

Exploring Drama in Education

An interview with Professor Jonothan Neelands

To cite this article:
 Göksel, Eva. (2018).
 Exploring Drama in
 Education. An Interview
 with Professor Jonothan
 Neelands. In: ETAS Journal
 Vol. 35, issue 2/spring
 2018. P. 13.



EVA GÖKSEL

How did you come to work in Drama in Education?

I started out as an English teacher and I literally bluffed my way into a drama job in a high school in Leicestershire in the UK. At that time there were huge resources for supporting drama – lots of advisory teachers, youth theatre, all kinds of stuff. I was brought up teaching in the Drama in Education (DiE) tradition as well as working in youth theatre. In fact, it is very important for me that I was involved in both.

Over time it became the norm the people did just one or the other (DiE or youth theatre), but I was trained to do both right from the beginning. I later moved to the University of Warwick to do teacher training. We founded a Drama in Education MA at Warwick in 1995, which still runs today. I then became increasingly interested in cultural policy and I ran the Warwick Commission. I'm now a professor of creative education at the Warwick Business School, where I teach Drama in Education to business leaders.



from the beginning. I later moved to the University of Warwick to do teacher training. We founded a Drama in Education MA at Warwick in 1995, which still runs today. I then became increasingly interested in cultural

What is Drama in Education (DiE)?

If I were to define it with limits then I would apply it to a specific model of drama that was pioneered by Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and Cecily O'Neill. I am of course being very specific. Some people are very strict about what is and what is not Drama in Education, but in my own work I really don't recognise those boundaries. I do primarily Process Drama, but I also incorporate elements that come from outside the Drama in Education tradition. In the last 10 years, the notion of 'ensemble', along with the relationship between drama/theatre and democracy, has been a driving force in my work. So that makes me open to the work of any practitioner with an interest in drama and democracy.

How has DiE evolved in the UK since the 1950s?

Over the years, there has been a shift from Drama in Education to Applied Theatre, but people took their methods of working with them. Drama in Education is a distinctive tradition now; it's probably a part of our history. However, it was an absolutely foundational stage in our history, but I don't believe that things should stay stuck; it's fine that DiE has evolved.

It has adapted to political circumstances and it will never quite disappear.

You have recently been doing a lot of teaching in China: What is the attraction of DiE?

Every child in China now has a statutory right to drama and dance once a week. It's in fact about character building – the Chinese see drama as a great way of teaching traditional culture. But it's mostly an economic argument, because China, better than the UK, understands the creative age, understands that creativity is everything, and wants to move from "made in China" to "designed in China".

Where is there a need for DiE in schools in the UK?

Everywhere. The tragedy is that the most disadvantaged children and young people are the ones that are the least likely to get access to the arts in the curriculum and extremely unlikely to get them as part of their home education. That is where the need is, but they are the ones that are under the most pressure to narrow the curriculum down to basic literacy and numeracy and therefore the arts get cut.

What advice do you have for teachers new to DiE?

Before diving into any drama work, you need to have a good working relationship with your class. There needs to be mutual respect between peers and the teacher. It's best to make a contract with the children: teaching drama is a risk for the teacher and for the students, as it's new to everyone. It's best to be transparent right from the beginning: explain what you plan to do in order to make the learning more enjoyable and state what kind of behaviour you expect from the group. Work in small increments; it can be enough to simply work with DiE for half an hour.

The seminal book Structuring Drama Work: A Handbook of Available Forms in Theatre and Drama which you co-authored with Tony Goode has been a best seller for over 25 years.

Structuring Drama Work was first published in 1990. A most recent edition was published in 2015, at which time the book had been reprinted for the 20th time. It is in fact a tool kit. It doesn't tell you how to teach. It lays out the palette of colours a drama teacher can use. How they choose to paint with it is up to them. The idea of laying out the drama conventions came from Dorothy Heathcote:

in *Signs and Portents* (1984) she says that teaching drama has to be made easier and that this should be done by explaining the basic drama conventions and by making them accessible. So that is what Tony Goode and I did.

However, we experienced some resistance to our book when it first came out: I think people liked the mystique of only a few people being able to teach drama. We, however, made Teacher-in-Role (teacher takes on a character) just one of 50 conventions; we collected and made transparent the different drama techniques. And now drama is taught mainly through the conventions.

Are there any particular drama conventions you would suggest to DiE novices?

Teacher-in-Role is very easy if you use the convention to tell a story in role as a character. Still Images (frozen pictures) are quite simple, although you can't do them all the time. Just look at conventions you feel comfortable with, decide if you can imagine trying them out. Structuring is the art: the use of different drama conventions in a lesson does take time to master. Look for opportunities to use still images, do some improvisation, and use some storytelling conventions. If in doubt use someone else's DiE lesson – there is no need to reinvent the wheel.

References

- Heathcote, D. (1984). Signs and portents. In L. Johnson & C. O'Neil (Eds.) *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected writings on education and drama* (pp. 160-169). London, UK: Hutchinson.
- Neelands, J., & Goode, T. (2015). *Structuring drama work* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Professor Jonothan Neelands is a National Teaching Fellow and Chair of Drama and Theatre Education in the Institute of Education, at the University of Warwick. He is an internationally renowned teacher trainer and workshop leader specialising in Drama in Education. He is the author of several books for teachers and students, which have influenced the development of Drama in Education in recent years, including *Structuring Drama Work* (Neelands & Goode, 2015), *Beginning Drama 11-14* (1998), and *Improving Your Primary School Through Drama* (2006).

Eva Göksel is a doctoral research assistant at the University of Teacher Education Zug and a PhD candidate at the University of Zurich, focusing on Drama in Education in teacher training. She coordinates the ETAS Drama and Literature Special Interest Group and she co-organises the "Drama in Education Days" in Konstanz, Germany: www.dramapedagogik.de