

Searching for the *Dream Studio Space*.

Exploration of a Teacher-Artist across physical, creative and imagined spaces; a reflective journey from Australia to the United Kingdom and back again.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tensions between artistic desires and freedoms of the Drama teacher. I consider the expectations of educational settings, and how these affect attitudes towards the Dream Studio Space, defined here as the ideal space desired or imagined by the Drama teacher, and notwithstanding the realities of actual conditions in school contexts. I examine beliefs about the potential for space to inspire meaningful Drama, and how attitudes to space depend on the level of creative freedom teachers have within school frameworks. Through reflective practice and personal experiences in classrooms across Australia and the United Kingdom, I examine how perspectives of the Dream Studio Space continue to change and to what extent this might influence the pedagogy of Teacher-Artists. I posit that it is critical for the Teacher-Artist to recognise the agency they exercise over spaces in order to facilitate student creativity in Drama. We should never allow the space to dictate what might be achieved by us and our students.

KEYWORDS

Drama pedagogy, Dream Studio Space, instrumental objectives, aesthetic learning, personal and social learning, expressive objectives, learner centred approaches, studio, space.

INTRODUCTION

I feel compelled to explore the differences I have experienced in physical and social settings for Drama Education, reflecting particularly on my formative years of study and early teaching career. I have recently returned to Australia and as the curriculum continually evolves, so too have my beliefs about the importance of studio space and its potential limitations or freedoms.

Drama was included in Australia's national curriculum reforms of 2013 in part due to years of collaborative advocacy by the National Advocates for Arts Education who helped shift it from "the periphery of the curriculum" (Saunders & Stinson, 2016, p.120). Despite this, Drama must regularly fight for a place in our schools. My experiences both as student and teacher have demonstrated that the provision of performance spaces and the priority given to our subject varies greatly (Neelands, 2009). This paper reflects upon the links between physical studio space and teachers' creative freedoms within the school context – do we sacrifice our artistry

and conform to rigid school expectations in return for improved performance spaces, or can we have both? I believe by reflecting on our experiences with space we gain a stronger understanding of its influence on educational pedagogy in Drama Education.

METHODOLOGY: THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN DRAMA EDUCATION

Reflection-on-action is a valuable tool for educators, as it encourages us to view experiences in our daily practice, relate them to prior knowledge and attempt to understand the ways of thinking that have led to these outcomes (Schön, 1983). Yaxley (1993) acknowledges Schön's reflective practice model and the continuous reflection teachers undertake, through the active involvement in developing their knowledge of the classroom and further describing of experiences to colleagues, arguing "it is through sharing, reviewing and revising that teachers develop and sustain a critically reflective discourse on teaching" (p.27). To examine changing views of space and its importance in teaching, I critically reflect upon my experiences in the classroom, as student and teacher, using this to frame my evolving pedagogy. In order to share and review my experiences, I have drawn upon evidence and reflections gathered from journals, classroom footage, notes, photographs and discussions with colleagues. Spanning almost a decade, these have allowed me to gain reflective insights into my thoughts and processes and how these have changed across space and time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Drama practitioners we develop content knowledge and performance skills but to become effective teachers we are required to develop pedagogical and methodological expertise (Davidson, 2017). Kempe (2009) argues that Drama can be broken down into "knowing about and knowing how to" (p.412) – using knowledge of dramatic practices to enact Drama – but that Drama education is also about *knowing through*: helping students gain an understanding of society through Drama. For training teachers, this involves the shift in perspective from performer to educator and dramatic artist: a Teacher-Artist. Howell and Heap (2005) suggest the necessity of training Teacher-Artists to work in schools and define them as those who can "meld their pedagogical understanding and skill with an aesthetic craft and sensibility" (p.59). As Teacher-Artists we must perform the roles of playwright, director and actor simultaneously while motivating students to "engage with the dramatic narratives of others, but also to find ways to communicate their own ideas" (Nicholson, 2007, p.2). Dunn and Stinson (2011) also recognise the role of Teacher-Artists and the necessity of educators "working with artistry, manag[ing] form and content skilfully and purposefully to achieve heightened cognitive and affective responses simultaneously" (p.619). Nicholson (2007) further acknowledges the potential tensions facing Drama teachers in secondary schools who must meet "the demands of education systems driven by standardisation and measurable learning outcomes" while balancing "the processes of working in Drama which are often most interesting when the unexpected or unforeseen is accommodated and accepted" (p.5).

Opinions around the necessity of defined artistic spaces vary within the Drama community (Neelands & Goode, 2015). Jerzy Grotowski (Grotowski, Wiewiorowski & Morris, 1967) contends that theatre should "eliminat[e] whatever prove[s] superfluous" and leave only "the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion" (p.62). Peter Brook (1996) further adds "A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (p.7). On the other hand, Hadjipanteli (2020) states that "an aesthetically motivational dramatic space proceeds as a source of creating an emotional learning ecology, which in turn, excites learners' thought and artistic inspiration" (p.204). Neelands and Goode (2015) offer balance between all three ideologues, suggesting "the expectation is that any movement or use of space in the defined area will be symbolic and meaningful for the spectators" (p.147).

Abstract discussions on the nature of performance are important but for Teacher-Artists, like me, we must take a more practical approach, working within the spaces provided. Sallis (2009) critically recognises the influence performance space has on successful Drama teaching and learning, advocating for secondary schools to provide “a dedicated, well-equipped drama space” (p.8) including adequate floor space, sound proofing, blackout facilities, electrical equipment, lighting and sound technologies. Sallis (2009) also emphasises that good working conditions “signal to parents, students, teachers and other members of the community that the study of Drama is a valued aspect of the curriculum” (p4).

Open space learning enables a pedagogy where students can engage more thoroughly with content through physical and ensemble work (Monk, Rutter, Neelands & Heron, 2011). The pedagogy of a Teacher-Artist is also shaped by their desired objectives for students. Neelands and Goode (2015) explore the perceived purpose of Drama in schools, identifying four key objectives, which they label as:

- *aesthetic learning*
- *personal and social learning*
- *instrumental objectives*
- *expressive objectives*

They contend that these objectives steer teachers towards a learning intention. *Aesthetic learning* emphasises teaching students about the art form of theatre whereas *personal and social learning* builds self-confidence and teamwork. *Instrumental objectives* focus on achieving measurable skills such as mastering transformation of character, whereas *expressive objectives* are less concrete, focussing on the development of the students’ attitudes and values (Neelands & Goode, 2015).

As Teacher-Artists, we must balance a pedagogy inspired by these objectives with the external variables of teaching: students’ abilities, school and community context, and curriculum requirements (Johnson, 2002).

In Victoria, Australia, the curriculum mandated by the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority dictates that Drama students must be given the opportunity to explore “a range of forms, styles and contexts” (Victorian Curriculum Foundation – 10 Drama) and “use the production components of props, costumes, lighting, sound and staging equipment and technologies and performance space” (Victorian Curriculum F–10 Drama). At senior levels, students are required to develop knowledge of production areas, listed in the 2019-2024 study design as costume, lighting, make-up, mask, props, puppetry, set pieces, sound design and theatre technologies (VCAA VCE Drama Study Design 2019-2024). These are to be applied in ways that are relevant to selected performance styles and while practicalities are at teachers’ discretion, it is imperative that some access to props and technologies is available for students to meet mandated curriculum criteria.

INITIAL IMAGININGS OF THE *DREAM STUDIO SPACE* AS A STUDENT AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1997) states “The performance space is never empty. Bare, yes, open, yes, but never empty. It is always the site of physical, social, and psychic forces in society” (p.13). I have taught in spaces that were *bare*: sparse, uncomfortable, asbestos-riddled portables from the 1980s, freezing in winter and stifling in summer. I have worked in *open* spaces: professional studios complete with lighting, blackout curtains, sound systems, costume rooms and sprung floors. None of these spaces were devoid of external societal forces. I have had to contend with the demands of changing national curriculum frameworks in two different countries and the interpretation of these by schools. As an artist, I have had to balance the desire to help students flourish creatively and personally with the pressure as a teacher to meet expectations of Drama from school leadership. This tension has significantly

influenced my pedagogy as a Teacher-Artist, far more than the physical spaces I have worked in.

Before beginning my practice as a teacher, I dreamed of what my experiences in the Drama classroom might look like. It is inevitable that pre-service teachers enter the workforce with imaginings about what their role will be, and these are often based on personal learning experiences (Gray, Pascoe & Wright, 2018). My preconceptions were based partly upon six years of Drama in a Victorian secondary school, spent rehearsing performances for our assessments or our parents in a brick classroom with fraying carpet and ripped curtains alongside peers whose enthusiasm for Drama varied greatly. My assumptions were also developed during four years of university, where my passion for performance grew as I studied Drama through academic, social and vocational lenses and regularly performed in what I came to think of as the *Dream Studio Space*.

Initially, I believed the *Dream Studio Space* to be a physical space characterised by resources I considered important for successful dramatic creation and performance. This included a wooden sprung or tarquette floor, black walls and black floor to ceiling curtains, preferably with the ability to section off part of the studio to separate backstage and performance space. Lighting should give performers the ability to create a total blackout, illuminate the stage or focus on an individual performer. Technology should enable recorded sound to be projected through speakers and the acoustics of the space should allow actors' voices to be clearly heard while the room is soundproofed, to block the outside world.

This concept of my *Dream Studio Space* was born from positive experiences at university and in response to being denied designated studio space in my secondary school, where our classes occurred in a small general-use classroom. I felt the lack of studio facilities contributed to many of my peers' attitudes that Drama was not a valuable subject. This frustrated me as I saw value in our dramatic work and wanted others to value it also. As outlined by Saunders and Stinson (2016), Drama's place in the Australian curriculum has been contentious and is perhaps a reflection of the wider view Australian governments historically take towards the Arts. My experiences of Drama in secondary school in the early 2000s showed me that Drama was not highly valued by school leadership in comparison to subjects such as Science or Maths. We had far fewer students at senior level as it was not promoted as a subject choice and our senior class was often unceremoniously shifted out of our performance space in the hall when it was needed for Sport.

From my experiences in secondary school, I drew the conclusion that performance space was critical to participants' views of Drama – my belief was that if we had access to better facilities, perhaps my peers would have taken the subject seriously. My university had a dedicated Arts building, and we worked in professional studios which embodied everything I had yearned for while at school. We also experimented with performance space, often working outside or staging performances around campus. I enjoyed and saw merit in this however still clung to the perceived safety and prestige the Drama studios held. This feeling stemmed from the sense that in the studios, we were free to create, and all creations were valid. This was a space designed for artistic endeavours which were appreciated by all those who occupied it. The physical design of the studios was critical to this and as a student, I felt my work was worth more if it was developed in a space with black backdrops, tarquette floors and professional lighting.

These early views of the *Dream Studio Space* developed when my primary focus was on the artistry of performance itself, rather than the teaching of Drama. As a performer I was only slightly aware of potential tensions between the expectations of the university as an educational setting and our freedom to experiment dramatically within the studios. While grades and results mattered, they seemed less of a priority to my teachers and me than producing artistic theatrical work - I was focussed on Neelands and Goode's (2015) *aesthetic*

learning and expressive objectives. However, in the subjects focused on Drama Education in my Teaching degree, we did not work in the studios but in general-purpose classrooms. I began to see this was not a disadvantage, as I was starting to shift into the role of Teacher-Artist, and thus concentrate on delivery of content as well as quality of performance. Now, I was starting to focus on *instrumental objectives*, primarily skill development and meeting assessment criteria, and *personal and social learning*, such as ensemble skills, through Drama. Even so, I assumed that whichever school I worked at, I would continue to have the *Dream Studio Space* allowing me to flourish as Teacher-Artist.

As a university student and pre-service teacher, I could not quite reconcile my understanding of performance with the notions of practitioners like Grotowski or Brook. Ironically, Grotowski's ideas about "the acceptance of the poverty of theatre" revealing "the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art form" (Grotowski et al., 1967, p.63) would later come to underpin much of my pedagogical practice once I began teaching in spaces where I had little choice but to accept the poverty of my surroundings.

WORKING WITHOUT THE *DREAM STUDIO SPACE*: DISCOVERING THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE FREEDOM

My first job in a secondary school did not come with the *Dream Studio Space* I had envisioned. I was hired as an English teacher at a well-respected, high-achieving school in Melbourne's suburbs. While I had no Drama classes of my own, I volunteered to assist with the school production and worked closely with the existing Drama department. Although I was not teaching Drama, that year still provided valuable insight into the position the subject held within the school and its importance to students. It is critical students feel accepted and safe in a Drama space, as a sense of belonging enables students to freely create without judgement (Gray, Pascoe & Wright, 2018). I saw the effects of this during rehearsal time through observing friendships formed among cast members and the lively discussion of dramatic choices between students and teachers.

The productions at this school were different to those I experienced as a student, as the Drama teachers prioritised workshopping and developing scenes in partnership with student actors, rather than being authoritarian directors. I witnessed how this created a sense of ownership for students who felt safe adding their creative flair to characters. It also felt like the teachers were given complete creative freedom by the school's leadership team who had very little input apart from approving budgetary decisions and advertising the show. Indeed, the promotion of the production made it apparent that Drama was a valuable way to attract prospective families to the school. It was of mutual benefit to teachers and leadership and we were happy for the school to use us as a promotional tool. The performance and rehearsal space were a dated 1960s wooden hall with a stage at one end which we again frequently had to vacate for Sports, however I was astonished at the calibre of work produced there under the guidance of the Drama department. They had the freedom to pursue their artistic visions and I began to see how important this was, regardless of my feelings towards the humble facilities.

In my second year at the school, I was thrilled to be given junior Drama classes (age 13-15) and the chance to develop my pedagogy as a Teacher-Artist. I was also introduced swiftly to the realities of teaching an artistic subject in a public school where the *Dream Studio Space* was not a priority. I taught in a portable classroom with torn carpet, peeling walls, asbestos and grimy windows. It shared a wall with a Maths classroom, and we were often told to keep our noise down lest it distract from algebra being explained to Year 9s. We had no sound system and began classes by moving tables and chairs to the sides or fixing the newspapers taped over the windows in an attempt to control the lighting. There was a disorganised costume room, but it was in another building making it difficult to access spontaneously. I was bitterly disappointed and at first did not understand how I was meant to excite students to

reach their creative potential (VCAA VCE Drama Study Design, 2019-2024) in a general-purpose classroom so far from my desired *Dream Studio Space*.

Grotowski advocates accepting the poverty of theatre (Grotowski et al., 1967) and I was surprised to find how readily this occurred within my own teaching. Without the *Dream Studio Space*, I still had the responsibility of a teacher and desire of an artist to teach students through the joys of Drama. I had to change my view of what was necessary for performance. My students and I developed great resourcefulness. Instead of props, costumes and sets, we used gestures, physicality and movements. In a few months, I went from disappointment to delight as I watched my students create outstanding work. Pivotal to this was the artistic freedom granted by the school leadership team to me. They were happy for me to use my professional ability to meet the requirements of the curriculum and to select topics of study that would work in the space given. I focussed on developing students' nuanced use of gesture, physicality and facial expressions, highlighting that a performer's greatest assets are their body and voice, while still imparting a theoretical knowledge of dramaturgy. While I did not realise at the time, I was utilising a combination of Neelands and Goode's (2015) *aesthetic learning, instrumental objectives* and *personal and social learning*. I was attempting to foster an appreciation of the art form, help students achieve curriculum outcomes and also shape my lessons around what I felt they would enjoy and benefit from. If I was enthusiastic as a Teacher-Artist about the space's potential for creativity, students were more likely to accept that they could achieve excellent performances without the *Dream Studio Space*. I recall one lesson vividly which illustrated this to me:

Tears formed in my eyes and I struggled to keep quiet. I abandoned trying to film the end of the students' performance and gave into laughter. Around me students were doing the same, visibly enjoying the show. To their credit, the actors kept complete focus. They were performing a scene in which they had been instructed to include use of symbol and transformations of place, time and character. The Year 10s had chosen to create a quest narrative and had cleverly framed it as a journey through a fantasy version of our school, with puns on teachers' names used for parodic characters and notable features of the school included. They used carefully controlled facial expressions and precise gestures to convey who they were gently mocking and transformed the only resources available to them (a broken-wheeled computer chair, scraps of paper and a table) into various objects to aid their quest. As the group took their bows and the class applauded, I laughed so uncontrollably that a student yelled out "We've broken Miss Longden!". Their work teetered between being hilariously offensive and plain hilarious.

– Reflective journal entry, 2013

This skit illustrated two things to me: my students' creativity did not depend on their performance space, and shared understandings of the world made for enjoyable theatre. I see developing students' understanding of the world around us as integral to my role as Teacher-Artist, and that "subject-specific, or disciplinary, skills are more successfully developed in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the human condition" (Neelands, 2009, p.13). Neelands and Goode (2009) argue that the term *aesthetics* must not be used to distinguish between high and low forms of art and instead it is vital to "start from the premise that the mass of people are vigorously creative in their own lives" (p.87). My students showed an inherent understanding of this and I appreciated their artistry more as it was unexpected in our dismal surroundings. The artistic freedom I had at this school helped me develop a

pedagogy centred on both Dramatic skills and fostering appreciation of all performance, regardless of studio space. Most radically, it had shifted my concept of the *Dream Studio Space* from a physical one to an abstract one; the *Dream Studio Space* was one where I could be creatively free.

THE CONSTRAINTS OF A NEW *DREAM STUDIO SPACE*: A LACK OF CREATIVE FREEDOM

“Miss, do we have to actually act? Can’t we just play with lights and curtains?”

- Year 8 student, London secondary school

After three years teaching in Australia and evolving in my role as Teacher-Artist, I moved to the United Kingdom and began teaching in a large, government secondary school in North London. The school has an excellent reputation in the community for improving student outcomes and caters to a diverse student body from a range of ethnic and economic backgrounds. I had little idea of what I was in for. Firstly, I was thrilled by the Drama studios; they were the *Dream Studio Space* I had imagined as a pre-service teacher and there were three of them. Secondly, I was relieved that the school leadership team seemed to value Drama as a subject and allocated significant budgets for annual productions which they also used as promotion for the school. Our Head Teacher frequently attended performance evenings and was enthusiastic in her feedback to students. I believed that surely the combination of the *Dream Studio Space* and supportive school leadership would lead to a stimulating learning environment.

Unfortunately, I soon realised that instead of feeling empowered in this *Dream Studio Space*, I felt creatively inhibited. While I had convinced students at my first school to embrace our empty stage, it seemed the luxurious facilities in the UK did not correlate with higher student engagement as I had assumed. Students were often antagonistic and openly dismissive of the subject and working in impressive facilities did not change this. I also found myself yearning for the creative freedom I was allowed in Australia. The curriculum at my London school was heavily structured; each class worked from a set of PowerPoints and prescribed scripts. This resulted in performances that were essentially rote learning. Although this allowed me as a teacher to check off acquired skills and potentially meet *instrumental objectives*, it devastated me as an artist that the performances felt entirely devoid of the enthusiastic creativity I witnessed in Australia. I had little artistic control as I worked within curriculum frameworks and faced pressure from leadership to censor many topics students wished to explore, such as drug use and knife crime, which were often reflective of their personal experiences. It also became apparent that being provided the *Dream Studio Space* meant there was an expectation to harness it for multiple large scale school productions each year – an immense, exhausting undertaking which left little time to add individual creative touches to my classes. The pressure to produce high quality shows also meant I felt more like the teacher than the artist and frustratingly, could feel myself becoming the type of authoritarian director I resented in my own school years.

A COMPARISON OF PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES IN THE SPACES

To illustrate the difference in artistic freedom I had as a Teacher-Artist and my changing relationship with the *Dream Studio Space*, I offer an example of my approach to Shakespeare in my two schools. In London, the curriculum design focussed on *instrumental objectives*. A typical lesson might look as follows:

- Teacher-led explanation of the plot of Macbeth
- introduction to the characters of the witches
- whole class reads through the first witches’ scene

- brief discussion of how atmosphere could be created
- organise students into groups and instruct them to rehearse scene for performance
- watch six very similar performances
- whole class feedback on creation of effective atmosphere / delivery of Shakespeare's lines

When this was the only option given to me as an experienced teacher, it felt artistically limiting as it did not allow development of *expressive objectives* or to explore the motives or intricacies of characters through development of emotive skills (Neelands & Goode, 2015). The *Dream Studio Space* became an unexpected hindrance. Often, I found myself frustrated by students relying on lighting changes or recorded sound to convey emotions rather than manipulating their expressive skills, and I began to resent the very studio space I had once craved. I began actively encouraging them not to use the technology of this *Dream Studio Space* hoping that it would force them to become more creative in their movements, use of space or characterisation, as the bare portables had to my Australian students.

Contrast this with the approach to Shakespeare in my Melbourne school, where I employed a process drama approach, using resources based on The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC, 2011). A typical lesson on Macbeth might include:

- students completing an obstacle course as soldiers before reading a triumphant battle speech, panting and out of breath to imagine the feeling of combat
- using physical theatre to create tableaux of battles representing lines of text to express Shakespeare's climactic points of action
- creating repetitive sequences of actions based on words from the play such as *dagger*, *clutch*, *fatal*, *blade*, *bloody business*, *dreams* to understand how Macbeth might feel before murdering Duncan

None of these exercises required much more than an empty space. This approach assumes that *expressive objectives* engage students with Shakespeare as it encourages them to develop empathy for the characters they portray and work as an effective ensemble. Shakespeare's text can then be layered on top of physical performance and I watched students connect with his words in a new light as they understood the fundamental human emotions of the characters. This allowed me to meet the Victorian Curriculum requirements that students "convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters" (Victorian Curriculum F-10 Drama) but importantly, also work alongside students as an artist, taking on various roles to guide them through the exercises and finally explore their responses through reflection as a teacher. All this was accomplished without a physical *Dream Studio Space* but in a metaphorical one where there was less tension between the expectations of the school and my artistic freedom.

It was my experiences in London that finally allowed me to appreciate that the *Dream Studio Space* was not the blacked out, technology equipped studio I had imagined, but a space where I could dream and create freely while helping students do the same.

CONCLUSION

My experiences of teaching in Melbourne and London have shown me that spaces can both hinder and help students' creation of meaningful work. Spaces are often linked to the perception of Drama's value as a subject. My own pedagogy as Teacher-Artist continues to develop and I recognise critically, as Drama teachers, we must strive to prioritise safety, inspiration and artistic freedom within the teaching environment over our yearning for a physical studio. Neelands (2009) argues that Drama has developed a "pedagogy of choice" where students make the decision whether to participate and "without this willingness, bred of

interest and engagement, there can be no active drama” (p.17). If we want students to choose to participate, we must enthusiastically recognise the unlimited potential that the empty stage has. The *Dream Studio Space* is just as discoverable in a general classroom as it is in a dedicated Drama room. As Sallis (2009) makes clear, it is still imperative that we advocate for the spaces that Dramatic practice deserves, but without these we still have the ability as Teacher-Artists to use any space to help students triumph over the “ambiguities, pleasures, unease and contradictions which contemporary living entails” (Nicholson, 2005, p.165). The *Dream Studio Space* is not a physical one; it is one we can create ourselves.

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