

# Lifelong learnings: *Pedagogy*, research-based theatre and the ongoing performance of teacher / teaching narratives

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## **Abstract**

This article details the ongoing and re-defining relationship between playwright / play, Research-based Theatre (RbT) and teacher / teaching narratives. Adapted from an invited talk at the University of British Columbia, July 2024, and adopting a creative autoethnographic practitioner lens as teacher / playwright / researcher, the article explores the creation of the author's play, *Pedagogy*, centred on early-career teaching and learning. It describes its shifting position as a performance text within mainstream theatre then educational and academic settings – and the relationship between playwright / teacher identities – suggesting a complex relationality between plays, playwright and their iterations across time. Simultaneously, it considers narratives – and identities – of teaching and learning as similarly shifting for practitioner / researchers as a kind of ongoing performance.

## **Keywords**

playwriting, teacher education, teacher identity, arts-based research, teachers' lives, autoethnography, performative lecture.

## **Introduction**

Plays in a variety of forms and written for a variety of purposes have existed across qualitative research for decades (Saldana, 2005; Salvatore, 2018; Denzin, 2018). Arts-based educational researchers have used plays – and predominantly focused on their applied drama performance outcomes, in relation to audiences and/or research

participants – to investigate issues, challenges and relationships central to educational settings, processes and policies (Gallagher et al., 2017; Barone, 2012). Research-based Theatre (RbT) has emerged as a useful umbrella term to consider the interrelationships of researchers, theatre practitioners, participants and audiences in research projects where plays and/or performances may be produced (Shigematsu et al., 2021). However, little has been written though about the shifting relationships between playwright, play and research as a play traverses different contexts for different (potential) audiences over time (Mackenzie et al., 2011; Gray, 2023).

In this article, I offer an account tracing my identities of playwright to secondary school teacher to researcher, focusing on my own positionality in relation to my play *Pedagogy* (Summers, 2016) over the span of almost ten years.

### **Narratives of Teaching and Learning**

Teachers' lives and identities have been the subject of much research, particularly in relation to initial teacher education (Beauchamp et al., 2009; Van Lankveld et al., 2017; Reeves, 2018). Narratives of teaching and learning, constructed by teacher / researchers – sometimes in conjunction with students – have informed qualitative research in education to question and challenge systems and norms (Clandinin, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Millner, 2008). RbT and applied theatre practitioners have used narrative and dramatic representation to explore teachers, teaching and learning (Lea et al., 2020; Bird et al., 2014; Sallis, 2014).

*Pedagogy* was my first contribution to this space, and springboarded what later become my doctoral project. In 2015, while simultaneously teaching full-time and completing a Masters of Teaching (Secondary) as part of the Teach For Australia program, I was compelled to process the experience in the best way I knew how: write about it. For almost a decade, *Pedagogy* has grown and shifted alongside many collaborators from inside and out of academia. Dramaturgically, it has developed from a raw, urgent account of personal and professional struggle to an almost at-peace account of leaving high school teaching. Just as I have reckoned with my identities as teacher, playwright and researcher, *Pedagogy's* purpose has morphed from a play-to-be-watched with awards,

funding and professional ambition to a play-to-be-played-with for teachers, teaching students and academics.

In February 2024, a moved reading *Pedagogy* was presented at the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne's Research-based Theatre Symposium. I was struck with how the meanings of, and my own relationship to, the play had changed over time. On a fellowship to learn more about RbT at the University of British Columbia in July 2024, I explored my relationship with *Pedagogy* in the form of an invited creative autoethnographic talk.

## Methodology

Autoethnography in arts-based research questions the interconnections between personal, artistic and scholarly identities and practices through narrative and academic forms (Adams et al., 2018; Bartleet, 2021). Early career academics have used autoethnography to explore their relationships to creative practice / higher education and teaching (Wilkinson, 2020; Pasa, 2019; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021). I have found this approach allows for deep, personal insights and experiences to sit alongside – and to playfully trouble – artistic and academic questions. I have used this way of thinking and writing to undertake self-examination that connects to the complex challenges of becoming and being a teacher / researcher / playwright.

In my talk, I combined aspects of poetic description, dramatic 'scenes', self-analysis and reflection on my shifting identities in relation to presentations of *Pedagogy*. This pastiche approach represents my own professional fragmentation, as well as the messy possibilities of theatrical writing. During the talk, I read from the page but presented this material performatively, to create a kind of 'performance lecture' (Cerezo, 2016; Tan, 2020; Firunts, 2016) with no slides or images that also resembled, suitably, a play reading. I referred to some academic literature but preferred to allow for the text to speak for itself, acknowledging that scholarly framing would follow in an article like this. This allowed me to focus on the intersections of creativity, identity and research to engage with – not 'lecture at' – an audience.

An adapted transcript of the talk now follows.

## Lifelong Learnings

I have always been marvelled by plays.

I don't mean the *mise-en-scène*, the actors, the theatrical happenings - as much as I love those experiments in bodies and space and time.

Plays.

As written objects.

Distillations of representation, sound, text, voice, poetry, action and matter all uniquely intermingling on the page, on a screen, with a flickering cursor or the zoom-in zoom-out of an Adobe Reader magnifying glass.

Plays, as both potential suggestions, yet wholly intact self-reliant enactments, of something bigger, more complex, more entangled than how they originally manifest.

Able to go big and small, micro and macro, human, humanity and beyond with a stroke or a slash or an italicised pause.

From an early age, I was drawn to plays because I loved to explore and dream and create, but I also loved to be on my own.

I loved the idea of conjuring more with less, elaborate plots, fantastical characters and unseen fantasy worlds.

The first fully formed plays I devised in my back yard, line by line, while jumping on a trampoline, surrounded by bamboo, mosquitoes, a broken brick fence and sweltering Sydney heat.

I typed them in Windows 95 and printed them as assignments in primary school to the confusion of my teachers.

"I didn't ask you to write a play. I asked you for a story with a beginning, middle and end."

Thinking this demonstrated an interest in theatre, one teacher put me forward for the school's Drama production.

I, with a moustache drawn on my face in eyeliner pencil, flubbed my only line in front of a packed-out audience of murmuring parents.

"I ruined the whole show, didn't I?"

"No, don't worry Chris. Not the *whole* show."

While this stomped on any possibility of an acting bug, my interest in plays deepened.

These strange objects – faster to read than books, quicker to write if you had your ear attuned to the chatter around you, clued in to the way we all say – and suggest – and fail – words, intentions, meanings.

As a teenager, I started reading plays with veracity.

I was intrigued by the wildly comic despair of the existentialists, the break-neck pace and break-apart structures of the in-yer-facers, scenes and fragments lasting pages or less and poetry scattered on pages in assortments of dialogue and image.

I became obsessed with what each of them was trying to do with words in their own weird ways.

What each of them saw as the magic and machinery of their plays, and their place – and role – as playwrights.

I wondered: what does it mean to have these things both here and not here, real and imagined, potentially having existed in some form in time and space as performance, but never definitively performed?

I graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts' (NIDA) full-time playwriting program just over a decade ago.

I have since worked as a playwright, dramaturg and resident writer with youth theatre and mainstage companies like Sydney Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre and Melbourne Theatre Company, occasionally winning major awards and some success.

My plays often tackled serious social issues, were sometimes comedic and form-pushing, but always political.

However, I struggled to earn a reliable income.

Unlike those whose work I digested, my work was commissioned, frequently developed and workshopped, considered by those in positions of power, and then passed over for full production.

Hard-copy publishers were only publishing works that had 'lived' because they were the ones which would sell.

My plays – sometimes valued by me, but not commercially valuable – went into the recycle bin, slipped across the desktop, thumb drive, folder to Cloud folder.

Digital void.

These things that fascinated me weren't enough to sustain me.

So, I tried to forget about them, too.

Like many in my position, I looked to what I knew – or thought I did.

Teaching.

I grew up as the child of two high school teachers, both the first in their family to attend university, and both first-generation migrants from the Ukraine who were raised in the outer western working-class suburbs of Sydney in the 1950s.

My mother was a natural teacher while my father hated it.

Combined, they taught in public secondary schools for more than 80 years.

My path was a little different.

I gained entry as one of around 60 selected from across Australia to the controversial Teach For Australia (TFA) program, based on the American Teach For All model.

I was employed as a full-time secondary teacher in a low-socioeconomic school in outer regional Victoria, three-and-a-half hours from Melbourne, for two years.

The only Drama teacher, who didn't really enjoy acting, who regularly got stage-fright, who was far happier hiding in a corner than leading a cry of WHOOSH!

Following this, I taught at a public school in the western suburbs of Melbourne for another two years – a culturally diverse melting pot of religions, social attitudes and working-class parents with ambitions for their kids.

Schooled in public education as a learner myself, these contexts radically reshaped my understanding of the system, the diversity and complexity of school communities, and entrenched educational and sociocultural disadvantage in Australia.

It was so much harder, and the problems so much more insidious, than I ever could've imagined.

I struggled, I failed, I did what I thought was teaching, I showed up, wedging myself inside and between conflicts of personality and pedagogy and practice.

Improving.

Occasionally.

Incrementally.

And while I thought I was done with plays, from these experiences in schools – rich encounters with the real that questioned my abilities, capacities and purpose – things from hidden places began to emerge.

Fragments.

Formations.

Lonely words, scraps on Post-It-Notes, pictures and scrawls from hallways and in-between lessons.

Which eventually became –

Plays.

I did not intend for my identities as teacher and playwright to overlap.

I did not even think that this was possible.

I planned to take a “break” from playwriting during my time teaching in outer rural Victoria, which ironically was when and where I wrote the first draft of *Pedagogy*.

I remember locking myself in a classroom of a now torn-down building and hammering out the last pages as the winter sun set, just past five o'clock.

Nine months later, the play was being read at the Malthouse Theatre as part of the National Play Festival, having won the Max Afford Award – worth more than half my teacher salary that year.

With this first draft, the seeds of my doctoral project – using playwriting – and my future academic career were sown.

Because how else could I make sense of what I did, what I saw, the systems I experienced, the students and teachers I encountered?

How could I share this with others, and try to rally a call to action, to assert the power of theatre to lead change?

*Pedagogy* explores my experiences moving to a regional town as part of TFA, and my academic and ideological unease with the program's expectations of me and the expectations I had of myself.

It's about learning to become a teacher when you are thrown in the deep end in an entirely new context, and trying to teach and practice empathy for others.

Focusing on just two characters – PJ, an ambitious new teacher doing a TFA-style program, and Sam, a struggling student who becomes part of an after-school co-curricular Drama program – the play depicts the fundamentals of pedagogy and what it means to occupy the shifting identities and competing responsibilities of both teacher and student.

Further, it hones in on the intentions, and ambitions, of teachers and students as they embark on devising and performing drama, challenging each other and exposing each other's sociopolitical values.

The murky greys of collaborative art, even more dangerous between a student and teacher.

It is largely naturalistic – set almost entirely in a dilapidated school hall across the course of the year – and very deliberately plotted to avoid all the classic tropes of sentimental 'saviour' or soap-opera sexualised teacher narratives.

At times, the characters break out of their scenes to speak in first-person, poetic monologues.

Formally, this gives insight into the isolation of the characters, the strange beauty of their surrounds, and their efforts to connect to each other and the world around them.

It is a play of pain and honesty for me.

It also a play that has never been 'finished' in many senses of how we might want a play to be 'finished.'

For almost ten years now, *Pedagogy* has grown, shifted and changed alongside many collaborators from professional theatre and academia.

When I wrote the play, this is not what I wanted.

But this weird sideways – back-to-front growth has been welcomed.

It has exploded and reconstructed in unexpected ways my own identities as a teacher, a playwright, and an academic.

It has made me reassess the teaching profession and given me new insight, and empathy, for a version of myself I now, as a teacher of students about to start teaching, meet all the time.

I want to talk about five encounters – let's call them scenes, I'll give them titles.

Important interactions with this play where it left my world and where it came to involve others.

It's not a chronological, linear narrative though: I'm a playwright, after all.

Let's start at the end.

### **Scene five: a kind of resolution-ing**

*February, 2024. The University of Melbourne.*

Professor Y is in the room. *The Professor Y.* The one who basically invented the term RbT, which I didn't even know existed a few years ago, and now suddenly I'm Co-Director of a RbT Lab? What if he hates it? What if he thinks it isn't RbT *enough*?

You've - got this.

This is my space – my classroom – my theatre. Literally: I teach in here every week during Semester, and it's possibly the place I've become more comfortable in myself – and more effective as a teacher – than ever before.

And these are my students.

Two of them, second year Masters of Teaching with a specialisation in Drama, who have voluntarily spent hours rehearsing with and without me.

Because they really want to do this play. Because for reasons I am only starting to understand, it means something to them.

They stand, with music stands holding their scripts, in front of a huge backdrop projecting an image of an empty town street, the rust of a gas station.

This is as close to a visual representation for the play – other than the words in space – that there has ever been.

And they read, and act, beautifully – capitalising on the genuine dynamic between them as friends and classmates, but finding the delicate subtleties of hope, and bravado, and angst, in the characters.

Together, they are so many things all at once, and I sometimes can't tell who I'm watching. And it doesn't matter, anyway.

In this version – the newest draft – of the play, PJ and Sam end up in the same school-hall they started, no longer teacher and student but co-existing in a new, unchartered space of mentor / collaborator.

A hopeful space.

But it wasn't always like this – this just happens to be where I have arrived, or continue to arrive, in this process of resolution-ing.

When we bring the lights up, an audience member asks the actors: “how do you feel about becoming a teacher after performing *that?*”

### **Scene two: bite the hand that feeds off you**

*January, 2018. Deakin University, Warrnambool, Western Victoria.*

Why on earth have they done this?

This is a peculiar decision from an organisation who tightly control their brand and are the recipients of tens of millions of Australian government funding.

I am sitting on a makeshift stage, preparing myself to read stage directions for *Pedagogy*. In front of me is an audience of almost two-hundred Associates, as they are labelled, of the TFA program.

In America, they call them Corps – a military and/or religious missionary connotation which I have always found troubling.

Three-quarters of the audience are yet to start teaching – this is part of their initial six-week intensive where they complete four Masters subjects (courses), then move straight into the classroom.

At this time, this model is revolutionary for Australia – everyone else needs a full Masters qualification before being given that responsibility. It is not universally liked: many teachers feel it denigrates the profession, creates an ‘us / them’ elitism, and that many leave the profession once they can add it to their CV.

This is what PJ does in *Pedagogy*.

I am nervous, because I am still so unclear: a critique of the program, a brutal and honest account of just how impossibly dire the situation in some of these schools in some of these communities is – what is this play doing *here?*

Later I will laugh it off with them.

“Isn’t it funny how I never mentioned the name of the program!”

“Ha ha ha, oh yes, of course PJ will go back to being a teacher in the end – I do think it’s hopeful!”

I will go back on all my convictions to please the audience, play the role.

At this stage, I am still practicing being a classroom teacher.

And while my practice has continued to improve, I am tired.

Worn thin by classroom management, by expectations to deliver curriculum I don't even fully believe in.

Genuinely exhausted, in the way your body gives out at 4pm on a weekday.

This play – this opportunity, in my summer school holidays – helps me feel connected to some part of me – playwright? - that I can still relate to.

We begin.

When you are an Associate of the program, you aspire to be one of the Chosen Few.

If you are one of the Chosen Few, you are asked to do special things: give pedagogical masterclasses to other Cohorts, speak on panels, address the media on some particular achievement you've had in your school, go to meetings with stakeholders and philanthropists, politicians. You do it all in your own time, to support the mission because they gave you this opportunity.

You wouldn't bite the hand that feeds, even if it's feeding off you, too.

As I read the final stage directions, I realise I've arrived.

Despite the brutal ending in this draft – PJ and Sam totally disconnected, PJ having left teaching for good – I get the Chosen Few treatment: a full standing ovation of the entire audience.

I have never, and will never, experience anything like it again.

I can only look down at my feet.

I clap towards the actors, wanting to make it about them.

I receive box of chocolates which sit at the bottom of my fridge for the best part of a year. The next few hours are a whirlwind of frantic conversations, cold beer and being cornered.

I don't really sleep until I get home the next day, then I sleep for what could be days or fortnights.

Then term starts again.

Teacher-in-role.

And with the brute force of the workforce expectations, I forget.

**Scene one: this is your moment.**

*July, 2016. Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne.*

Back in the big smoke and a literal sign with my name on it.

The poster has a roughly-drawn kick scooter – a motif from the play, as a vehicle for Sam’s expression and mobility.

“by Chris Summers”.

It’s just before school holidays, and my Principal has given me leave – with pay – to come and be part of the rehearsal room process.

I miss it – so much – when you combat the loneliness of writing with the teasing apart and workshopping of text, together.

This is my moment, *Pedagogy’s* moment – the first of two presentations for industry and the public, designed to sell the play to commercial theatres as part of a large-scale Festival.

The aim is to tantalise directors and companies alike to complete the play’s vision in their own way.

The audience is a collection of industry types, students from acting schools and an assortment of general public.

A lot of my teacher friends have shown up, who I think will find the play its own special form of therapy.

Two former lecturers from my Masters of Teaching arrive (three years later, they’ll become my PhD supervisors).

I tell the world on Facebook and spread a post on Instagram, too.

The theatre is almost full.

Saturday night.

Prime time slot.

No pressure.

I allow myself to imagine:

This – might be my way out?

“by Chris Summers.”

I don’t need to be a teacher.

But maybe I want to be a teacher.

My way out of everything, other than writing plays –

This might be the start of a whole new –

Focus.

No responsibility.

Enjoy.

Lights up.

Look around.

Less obviously.

Lock.

On him.

That one – sitting down in that row – he does programming for – is he smiling?

Her.

She's important – I have to follow-up – she's –

Why's *he* whispering to – that's rude –

Are they letting people in late?

It's eight past eight.

Breathe.

Did someone leave?

Was that seat empty before?

Is someone's phone going off?

Is she asleep?

Then –

...

It's over.

...

I get a call-out.

Everyone turns to face me and applaud.

*How?*

It's over.

All that, and it's –

...

My Mum loves it.

She always says that.

My Dad says well done.

He always says that, too.

My teacher friends, who cheer and guffaw at the hidden inside references, argue over who PJ is based on.

But otherwise, there's...

...

Everyone from the Festival said it went so well.

...

I see a sort-of friend: a well-established theatre and TV director.

I ask her for her honest feedback.

She tells me the problem with the play is there is no sexual relationship between the teacher and the student.

“How can you *not* go there?” she asks, genuinely.

For a second – because of who she is – I almost believe her.

But I tell her that this is the exact opposite of everything I ever intended to do.

That is the exact reason I wrote this play – to avoid the stereotypical tropes of teacher / student narratives, to look at what it really means to teach and learn and make art, to look at the complexities of our education system and –

She shrugs and smiles, walks off.

I think about this for a very long time.

But she's right.

Because despite weeks of waiting.

Follow-up emails to colleagues.

Cold calls to companies.

There's...

The occasional, friendly: “it's not for us.”

Otherwise, silence

That night, I am called over and referred to as “the man of the moment”.

The moment was over before I got there.

**Scene three: turns out that wasn't your moment this is your moment but it's slightly less impressive.**

*December, 2019. Albury / Wodonga, the border of New South Wales and Victoria.*

I have left classroom teaching and begun the terrifying descent into starting a PhD in Education.

I pitched my supervisors several ideas, and they have convinced me to do the wildest: re-write *Pedagogy* – expand on it – reappropriate and recontextualise it, to be followed by two new plays: *Curriculum* and *Assessment*.

So I am writing again.

From the same places – teachers, education, systems – with a new set of experiences of struggle and cries against inequity.

New pages filled with text and scrawls and half-written character-names with completely unknown trajectories.

I'm still a playwright, but now, this is research.

So: are these plays – autoethnography, performance ethnography, RbT, practice-based research, or all, or none of the above?

At the same time, I am about to leave a coveted residency with a major theatre company, empty handed.

Another flicker of career that brightly burns out.

I am at a juncture, doubting myself and whether writing will ever get easier, and that maybe teaching wasn't really that bad.

I get a reprieve.

Some money as part of a government-funded program: "Lost Plays".

It is suggested that I use the money to take the play regionally – given this is its context, surely this would be a sensible place for the play to be 'found'?

I take the train through the winding sprawl of Melbourne as it travels further north, and the sky gets wider and the dirt gets dryer.

Towns shrink.

Houses fall apart.

Distances between things extend beyond tens of kilometres.

The theatre sits on one side of the Murray River, in Wodonga, Victoria – the bigger, wealthier township of Albury, New South Wales, sits on the other side.

It is a professional theatre with strong community connections.

People come and go between the two, working on one side or studying in the other, living and commuting in this state of flux.

Happening and not-quite-happening across borders.

Worlds simultaneously together and apart.

The director for the company is intrigued but brief.

“Who is the audience for this play, though?”

I try to tell her – everyone has a narrative about a teacher, everyone has an investment in the education system, everyone has been a learner and these are pressing issues for our present day, for –

But I catch myself repeating myself.

“Let’s find out,” she says.

In workshopping, she challenges me to challenge the version of regional life I have put forward – is it really this bleak?

Do students not see, despite the brokenness of the systems and structures around them, the seeds of hope in small sites of resistance?

I re-write.

It has been so long now since I first lived this play – since it was my life – that I find myself mellowing.

The rawness and rough edges softening, a little, and the hints of gleam emerging from unexpected cracks.

The storm of a story that blustered out of me, uncontrollably, now patters in places.

Unexpected new growth.

We do another reading and the community shows up – former teachers, artists – who offer insightful comments on subtext and rural authenticity.

Largely, they feel seen.

“Let’s keep in touch,” the director says, promising nothing but giving a little promise as I depart this town which is also two towns.

The next day I fly to Sydney to get ready for Christmas.

2020 has a lovely ring to it.

**Scene four: enacting lessons.**

*June, 2023. University of Newcastle, a few hours north of Sydney.*

The sun blares over gentrified warehouses and bike lanes and once-bustling ports.

A working-class city now full of glass and multi-million dollar views.

I wait, nervously.

I am running a hybrid play-making applied drama workshop in a tower overlooking the ocean.

Teaching.

Again.

Every day, again, actually.

Full-time at a University.

A kind of teaching of teenagers and twenty and thirty somethings, mostly, that is different but still rewarding.

Even if they don’t need me in the same way.

Even if the high school teacher shortage in this country keeps worsening, and students – and their communities – are the ones suffering the most.

The guilt swirls.

Just another one who left.

Breathe.

There's twenty or so, which isn't too bad for a tightly-programmed Drama conference.

They are mostly current teachers.

And they have taken on excerpts of *Pedagogy* – going between teacher and student, then swapping over roles – acting and analysing simultaneously how these classroom scenes relate to their own experiences.

Their own mistakes.

The lessons they've learnt in the months, years, decades, that they've practiced.  
They don't stage, in the traditional sense, but they direct each other.  
They do things unexpected with action, voice and gesture.  
They rein absolutely nothing in and go for every big moment.  
They are thoughtful and deeply understanding in their reflections.  
They make demands for the work to go in front of principals and governments.  
They assert their own agency in the subtext and recount stories from their own lives.  
They ask to keep the script.  
And then they are gone to the next session.  
I do not have to leave the room immediately.  
I re-arrange the furniture and sit.  
There are surfers and freight tankers swilling in the same blue and white swell.  
I flick through the pages of a leftover script.  
This might be what I was meant to do.  
A script that has been on life support through COVID –  
Has been superseded in a PhD with plays more dangerous, more dramaturgically daring.  
Right now, the play refuses to let itself be murdered, without a struggle.  
Right now, the play has never been more alive.

The next scene, you could say, is currently in development.  
Halfway through 2024, halfway around the world, what to make of it all?  
I wish that I could offer an easy summation of what I have learnt.  
However, just as this journey with *Pedagogy* has been unexpected, non-linear, I am in a process of still-learning.  
Still processing that I am deeply invested in a profession that helps and changes others, but that I left.  
Still processing that I am hopeful of one-day having big audiences to my work, but I know that probably won't be as meaningful as what I do now.  
I do not have *findings* as we might ordinarily think of them in research – because for me, there's nothing easy to be *found*.  
I have a few reflections, though.

In true playwright form, the real connections are the ones you'll have to make yourself.

Firstly, when you shift your perspective of what research can look like, there is no limit to what art can be or do, and for how long that engagement might last.

If *Pedagogy* had been taken up by a theatre company, I have no doubt that like many new Australian plays – it would've been damned with faint praise, a three or three-and-a-half star review in a newspaper by a journalist who doesn't really like theatre, audiences fifty to seventy per cent full, and then after a few weeks never heard of again.

If plays in Australia get a second opportunity on stage in full production, they are the exception, not the rule.

There is nothing sustainable about this; for playwrights, for artists, for the environment. *Pedagogy* would have been truly dead.

Re-imagined as a piece of RbT, however, *Pedagogy* has travelled across Australia and internationally, sparked deeper conversations with teachers / students / parents / academics, mostly in low-stakes engagements.

By changing the context, opening up new relationships, meaningful interactions have emerged.

Sometimes in conference rooms.

Sometimes in classrooms.

Sometimes in small excerpts, used as stimulus material to devise from.

And I don't want that to stop.

Secondly, impacts – *findings* – as an arts-based researcher are not easily predicted or easily earned.

In my PhD, I had wanted *Pedagogy* to be part of a national and even international discussion around the reality of funding-starved secondary schooling in Australia.

I had wanted it to make people sit up and take notice, to see this work as a more powerful way of encountering an issue written about in newspapers, reported on simplistically.

If it was shown – experienced – through narrative and theatre – maybe then it would lead to change.

Instead, the change I have seen – and only really started to begin to ‘measure’, whatever that might mean in relation to arts-based research – has been far more localised.

More personal.

From the students who have acted in the roles and allowed me deep insight into their own thoughts and fears about the profession, their vulnerability and genuineness.

To the former teachers who, sometimes tearily, have reflected on a similar journey of leaving the profession but trying, and succeeding, to remain.

To the strangers who have said: “I recognise that student, I taught that student.”

To the ones who said: “I was that student.”

To the attendee who told me that watching the play was what they would remember from a conference; that we put too much emphasis on academic posturing, and not the stories that wrestle with affect, the real and the heart.

Sharing work in this way has been humbling and rewarding in a way I couldn’t have expected.

It has been dialogic and connected to communities of teachers and researchers / artists alike.

Finally, just as a play is always in flux – complete but also yearning towards new realisations on the stage – so too are our identities as teachers.

Because every moment of the day, teachers play so many roles, juggle so many competing demands, consider the needs and interests and abilities and challenges of others, before shifting, and changing again.

Rarely for the benefit of themselves.

Whether it’s covering a class in an entirely different subject area, responding to a heightened situation between students or taking on a position of leadership – it is a job with variability built in at its core.

Teachers are always *doing*, but simultaneously, *never doing enough*: your project is further study, professional development, reflective practice.

And despite the personal values remaining consistent – the desire to educate, to nurture, to explore – the day-to-day is never the same.

There is something propulsive in that; something that invites possibility even in the most challenging circumstances.

I thought leaving the classroom when I did was the end of my teaching.

But I haven't left - does anyone, really?

It's a different context, different student groups with different needs, and an opportunity to embark on research with and alongside them.

It's not, perhaps, where I'm needed most in a system that continues to escalate in crises of staffing and standards.

But for all of us –

No matter how long we stay, or classes we teach –

Our identities as teachers are always there.

In *Pedagogy*, there is a motif where PJ, as teacher, holds her hands out, and tries to lead a clap with Sam.

This is to signify the start and the end of the Drama games they play.

Sam initially messes with PJ, deliberately not clapping.

Then he claps at the wrong times to derail her efforts, to assert his dominance over her.

She grows frustrated but persists.

As he becomes increasingly invested, he follows and claps in time.

And as he becomes aware of his power – his own creativity and artistry – instead of following the claps, he leads.

PJ has to learn what to do with that.

This dynamic – leading and following – teaching and learning – creating and resisting –

I think isn't only relevant to education.

It's relevant to art and research.

It's the space where we all work.

Create.

Relate.

The space – the tension – the potential – between claps.

I'm still learning what to do with that.

But I think it's the best place to be.

## Conclusion

My talk, and this subsequent article, represent the latest engagement with *Pedagogy* as RbT that continues to have personal, and social, relevance for discourses of teaching and learning.

The systemic challenges presented only persist: issues of teacher retention (and its relationship to initial teacher education programs) have intensified in Australia in the post-COVID years (Heffernan et al., 2022; Whiteford et al., 2021; Aulia et al., 2022; Wyatt et al, 2021), while state education departments have shifted increasingly towards explicit and direct instruction models of teaching and learning (NSW Department of Education, 2024; Victorian Department of Education, 2024). Meanwhile, AI is fundamentally changing the landscape of the professional, pedagogical and relational nature of what teachers and students do (Selwyn, 2019), promising opportunities alongside renewed emphasis on in-person experiences. Teachers perform their professional duties as the policy and pedagogical expectations continue to shift around them.

With my journey writing, re-writing and re-staging *Pedagogy*, I argue that playwriting and RbT have given new ways to explore shifting identities as teacher / playwright / researcher while remaining connected to communities and audiences. And through undertaking this creative autoethnographic approach, I reflect on – and argue for – the power of RbT plays like *Pedagogy*, and artist-researchers, to make contributions in this way. Further, I offer a new hybrid lecture / creative form that gives insights into how RbT works can exist in different contexts across time, while deepening understandings of playwrights' complex, entangled relationships to their multiple identities, contexts and their work. Future playwrights, researchers and artists could find this useful to creatively interrogate the intersections, limits and boundaries of educational research and arts-based practice.

We need creative solutions to deeply understand the complexity of *why* education systems and workers are stretched and strained, and to imagine possible solutions that benefit teachers, learners and communities alike.

This article, *Pedagogy*, and RbT as a methodology are parts of a conversation we must continue, and advocate to, be a part of.

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