
>
> Dorothy Heathcote (Smedley 1971)

Drama, as Dorothy Heathcote suggested, is at its best when it explores ideas and makes sense of experience. Drama is a way of 'creating and interpreting human meaning through imagined action and language' (Neelands 1984: 6). To realise these goals, the philosophies underpinning drama education in Australia value the development and expression of student voices. In New South Wales (NSW), for example, the rationale in the Stage 6 (Senior) syllabus celebrates the role of drama as a means to explore, understand, construct, and communicate social and cultural values (Board of Studies, NSW 1999: 6). Similarly, the Stage 4 and 5 syllabus outlines the role drama plays in helping students 'explore the world' and of 'developing, sharing and expressing emotions and ideas' (Board of Studies, NSW 2003: 8). This

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article argues that playwriting is an activity that offers unique opportunities to meet these goals and to foster students' feelings of agency. The playwriting process engages students directly and authentically with skills and experiences fundamental to consolidating feelings of agency. We suggest also that the benefits to agency found in the experience are increased by the development of playwriting proficiency.

Exploring agency in and through playwriting

Agency is a belief in our ability to influence the course of events in our environment. An individual with agency has 'the power to shape their life circumstances and the course of their lives' (Bandura 2006: 164). The decision to write a play originates in a desire to communicate a pressing issue to an audience, to engage in a social dialogue: 'You write a play for your audience, because you have something you want to bring before their attention. The topic might be a burning one for you and you would like the audience also to give it a high priority' (Taylor 2002: 14). The playwriting process focuses students on finding a 'burning' issue in their world, one that *needs* to be addressed. This encourages what Stevenson calls 'cultural citizenship'; a willingness and ability to understand and critique social life (Stevenson 1997). As Albee suggests, we write a play because we wish to influence thought, to reflect society back on to itself to challenge prevailing ideas and practices (cited in Flannagan 1996). Playwriting asks students to think about their world, developing the critical consciousness (Freire 1974) essential for agency.

The self-knowledge and reflection encouraged by playwriting offers students a profound opportunity to consider their world and their place in it. As Bandura argues, 'the metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions is the most distinctly human core property of agency' (Bandura 2006: 165). An awareness of self increases an awareness of society and a willingness to be positively involved (Stevenson 1997). In writing about their experiences, students develop skills in self-reflection and empathy, two skills essential for playwriting (Jester and Stoneman 2012). Further, playwriting has the potential to encourage students to consider other perspectives (Fisher 2008). This empathy benefits self-awareness and consolidates perceptions of self–efficacy.

Through critical and creative self-reflection, a playwright creates a vision for their play that reflects their 'thoughts, intuitions, and attitudes' (Smiley 2005: 18). Taylor emphasises this personal nature of playwriting as 'the idea for the play comes from within you … your play will be composed from your values and attitudes, your hopes, fears and desires' and entails self-exposure, as a play catapults a playwright's 'opinions, ideas, passions and prejudices into the forum for debate' (Taylor, 2002: 27). But it is precisely the willingness to take on that risk, to engage in the social dialogue and to put ideas into the crucible of public scrutiny that consolidates the benefits to agency. As Sklar (2008: 136) suggests:

> When children write plays, their wishes, fears and secrets face an audience. An audience isn't a do-gooder making nice. It is an authority figure with a grudge against one's race or class. When it laughs at the jokes or applauds, it can be trusted. It is saying this play – and by extension its author – fits into the world on its own merits. In effect, each playwright declares, 'This is who I am. I count.' The audience, in its turn, validates this assessment.

Playwriting offers young people an opportunity for self-expression that may be otherwise absent in their world. Gattenhof (2006: 30) argues that, 'to have their voices heard in response to issues that impact upon them … creates a sense of belonging for young people whose

voice is often marginalised in society'. A play written by students does not just reflect community values, but when read or performed by others it becomes a part of that community and is a critical interaction with that culture (Doyle 1993). Doyle argues therefore that 'we miss much of the potential for drama if we do not realise that it can play a part in reformulating culture just as it does in objectifying it' (68). Young people use the arts to 'transform' their understanding of the world and to make symbolic meaning of their lives (Mooney 2005). Through the social aspect of a play, in workshop and performance (real or imagined), students participate in the cultural dialogue.

As plays need to not only be interesting for the playwright, they need to connect and affect a universal audience (Edgar 2009), students' agency can be increased and broadened by developing playwriting proficiency. *Learning how* to write about the world allows us to rewrite it – to critically read and then to transform it (Freire and Macedo 1987: 35). Drama and theatre empower students to transform society; 'to build a future, instead of just waiting for it' (Boal 1992). Playwriting's focus on imaginative and symbolic thinking, the creation of worlds inhabited by characters of their choosing, represent key activities that contribute to playwriting's significant and unique potential to develop student agency. Similarly, creating characters who 'reflect … and make corrective judgements' (Bandura 2006) in their fictional world offers students a rehearsal for agency in their own lives. This 'recreation' of society embraces but goes beyond narrative, beyond the literal and beyond words (Eisner 1988). Symbolic thinking is essential to agency; creating the power to visualise futures, and to 'construct, evaluate and modify alternative courses of action to secure valued outcomes' (Bandura 2006: 164). It is this creative dimension that makes us human, enabling us to 'intervene in reality in order to change it' (Freire 1974: 4).

Learning how to understand and manipulate the signs and symbols that constitute stage language (Elam 1980; Pfister 1988) gives students new modes of expression and the opportunity for thought previously 'inconceivable' (Nicholson 1998: 79). Nicholson suggests that 'as students take control of the dramatic form [they understand how to] construct dramatic texts as a vehicle of thought and communication (Nicholson 1998: 84). Increased proficiency, increased skill in the language of the stage, allows students to not only express their existing ideas and concerns, but to develop new ideas and social and cultural skills.

The study

The research presented in this article explored playwriting pedagogical practices in New South Wales Secondary schools. The study aimed to understand the teaching and learning experiences of students and teachers and had a particular focus on writing for external assessment, in this case the Scriptwriting Individual Project in the NSW Higher School Certificate Drama examination.[1] It explored the teaching of the short play form – plays that are 15–25 pages in length. Specifically, it addressed the research question: What are the teaching and learning experiences of students and teachers preparing a script for external assessment for the NSW Higher School Certificate Drama examination?

Data were gathered from teacher-student pairs in five schools: five teachers and five Year 12 (final year) student playwrights. The participants and the schools are referred to here using pseudonyms. The data collected were qualitative in nature, and consisted of semi-structured interviews (referenced as Int: 1 etc. in the data), students' logbooks, and observations of process and product. The participants were interviewed twice, once during

the writing process and once after the plays were complete, with the second round exploring themes from the first. Where possible, a playwriting teaching and learning session and play reading workshop at each site were observed. The interviews and observations were carried out in the students' and teachers' normal school environment and took place during the course of a normal day – in a free period. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, and the mentoring sessions were videotaped. The plays in draft and final form, as well as the students' logbooks, were also examined and used to corroborate and complement the ideas expressed in interview and observed in student-teacher feedback sessions.

As qualitative research, this 'thick data' (Denzin 1989) was used to better understand the complexity and subtlety of the situation, exploring where the data supports, elaborates and contradicts each other to construct meaning through crystalisation (Richardson 2000) and montage (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). As the objective was to learn from the participants (Creswell 2007: 30), the research design aimed to inform theory and practice by understanding the 'lived experience' of playwriting pedagogy.

The data were analysed and explored through mindmaps, annotations and memos, identifying links, themes and common ideas. The data were then further analysed through the focus of the categories, looking for connections across all sites. The data were examined not primarily to understand the specifics of the cases but on what they can tell us about the experience of playwriting pedagogy. The various experiences have meaning in themselves, but create further meaning in dialogue and juxtaposition.

The emphasis on thick descriptions aims 'at getting below the surface to the most enigmatic aspect of the human condition, the construction of meaning' (Eisner 1991: 15). As Fetterman argues, 'what people believe to be true is more important than any objective reality: people act on what they believe' (Fetterman 1988: 18).

Context of the research

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the experience of students and their perceptions of agency. The students in this study were all from independent schools: two girls (Sarah and Phillipa) in single sex schools and one boy (Sam) from a co-educational school in Sydney; and two girls, from a regional area south of Sydney – one from a co-educational school (Lucy) and one from a single sex one (Patricia). As the students were preparing the play as part of their Individual Project for Drama, they had chosen this project over other options and were mostly new to playwriting, with Sam being the only student to have attempted to write a play before.

The nature of the Individual Project means that the majority of work is carried out independently of the teacher, and most of the interaction between teacher and student occurred outside of normal class time. Most students were able to have sections of their play read or performed before an audience, and all reported that they received feedback from a number of sources on their written text. However, most playreadings/workshops formed part of the assessment procedures and occurred late in the process.

In terms of the playwriting teaching and learning that took place, the teachers in this study were operating on the belief, common in creative writing pedagogy, that 'inspiration not education drives creativity' (Swander, Leahy, and Cantrell 2007: 15). The teachers expressed a distrust of intervention that stemmed from a belief in intrinsic creativity: that naive talent is 'noble' and should be kept free from the corrupting influence of teaching. Teaching and

learning strategies that focused on knowledge and skill development were not prioritized and the process involved point of need student-teacher feedback sessions. The teachers reported that they did not follow a 'program' or consult texts in preparing for their interactions (Ms. Bates) and believed that a structured course was unnecessary and unhelpful. Their role was to guide the process of discovery through shaping and editing drafts of student work and that the student's unique talent, their creativity and individual voice, needed to be protected from the limiting effect of rules and knowledge. Their approach had been impacted by longstanding Romantic assumptions that creativity, as a concept and a process, is generally unknowable and perhaps even mysterious.[2]

Findings

This research found that playwriting offered unique opportunities to encourage and develop students' feelings of agency and that the process of writing a play provided students with an opportunity to explore, develop and generate their views of the world. Writing a play emerged as a reflective process that improved self-awareness. While it clarified and made the students more conscious of their current positions, it also led to students *developing* new ideas and opinions. This increase in awareness was strongly associated with feelings of personal growth that were reported as unique in these students' drama and general school experience.

Exploring 'big' ideas

The findings of this research indicate that playwriting offered an autonomy not found in other aspects of the drama course. The students communicated that they felt free to think broadly for an idea or topic and that they reveled in the freedom of choice. Students considered playwriting to be more 'serious' than devising, with one student noting:

> **Sarah:** [Playwriting is] kind of more professional, essentially, than self-devised stuff you do in class, cause you're in a group, and you sort of make it up and change stuff as you go along … [in playwriting] you've got absolute control over what happens, whereas anything else we have done in drama we haven't really had that.

For Sarah then, writing a play involved a process and a product; autonomous self-reflection and personal commitment to an idea, as well as the written artefact, that brought a *gravitas* to playwriting not present in playbuilding.

The students expressed the view that good plays were more than just entertainment and that a play needed to address something relevant and crucial, both to them and to their audience. Noting the link between aesthetic quality and moral meaning, they defined a good play as one that tackles 'big' issues in a manner that respects the intelligence of their imagined audience. Proficiency in craft was needed to ensure the plays were engaging and not dogmatic. For Phillipa, identifying the key lesson or moral for her play was the start of the process: 'definitely the message came first and I kind of worked it from there' (Int. 2). She focused significant energy investigating potential ideas, many of which were sophisticated and philosophically rich. Her log explored 'big' ideas, such as: 'What makes us human?' and the question of God's existence. Phillipa believed that a good play needed a definite moral as an audience needs to learn something. She mentioned that the most memorable plays for her are those that convey a message:

Phillipa: To be honest, I have forgotten some of the stories but the lessons are still there. (Int. 1)

Some students saw the play script as an opportunity to be 'didactic' (Lucy) and to examine 'right and wrong' (Phillipa). In their attempt to solve their philosophical dilemmas they were knowingly creating texts to contribute to the cultural dialogue and for others to learn from, to help them solve real life problems.

Autobiography and personal investment

The second finding was that playwriting encouraged personal investment in ideas and inspired students to mine their life experiences to explore significant issues. The student playwrights chose ideas that were closely linked to their own life dilemmas and developed a theatrical metaphor for autobiographical experiences and observations in an attempt to make sense of their world. Sam, for example, suggested the playwriting project allowed true freedom to express himself and communicate his take on the world:

Sam: [with scriptwriting] you can choose to write about anything … [but] you wouldn't write about something you aren't passionate about or you don't care about. (Int. 1)

Sam began the writing process, not with a specific idea, but with a genre and employed elements of the Absurdist style to convey his nihilistic and existentialist views. For this student, the genre represented the idea and his play explored his disillusionment with modern society and the world into which he is graduating. Thus his choice of style was a way to question society and explore an issue about which he felt deeply.

Because of her life story and her family's journey, Phillipa indicated that a social and political situation, in particular corruption in the Philippines, was intensely significant to her. Her play reflected her desire to have something to say, to make a difference, and was linked her exploration of playwriting as a 'voice':

Phillipa: I started thinking about maybe the voiceless people, and so I think my protagonist … is someone who is kind of a 'voice-less' person and I've kind of written about how he may have lost the voice.

This reflected Phillipa's view that a playwright is someone who acts as the voice for ideas. She also saw writing a play as a way to give agency to others and, by engaging with universal concerns beyond herself, contribute to the cultural dialogue.

Lucy, too, focused on expressing sophisticated ideas and used the freedom inherent in the project to explore the 'darker parts of human nature' and how they 'affect … people' (Int. 1). For her play, Lucy wanted to create a theatrical representation of one of her dilemmas**:**

Lucy: Personally, I was really grieved at the feeling of a loss of innocence, as I was growing older. That was something for me that I was sad about. I also think it's interesting because the characters learn something for me … I'm a kind of 'teaching-type' person. I enjoy teaching other people things. (Post-workshop discussion)

Lucy saw the play, through the use of metaphor, as a vehicle to communicate her observations and the lessons she has learnt about her life dilemma; to turn a personal crisis into a universal discussion. The play was an opportunity to act – to affect change through the questions she raises and the observations she presents.

However, the autobiographical nature of the task meant that the playwriting process was one that involved a level of risk and vulnerability. To increase the effectiveness of the theatre and diminish the potential vulnerability, the students strove to create a universal metaphor

or vehicle to effectively communicate their personal ideas. This process also resulted in increased self-awareness and growth.

Playwriting as learning

The third finding, related to the autobiographical nature of playwriting, suggests that the writing experience provided opportunities for students to do more than just restate or express their views. Playwriting offered significant moments of personal growth and learning about the world.

Sarah's particular playwriting experience demonstrates the possibilities and opportunities for aesthetic and personal growth offered by playwriting. Sarah explained that she began her writing process aiming to understand an issue and, through that process, to understand her world: 'I love looking at why people do what they do and how that comes to play in their actions' (Int. 1). Because of her own life experience, including the divorce of her parents and problems around custody, Sarah's initial idea focused on the issue of child abduction. However, her new 'life' experiences influenced the purpose, content and form of her play. Sarah recalled how dealing with a friend's depression influenced her understanding of how best to explore and discuss mental health issues:

> **Paul:** So, it's the intensity of the life experiences … that pushed [them] into this play?
>
> **Sarah:** Yeah, and I think that's one of the things that makes the writer is that ability to interweave your life experiences. Not directly, you are not retelling the story of what happened to you or your friend, but it is to take the issues behind your life and work them into something similar, … I mean you take the experience and you change it to shape, … and then you sort of say, 'What was the crux of this issue? What did I learn? How did I learn it?' … So I think it's a matter of learning from it and putting what you have learnt into your piece. (Int. 2)

This developing understanding of life influenced Sarah's views on what a play should and could do. Initially, Sarah began writing a personal play but approached it in a legalistic way, with a didactic purpose: she wanted to communicate her specific position. However, reflecting upon her life experiences changed the premise or core objective of her play from intellectual certainty to emotional empathy:

> **Sarah:** I've placed a far greater importance on the emotional engagement of the audience … Initially I was trying to teach and … get my opinion on an issue across whereas now … it's about forcing the audience to form their own opinions on the issue and actually emotionally engaging them in something real. (Int. 2)

Sarah's interweaving and morphing of her life into her play required functional self-awareness and she saw emotional truth as the way to create meaningful affective theatre. Thus learning about playwriting and learning about human behaviour co-existed. Increased understanding of the world impacted her view of what constituted a good play, suggesting the reciprocal relationship between increased proficiency and increased agency. Her focus on 'forcing' the audience reflected her belief in her agency: she felt entitled to contribute her views, that her perspective was valuable. Sarah indicated that 'writing this play has really helped me grow as a person' (Int. 2).

In one particular case, the power of playwriting to encourage personal expression and to create new understandings occurred without conscious awareness or intention by the writer. Patricia indicated that she did not consciously approach playwriting with the intention of making a statement:

Patricia: I did not set out to write a play with a clear message. I am not Brecht. (Int. 2)

However, the autobiographical aspect was as strong in Patricia's play as it was in the work of other students in the study. During the final stages of the second interview, Patricia realised that her play symbolised her own struggles with societal expectations and that she had created a subtle metaphorisation of her life and identity issues. In explaining her experience of school, Patricia recounted that her early high school years were difficult:

Patricia: I used to be ah … picked on a bit, cause I'm excitable, I've got this big obsessiveness to me … People didn't get that, and I didn't get people. And then I've eventually learned there are rules, and I wanted to learn what these rules were, so I could either decide 'Yeah, I will obey that one so they don't look at me funny' or I'll decide 'There ain't no way in hell that I am obeying that one'. So, people, and their rules, and when it is appropriate to say something [and] when it is inappropriate to even think about something, all of that sort of thing, I find incredibly interesting. (Int. 2)

In discussion of the characters and meaning, Patricia saw that her play did have a message, but was unaware of it until it was revealed to her by a reader unconnected to the process. The autobiographical qualities emerged when she unpacked her observations about these social rules:

Paul: This revelation, where you described [your] life experience … and I said 'That's in the play' and you went 'oh god, I don't know, is it?' And it is/

Patricia: /It is!

Paul: [the characters] represent the conflict in you/

Patricia: Yeah, 'there are rules'.

Paul: 'What's the sacrifice I have to make to fit in, and how much of it is me and what's the cost?'

Patricia: Yeah.

Paul: That is why the self-help book is the symbol/

Patricia: /Yeah.

Paul: Those books are supposedly the ticket to happiness.

Patricia: They're not, but he thinks it is. He says 'I have a rulebook … it has rules. I follow these rules. I am all fine.' (Int. 2)

Having not previously made the connection, Patricia was very excited by the revelation that her play was the manifestation of her dilemma of 'how to be happy and of how to live in a world of rules'. It reflected the enormous but complex benefits to agency offered by the playwriting process. Playwriting became a way for Patricia to make metaphors of her life experiences; creating *characters* to grapple with the dilemma of navigating the social world she seemed to not instinctively understand, and which didn't understand her. In creating these metaphors and characters, Patricia demonstrated that she did have insight into the pressures of society and the challenging chore of negotiating expectations. Her metaphor was part of her self-actualisation: externalising her internal conflict. The central dilemma of the people in the world of her play was the central dilemma of her life: 'Do I want to break the rules? Do these rules have validity?'

Agency and proficiency

A fourth finding from the research was the potential impact of students' playwriting proficiency on agency and feelings of self-efficacy. The ability to realise their objectives and write a piece of effective and affecting theatre was impacted by their control of the craft.

The students expressed that they found playwriting to be more difficult than they anticipated and more difficult than other forms of writing. The belief in intrinsic creativity may well have suggested that the play was 'in' them and only needed to be 'expressed'. Lucy admitted to not 'really knowing the form at all' (Int. 1) and had only read one play beyond class work. Sam reported that when he approached his teacher with a genre, she encouraged him to begin to write:

> **Sam:** So she basically said, it seems like you have a good idea, now go and try and write a first draft. So I began writing my draft and almost instantly I learnt that it wouldn't be such a breeze. (Int. 1)

The 'learn by doing' meant a process of trial and error that resulted in mixed feelings for the students:

> **Sarah:** It's the first script [that I have written] and I am enjoying it, but at the same time it has made me aware that I have no idea what I am doing. (Int. 1)

Sarah revealed a lack of understanding of how 'learning' informed her practice:

> **Paul:** What do you grab from your 'knowledge of theatre' to communicate your message?
>
> **Sarah:** I don't know … if it works, it works. (Int. 1)

The teaching and learning they experienced did not support the students' need for actual and perceived skill development and a number demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of writing for the stage. In describing the components of a good play, Patricia revealed a lack of awareness of dramatic action, conflating it with activity:

> **Patricia:** Action, you do have to have some, whether its action with swords, as mine happens to be, or whether it's understated minute movements, it's gotta have good ideas throughout it, a good plot, great dialogue and then action to it … (Int. 1)

Phillipa was unaware of the basics of scriptwriting. In discussing her play a few days before submission, Phillipa revealed that she did not know the basics of formatting, such as where to place the character list. She was also unaware of the purpose or the need for stage directions, resulting, for example, in her including dialogue in stage directions. Like Phillipa, Lucy did not have a character list for a workshop reading, nor a clear stage setting, prompting the student actors to ask questions that should have been answered by the text (Obs.).

While the students were able to imagine an original kernel of an idea that was potentially theatrical, they were generally not as successful in realising this into a workable concept. Sam's initial idea of domestic absurdity utilised an image of a vertical bed, with its inhabitants trapped in a bedroom, but he abandoned this idea for a more realistic setting. Phillipa initially began her play with a physical representation of the human body, to show the corruption in society as a sickness, but her play evolved into a TV-like courtroom drama. Sarah realised the need for symbol and introduced a broken vase to convey the metaphor of a fractured relationship. However, this was unsynthesised and was confusing rather than affecting (Sarah's play script). Lucy, too, demonstrated a superficial understanding of the play form and the way thematic meaning is made, introducing techniques, such as foreshadowing and intertextuality that were similarly confusing rather than clarifying (Lucy's play script). The need for greater playwriting literacy was demonstrated by the students' inability to develop

these initial ideas into realised theoretical concepts. This lack of knowledge impacted on their ability to control the techniques of the stage and, in turn, affected the effectiveness of the artifact – of the play.

Discussion

Writing a play offered the students in this study an opportunity to explore, develop and generate their views of the world and, further, that this opportunity created a sense of personal growth. In each site the students considered playwriting as an opportunity to express their views on 'big' issues that had particular relevance to their lives. They approached playwriting as an opportunity to question aspects of society and to make sense of the world around them, where they worked through key autobiographical concerns. Their experience suggested that playwriting helped them to understand the story they were living and to share their realisations. Writing a play empowered the students by validating their experiences *and their interpretation* of those experiences. In seeing the universality of their views, students were reflecting on their 'thoughts and actions' (Bandura 2006). Playwriting offered students the opportunity to see their ideas and life experiences as valid content for a play (Sklar 2008) elevating them from the ordinary to the universal. The desire to change society was evident in all the plays, demonstrating the capacity of theatre to empower: to build our future, instead of just waiting for it (Boal 1992: 16).

However, what also emerged was the relationship between the ability to manipulate the conventions and stylistic features of the play form and the students' ability to *realise* the potential intrinsic in the process. There was a positive relationship between the skills developed in playwriting, such as the creating of metaphors for autobiographical experiences, and the development of critical consciousness (Freire 1974). As observed in Sarah and Patricia's experiences, *realising* the benefits to agency were impacted by the students' control of playwriting technique. The ability to create characters that symbolise the students' ideas and the symbols to bring theatricality to the play were important in consolidating the opportunity for agency and allowing access to further benefits. Similarly, Phillipa and Lucy's ignorance, for example, had the potential to limit the effectiveness of their play to communicate their ideas, and subsequently, their feelings of efficacy and agency. The potential inherent in playwriting to encourage freedom and control needs to be supported by scaffolded learning experiences to ensure opportunity is supported by skill development. The findings of the study suggest that the students' experience of a non-interventionist pedagogy impacted their ability to fulfill the promise of their work.

The teachers were keen for the students to express their intrinsic creativity and the teaching and learning processes were based on assumptions that creative work needed to come from the students. This approach was paradoxically unsuccessful in helping these students access the skills needed to realise their objectives. The lack of experience both in reading and writing plays, as well as a lack of encouragement to engage with playwriting theory, meant that the students' understanding of the play form was not extensive or, at times, sufficient. The problems with skill development challenge the effectiveness of their non-interventionist pedagogical approach. The teachers' reluctance to intervene was perhaps related to their lack of engagement with playwriting theory, both semiotic and pedagogical.

Agency is more than freedom to *choose* ideas; the students need the proficiency to articulate their ideas. Students need proficiency in theatrical literacy and dramatic vocabulary to

'imagine' new opinions and ideas to broaden their cultural frame (Nicholson 1998). Semiotic understanding enables the student to develop a theatrical metaphor for autobiographical experiences and observations. Freedom is real if students have the words to express their views and the clarity of thinking to formulate new ones. To rewrite the world one needs the literacy to write and the vocabulary to 'rethink' it (Freire and Macedo 1987). This research suggested that playwriting knowledge is not a restraint but is enabling, and to remove or withhold it is an act with strong implications for agency.

Implication for research and policy

The unique processes involved in playwriting, as well as the creation of a personally significant product, emerged as particularly beneficial to the development and enhancement of skills and abilities required for perceptions of agency. This research suggests that the benefits to student agency are increased and consolidated by improved proficiency in craft. Students not only benefit from the opportunity to 'experience' playwriting, they need to engage with teaching and learning activities to scaffold and develop playwriting knowledge and skill. This research highlights the need for further research to investigate best practice in playwriting pedagogy, as well as the impact of a more rigorous theoretical teaching and learning program on feelings of self-efficacy. Studies that used playwriting programs to empower marginalised youth (Feffer 2009; Fisher 2008; Fisher, Purcell, and May 2009) were noticeably, and in some cases consciously, theory free. These programs offered great benefits to their students and further research is needed to determine if increased knowledge leads to improved engagement and self-esteem.

The research suggests greater emphasis on playwriting, both in pre-service teacher education and classroom practice, will increase teacher engagement with this valuable process. The potential benefits of playwriting are yet to be fully realised and a paradigm shift in the classroom is needed if we are to see students gain greater access to the benefits. Extending opportunities for students to exercise this voice is beneficial to all involved, ensuring an enriched and diverse critical and cultural conversation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the multiple benefits for agency and self-awareness offered by engagement with the playwriting process. A play provided a metaphorical, and thus relatively safe opportunity for discussion of 'big' ideas and concerns in the lives of the young people. The autobiographical nature of the plays, and successfully managing the risk involved, reinforced the students' sense of agency. It encouraged them to reflect on their life stories and, through metaphor, find universal observations and ideas to communicate their opinions and question the world in which they live. However, a lack of playwriting proficiency was seen to limit students' ability to realise their potential, with significant impact on students' feelings of self-efficacy and agency.

Developing greater playwriting proficiency in schools will work to broaden the skill base of our young writers and encourage diversity and democracy of voices, in content and in form. The re-igniting of interest in this under researched and under-utilised process has the potential to offer authentic opportunities for students to grapple with 'big' ideas and develop a lasting proficiency that fosters symbolic and creative thinking. It encourages students

to develop their reflective skills and increases self-knowledge, while also encouraging a belief in their ability to contribute to and influence their world. At a time when the need for greater understanding of ourselves and of each other is so pressing (Anderson 2014) increased engagement with playwriting and its ability to encourage both empathy and personal growth seems a practice that deserves much greater attention. The habits of mind and skills of agency, as well as critical reflection and creative invention, are essential skills for our young people. The playwriting process, involving workshops and performances, also encourages 'actual' collaboration and community engagement in a time when contact with others is becoming increasingly virtual and mediated. The benefits of playwriting to our students has the long-term potential to contribute to more diverse and vibrant new Australian performance writing, as well as to encourage more engaged and culturally aware citizens contributing to a more diverse, empathetic and vigorously democratic society.

Notes

1. Students in their final year of school in NSW complete the HSC. The HSC Drama course involves three components: the study of core content (*Australian Drama and Theatre* and *Studies in Drama and Theatre*) assessed through a written examination (40%), as well as a Group Performance (30%) and an Individual Project (30%). The Individual Project allows students to choose to complete work in critical analysis, design, performance, scriptwriting or video drama.
2. For a more extensive discussion of this aspect, see P. Gardiner (forthcoming).

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