

A research-based theatre text and its development, recreating conversations about indigenous content and concepts in secondary school and tertiary drama classes

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Abstract

As the primary focus of this article, the writers recreate, in the form of a Research-based Theatre (RbT) script, their conversations over Zoom which began during the Covid years where they discussed, debated, dissected, and compared theirs and others' practice when working as educators teaching Indigenous content and concepts in drama in their respective countries - Auckland (Ngati Paoa), Aotearoa New Zealand, and the lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation in Melbourne, Australia. Their RbT personas discuss how non-Indigenous drama/theatre practitioners/artists may give voice and scope to underrepresented Indigenous communities, whilst eschewing cultural insensitivities and appropriation of practices and traditions. Both being RbT practitioners yet never having previously worked together in this way the writers set themselves the challenge of crafting a performance script from their Zoom conversations which took place over several months between 2020 and 2023. As well as featuring the version of their script which they presented at the second Australian Research-based Theatre Symposium (held in 2024) this article highlights the processes they undertook to develop the RbT script and the challenges it afforded them.

Keywords

Research-based theatre, drama teaching, First Nations, cultural diversity

Background

Between 2020 and 2023 as the two writers of this article, Nick Brown in Auckland (Ngati Paoa), Aotearoa New Zealand, and Richard (Rick) Sallis on the lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation in Melbourne, Australia, engaged in a series

of regular meetings over Zoom. We discussed, debated, dissected, and compared our practice when working as non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous content in drama in our respective countries, to primarily non-Indigenous students. To some extent this was precipitated by Richard in Australia after he read the document *Teaching First Nations Content and Concepts in the Drama Classroom, advice for teachers in Victorian schools* (Bell-Wykes, et al., 2020). Having been drama educators and Research-based Theatre (RbT) (Belliveau and Lea, 2016; Beck et al., 2011) colleagues for several years (but in different Oceanic countries) we have often caught up and presented at conferences and other professional learning events to share our practice. However, when Covid hit, and lockdowns came into force we decided to initiate a project where the two of us would regularly discuss our thoughts over Zoom. We subsequently narrowed down this broad topic of conversation to share our interest in teaching Indigenous content and concepts in drama in our respective countries¹. We set ourselves the challenge of crafting a RbT script from our online conversations. Primarily this article re-captures the Research-based Theatre (RbT) script that we presented at the second Australian Research-based theatre Symposium held in Melbourne in 2024. We also discuss the processes we undertook to develop the RbT script from the transcripts of our Zoom conversations. As a result, this article focusses on the formation and presentation of our recent RbT work and its subject matter, that being the teaching and learning of Indigenous content and concepts in drama in our respective Oceanic countries.

As Sajnani et al. contend (2019) each RbT practitioner “works differently depending on [their] experiences as artists and researchers, how [they] view the purpose of [their] work, who [they] think it’s for and how [they] craft it” (p. 93). For them RbT is a powerful medium in which to share research findings because it invites conversations “where change begins to happen and social efficacy can take hold” (p. 92). Citing the work of Sajnani et al. (2019) Carter and Sallis assert that constructing an ethnodramatic dialogue (Saldaña, 2011) is a form of “meditation” on research data because its dramatic form holds the attention of the audience and presents findings in a legible and accessible way (2019, p. 83).

¹ Later in this article we discuss our understanding of the difference between the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Nations’ as is understood by many educators, especially in Australia.

Duffy and Hatton contend that writing, “duoethnography” (Sawyer and Norris, 2012) “provides a framework that captures, complicates” the researchers’ “identities and analytic stances” (Hatton and Duffy, 2019, p. 203). Duoethnography, like dramatic texts “invites complexity and collisions of similar, divergent, and, at times, competing points of view” (p. 203). Significant to this article, the duoethnographic ‘conversations’ that led to the formation of Duffy and Hatton’s dramatic narrative took place over Skype®. Via the ethnographic conversations the stances of the two researchers were laid bare and carried with them the “weight of [their] own personal histories as well as well-hewn performance and research traditions” that have formed them as both researchers and (dramatic) artists (2019, p. 205).

Informed by such documentations of practice we were inspired to dramatise our conversations of practice because we wanted to share our discoveries in a form which other drama/theatre educators and RbT practitioners might find engaging. The data drawn on for this article are a combination of our ethnographic and reflective practitioner (Schön, 1991) conversations, recordings and transcriptions as well as secondary sources from a review of literature we conducted. From the outset we decided that before writing for a journal we would present our Research-based Theatre script to an audience to gauge its reactions. Significantly we determined that the RbT performance would be fashioned for an audience comprised of peers rather than the general public; we envisaged what peers might find interesting and valuable pertaining to the subject matter. Strategically and pragmatically, we determined that the performance would be presented utilising Readers Theatre (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995) whereby we would read the script with accompanying actions and gestures. This was because as fulltime educators living in different countries the chance to learn lines and rehearse was limited. We followed a model outlined by Carol Carter and Rick in two previous RbT articles (Carter and Sallis, 2019; Sallis and Carter, 2022) where conversations between academic colleagues are dramatized and presented at professional learning gatherings. We first presented our performance at a ‘professional development’ day for staff at Nick’s school, Westlake College in Auckland in late 2023. Encouraged by the feedback received regarding the subject matter and the form in which it was presented, we worked on a

second, more developed draft that we subsequently presented to a gathering of RbT practitioners.

Setting the Scene

We shared our *pedagogical* thoughts and experience as two male-identifying non-Indigenous drama educators. This is significant given that in both our countries the majority of drama/theatre teachers are similarly non-Indigenous and, as we discuss later this can pose *teaching and learning* challenges especially in Australia. Due to our geographical distance 2,500 kilometres (1,553 miles) apart between Melbourne, Australia and Auckland, New Zealand, (*and during Covid*), we shared autoethnographic and reflective practice accounts online.

In our Zoom conversations we interrogated our pedagogical practices within, between, and comparatively, using the following four questions with both of us responding based on our own teaching and learning contexts. As such these questions were a starting point and sparked further questions as the discussions ensued.

1. How does *your* specific context/teaching space allow for (enable, facilitate) Indigenous voice and performed identity?
2. How does your own *personal* (implicit/explicit) sense of *identity* (national-cultural-gender ... positionality) function as a predicate to your work with students?
3. When in Australia you look to Aotearoa New Zealand, what facets are you *covetous* of when considering how you execute your role and your work? And vice-versa?
4. Do you find that either existing play-texts or devised performances (and their resultant performance texts) are the best way to generate and express Indigenous voice with *students*; how do the two approaches differ in your rehearsals and workshops?

During the online conversations Nick drew on their experience as a secondary school drama teacher, academic, and their doctoral thesis entitled, *Shaking my Practice: Navigating Curriculum, Aesthetic and Social Curiosity* (Brown, 2020). Rick drew on their work as a lecturer teaching drama to pre-service candidates, including the experiences of their students (who self-identified as Indigenous or non-Indigenous educators) teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content when on placement in schools. Early in our

discussions it was evident that, from a cultural and sociological perspective, our teaching and learning contexts were markedly different; when developing the text for the Research-based Theatre script, we were keen to ensure that it maintained the times when we were surprised by and/or challenged each other's views or pedagogical circumstances.

Script development

Knowing that an aim of our collaboration was to produce an ethnodramatic narrative, each online conversation was chronicled using the Zoom record function and the transcripts were subsequently edited, grouping similar thoughts and views together to form a more coherent narrative. Given that another aim was to produce a script we could use at professional learning events we then interwove literature and statistical data into the developing narrative to provide an evidence base for our contentions. However, the first full draft appeared too contrived and we realised we had sacrificed the conversational tone we were aiming for; we found it more challenging than we had anticipated to recapture the conversational tone. Early drafts were largely devoid of the informality and passion that had characterised our conversations; at worst they appeared dry and stultifying and perhaps worse still, 'worthy' (i.e. commendable subject matter but lacking artistic merit). When developing the early drafts, we fell into the trap of trying to validate our assertions and not trusting enough in the content of our original conversations. As well as editing down the text we inserted some stage directions, especially regarding how to say certain lines; we included such stage directions to help us, as actors, recreate more authentically the tone of our original conversations.

Contextual background

In this section we present the contextual background for the ethnodramatic script that follows, noting that not all that is in this section was subsequently used in the performance text. Marcia Langton, one of Australia's leading authorities on, and voice of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, uses the terms 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably (2019). Similarly, in our conversations when referring to the Australian context, we use these terms in the same way. However, it is important to acknowledge the distinction many educators make between these terms especially in

Australia. Many regard 'Indigenous' as the more general/generic of the two terms. 'First Nations' is often preferred because it acknowledges that there are many different Indigenous Nations in Australia, and it recognises their sovereignty.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a bicultural nation, graduating teachers are expected to reach and ideally exceed the cultural competence required to teach in a bicultural learning space. The Standards for the Teaching Profession/Ngā Paerewa, provided by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa, New Zealand outlines the requisite level of proficiency and are rooted in a "commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi" (2019, p. 4). Te Tiriti/The Treaty is New Zealand's founding document, and there is an expectation that teachers will develop a level of cultural facility and be able to demonstrate their commitment to the Treaty principles. "Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership" is the first standard addressed in the Code of Standards (p. 18, 2019). Written in both English and te reo Māori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) was signed in 1840 by Māori kaumatua (elders) and representatives of the Crown and details the roles and responsibilities of the Crown towards Māori and vice versa. The Treaty is focused on the principles of Partnership, Participation, and Protection. It should be noted that as this article goes to print the Treaty in New Zealand is under threat (which it wasn't when we commenced our work on this article) and currently no such treaty exists at a national level in Australia.

Australia has a set of Graduate Standards for beginning teachers which is produced by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). It states that graduating teachers must "demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds" and "demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages" (AITSL, 2023, 1.4 and 2.4). However, little, if any, advice is provided in the document as to *how* teachers are to achieve this and it is evident that some pre-service teachers, their mentors, and other experienced teachers grapple with how to demonstrate/attain these teaching standards in their work. In its Australian Curriculum documentation ACARA (the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) states that it "acknowledges the gap in learning outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous peers"

and that it “recognises the need for the Australian Curriculum to provide every opportunity possible to ‘close the gap’” (2023, paragraph 1). To achieve this, the Australian Curriculum ACARA has identified two “distinct needs”. First Nations students should be able to “see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum and that all students [are] to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of Australia’s First Nations peoples” (2023).

In the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* (2023) predominantly the way of engaging with First Nations content and concepts is through exploring traditional and contemporary artworks. However, there is limited recognition given to non-Indigenous students’ *own* art-making utilising, as appropriate First Nations’ ways of knowing. Bell-Wykes et al. (2020) provide guidance to teachers regarding the teaching of First Nations content and concepts in drama (2020)². As well as providing *advice* to teachers and learners it draws attention to some of the challenges and considerations drama educators face when addressing First Nations content in their classrooms. For example, in the section titled ‘*Why can’t you just give me straightforward answers?*’, the authors note that when its ‘advisory group’ was consulting on the document “[in] some cases, there were as many different perspectives on a question as there were people in the room” (p. 12). To some degree this points to a challenge that Australian drama/theatre educators face because as mentioned earlier there are numerous Nations on the continent with around 200 different languages spoken; any advice needs to be localised to where the teaching and learning community resides. For example, the Bell-Wykes et al.’s document is localised to the state of Victoria. Whilst it provides advice based on wide consultation with Indigenous peoples, theatre industry professionals and educators, it remains for individual teachers to decide whether to, and how to adopt it. Aside from guidelines documents specifically related to drama/theatre education there are other documents and initiatives that are relevant to the teaching and learning of drama education in Australia such as “Closing the Gap” (Closing the Gap, 2024) “Marrung” (Victorian Government, 2024), “MYCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education” (2008).

² The advice is for teachers specifically in the state of Victoria, Australia, given that any curriculum-based documentation and advice for schools needs to consider the perspectives and culture of local First Nations peoples and not be generalised.

The New Zealand Curriculum, (Ministry of Education, NZ, 2007) states that the “curriculum acknowledges the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand”, and demands that “all students have the opportunity to acquire knowledge of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga” (p. 9), that is Māori language and cultural custom. The learning of te reo Māori is seen as a key to engaging in 8ea o Māori, the Māori world, and te reo is seen as the most prized taonga, or treasure: “Te reo Māori is indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a taonga recognised under the Treaty of Waitangi, a primary source of our nation’s self-knowledge and identity, and an official language ... By learning te reo and becoming increasingly familiar with tikanga, Māori students strengthen their identities, while non-Māori journey towards shared cultural understandings” (Ministry of Education, NZ, 2007, p. 14).

However, a tension exists between the stated aims of the New Zealand Curriculum regarding teachers’ practice, and scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith who asks hard questions of researchers, especially Pākehā teacher-researchers working in an Indigenous space: “Whose research is it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?” (Smith, 2012, p. 10). For Smith it is clear that in the final analysis it should be the Indigenous who own and share such research, as after all, as Smith asserts, “Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes” (p. 29). Respectfully contradicting this viewpoint is Māori theatre maker and social worker, Jim Moriarty, who in an interview with Nick told him that “when it comes to finding solutions in this [bicultural] space, then all-comers are welcome” [after all] if Māori culture is to survive and thrive ... then *all* participants are welcome into the conversation” (Moriarty, private correspondence, 2009)³.

However, according to Aboriginal scholar Lester Rigney (1999), emphasising Ward Churchill’s (1993) earlier declarations of indigenist positioning, [who] has argued for an indigenist approach to research that is formed around the three principles of resistance, political integrity, and privileging indigenous voices ... Rigney argues that

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research must serve and inform the political liberation struggle of indigenous peoples (Smith, 2005, p. 89).

Research-based theatre and ethnographic conversations

As non-Indigenous educators and researchers we, the authors, keenly felt at the time of the online conversations (and continue to feel) the responsibility to carefully position ourselves between the conflicting points of view under discussion. We acknowledge that our respective teaching contexts are too often a classroom or rehearsal space architected in a Eurocentric style, that mitigates against Indigenous identity and voice. Progress in this space, in Aotearoa New Zealand, towards equity and equality, has been slow: Te Tiriti o Waitangi came first (1840), followed by Māori seats in parliament (1867); more recently the establishment of The Waitangi Tribunal (1975), then Māori wards, and co-governance arrangements for contested resources (such as the Waikato River) and this has affected teaching and learning in New Zealand schools. In Australia, despite efforts by authors such as Bell-Wykes et al (2020) and organisations such as *NADIE* (1995) and *Drama Australia* (2007) a unified approach to the teaching of First Nations' content in drama remains an aspiration. This is due in no small part to the uniqueness of the Australian context where there are many Indigenous Nations and as such there can be many different views on how Indigenous content and concepts should be taught in Drama.

Research Based Theatre Script – Draft 4, 2024:

Teaching First Nations Content and Concepts In Drama in New Zealand and Victoria, Australia - A Conversation Between two Non-Indigenous male Drama/Theatre Educators

In the RbT script that follows rather than using our names we have used a map of our respective countries as a way of respecting the cultural and geographical heritage of our First Nations peoples. We have included a 'NARRATOR' whose role is to provide additional contextual information about the content and context of the conversations on which the script is based.

Scene 1: a context; two researchers position themselves.

NARRATOR: Scene One – Two locations: Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Melbourne, Australia: two researcher/practitioners, chat. The first sits in his school office on the lands of the mana whenua, Ngati Paoa; the second working from home on Dja Dja Wurrung lands and waters⁴. Before the Zoom session starts, each of the two non-Indigenous researcher/practitioners hears exposition playing in their head.

PERCEPTION WITHIN. PERCEPTION WITHOUT

(NICK and RICK are each seated at a desk on opposite sides of the stage, each with a laptop open in front of them. Behind them is projected a slideshow which periodically depicts their on-Zoom , conversations as well as images and other data pertaining to their conversations. For verisimilitude occasionally the foibles of online conversations are highlighted such as the screen freezing, someone mistakenly speaking with their microphone off and so on).


🗣️ Right Nick we're recording now. The transcript will be available in the 'Cloud' once we're finished and I'll send you the link. We're using my university's Zoom account so there's no time limit on our meeting. I've got my notes in front of me - I'm not going to read off them as such; they're just there as memory joggers. Shall we start with 'Perception within. Perception without'? You know about the 'exposition-playing-in-our-head', that we discussed last time. Do you want to start us off?

🇳🇿 Sure, here we go. *(Pause, whilst Nick gathers his thoughts)*. I have two narratives that fill my mind in quieter moments. In one narrative, it is 2011. I am arguing with my brothers (again!), who are both English, and live in the UK. We are debating the merits, the place, the value, the cultural impact of my home team (and the Rugby World Cup competition favourites) the All Blacks performing the Haka before a game. This argument comes a few days after another racially insensitive opinion piece by rugby writer

⁴ The Victorian--based researcher/practitioner teaches on Wurundjeri land but during the Covid pandemic worked from home on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung peoples.

Stephen Jones, who reduces the cultural significance of the haka to a tribal dance used to intimidate the opposition. This is the *Perception without*.

The *Perception within*. In the other narrative, a second-generation Sri-Lankan New Zealand student and a Pākehā student meet onstage in a formal greeting of master and servant (characters), designed to be part way between physical theatre and tikanga Māori. They are in a school production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performing Oberon and Puck. This production is set in a New Zealand context where the court of Duke Theseus is fervently te ao Pākehā (a euro-centric world), whereas the woodland realm of Oberon and Titania is clearly te ao Māori (the Māori world). No matter that only three cast members identified themselves as Māori, Māori characters were developed and performed by Pākehā students with skill, with respect, with mana, and crucially with the blessing of the Māori cultural collaborators who co-directed the piece. 'If Māori culture is to survive and thrive,' Māori theatre maker Jim Moriarty once told me, '... then *all* participants are welcome into the conversation,' (Moriarty, private correspondence, 2009)⁵. These students, and many others, are given voice and agency through embodied learning and performance. They, as collaborators, and students, have helped me, in part, to reject the overly Western bias in my teaching and directing practice and instead refocus it towards an Indigenous performative sensitivity. As a result, I have become dedicated to building drama and theatre that is a true reflection and reinforcement of the community that the drama is located within and emerges from, as Kershaw (1992) extols me to do, and have - in my choice of dramatic material - begun to reject what Lyn Fels calls the "tyranny" of well-known scripts (2012, p. 52) in order to do so.

 The setting is a classroom in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. I sit at the back of the class as a participant observer. I watch on as a Year 11 Drama teacher looks at the seat vacated by the last student-actor. The student has just been 'hot-seated' as the character William Thornhill from the Andrew Bovell play *Secret River* (2013) based on the novel by Kate Grenville (2005) where the presence and voice of the Indigenous Australian is foregrounded. Another student looks at the vacated chair at the front of the class and


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posits, 'Hey Miss, David was great as Thornhill, don't you think?' The student continues, supported by their peers, 'But we need to hear from one of the Indigenous characters. Hey Johnny (who is a non-Indigenous student) why don't you play Yalamundi, (who is the Dahrug tribal elder)?' There is a pause as the teacher considers their options. The teacher is frozen. 'I think we ...' they offer, but nothing follows. It is apparent that the teacher is conflicted, between giving voice to the underrepresented Indigenous population and a fear that what might eventuate during the drama activity could be culturally insensitive and fail to capture the First Nations character's worldview appropriately. The teacher hesitates, then demurs. 'In your drama journals I want you to write what the character of Yalamundi *might* say to Thornhill'. This is the *Perception within*.


By contrast, here's an example of the *Perception without*. Two Australian rugby league teams are about to play. An Indigenous elder walks between the two imposing groups of athletes, in a suit. His name is Uncle Graham Davis King, a well-known First Nations artist and educator in New South Wales. He gives a 'Welcome to Country'. The rugby crowd is quiet and respectful. There is an implicit understanding that this moment is but one in a history of the longest continuous culture in the World as it is held in the hearts and minds and culture of those the speaker, Uncle Graham Davis King, represents.

Scene 2: A conversation starts


NARRATOR: A series of Zoom meetings continue over the months that follow. At the start of this meeting, Rick has a notion, through reading, researching, and talking with colleagues, of the apparent integration of Māori culture in educational contexts in New Zealand (and everyday life). Nick nods appreciatively, as he also reveals that although he is confident of his own Aotearoa context, he is curious as to how Indigenous voice and presence is positioned in Australian classrooms and workshop/rehearsal spaces, and the challenges therein. He wonders aloud how such knowledges would inform his own developing practice. And so, the two non-Indigenous drama educators begin to share stories of their work, that both reinforce and contradict each other's perception from a distance.

 (Aside) Oh, [expletive], I just realised I forgot to record this Zoom session! I'll use my phone. I've got an App that produces a transcript automatically - hold on! (Pause). Okay, I'm right now ...

 Well, my friend, your sense, your image of what is happening in performing arts classes in Aotearoa New Zealand with Indigenous culture is broadly speaking, accurate. Te ao Māori, Tikanga Māori, Māori cultural artefacts and performance attributes, and texts, are all available and widely used within our classes (drama, and non-drama), as well as school productions. However, there are deep issues and profound complexities that sit surprisingly close to the surface, that – from 30,000 feet – are easy to overlook, whilst down at the chalk-face ... Two issues quickly come to mind, which we can unpack – One: that the Māori student experience and position is, unsurprisingly, far from a monolith, and two: that there are those in the media and in politics who enjoy attacking the status of indigenous presence and voice in New Zealand. For example, back in 2021 when the leader of the opposition maintained a sustained attack on the use of 'Aotearoa' instead of 'New Zealand', which are used almost interchangeably by Māori and Pākehā alike.


 (RICK raises the hand emoji) 'Pākehā'?


 Apologies, Pākehā is a word in te reo Māori that means a New Zealander of European descent, or non-Māori.


 Thanks, and I guess at this point I should say for the recording something about the Australian context. As we position ourselves, I suppose it's important to explain that in Australia each state and territory operates independently of others when it comes to education policy. Drama is part of our national curriculum (from the early years onwards) so it's taught across the country but there are (necessary) local differences when it comes to the teaching and learning of First Nations content within it.


It's also important to point out that I'm speaking mostly from the perspective of someone who teaches in Victoria because there is no singular approach when it comes to the teaching of First Nations content and concepts in Drama in Australia, and that of course is significant in of itself. In Victoria at least in Drama play-texts like *Secret River*


(Bovell, 2013) and other resources such as *Living on Stolen Land*, a book of Aboriginal poetry (Kwaymullina, 2020) are studied. However, there remains a concern amongst teachers when it comes to how their non-Indigenous students can, if at all, portray First Nations characters. First Nations leader Marcia Langton provides advice to teachers to find every opportunity to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their classes. With particular relevance to the teaching of drama she reminds educators that “storytelling is the original classroom” (2019, p. 111). Dr Mark Eckersley, who has long studied the teaching of First Nations content in Drama in Australian schools and beyond, points out that First Nations drama, like First Nations stories, has been passed down by an oral and kinaesthetic tradition (via tribal elders and cultural caretakers) and it is only in recent history that the spoken word has become the written word. Thus, like Bird and Sinclair (2019) he posits that embodied pedagogy one of the mainstays of drama education is ideal to utilise to teach in, and about, cultural perspectives, in this instance First Nations ways of knowing (Eckersley, 2022).

 That’s fascinating. I feel that here in Aotearoa, texts such as *Secret River* or *Living on Stolen Land*, would be positively celebrated and explored in a class, and utilised by my teaching colleagues, just as New Zealand texts by Māori and Pasifika writers are and have been. Plays such as Witi Ihimaera’s *Woman Far Walking* (2000) and Oscar Kightley’s *Fresh off the Boat* (2005) that have become part of the New Zealand canon of texts that help explain our bicultural and Pasifika identity and place in the world, to ourselves, to each other, and to those looking at us from overseas. However, as I say this, there are separate issues when we in New Zealand consider the positioning of a Māori student at the heart of such work in an indigenous school space.

 (Genuinely curious) How so?


 As well as a drama teacher, I have also fulfilled the role of Māori Dean in my school, looking after the pastoral needs of the around 125 students (from a school of 2,500) who nominate themselves as Māori, which, in itself is complex, with many students recognising multiple strands to their whakapapa ...

 (Interrupts) 'Whakapapa'?

 Sorry, yes. (*With a smile in his voice*) 'Whakapapa' (*he pronounces it slowly, 'fa-kuh-pa-puh'*) is an individual's genealogy, their family tree, and is a precept in te ao Māori that is of importance to Māori. When working as Māori Dean, I recognised that there are some Māori students who are not fully immersed or 'rooted' in te ao Māori, who are, maybe, urbanised, disconnected from their iwi (their tribe) and maybe also their Marae (which are mostly rurally located). However, these self-same Māori students were often called upon to speak up for, or about, te ao Māori (the Māori world) in class.


Scene 3: concerns, challenges and deliberations

NARRATOR: A month or so later Nick and Rick, meet again on Zoom and they deliberate about what they deem to be some of the specific 'concerns' they and other educators may experience teaching First Nations content in drama and theatre classes.

 When working with Indigenous students, (that is) Māori students, offence might be given inadvertently to those who are still coming to terms with their own identities, whilst a teacher, externally, makes presumptions about their positionality/s. For example, if a student is 'seen' as being Māori, then maybe they can be called upon to speak 'for' and 'about' issues of te ao Māori, tikanga Māori, te reo Māori ... However, at the same time, these young adults might also be grappling with not only the C/cultural, but the personal, the gender-sexual, the familial, and the emotional. Separating or privileging C/cultural identity from other facets of emergent identity is, as we know, tricky when working with indigenous voice and presence. Does this experience chime with you?

 (*NICK's computer screen freezes*) Sorry NICK your screen froze for a moment. What was your question again?

 Sorry about that. I asked if the experience I've just recounted chimes with you.

 Yes, indeed. Here in Australia, some researchers are beginning to investigate how drama teachers and their non-Indigenous students are approaching the performing of Indigenous character(s) from a text or in devised work. As Hradsky and their co-writers found in their study, teachers describe their work in this area as a 'journey' of discovery

and application, and one of the first points on it (the journey) is to overcome being “uncertain and afraid of teaching First Nations content” and focussing too much on “what not to do” (2021, p. 78). In my teaching I regularly refer to the Drama Australia document *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guidelines for Drama/Theatre Education*, (Drama Australia, 2005)⁶ and the document called *Teaching First Nations Content and Concepts in the Drama Classroom, advice for teachers in Victorian schools* from Bell Wykes et al (2020). The main differences between the documents are that firstly the one from Bell-Wykes et al. is intended specifically for the local Victorian community whereas the *Drama Australia* one is intended to apply to drama teachers in all states and territories, whilst acknowledging the need for consultation at the local level. Secondly, the focus is different. The *Drama Australia* document is more about the choice, and enactment of *scripts*, whereas the other provides advice regarding teaching First Nations content and concepts, across a range of teaching and learning in drama -whether staging a play, devising works (i.e. play-making) or engaging in drama education activities more generally. It is notable that even though these documents are readily available there remains a concern amongst drama teachers when it comes to *applying* this advice in their practice.





That’s fascinating but also terribly sad; what do you think has limited the interest in the use of these documents?





To my mind, it’s not such much about a lack of interest. Instead, it comes down to many drama educators being concerned that their approach and that of their students may be inadvertently culturally insensitive. Reassuringly though, as the Bell-Wykes et al. (2020) document points out, the Drama classroom is not a professional theatre environment and so teachers, and their students should see it as being a safe and supportive space for experimentation with, and the challenging of, cultural norms and stereotypes around Indigenous Voice. For example, planning and conducting process dramas (Bowell and Heap, 2001) and working with Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1993) are ideal approaches to employ to explore cultural and social content with drama students.


⁶ At the time of publication Drama Australia was preparing a new version of this document.

 Yes, I agree. In my own practice I recognise the tension/s between Process (the workshop and rehearsal part) and the Product (a final public sharing of any work predicated upon the workshop/rehearsal). The exploration of our shared culture/s, through the process, is valuable to all, even if ‘missteps are made’, as you say, is so important to a progressive society. We all recall being an early career teacher and being only a few steps ahead of the class in regard to content. Then for those who are new to this space that experience is relevant here: humble yourself; be vulnerable; but try. Valuable teacher-student work will likely eventuate even if it’s not finely tuned, yet. As Voltaire reminds us: never let the perfect be the enemy of the good. (*RICK puts a ‘thumbs-up’ and a ‘smile’ emoji in the ‘Chat’*). Any dramatic-theatrical exploration and/or resultant work may not be all that one hoped for, and it may come with challenges to teacher and student, but positive dialogue, and new pathways, could/should/might/will emerge because of the work in this space.


 You know, with all that in mind at times I too have shied away from teaching Indigenous content and concepts in Drama for the reasons I outlined earlier.


 That Voltaire quote reminds me of Johnny Saldaña’s admonition (which you once raised in a former article) ...


 Oh, of not “getting tied up in ethical angst”, (Saldaña, 2005, p. 64). Whilst Saldaña is referring to the writing and presentation of ‘ethnodrama’, I think this viewpoint has classroom applications as well. I’ve certainly tied myself up in this way when teaching Indigenous content; I think it’s because like many Australian drama educators I’ve worried that I needed to be better informed and up to date with my own learning before teaching First Nations content and concepts to others. Especially given my role as a lecturer in an education faculty who is educating Teacher Candidates, future Drama teachers, who are looking to me to exhibit best practice.


 (*Jumping in*) Yes! Agreed, we need to go to what I call the ‘discomforting place, where we try on the habits, nature, and culture of the ‘other’, and by doing so having a positive

impact on a student's empathy and growth. To aid me in this, I have built into my practice a tuakana-teina model. But more about that later.

 And whilst we have been discussing and debating these complex issues around Indigenous Voice and Presence in our classrooms, there are lessons to be learnt from how professional performance-makers are grappling with these issues; acknowledging that of course there are also different approaches and practices in these two contexts.


 (*Jumps in again, with gusto*) Yes, of course! But here's the complexity – as we recognise the appropriate professional practice, we also need to recognise that in our classrooms, in workshop and rehearsal, it is important that we give licence to students to take on a role, a character, whose circumstances are beyond a student's frame of understanding and experience, which includes - for me at least - characters and situations beyond a student's own culture. I encourage this to enable students to develop greater empathy and understanding for positions and viewpoints beyond their ken. Would you agree?


 (*Interrupts*) Sorry Nick I think that I've got someone at the door. Back in a moment. (*Pause. NICK takes a swig of water while he's waiting*). (*Returning*) ... just a package I ordered online – some things for my home office, working from home. (*Pause*). You know, to inform my own practice I still refer to Sharon Grady's book *Drama and Diversity* (2000), where the author reminds drama educators of the multi-cultures, we are likely to have in any of our drama classes and that our curriculum and pedagogy should not only reflect this but actively promote and encourage this diversity. Here I'm thinking here of First Nations students, who may or not have self-disclosed their cultural background and identity to their school.


 'Multi-cultures', yes, which is profoundly different from "multicultural'. When I read or hear [the term] 'multi-cultures' my sensitivity to the individual needs of each is piqued, both personally and professionally. Whereas the multicultural approaches me as an amorphous form, which is harder to dissect and engage with.


Scene 4: teacher identity and teaching programmes

NARRATOR: In this Zoom session Nick and Rick address one of the conversation starters they had set themselves, that being, ‘How does your own *personal* (implicit/explicit) sense of *identity* (national-cultural-gender ... positionality) function as a predicate to your work with students?’.


 As I reflect upon what I said last time about how ‘multi-cultures’ is different conceptually from ‘multicultural’, I recognise that as a Pākehā teacher, my experience has been comparable to many New Zealand teachers, who are also Pākehā and/or recent migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand. I say this as I fear a new form of colonialism of the ‘non-Indigenous’ (and women and non-binary) might occur, as these predominantly white teachers presume to lead a conversation about Indigenous voice. In 2021, our New Zealand teacher demography indicated that 73% of teachers are Pākehā, 12% are Māori, and that 45% of teachers are 45 or older, according to New Zealand ‘Education Numbers’ (Education Counts, 2024).


 (*Building on what NICK has said*) And it’s important for me to acknowledge that amongst the two to three percent of Australia’s teaching population who identify as First Nations there are of course Indigenous drama teachers, and it’s essential that their voices are heard and that their points of view should inform practice.


 In Aotearoa New Zealand there is some squabbling from those on the right of this discussion, over the privileging of the *Indigenous* voice over that of the *multicultural*. At the same time, I hear the voices of Māori scholars, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who ask hard questions of researchers, especially Pākehā teacher-researchers working in an Indigenous space. Smith demands that we answer the following: “Whose research, is it?” (2012, p. 10). For Smith it is clear that in the final analysis it should be the Indigenous who own and share such research. As Smith asserts, “Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes ...” (2012, p. 10).


 (*Quickly interrupting*) Yes, but as drama educators even though we might have sound pedagogical motives for doing so, we can’t *presume* that all our students may want to go along with our approaches to teaching First Nations’ perspectives in our classrooms.

As Hradsky and other researchers have pointed to (2021), we need to bring our drama students with us on the ‘journey’. It’s not enough to assume that by engaging in around First Nations content and concepts our students will appreciate the importance of this cross-curriculum priority. Therefore, as drama/theatre educators we need to show our students *why* this matters.

 (Enthusiastically) Agreed ...


 And we can’t mistake ‘well meaning-ness’ with permission. Permission still needs to be navigated, negotiated, and received before the work can begin.


 Agreed! You know, culturally-inclusive practice is possible, in both our contexts as we experience them, and beyond; it is important to look beyond one’s quiet biases and find ways of not being exclusive and finding platforms and programmes that promote/deliver inclusivity.

 (Interrupting, enthusiastically) You’re describing a need to be proactive in being inclusive.

 Yes.

 Almost a drama teacher’s version of affirmative action around Indigenous voice?

 Yes. However, as we work towards this, we must – as Johnny Saldaña has also taught us – “avoid the juicy stuff” and to not be “lured by the exoticness of it” all, avoiding the remarkable revelation (2005, p.64). And remembering that in our work with young impressionable students, anonymising is also not always enough.

 A good reminder, Nick. As educators and Research-based Theatre practitioners, we need to be engaged, conscious, and critically evaluating each facet of the process.

NARRATOR: As the recording of their final online conversation concludes, and as they leave the Zoom call, Nick and Rick take with them the wisdom of each other’s experience. As they had aimed for, their future selves will share versions of this RbT script at conferences and professional development events.

Epilogue: out of role – recommendations / conclusions

NICK and RICK: Before we conclude this article, we think that it's important to acknowledge once again that we are in two distinct cultures, and the analysis we have provided here whilst it might be relevant to our own cultures, and contexts it might not transfer to others. Below we each make our summations.

NICK: I am reminded of one of the key things that I have built into my teaching practice - that crosses distinct cultural boundaries - which is a tuakana-teina model with students, which is also present in Rick's teaching practice, with students and beginning teachers. Tuakana-teina is a concept from te ao Māori that aims to recognise both teacher-as-student and student-as-teacher. With humility and confidence, I performatively defer to culturally knowledgeable students in my classes who are tangata whenua (indigenous). I visibly ask for their advice when struggling for a word, for a correct pronunciation, for tikanga (a cultural action) that can be used to serve a moment in that class. I have coached the student(s) to respond in such a way that invites other members of the class to also defer, when needed, to the knowledgeable student. It reflects mentor, Janinka Greenwood's philosophy that such a process allows "participants to re-examine roles they usually took" (Greenwood & Wilson, 2006, p. 5), humbling a teacher into a position where they could confidently accept that "when I make a mistake, I expect to be challenged on it", especially by those students with specific C/cultural knowledge that I, or my students, are yet to access (Greenwood, 2005, p. 6). However, I acknowledge that a cultural body of students is far from a cultural monolith; never look at a student and presume to see or know a totality of their culture or background, as many are unrooted from their personal-familial moorings of culture and knowledge; never presume that a student has self-knowledge of their culture or tribal/indigenous knowledge; quickly and positively engage student-allies in a class, especially culturally knowledgeable students who can guide and advise a teacher (tuakana-teina); be brave and make choices/take risks and develop a positivist approach to teaching and learning with indigenous content, and that is better to try and fail at times than to not try at all.

RICK: A previous senior drama student research participant once told me, "there is no better way to tell drama teachers and students things about drama than with a play" (Sallis, 2010). Their assertion has stayed with me ever since. From the experience we have

recounted here it is tempting for Nick and me to now rephrase that statement to, ‘there is no better way to present a conference paper to drama teachers, academics and artists than with a piece of Research-based Theatre’.

The main challenges as we experienced them when devising the piece were to keep the script and its performance engaging and conversational, inject moments of humour (if the subject matter permits) and try at all costs to ensure the text and its enactment is entertaining, not [too] weighed down with overly-jargonistic language, and to be artistically satisfying.

As we discovered, given that most spaces these days used for conference papers have audio-visual facilities, utilising these can be a highly effective support to a RbT performance when there is only a single, or a few, actor-presenter(s) performing the work as Readers Theatre. In this instance our performance of the above RbT script was accompanied by pre-recorded footage reenacting some of our on-Zoom sessions, at times to [intentional] comic effect. Significantly, we found the enterprise of working on the script and its presentation to be highly collegiate; it was satisfying not only because of what we learnt from each other regarding the subject matter, but due to the greater insights we gained into the devising and enacting of a Research-based Theatre performance intended for a conference audience, based on our professional practices.

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