



## Using Theatrical Traditions to Teach Empathy

**Abstract** This chapter considers traditions in the theatre as the basis for learning that transforms dimensions of teacher training including specific training in empathy. The affect and effect of the arts and creativity on pedagogy has garnered renewed scrutiny (Anderson, The Challenge of Post-Normality to Drama Education and Applied Theatre. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 19(1), 110–120, 2014) as the nature of schooling and work changes and societally we continue to grapple with concerns about the global economy, health, environment and social challenges. Critiquing theatrical traditions to activate methods to teach *with*, *for* and *about* empathy is the line of inquiry in this chapter. Experiencing through an artistic medium such as theatre allows us an experience that might engrave a lesson on our heart. Speculation, by contrast, leaves us untouched and disengaged from the reality of other people according to the British playwright, Sarah Kane (1971–1999).

By exploring the traditions of the theatre, specifically Stanislavski's method acting (*An Actor Prepares*. New York: Theater Arts Books, 1936), process drama (Bowell & Heap, *Planning Process Drama, Enriching Teaching and Learning* (2nd ed.). Abingdon, England: Routledge, 1995) and drama-rich pedagogies (Ewing, *Drama-Rich Pedagogy and Becoming Deeply Literate: Drama Australia Monograph No. Twelve*. Brisbane: Drama Australia, 2019), teachers in training can enhance their understanding of the diverse social and cultural needs of the students in their care. Pedagogy

and praxis that is firmly situated in enactment and uses the imagination as a generative tool can facilitate an understanding of multiple perspectives by 'walking in someone else's shoes' (Ewing & Simons, 2004). The term process drama refers to a participatory and engaging form of theatre tailored to the task of teaching and learning, where a factual pre-text from any discipline area or domain can be used to imagine real events. In a process drama the participants assume different roles and undertake aesthetic and creative opportunities through highly structured dramatic activities. Fiorella and Mayer (2015) argue that when students receive the appropriate guidance, the act of imagining can be a powerful pedagogical tool. Key to this model is the active co-construction of meaning by teachers and students and its transformation into relevant and consequential knowledge.

**Keywords** Theatrical traditions • Factual pre-text • Co-construction • Consequential knowledge • Etude • Improvisation • Drama praxis • Productive empathy • Ethic of care • Active analysis • Communities of practice

## THE BENEFITS OF DRAMA-RICH PEDAGOGIES

Previous chapters have argued why empathy should have a critical place in any newly conceived curriculum and attempt at school transformation. This chapter unpacks the method teachers and those facilitating knowledge might actualise through the activation of the long traditions of theatre as a pedagogic and didactic tool, to explicitly teach empathy as a critical concept and behaviour.

The benefits of drama-rich pedagogies in the teaching of various disciplines are many. Primarily, the learning experience encourages students and teachers to 'hold a mirror' up to their views and, as a result of that insight, perhaps change views or gain an 'empathic understanding' (Arnold, 2005) of the plight or circumstances of others. Equally, drama-rich pedagogies and process drama enable a reflective and critical approach to the acquisition of discipline knowledge, thus fostering independent thinking now considered a goal in classrooms of the twenty-first century.

Recent research into the benefits of an education rich in experiences of and with the arts (Ewing; Anderson et al.) has revealed what many teachers practising in these areas and disciplines have always known—that the

arts (and relevant here in this work about becoming empathic), drama and theatre can provide the necessary disciplinary and methodological framework to facilitate a deep understanding of complex ideas. This chapter considers research specifically on the impact of using drama-rich pedagogies and theatrical traditions and explores why this particular pedagogy can be a powerful tool for developing a transformational view of empathy.

Adolescence is a time of enormous social and emotional growth, and contrary to the mythology that surrounds this period, teenagers are often the most politically and ideologically attuned members of any community. Recently, around the world, huge numbers of school students, led by Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg, abandoned their classrooms to attend a series of protests about what they saw as gross inaction by successive world leaders on climate change. They risked the punitive measures threatened by their schools and, predictably, the backlash of the conservative commentators in order to attend the strike rally—hardly the actions of a politically naïve and disengaged millennial cohort. One of the reiterations in their protest banners was their collective frustration at what they believe is the very obvious and immediate effects of climate change and older generations’ refusal to act.

### THE PORTABILITY OF THEATRICAL METHODS

Remote and regional parts of Australia have historically held conservative views about a raft of issues, particularly regarding immigration for example. Practitioners and teachers in these remote and sometimes low socio-economic areas have also expressed interest in methods that would engage their students and allow them opportunities to challenge assumptions especially about race and religious beliefs. In a research project conducted at the University of Sydney, Australia (2018), teachers in rural and regional areas talked about how difficult being a young teacher was in classrooms that were sometimes divided on racial and religious battlegrounds. Increasing pressures of testing and the economic pressure of the ongoing drought in Australian country towns were cited as the two most pressing issues that teachers had to contend with. The agility provided by theatrical traditions in a classroom that might lack access to technology is that facilitating this learning experience requires very little by way of resourcing, other than teacher training. The body, the self and the imagination are all tools that transcend race, economic inhibitors and the like. Using a pre-text (Saunders, 2015) requires only one rich resource and can be chosen

from a wide range of material to inspire students and to act as the jumping off point into discussion about any given issue that might lead to empathic understanding. As a pedagogy and praxis, this fits any paradigm of a socially just praxis.

The playwrights and actors, who took part in a study about the getting of empathy (see Chap. 6 for detailed discussions of praxis), found commonality with teachers when they discussed the unpredictability of audiences and the pressures on young playwrights to produce work that was different but 'safe'. Similarly, teachers are encouraged to pursue 'safe' pedagogies that lead to predictable outcomes for their students. Teachers in the reference group, as part of the study, also discussed the risk involved in deviating from the standard or linear approach to pedagogy and the fact that this also constrained their students' intellectual freedom.

### RISKY AND EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGY

Every playwright worth their salt would argue that their writing provides them with an opportunity to experiment with ideas. Sometimes their experiments are met with success, commercial or critical, but often their work doesn't make it off the page. As an experimental pedagogy, etude and improvisation to facilitate the developing of empathy were catalysed in the 'huddle' project (see Chap. 6 for discussions of practice), and clear distinctions were drawn between the two concepts of etudes and improvisations as didactic tools and methods. The actors described the differences in their practices between etude and improvisation and discussed ways the group could pillage the practice for teacher training in empathy.

Etude when performed with fidelity in the Stanislavskian (1949) tradition generally follows a text as compared with an improvisation which follows a theme. Using a text for an etude means free reading by the actor or performer and intuiting the text which has previously been unseen or unrehearsed. An etude performed with integrity should allow the play to be studied for its action, developed alongside the text which is used as a physical map. An etude inhibits some of the freedoms of improvisation because the text is the map—any diversion means you become lost in a tangent. Far from being inhibiting for performers, devotees of the method report that the freedom an actor is given in an etude is emotional or empathic allowing for a true perspective of the character's actions. This method when captured as a pedagogy and praxis is productive in teaching

about affective issues and allows students the agency and liberty to explore their own perceptions about a given situation or circumstance.

In developing a mandate that ensures common prosperity and longevity, the OECD recognises part of global and social challenges is, where there is widening conflict along ideological and religious lines, there is also a growing mistrust in governments particularly in Western societies where transparency and access to unfettered government machinations can no longer be assured. This uncertainty precipitates opportunities, if taken, to embrace or conversely rail against the complexity of societal problems. The teaching profession in Australia reflects the increasing social and cultural diversity that the organisation speaks of, and for this and other reasons, the social piece in the educational transformation is key to evolving this pedagogy in meaningful ways. Finding new ways to ensure the fidelity of diversity and its profound benefits to our society is a key tenet in this pedagogy of empathy using theatre as the impetus.

Rich discussions between the playwrights, actors and activists were had about the common concerns in developing and knowing more about human behaviours and what inhibits empathy. Many of their concerns reflected what the OECD has identified as ongoing issues that require nuancing and thoughtful pedagogy to address these problems. At the conclusion of the research huddle, it was useful to map these concerns against those articulated by the position paper (2018) and to identify where the theatrical methods we had worked on could make inroads in the identified areas of interest.

As part of the discussions, the actors asked the teachers what their principal concerns were in teaching about any complex human behaviours. The issues the teachers found most confronting and difficult to deal with in their classrooms were those of race and generalised intolerance. The teachers in regional areas were conscious that many of their students had little experience with multiculturalism as their communities tended to be Anglo-Saxon with smaller populations of Aboriginal people. In contrast to the regional teachers and their experiences, urban teachers reported that as many as 30 language groups could be represented in the one classroom, and this presented unique problems as the diversity may also include students from warring and opposing culture groups. By utilising a text and performance in the tradition of an *etude* and a scaffolded approach to broach contentious issues, the teachers found an almost immediate effect in reducing prejudice and heightening empathy in their students' behaviour and attitudes.

### *Theatrical Traditions and Drama*

The theatre has a long history in Western and Eastern contexts of provoking the public discourses about the social, economic and historical—great tomes have been written that analyse the place of theatre in shifting perspectives and/or reinforcing a political ideology.

One of the affordances of drama pedagogy is the way it precipitates an active and embodied way to learn about human perspectives and the world around us. In drama practice the concept of praxis captures the underpinning theory of learning and cognition with the active engagement or 'the doing'. Derived from the Brazilian educator Freire's philosophy (1970), a critical piece in this concept is the way reflective practice can be used. This practice can propel students who engage in this learning with an understanding about others and their predicaments.

In some educational spheres practice and praxis and drama and theatre are seen as tensions—the theorists in opposition to the practitioners and vice versa and the drama practitioners concerned with process and the theatre practitioners with product. Much has been written about this debate and, whilst in some quarters these tensions have resolved, it is the principles and traditions that are useful here in developing empathic intelligence and practices, rather than ideologic positions on theatre and drama.

One of the gifts of the drama and theatre world is that praxis is an inherency in both contexts. One cannot exist without the other and, as facilitators of this methodology argue, this way of learning is characterised by the imaginary and 'doing' the imaginary work. Drama praxis and theatre processes are characterised by connections and relationships—to texts, to character, to ideals, to tensions, etc. The hallmark of this work is its co-constructive and group approach which lends itself to the work of empathy and rational compassion. As Taylor (2004) observed, it can sometimes be glossed over by educators that the work of drama is to provide 'improvisational encounters' in different contexts (p. 9). These encounters are negotiated by students and this brings with it the necessary considerations and challenges but at its heart—drama *and* theatre are about human experiences.

Robyn Ewing (2019b), a leader in the field of literacy, drama and initial teacher education, has long argued for creative arts and drama-rich pedagogies as vital to the social, emotional and intellectual well-being of any society (p. 9). Her argument extends the premise that drama-rich pedagogies and theatre practices develop critical understanding in the 'other'

4C's (Gibson & Ewing, 2019). They describe these abilities as curiosity, compassion, connection and courage. These critical concepts provide the framework for teachers and students to habituate the action and activity of making a difference by heightening skills of empathic intelligence and the creation of *empathic leaders*. As Ewing reflects, it is not sufficient for us as human beings to be empathetic or to profess to have empathy for someone or something—this passivity as Boler (1999) also argues is unproductive. A productive empathy developed by utilising the methods of theatre practitioners can produce deeply literate empathis.

### DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN PEDAGOGY AND THEATRICAL TRADITIONS

The debates regarding what constitutes dramatic pedagogies, process drama, theatrical practices and traditions have vexed many in the educational sphere. Ewing's (2019a) careful and purposeful arrival at *drama-rich pedagogies* as nomenclature that captures the work described herein is the culmination of theories and practices–praxis that takes account of relational pedagogy, critical pedagogy, process drama and dramatic inquiry as examples of terms that can be used to describe the way teachers and facilitators interact and co-construct learning processes with drama.

Drama-rich pedagogies capture the seminal aspects of learning with play, the imagination, creative practices, embodied ways of knowing, perspective taking, collaboration and dialogic interaction (Miller & Saxton, 2005, p. 5). All the aforementioned elements of drama (this list is not exhaustive or definitive) contribute to the way students learn about being in the world and these *wonderments* (O'Grady & Smyth, 2017, unpublished) that allow students to assume different perspectives and to understand disparate points of view. This aligns with the way Stein (1964) conceptualises empathy as a process. Stein's original work posits that through acts of empathy we can come to learn what type of person we are. This is partly because through acts of empathy we can become more fully aware of what it is that we actually value.

One of the cornerstones of drama-rich pedagogy is the physical enactment or embodiment of a character or construct. Physically 'walking in someone else's shoes' (Ewing & Saunders, 2016) provides teachers with the premise for curriculum and activities where a student is allowed under the skin of a character. This idea of physically embodying or taking on the

characteristics of another person's situation has been problematised recently as a limitation rather than a precept for empathy. Boler's pedagogy of discomfort (1999, p. 175) debunks the idea that a simple act of walking in the shoes of another is sufficient experience to precipitate a truly empathic response. Research and some examples of practice would disavow this claim as insufficiently nuanced. The act of reimagining a character and thinking, moving and making decisions as they would is a powerful and critical performance in empathy.

In a similar vein, pre-service students who participate in the process drama 'Stolen' (Saunders, 2015) engaged in activities based on testimonial given at the Australian Royal Commission into the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children and tabled as part of the findings and report 'Bringing Them Home' (1997). Pre-service teachers when asked about the effects of participating in this co-constructed drama commented on the powerful way it made them feel about this dark past and how this would change the way they teach issues about dislocation and belonging. Critically, they also said that this experience developed a heightened cultural competence in their classroom practices.

### METHOD ACTING AND AN ETHIC OF CARE

A frustration that is almost universal in theorising empathy as an active practice is that whilst empathy or any development that heightens consciousness about becoming more humane is agreed upon as a good thing, many scholars (Noddings, 1984; Nussbaum, 1995; Verducci, 2000) agree that the ephemerality of the concept empathy leaves teachers, in particular, grappling with how to actually teach it. In the previous chapter, discussion about moving towards a pedagogy of empathy has positioned empathy and empathic practice as a key piece in any contemporary curriculum in the face of the unknowable future. Teachers are increasingly asked to assume administrative and bureaucratic roles, in an already full teaching schedule, and this necessarily means the applied practices of achieving a classroom of functioning empaths should be captured by achievable steps and lesson planning.

As Miller and Saxton (2016) have encouraged, it is insufficient to engage with a feeling or an affective notion without building knowledge as part of the learning experience. Fundamental in this knowledge building is the act of asking better questions and of noticing. Asking better questions means placing student questions at the centre of good teaching



practice. Allowing time for students to respond, modelling thought processes to reach a conclusion to a question or going deeper by asking additional questions is good teaching practice. In the diverse and culturally rich classrooms across different hemispheres, teachers and students stand to benefit (and, ultimately, societally) from an enhanced understanding of each other. Konrath et al.'s 2011 study reported that empathy in students had diminished significantly in the conversational arts, because texting was increasingly replacing facial interaction. Miller and Saxton (2018) offer several steps in the way conversations can be enlarged in classrooms including by explicitly teaching critical thinking, building a healthy community of inquiry and engaging in deep reflection as a dimension of empathic awareness. An additional dimension should be added to this list of critical inherencies for successful and rich learning and is based on the principles of *etude* derived from method acting.

Method acting as developed originally by Konstantin Stanislavski is the most popular means to teach acting in Western contexts. Originating in Russia and adopted in America, there are various interpretations of this method. Briefly summed up, the method centres on the idea that by discovering a character's inner and emotional life, an actor's intentions and motivations can be made real in any performance. A celebrated example of this method is that employed by American actor Dustin Hoffman who played a marathon runner being chased by Nazis in the film *Marathon Man* (1976). In keeping with this reliance on method acting, Hoffman rarely slept and ran hundreds of miles under duress in order to understand the experience of the character. This is neither practical nor desirable for school students; however, the premise of understanding that human behaviour and circumstances are shaped by the physical and the emotional is a key concept in developing empathic intelligence.

Noddings (1984) ethics of care trains those in the medical field including nursing students to understand and practice 'care'. The caring principle relies on the premise that you must not be subsumed by care but rather you maintain your own sense of self in the practice of care and develop a capacity for duality—that is, understanding a situation and responding with an ethic of care whilst retaining a sense of self. These principles of ethical caring have much in common with the concept underpinning method acting and drama-rich pedagogies. Stanislavski wanted his method acting to allow for an artistic expression that was authentic in terms of representing the humanity of a character, and it is this training that can improve empathic understanding and develop rational compassion as a

desirable skill for students to attain. Caring empathisers (Noddings, 1984; Verducci, 2000) rely on a set of principles that can be developed through a cognitive understanding of methods. These include learning to read textual clues, attention and attunement to the behaviour of others, motivational shifts, substitutions and duality.

Maxine Greene (1995) tells us that 'of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities' (p. 3). And by concretising imagination as applied practice, initial teacher education students can develop a confidence in their practices as empathic leaders of discipline knowledge with confident use of *etude* with an ethic of care.

### ACTIVE ANALYSIS AND ETUDE

This technique developed originally by Stanislavski has been modified by many teachers of acting including the famous Lee Strasberg (1901–1982) and Stanislavski's protégé Maria Knebel (1898–1985) who passed this work down as a method in rehearsal processes. Active analysis and *etude* are designed to provision actors playing any character with an active rather than passive way to heighten character work and to ensure authenticity and integrity in performance. Rehearsal rooms, like classrooms, use discussion, questioning, noticing and textual analysis as part of a suite of tools to get under the skin of a play or scene and to produce a credible and aesthetic interpretation of the work. No two performances are ever the same—even when the scene has been performed by the same actor in the same theatre. It is this principle that lends so much to developing empathic practices as no two human behaviours are ever the same.

*Etude* forms the central dimension of active analysis. *Etude* requires embodiment and performance that mitigates any passivity or superficial interpretation of work because the participant needs to rely on improvisation and imagination. *Etudes* are developed to produce a scenic speech that combines the elements of empathic understanding including the emotional, the social and the psychological (Zamir, 2010). The action of an *etude* should allow actors an opportunity to develop a character's memory. This precipitates their ability to behave and decision make as if they had the lived experiences of that person or character. *Etude* sanctions the development of subtext and motivation before an actor takes on the cognitive task of memorising lines. The process and performance of *etude* precipitates any memory activity and relies on the critical thinking,

questioning and noticing in order that the character asks and answers powerful questions that are posed by the text. For Miller and Saxton (2018) questioning and developing a critical thinking mindset requires ‘thinking to go deeper to discover how to act, modify, create, control and test out information’ (p. 21).

### *If...*

In an active analysis and context of *etude*, the director asks the actors to use *if* as the provocation in exploring the inner life of a character and person. The empathic process requires some space and time to reflect and to improvise the experiences and personhood of the character. ‘Nothing but Nothing’ by Towfiq is a play that tells the story of an Iraqi boat refugee and his incarceration in an Australian detention centre; it has been used to great success in some classrooms to learn about the treatment of refugees. In order to develop empathy, the principles and practices of *etude* mean the actors/students would need to intuit the text by asking *if* questions about the characters. This helps students to understand multiple perspectives of all the people in the play and interpret their actions.

Using *if* as the stepping off point into authentic performance and creating original and improvised dialogue, the actor can then overlap and interact with the integrity of the text by capitalising on their personal and critical engagement in order to make meaning. A consideration in this process of active analysis and *etude* is that any performance is not designed to be seen by an audience. Similarly in process drama, the experience of performance and play is designed for the benefit of individual and for collective unanimity and understanding not for public performance.

Some interpretations of the active analysis process and *etude* refer to ‘the pools of silences’ created by asking questions and presupposing imagined lives without reading or engaging in information and context that might prejudice or compromise the spontaneity of the process. It is thought that Stanislavski wanted to create conditions for expression that meant actors felt connected and importantly *responsible* for their character from the outset of the rehearsal period. As Ewing (2019b) remarks, ‘dialogue and substantive conversations are central components of embodiment and enactment’ (p. 23.), and these critical components are key to any development and co-creation of empathy and rational compassion in a myriad of circumstances that are concurrently powerful and

empowering. Zamir (2010) likens active analysis and questioning to learning a new language and suggests that in the first lesson you can only say a few words but, as your repertoire of words grows, the sentences you speak also allow you to ask questions in that language and this allows for a heightened understanding.

### DISCUSSION OF PRACTICE: ETUDE FOR EMPATHY

In 2018 the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the School of Education and Social Work, at the University of Sydney, trialed the use of Stanislavski's etude as a method to train pre-service teachers in ways to develop a critical empathy and nuance early career pedagogies. The project sought to delve into the various practices and habits of actors, playwrights, Aboriginal educators, community members and teachers and to appropriate and apply them in teacher training curriculum, to teach with, for and about empathy. The following questions were the driving questions for discussion and action in the bringing together of this disparate group:

- How do we learn to be human and humane in the world?
- How do we prepare our students to be good global citizens in a world where over 6 million people are currently stateless?
- How do we provide access to a way to respond to human rights issues by exercising judgement and decision making using a theatre-based model and pedagogy?
- How can theatre and applied theatre method activate a humanising approach in moving towards a pedagogy of empathy?

The group worked to devise a pedagogic tool based on the improvisations and etude situated in Stanislavski's active analysis, to offer pre-service teachers a doable and teachable method for establishing critical empathy. Stories were shared by emerging practitioners and playwrights of the circumstances where this method may have alleviated misunderstandings and mistrust had it been used in an educational context. Practitioners in remote and low socio-economic areas were interested in methods that would engage students and allow them opportunities to challenge assumptions especially about race and religious beliefs. The teachers talked about how difficult being in classrooms that were seemingly divided along insurmountable racial and cultural lines and their need to find new ways to challenge these modes of thinking and break down barriers.

The playwrights and actors found commonality with teachers when they discussed the unpredictability of audiences and the pressures on young playwrights to produce work that was different but ‘safe’. As an experimental pedagogy, etude and improvisation were catalysed in the project and clear distinctions were drawn between the two concepts. The actors described the differences in their practices between etude and improvisation to provoke ways the group could pillage the practice for teacher training. Etude generally uses or follows a text as compared with an improvisation which usually follows a theme. An etude performed with integrity should allow the play to be studied for its action, developed alongside the text as a map. An etude inhibits some of the freedoms of improvisation because the text is the map—any diversion can mean you become lost in a tangent.

Etude as a way of learning has at its beating heart the intersection of play and imagination. Philip Taylor (1998) fittingly described drama as ‘an opportunity to transcend the ordinariness of our own lives as we contemplate what is possible as we aspire for clarity and meaning’ (p. 14).

To understand how a new method or repurposing of theatrical traditions might open up possibilities for developing empathic awareness and understanding can also be a conduit to deepen conversation as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2001) between theatre and classroom practitioners. The commonality found between classrooms and rehearsal rooms is where the critical overlap lies between the role directors and classroom teachers play in shaping the climate for questioning, speaking and appreciating ideas that are both affective and intellectual. This can also occur even when the ideas proposed may not accord with those held by the teacher or the director’s conceptualisation of characterisations in the play or performance piece. We are reminded that, when students are able to create questions and control and direct the exchange of ideas, this can have the desired effect of a spillover into their lived worlds, where powerful conversations and an appreciation of other ideas can occur even when there is a disagreement (Miller & Saxton, 2016). Learning to respect differences and inviting other contravening ideas is a part of a robust community of ideas and productive, inclusive discourses and, of course, empathy.

The vast repository of writings both scholarly and popular about empathy as a desirable personal trait requires thoughtful introspection and perusal. How this method can be construed to best effect in classrooms by carefully constructed and reflective pedagogy and practices is a key issue

for practitioners, performers and writers. The popularity of empathy as a common-sense, social good requires ongoing and careful scrutiny. As an applied practice, using theatrical techniques and traditions like the etude as a principal tenet and praxis, the hope is that teachers particularly those training to work in classrooms might see the benefit to a more nuanced and therefore effective invocation and understanding of empathy.

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