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The intellectual whakapapa informing the New Zealand drama curriculum

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# THE INTELLECTUAL WHAKAPAPA INFORMING THE NEW ZEALAND DRAMA CURRICULUM

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## ABSTRACT

*Underpinning drama education in New Zealand is the desire to improve the lives of individuals, communities and societies by catalysing embodied learning in and through the art form of theatre. Learning in drama is intended to foster well-being, social cohesion and active citizenship. Put another way, drama education in New Zealand has always been about more than training actors for the theatre stage. It has been about fostering the development of actors who engage in, on and with the world. This determination has led to the particular pedagogical and curricular response that frames how drama is taught in New Zealand.*

*In drama education in New Zealand we have focused for a generation on working practically to explore the nature of drama as a meaning making tool. Students not only study theatre by passively watching, they actively partake in framed fictional worlds and reflect on these embodied experiences. By engaging students in dramatic encounters, we argue drama education bears the potential to engage in critical and creative engagement with pivotal social issues in the real world (Anderson & O'Connor, 2015). The nature of the meaning making has seen a deliberate privileging of non-naturalistic forms of drama presentation and representation. Progression is understood in the curriculum as moving from exploration of narrative through imagined and social play at junior primary to understanding how to use conventions as dramatic structuring devices (Ministry of Education, 2007). This can be understood as a conventions approach (CA) to drama education. In this article we consider the pedagogical and theatre traditions that informed the New Zealand curriculum to contextualise the planned curriculum refresh in 2023.*

## Keywords

Theatre; drama education; conventions approach; curriculum refresh

The current curriculum was written in 2007 at the height of a neo-liberal approach to education that focused on individual achievement, stepped and measurable progression and alongside the development of NCEA assessment processes that like much of the other reforms of the time constrained learning into measurable skill development. The ghosts of the neo liberal reforms that brought in national standards, a grinding focus on a limited understanding of literacy and numeracy and best evidence syntheses and learning made visible still haunt the education landscape. We argue in this article that the arts curriculum at the time sidestepped many of these pressures in creating a document that was informed by a century of thinking about how and why drama should be a compulsory subject in schools, centred in progressive and critical theories of education and theatre making.

In 2023 the Arts will be refreshed as part of a wider project driven by the Ministry of Education to update and realign the curriculum in line with a growing desire to indigenise the curriculum and recognise the importance of mātauranga Māori. This article outlines the Eurocentric foundations of the current curriculum so we might clearly understand what we will be refreshing next year. We suggest we might, by looking backwards to our intellectual whakapapa informing the current curriculum, better understand and consider what is important to hold onto. We place the development of the curriculum

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within wider global theatre and education movements to understand how and why we have the form of drama education we have in New Zealand and how we might respond to a desire to more directly and acutely locate the curriculum within the New Zealand context, especially as we consider obligations schools have to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

We lay out the rich tapestry of this whakapapa for readers to make their own connections to their teaching practice and to consider how each of the layers over a hundred years of developing drama pedagogy and curriculum in schools has shaped and formed our current curriculum. Although we unfold the history in a linear fashion for clarity, we acknowledge that the debates and philosophical arguments in the field speak instead to much a murkier story of how we resulted in what we describe as the current Conventions Approach to drama education.

### **The 20th century: Progressive education, critical pedagogy & theatre-making**

Nicholson (2005) suggests that the 20th century saw two parallel developments advance the development of Drama Education. One consists of the radical theatre practices of the political left and community theatre. The other comprises two conceptually related strands in critical education. These two strands are European approaches to the child-centred progressive education mentioned above, and the praxis of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy (CP). Progressive education and CP aim to transform hitherto authoritarian processes of learning into democratic and equalitarian educational practices. At the heart of such endeavours sit attempts to subvert the hierarchy between teacher and learner and to validate knowledges previously subjugated. These developments in both theatre and education interlink the notions of social change and dramatic and educational practice respectively. They aim to employ theatre and education as means to disrupt social hierarchies and divisions.

### **Progressive education: The learner as subject of personal discovery**

The child-centred progressive education movement gained momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s. Researchers such as Britton (1970), Bruner (1979), Moffett (1968), and Vygotsky (1976, 1978a, 1978b) began to highlight the significance of play for children's learning and development and spark educators' interest in engaging young people in dramatic play (Taylor, 2000). Progressive education rejects the traditionalist view of knowledge-centred education. This traditional approach to pedagogy proposes that the purpose of education is the transmission of knowledge in the form of static facts and skills of which children are naturally devoid (Bolton, 1984). The Western education system privileges this "empty pitcher" (Bolton, 1984, p. 3) model. It regards learners as empty vacua in need to be filled with objective knowledge. Such an instrumental approach to education argues that personal experience is divorced from teaching and learning. Learners do not create knowledge but classify and absorb information verified as scientifically correct by authorities. In contrast, progressive education underlines the importance of learning by doing. Its principle tenet is the assumption that knowledge is innate to every child. Progressive education shifts the focus onto the learner as the subject of active inquiries and personal discovery (Dewey, 1921). From this perspective, playing and creating are essential to learning and development. Fröbel (1912) highlights play as "the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul" (pp. 50–51). The process of learning rather than the expected outcome of acquired pre-determined knowledge claims centre stage. As Quick (1902) notes, "The success of the education is not determined by what the educated know, but by what they do and what they are" (p. 525). Progressive education emphasises individualism and self-expression. The learner, specifically the child, is regarded as a seed filled with immanent knowledge and potential. Educators are to wait for the child's innate knowledge to ripen, grow and unfold naturally. The task of the educator is to protect this process from being tainted by adult claims to logic and authority.

### **Critical pedagogy: Conscientização as a practice of freedom**

Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy (CP) similarly opposes such an authoritarian "banking" model approach to education and its inherent hierarchy of power. Grounded in dialogic exchange, his concept of *conscientização* (conscientisation) acknowledges the distinct and legitimate forms of knowledge that both learners and educators hold without regarding one as more valid or valuable than the other. Freire makes a case for a Pedagogy of the Oppressed based on critique and hope that empowers those subjugated to recognise, name, criticise and transform their circumstances. Knowledge emerges from the process of training to observe and denote contradictory dominant socio-economic narratives and from a growing sense of agency and ability to act against oppression (McCoy, 1995). CP posits that knowledge is never politically neutral. Education is a political act, and social justice and democracy are always intertwined in the process of teaching and learning (Giroux, 2007). Freire (1970) insists that education is either a "practice of domination" that intends to encourage conformity into an existing knowledge system, or a "practice of freedom" (p. 54). As the latter, education provides students with the means of learning so that they construct new knowledges and recognise their capability of self-conscious political action towards social justice and change.

### **Finlay-Johnson: Introducing a dramatic method of teaching**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the UK, educators Finlay-Johnson, Caldwell Cook, and the so-called Speech and Drama experts developed distinct approaches to pedagogy specifically in relation to drama. In her book *The Dramatic Method of Teaching* (1912), Finlay-Johnson proposes that dramatic processes can make school lessons and academic subjects more engaging. As she reflects on her own teaching practice, she suggests that dramatic engagement increases students' interest in factual information and subject matters. Finlay-Johnson emphasises children's inherent instinct to engage in dramatic play, the importance of the process of play over the output of theatrical products, and the value of both improvised and scripted drama. She highlights that performing for an external audience is not a prerequisite for learning and proposes that teachers should encourage children to structure their own drama. While Finlay-Johnson focuses on effectively arresting students' attention towards the content of a variety of subjects, she also reflects that the process of experimental learning through dramatic engagement is of high educational value in and by itself, not just factual knowledge.

### **Caldwell Cook: Dramatic craftsmanship & literary appreciation**

Caldwell Cook enhanced the teaching of dramatic literature by regarding the experience of play as a legitimate basis for learning. By experiencing classic English literature through dramatic engagement, learners were to develop interest in and enjoyment of artistic form. For Cook, the drama process itself is an instrument to develop dramatic craftsmanship and literary appreciation (Bolton, 1984). Unlike Finlay-Johnson, Cook (1966) was not interested in engaging learners in personal interpretations of scenes. While he does highlight the importance of play as "one of the fundamentals of life", he also alleges that it is "capable of anything but a further explanation" (p. 8). From this perspective, the sole aesthetic experience does not require any added structure that promotes reflection and analysis (Bolton, 1984). Unlike Finlay-Johnson, Cook's approach proposes that performing literature in front of an audience is vital for learning about the artistry of dramatic literature.

### **Ward: Creative drama for competence & conformity**

From the 1930s onwards, Ward (1957) developed her approach, Creative Drama, which became the predominant drama pedagogy in the US. Its premise is the re-enactment of storylines predetermined by the facilitator. Ward's approach does not focus on the reflection of the experiences gained during the drama but on the acquisition and reciprocal assessment external skills, such as characterisation and diction. Ward (1957) asserts that Creative Drama provokes children's "creative imagination" by facilitating "a controlled emotional outlet" (p. 4). By improving communication, concentration and

co-operation skills, Creative Drama works to enable children to conform to productively mainstream society (Taylor, 2000).

### **Slade: Child drama as free expression & child-centredness?**

Slade (1954) was adamant that his Child Drama follow the Romanticist child-centred education paradigm à la Rousseau. He regarded dramatic play as an end in itself. From this perspective, play is “the child’s way of thinking, proving, relaxing, working, remembering, daring, testing, creating and absorbing.” (Slade, 1954, p. 1) Not only did Slade regard play as the essence of the child’s life, he also viewed the free play that characterises his approach as a form of art in its own right. Any structuring of dramatic activity according to learning objectives is to be banned. Dramatic activity in childhood should be free from traditional theatre spaces, public performances, external audiences, school productions, pre-written manuscripts, and the teaching of theatre arts and performance skills (Slade, 1995). From a Sladian point of view, all such alleged adult inventions do nothing but encroach on and endanger the purity, creativity and freedom of children’s absorption into dramatic worlds and the natural and innate impulse of the child to play. As “loving all[ies]” (Bolton, 1984, p. 34), educators are not to interfere but merely offer impulses for play from outside the dramatic frame.

Slade reproached the Speech and Drama experts for erringly assuming that they pioneered progressive education. He vehemently sought to steer them away from their training approach. The experts, however, viewed themselves as combating the traditionalists, who, in turn, regarded drama as nothing but futile amusement. The experts considered themselves revolutionary fighters against the traditionalists’ empty pitcher model, as cultural mediators who, at long last, brought high art and proper elocution to children who were, from their point of view, culturally impoverished. They too claimed to advocate drama as a means to facilitate progressive child-centred education in the pursuit of fostering learners’ personal, emotional and spiritual growth.

Slade’s insistence on the distinction between drama and theatre epitomises two antagonising views on Drama Education practice. They create an artificial dichotomy between natural, untouched expression of the child’s soul through free play and refined expression mediated through acquisition of performance skills. Regarding Slade’s Child Drama as the re-enactment of storylines, Bolton (1984) argues that Child Drama does not actually have much to do with free expression and child-centredness. Since teachers narrate stories after which children merely enact the actions occurring in them, Child Drama places significant emphasis on the achievement of a product, not on the engagement in a process of self-expression in the present moment. Learners do not explore the complexities of dramatic situations. They show and describe events according to pre-determined narratives. The focus is on linear plots determined by the educator. While this eventually leads to free play, Child Drama forthrightly ignores the essence of art and perpetuates the very output-driven practice Slade so fiercely deplored. It disregards the very self-expression it proclaims to ignite (Bolton, 1984).

### **Way: Development through drama by transcending knowledge?**

Way (1967) developed Child Drama further by emphasising short term tasks, individuality and intuition. Way’s (1967) Development Through Drama approach consists of activities and exercises that foster skills related to sensitivity, concentration and perceptivity. Way’s Child Drama is a stable predetermined groundwork that asks the teacher to dictate and control student engagement (Bolton, 1984). The teacher serves as a facilitator of sensory exercises and as a detached narrator who reads out stories from outside the frame of dramatic representation. Children enact these and reproduce associated emotions from memory. In this way, Development Through Drama is output-oriented, although Way claims that he disregards the notion of drama as a significant product in itself (Taylor, 2000). When teachers instruct children to execute pre-planned progressions of set exercises, they provoke sensory experiences but not acts of symbolic representation. Bolton (1984) argues that this has little to do with theatre.

## Brecht: Epic theatre & the fight against empathy

Bertolt Brecht sought to provoke audiences to understand their experiences of theatre as a social event. In the 1920s, Brecht embarked upon an almost four decade-long journey of developing his innovative theatre practice and theory. Brecht defined the purpose of his art as inherently political. His aim was to engage people generally excluded from theatre performances to critically explore their social realities and the structural forces that uphold it. Like Freire (1970), he intended to provoke audiences to take political action and affect social justice by demanding material change. The theoretical framework of Brecht's practice is Marxist theory, specifically dialectical materialism (Brooker, 2006). As a dialectical materialist, Brecht did not regard the material world as a fixed essence but as dynamic and alterable. From this point of view, societal structures are not permanent but constantly in flux, subject to a perpetual process of change through interaction and dialogue. In consequence, conscious, critical and active citizens can change the course of history (Mueller, 2006). Crucial to Brecht's practice was the desire that audiences transfer the insights made in the realm of the theatre to their everyday world. He aimed to encourage ordinary people to become critical agents conscious of their position in the social narrative and the capitalist matrix of power and resources. Ultimately, communal action based on dissent and protest is to overthrow the capitalist order and abolish social inequalities.

Brechtian aesthetics oppose traditional representational naturalist and realist theatre. The latter claims to truthfully reflect social reality. Audiences are absorbed entirely in immersive identification with the illusion offered on stage. They concentrate fully on the emotional process of empathising with the fate of individual protagonists. From a Brechtian perspective, such theatre fosters passive spectatorship and the belief that life and society cannot be changed. From this point of view, naturalist and realist theatre encourages the audience to abandon their analytical capacity to criticise dramatic events and characters. Theatre purely living on mimesis and catharsis, as put forth by Aristotle's Poetics, is illusionistic and individualistic and no more than "a reactionary prop to petty-bourgeois morality" (Brooker, 2006, p. 212).

His critique of naturalist and realist theatre led Brecht to develop a new model of theatre. Epic Theatre sought to respond to the unparalleled social and economic change characterising 1920s Germany, in terms of both significant headway in science and technology and the rise of corporate capitalism (Brecht, 2001). The tales of Epic Theatre plays serve as fictional frames, or "historically distant parallels to contemporary issues and events" (Brooker, 2006, p. 214). Through the distancing properties that the analogy of story and fable affords, Brecht aimed to reach audiences who might otherwise refuse to engage with sensitive social issues directly. Epic Theatre aims to depict social conditions, events, situations and characters as socially constructed, always resulting of and contingent on history and politics and hence as capable of change. It seeks to critique the glorification of individualism and to uncover the myth that the distribution of power and resources are a natural given (Brooker, 2006). Brecht wanted his audiences to critically examine the characters and events they encounter on stage. While he dreaded the threat of drowning spectators in empathy, Brecht (2001) emphasised that reason and emotion are complexly intertwined. He was aware that his educative practice had to speak to the affective state of pleasure and enjoyment if it was to awaken his audience's willingness to critically grapple with societal issues. Brecht's demand for detached analytic engagement, then, goes hand in hand with a perhaps unintended call for a certain degree of intermittent emotional engagement elicited by the very processes of mimesis and catharsis that Brecht so determinedly despised. Babbage (2004) goes so far as to note that in Brecht's theatre, "[e]mpathy is not eroded altogether but its free flow is inhibited to permit a more detached position from which critical speculation is possible" (p. 45).

Brecht developed *Verfremdungseffekte* (alienation effects) as theatrical strategies. He not only built them into the texts and structures of his plays, he also implemented them via the particular fashion in which he transformed his written plays from the page onto the stage. By means of *Verfremdungseffekte*, Brechtian theatre makes the mode of storytelling and theatre production ostensibly visible. Rather than creating the conventional neatly synthesised *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Verfremdungseffekte* work to disjoin the

theatrical performance demonstratively and deliberately. They lay bare the function of the narrative and its manner of functioning. The nature of narrative in Epic Theatre can be considered a *Verfremdungseffekt* in itself. A nonlinear episodic montage connects scenic units in a way that allows audiences to recognise the mode of production of both the “external” and “internal” status quo inhabiting the dramatic world. *Verfremdungseffekte* take an active part in the telling of the story by talking back to and commenting on dramatic events. In this way, they provide the taken for granted with the power of what is bewildering (Brecht, 2001). They stimulate understandings of social conditions as actively created by human beings in distinct historical and ideological contexts and as possible to be transformed in reality.

### **Heathcote & Bolton: Drama for learning through thematic exploration**

British educator Heathcote (1984) echoes Brecht in her call to recognise theatre as a powerful educative means to “shatter[ing] the human experience into new understanding” (p. 120). In the early 1950s, Heathcote and her collaborator Bolton (1979, 1985, 1998) began to develop their perspectives on teaching approaches based on dramatic inquiry. Drama for Learning emphasises the multiplicities of meaning inherent in drama (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). It is based on a combination of immersion in dramatic improvisation in role and personal reflection that connects the experiences made during the drama to the real world. As Heathcote (1984) notes, by “putting yourself into other people’s shoes and, by using personal experience to help you to understand their point of view, you may discover more than you knew when you started” (p. 44). Initially, Heathcote and Bolton (1995) explored Living through Drama, durational immersion in fictional worlds and make-believe play. However, Heathcotian practice opposes entirely unstructured free play. Rather, thematic planning is to enable children to access and explore unfamiliar socio-historical contexts. The more Heathcote and Bolton moved away from Living through Drama, the more they highlighted the importance of structuring for participant reflection on the dramatic experiences at hand and, by extension, children’s own worldviews and attitudes (Heathcote, 1982; O’Neill, 1990).

Heathcotian drama experiences provide learners with frames. Frames are not necessarily fictional narratives. For example, the structural strategy Mantle of the Expert (MoE) can be considered a frame in itself. MoE casts learners as experts of the themes explored in the dramatic engagement (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Frames allow participants to take a step back from their own perspective and view issues from another standpoint. This distance allows framing to catalyse genuine, affective and bold engagement with sensitive issues (Bolton, 1984). As no penalty zones, frames afforded by participation in structured dramatic play enable children to experiment with attitudes and behaviours without fearing consequences and judgement in the real world. Another structural strategy to uphold frames is Teacher in Role (TiR). TiR allows teachers to actively participate in the drama by adopting roles alongside children. Learning experiences are no longer didactic lessons determined by educators as teachers join learners in the realm of dramatic representation. Communally, they structure the progressively unfolding drama experience (O’Neill, 1991, as cited in Taylor, 2000). By acknowledging that theatre is a collaborative art form, Heathcotian practice encourages teachers and pupils to act as on par with each other as they negotiate and co-create imaginary worlds and opportunities for critical reflection (Taylor, 2000). Ambiguity, uncertainty, spontaneity and open-endedness replace the re-enactment of predetermined plots and fixed series of skill development exercises (Heathcote, 1984; O’Neill, 1991, as cited in Taylor, 2000). The thematic explorations Heathcote proposes engage both intellect and emotion. Intuition and awareness work together to catalyse reflection on dramatic experiences both during and after them (Bolton, 1984).

### **Boal: Oppression, desire & the promise of metaxis**

In late 1960s Brazil, director and playwright Augusto Boal began to develop his approach of socially engaged theatre. The basis of Boal’s approach is Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Like Freire, Boal aimed to provoke people to engage in *conscientização* rather than depositing knowledge about the art

form of theatre into allegedly empty pitchers. He intended to make the creative process of theatre-making available to all people as a means to explore and express their own exigencies and wishes (Babbage, 2004). Simultaneous Dramaturgy, for example, enables audiences to suggest possible actions that actors then improvise on stage. In Image Theatre, all participants jointly investigate an issue of common concern by creating sculptures with each other's and their own bodies to throw light on their manifold meanings, implications and possible solutions. In Forum Theatre, spectators perform their own suggested actions by directly immersing themselves in dramatic events as protagonists of the drama. To facilitate this process, Forum Theatre features a *coringa*, or Joker, who encourages acts of interference, helps spectators to enter dramatic worlds, and animates participants to analyse the dramatic action while it is unfolding (Boal, 1979).

Boal-based practice simultaneously engages and distances participants from the issues explored (Collier, 2015). If participants experience themselves simultaneously occupying the realms of reality and fiction, they can find themselves in a heightened state of "double awareness" (Gjærum & Ramsdal, 2015, p. 188). Boal (1995) defines this liminal state as metaxis, "the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (p. 43). When "the fictional world overlaps or collides with lived experience" (Chinyowa, 2015, p. 170), participants experience themselves concurrently as protagonists and spectators of their own actions. In such moments, the interplay of memory and imagination opens up possibilities to reinterpret the past and picture alternate ideas of the future (Boal, 1998). As Vygotsky's (1976) "dual affect" describes how playing can cause children to "simultaneously weep as a patient and revel as a player" (p. 549), metaxis describes the dual experience of empathising with a role while reflecting on the self (Chinyowa, 2015). Metaxis enables participants to listen to and use their bodies as "generative sites of knowing" (Linds, 2006, p. 115) in the present moment (Linds & Vettrano, 2015).

### **O'Neill: Action, reflection & aesthetics**

British educator Cecily O'Neill shares Boal's emphasis on the interplay between immersive empathetic identification and detached analytic reflection. She began to develop her approach to drama education in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the term Process Drama (PD) is often associated with Heathcote's conceptualisation of drama and learning, PD is now generally accepted as a synonym for O'Neill's practice. Hereafter, we use the term PD to describe O'Neill's approach. O'Neill enriched Heathcote's approach by responding to Hornbrook's (1991, 1998) critique that educational drama lacks aesthetic significance and quality (Taylor, 2000). O'Neill's insistence on PD as a legitimate, artistic form of theatre in its own right demands from educators a thorough understanding of theatre form, aesthetics, structure and dramaturgy (Bolton, 1998; O'Neill, 1995). In group improvisational activity, learners intermittently identify with fictional roles to engage in complex and morally difficult situations within dramatic frames. They do not remain in the same fictional role over a lengthy period of time. In this way, they can access a multiplicity of roles and perspectives in order to explore a variety of values and identities. In and out of role, learners engage in non-dramatic activities, such as writing and drawing. This provokes them to reflect on how the dramatic world they construct can throw light on their experiences of and perspectives within the real world (Bolton, 1998; O'Neill, 2006b).

A pre-text sparks the improvisation and thus the emergence of the drama (O'Neill, 1995). A pre-text can be a snippet of fictional or non-fictional text, a poem, a photo, painting or object, or a beginning of a story. As the seed of thematic exploration, a pre-text frames learners in roles with specific purposes rich in potential for dramatic action. Leaders structure the dramatic material both in preparation before the workshop and on their feet during the session. They work both within and outside the fictional world, both in and out of role. In this way, learners and leaders work collaboratively as creative teams<sup>i</sup> to co-create provocative imagined worlds. They do not generate these experiences for an external audience, but for their own aesthetic enjoyment and learning (O'Neill & Lambert, 2006). As a communal art form, PD can expand learners' zones of proximal development (ZPD), the distances between their ability to meet a challenge under guidance and their ability to grapple with it on their own

(Vygotsky, 1978a, 1978b). A special ZPD opens up between participants' past real-life experiences and the meanings embodied in the presence of dramatic engagement. By refusing the provision of ready-made narratives and answers, PD allows memory and imagination to throw light on a variety of alternative worldviews, attitudes, and behaviours within and outside the dramatic frame. PD challenges familiar perspectives and provokes creative teams to grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty (O'Neill, 1989, 1991, 2006b; O'Neill & Lambert, 2006).

PD's non-linear episodic structure of distinct scenic units of action means that creative teams do not work towards plot. Rather, they move beyond simplistic chronological cause and effect narratives by generating complex webs of meaning (O'Neill, 1989; O'Neill & Lambert, 2006). The purposeful manipulation of dramatic events out of their chronology manifolds the points of view from which creative teams can perceive and examine dramatic events (Bolton, 1998). The safety of fictional frames allows participants to step out of dramatic engagement at any time. Since a pre-text catalyses acts of a specific form of symbolisation, that of physicalisation, it provokes creative teams to shape their inner, private ideas into public display, offering possibilities of multiple readings and understandings (Taylor & Warner, 2006b). PD's dialogic nature engages learners as autonomous agents that can communally and independently grapple with human dilemmas on a personal, emotional and intellectually challenging level (O'Neill, 2006a). Simultaneously experiencing fiction and deciding about its course, creative teams come to develop an understanding of their own agency and power in constructing (imagined) social realities (Bolton, 1998). In this way, PD lends itself to explore challenging issues such as prejudice, racism and oppression (Taylor & Warner, 2006a).

### **Neelands: A Brecht-inspired conventions approach to drama & learning**

As discussed earlier The Conventions Approach (CA), developed by British educator Neelands, enriches O'Neill's PD and sits at the heart of the drama curriculum in New Zealand. CA anchors PD in an explicitly Brechtian philosophy by imbuing it with alienation strategies. Neelands defines and systemises dramatic conventions that contain the impetus for dramatic improvisations. By setting students scenic tasks, they lay the groundwork for theatrical explorations in distinct units of dramatic action. CA relies on montage, the distinct non-linear assembly of form and content that juxtaposes images, scenes and sounds (Neelands, 1997). Educators sequence conventions into coherent yet alienating significant participatory art. Students in New Zealand are expected to understand and replicate this approach at Level 4 of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). The objective of CA is to shatter familiar perspectives and attitudes into provocative strangeness and turn ideas and identities perceived as foreign into shocking familiarity (Neelands, 1997). Learners take on different roles in different situations to reflect on behaviours from new perspectives on both a cognitive and an emotional level (Neelands, 1992). Participants develop an awareness of how both dramatic and real worlds are socially constructed within distinct historical, political and socio-economic circumstances (Neelands, 1994, 2000; Neelands & Goode, 2000). Educators actively structure experiences both within and outside the drama. These experiences allow learners to explore intangible theoretical concepts through the tangible nature of direct human experience (Neelands, 1992). Neelands (2010b) stresses that learners can develop a certain degree of understanding and empathy by pretending to be others, but they can never actually become them in all their complexity. The only way we can learn is by imagining ourselves in different situations and roles while being conscious, critical and reflective of our acts of imagination.

CA integrates the representational theatre as proposed by naturalist and realist playwrights and presentational theatre as proposed by Brecht. In this way, CA frequently disrupts and challenges the normalisation of the realities experienced within representational frames. Learners do not imitate life-like situations realistically in real time allegedly able to explore truthful human existences (Neelands, 2010b). Rather, CA often interrupts learners' acts of attempting to walk in the shoes of others who are culturally, socio-economically or historically located differently from themselves. Learners become directors, writers, actors and audiences to practise acts of empathy while rehearsing active, creative and

critical democratic citizenship. By Level 5 of the curriculum, CA encourages learners to consider how dramatic and real worlds are socially constructed within complex power relations (Ministry of Education, 2007).

### Refreshing curriculum

Refreshing the curriculum will require the refreshers to carefully consider the above history of drama education and determine what might best serve the needs, interests and dreams of current and future students. It is clear that although the current curriculum needs to localise itself and embrace the full possibility and potential embedded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, how might we negotiate with the global knowledges we have gained in developing drama education as a distinct art form? Those who lead the curriculum refresh in drama will therefore need to not only look forward to what they think might be of value in the future, they will need to remind themselves of where we have come from. We need to walk backwards into the future of drama education. Our story as drama teachers has also been shaped by the unique circumstances we have formed in classrooms here in New Zealand, and our often incidental and clumsy interactions with ngā toi and mātauranga Māori. In particular we will need to consider the manner in which we understand in Western epistemologies and drama as part of an arts curriculum with four discrete discipline areas as compared with ngā toi. While the ngā toi document has only three disciplines, these operate on a deeper conceptual level that recognises nga toi as intrinsic to identity and the humanity of people rather than something that can be occasionally participated in. How we negotiate these distinct differences and how we understand the nature, purpose and function of the arts and the place of drama inside them will, we believe, lead to the type of debate desperately needed as we locate our work not only within a global understanding but also within a local reckoning. The refreshers will need to think conceptually, theoretically and place carefully this global whakapapa alongside calls for a more indigenous and localised curriculum. Our curriculum deserves and needs to be looked at with fresh eyes but also with a vision informed by what we already know about our art form.

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<sup>i</sup> We are using the term “leader” instead of “teacher”, suggesting that the PD facilitator is, rather than an all-knowing pedagogue who instructs learners to enact a story on the basis of dramatic skills, a co-artist who leads learners through the drama experience according to their needs and interests, to co-create a significant aesthetic learning experience. We are using the term “creative team” to denote this community of learners and leader(s).