

## **The Quest for the Heart-Shaped Diamonds: Dilemmas Arising from Teaching Drama as Therapy**

**By Ellen Foyn Bruun**

This article presents an educational project at The University College of Nesna in North Norway. In the autumn term 2007 a new course module was offered on the Bachelor level that focused on drama as medium in special needs education. The course was co-run by a cross-disciplinary team from the drama and the education departments. The curriculum covered the fields of applied drama and special needs education. Through experiential instruction the student group was provided communal drama experience and practice in a learning environment that also encapsulated lectures, discussions and reflection on practice. The rationale behind the curriculum was to create an educational space that allowed for personal experience with drama and theatre based processes as applied in dramatherapy, educational therapy and special needs education, mainly focused on children.

Throughout the academic year the students came together six times for a one week intense gathering each time. Their backgrounds differed. Some were already experienced social workers, teachers and health workers. Others were full time teacher training students who were keen on learning how drama would be applied in the future work within special needs education. Then there was a last group of mixed background and motivation who seemed curious about the course on a general level and how they might benefit from it themselves without a clear picture of future professional identity and role. From the beginning the students seemed in general aware of the importance of risk-taking in play and also of the necessity of theoretical reflection. The teaching methodology combined practical drama work with reflective discussions in and on practice.

Starting with simple improvisation exercises and drama games seemed a proper way to introduce the subject of drama in this context, as the group step by step became secure, developed trust and the ability to take new risks together in play. At the same time the field of special needs education was presented and linked to the drama practice. In Norway the field of special needs education spans a broad

practice which aims to cover a range of different perspectives concerning the development of people who, for some reason, have difficulties within the usual educational and social framework defined by the culture. The main focus of this project was children: pre-school and school children, with and without learning difficulties. A general assumption in the student group needed to be overcome that educational and therapeutic processes are somehow polarised. This reflects maybe a broader cultural context and educational tradition in Norway, more than in Britain, that has a tendency to regard clinical and educational work with children and adolescents as essentially different professional fields of training as well as practice. The course I am presenting here is an example of innovating practice that strengthens cross-disciplinary thinking in higher education.

As for the drama practice in general, the drama curriculum focused on four aspects of the subject matter. This quadriplegic way of defining drama is quite a common way (for example Christiansen 19?, Rasmussen 198?) of regarding drama within the field of drama in education and it claims the four following aspects of learning:

- 1 the thematic (learning *about something* through drama)
- 2 the social (learning *about ourselves and others* through drama)
- 3 the personal/therapeutic (learning *about myself* through drama)
- 4 the aesthetic (learning *about the art form* of drama through learning about drama).

These four aspects of drama as a subject can be connected to different pioneers, practices and traditions which are important to know about. However, this *theoretical* framing also risks creating dichotomies and hierarchies that do not foster a drama practice where the whole psyche, mind and body together, are seen as one. Still it seems to be helpful for students on an introductory level to be presented for this kind of thinking as it fosters a reflective awareness of the complexity what is going on, when it's going on!

After focusing on Sherborne (1990) and Laban through an introduction to movement and touch,

students were led through work on metaphorical stories, fairy tale and myth. The Russian folk tale about Vassilisa and the witch Baba Yaga was dramatised in parts in different ways to introduce the group to some of the creative richness and healing potential of working with metaphors and thus at an obvious imaginative distance from our everyday reality. This oblique approach to the exploration of the group and each individual characterises much of dramatherapy practice. The following vignette illustrates the students' work at this point of the course.

*The session leader (me) is re-telling the story slowly and attentively while the group of students acts the story all in roles they have chosen themselves. The space is quite a big black box where the different fictional locations have been marked out on beforehand.*

*- "The forest lay in front of her, black and impenetrable. Once more the doll told her what to do. She took one of the skulls and put it on a stick. When she ran through the forest the eyes of the skull were glowing as if it were in the middle of the day."*

*A and H are both Vassilisa running through the imaginary forest that other students improvises on the spot. Another student, V, who plays the skull is running along side. B, who has chosen to play the tiny doll Vassilisa was given by her dying mother, is also running with them.*

*At the other side of the forest/room are three students waiting in an installation of tables and chairs covered with scarves. They are playing the two step-sisters and the wicked step-mother waiting in the step-mother's house. With the glow in the skull they are all burnt to death and then transformed into a beautiful rose bush. It is the character of the skull herself that invites the three dead characters and, one by one, form them into the rose bush. This is the end of the story - today. Still in character and in a space of their own, the students are asked to imagine that he, she or it would be the main character in another, new story. What would it be? Where and with whom? After a couple of minutes they all write down on a piece of paper the title of this new adventure. Afterwards, and out of character, some of the story titles are shared, while others are kept*

*private.*

Through structured work with role and improvisation the students seemed to become more aware and get insight of the relationship and potential of self-reflection that drama work entails. The theme of the helpful doll is important in the story and this was mirrored later pedagogically, as the group all made individual dolls to use as a well-known trust-building tool in communication with clients. Further the group work seemed to enhance the outcome. Working with the relationship between the individual and the group is something most drama educators do, knowing through experience how the one can profit from the other in the maturation process of the group members. In this kind of educational project, which combines drama with special needs education, the pedagogical challenge is to create a learning process in which the students understand and acknowledge the *conditions* necessary to experience drama as an *art form*. It seems to me that they need to experience themselves at the same time as creators and created in a flow that hits them on a deep personal level and surprise them with its potency. To understand the ontology of drama one needs to experience that its aim *is* the experience itself where artistic communication and self expression are one.

However it is likewise important to reflect cognitively to be able to make distinctions and theorize according to professional standards. It is also useful to do this with students who, in their future work, will plan, structure and lead drama sessions. It is useful, for example, to reflect on and discuss the term *resilience* within a framework of social competence, personal development, physical skills, imagination and so forth. Furthermore it is useful to look at the drama practice and kind of exercises that will potentially give the child, client, pupil or student the opportunity to develop in these areas, gain self awareness and knowledge to act confidently and appropriately. But rational thinking is not enough and potentially does not encompass the experiences in the arts, whether drama, music, dance, poetry, painting or other visual art forms. The ultimate aim in using the arts as therapeutic tools is to support the child or adult in his or her *own* developmental process, where self-regulation (Jung in Stevens 1994: 72) is more

important to learn and practice, than immediate behavioural results. These risk being acquired superficially, not through the whole psyche, but by the cognitive mind alone. The holistic learning process that drama *can* provide is potentially transformational and confronts the human being with its existential loneliness, as well as its universality and connection on the transpersonal level. I would argue that learning about drama *for real* is not possible without experiences that result in some kind of individual in-depth transformation. Drama is an art form and the aesthetic experience is at its core both as a learning medium and expressive art form.

At the end of the course the students were organised in groups for the practical exam. They all planned a drama session for a hypothetical client group and led this with the rest of the student group as participants. One can say that this in itself was drama since it was framed as a kind of role play between teachers/therapists and a group of potential child/adolescent clients. One example of drama practice the students chose for this session is illustrated in the following vignette.

*- "Steady! I am holding you. You can board the ship safely. Sit down quickly and find your place. Get the ores ready. All aboard. Ship a' hoi!"*

*Student C is guiding the group into an imaginary ship and once all have settled on the floor she goes in front and initiates the communal effort of rowing the ship. Each with one imaginary ore finds a rhythm together and starts rowing across the ocean at a steady pace.*

*The 14 female students are in their last phase of the course. They are now working together during a whole day, trying out and being tested in their understanding of and skills in drama.*

*C's group is leading the rest of the group on a journey through the four elements making sure that aims such as social inclusion and physical awareness are met. The fictional universe is full of roles such as pirates, explorers and map readers and so on. After a year of training it seems natural for everyone to play and over all they seem comfortable in exploring the fictional reality through a character. The transformational power of play seems obvious when watching the*

*group. Not only do they seem to have acquired knowledge and insight in how to structure a drama session for special needs education, they also appear confident and playful together.*

In an academic educational setting it can be a challenge to create a learning environment which provides the necessary conditions for allowing transformational processes. Assessment format, time schedule and curriculum risk jeopardizing the natural flow and timing of any organic process. Working as a drama educator is different than working as a dramatherapist. To me it seems important to respect the educational space and make it clear to the students that it is not a therapeutic space. The therapeutic space would demand a different relationship and contract between us. However, in order to convey the idea of drama as therapy, we need our students to take risks and ‘forget’ that they are students. My experience, both as lecturer and previously as student, is that this double reality is quite possible to relate to. It mirrors a general ‘dramatic’ aspect of life of *being in* and *reflecting on*, not un-similar to Winnicott’s concept of me and not-me (Winnicott 19?). With drama as the subject-matter and with a safe space for exploration the learning outcome paradoxically covers life processes as well as art processes.

Working with the arts provides open opportunities for experiential transformational processes. The aspect of *personal development* has been an important part of the history of drama education, not only through the work and writings of pioneers such as Slade (1954), Pemberton-Billing/Clegg (1965) and Way (1967), but also through Ward (1930), Spolin (1963) and Heathcote/Bolton (1994). Dramatherapy is a growing professional field due to pioneers such as Slade (1954), Lindqvist (1998) and Jennings (1990). There is a dilemma in teaching drama as therapy because the educational space has to be able to embrace both education and therapy. Working with creative processes is a risky business as it should be. To be able to take risks it is important and necessary to create a space that allows the participants to temporarily put aside their social role as students, to be able to experience themselves, also as clients. Every student needs to get in touch with his or her inner child, in order to be able to develop his or her inner supervisor (based on Jennings 1990: 52). Intuitive knowledge and empathy with our clients is at the end of the day, based in

our self knowledge and awareness. This is consequently an educational aim. Yet, it works therapeutically and self-regulative. It broadens the student's self-insight, self-awareness and feeling of Self.

It is however also necessary to draw attention to the limitations of any course or university module of this kind. The dilemmas perceived when teaching drama as a *tool* to social workers, teachers, health workers, counsellors, therapists or others are many. There is a constant risk of making too many compromises and reducing the field to becoming "a useful bag of exercises". Further the field of dramatherapy practice is characterized by an eclectic abundance of theatrical traditions. Some are more theatre-based, such as Jennings; others more ritual and play-oriented, such as the Sesame Approach (Lindkvist, Slade). Furthermore there are some different traditions on the two sides of the Atlantic. Little of this was made part of the course that I have presented here which was a basic and introductory course to the field of drama and special needs education. I believe though that it is possible and necessary to convey the core of drama as a subject of its own. When drama is taught as an instrumental tool *without* the necessary in-depth experiential study to really *know* the tool, it becomes in my view a *bad* tool. This is similar to what Peter Slade named in his book *Child Drama, as bad drama* (Slade 1954: 25). This does not refer to doing drama right or wrong, or even better or worse. It is related to the relationship between the individual's inner impulse for expressing himself and the way of communicating this in the art-form. One useful theoretical framework on this relationship between the aesthetic impulse and the medium is developed by Malcolm Ross (Ross 197?). An experiential understanding of this relationship will prevent misunderstandings about the concept of drama as a tool only.

Another practitioner who has met similar challenges to the ones I have described in this presentation is American John Nolte in the book *Drama for Life* (Lepp 2000). Nolte who has worked clinically with psychodrama for many years, is writing about his experience as a course educator in similar settings as the one I have described. He discusses similar dilemmas arising from teaching psychodrama and wonders whether his experience of drama being used as a tool superficially is restricted to psychodrama (221). My experience over the years as drama educator is that this is general problem in

drama training. My impression is that this is happening a lot and that there is a considerable value in querying the effectiveness and learning outcome of brief training modules where drama and theatre based processes are considered instrumental a *tool* for be it therapy, political emancipation or in other contexts. Therefore, maybe particularly in training modules similar to the one I have presented, it seems important to create a learning environment where respect and risk-taking are fostered likewise. There is a danger of future malpractice however if the core of the art form is not experientially understood in depth. I believe that the project I have presented was conscious of this danger and addressed the problem by providing a permissive educational space that allowed the students challenge themselves and experience the power of transformation in drama and theatre based processes.

The quality and level of reflection depends on our ability as educators to allow this permissive space to unfold and guide the reflective process responsibly and adequately. On the one hand the reflective process is a ‘looking on’ process, looking from the outside and analysing with objective knowledge. On the other hand it is also a ‘being and looking in’ process, not looking away from ourselves, but rather *into* ourselves and the connection to humanity which is shared feeling of belonging to something meaningful bigger than the individual, and yet where my individuality is unique, whether I am the adult therapist/teacher or the child/client. I believe it is in this way the child itself experiences being *seen*, in the sense of *Esse Is Percipi*, pointed out by Hillman in *The Soul's Code* (1996). The role of the mentor, according to Hillman, is to “see beyond” (113), and in that lies the power and gift of perception, since it reveals to the supervisee his or her uniqueness or *acorn*, in Hillman terminology.

The role of student can be an obstacle to the adoption of a position as experiential group member. Working in the art form with metaphors and obliquely exploring one-self and the group is a useful way of overcoming this resistance. This is at the same time an exemplary way of communicating and making a point of the way drama as therapy has its power and potential. The distance in the metaphor creates a passage or bridge to the deeper self that tricks the rational ego so to speak. During the last session of the course led by the students with the rest of the group as participants there seemed to be many examples of



this happening. The presence of external examiners may well have increased the need to meet in the metaphoric realm and also to acknowledge the group one last time before the end of the course. Once the last session closed the examination board came together to decide on the grades. It seemed easy to switch mode, as the student group had demonstrated that they were able to lead and create a drama session that allowed for flexibility, choice and for each individual to contribute freely. The students seemed to have expanded their professional knowledge theoretically and practically, as well as on a personal level. However personal change is a complex phenomenon. Changes of behaviour exhibited in groups may act as precursors and initiate deep level shifts of transformation which often can only be understood retrospectively. But by the end of the one year course my co-educators and I could conclude that the students seemed ready and able to use drama in their further professional careers as special needs education teachers, health workers, educational therapists or drama practitioners in cultural settings. By applying as a learning medium dramatherapy practice based on an oblique approach and working from within the art-form, the educational and self-regulating therapeutic processes could run concurrently and overlap. The last example of drama practice also student-led illustrates this I believe in a way that is both naïve and deeply convincing.

*The whole group is standing close together in a circle, listening to music symbolising a time machine. It takes them to the planet of the heart-shaped diamonds. They arrive and it seems empty until D, dressed in a long blue cloak with a crown on her head, comes out from behind a curtain welcoming them as the Queen of the planet. She asks the travellers about the journey and challenges on the way. She then leads them to a strange silvery tree decorated with the heart-shaped diamonds. Before leaving the planet in the time machine everyone is offered a heart-shaped diamond to bring back to the present earth.*

*Once everyone is back on earth one of the facilitators gives everyone the opportunity to think about what the diamond can be used for. All the students are now sitting in a circle. The*

*examination board of four people is sitting behind tables by the wall, taking notes and looking at their watches for time keeping.*

*- "The diamond will help me to be generous to my mother today," says P.*

*B next to her says: - "I will use it to remember this journey."*

*Words like warmth and positive energy pop up around the circle. Some are silent.*

*H says: - "I will look in the old album with photos of my dead grandfather and remember the things that we used to do together."*

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