

DRAMA AND THEATRE EDUCATION IN CANADA: A SNAPSHOT

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ABSTRACT. This “Note from the Field” provides an overview of what is happening in K to University drama and theatre education across Canada. In addition to this snapshot I offer some considerations for extending this discipline and its potential impact on curriculum, policy and practice.

ENSEIGNEMENT DU THÉÂTRE ET DE L'ART DRAMATIQUE AU CANADA : UN PORTRAIT

RÉSUMÉ. Cette « Note du terrain » dresse un portrait du milieu de l'enseignement du théâtre et de l'art dramatique au Canada, du préscolaire à l'Université. En complément de ce portrait, je formule quelques suggestions pour enrichir cette discipline et augmenter son influence sur les programmes, les politiques et les pratiques.

As an art form, drama and theatre education has the potential to educate and foster a student's creative imagination and aesthetic sensibilities *as well as* to cultivate a socio-emotional, community, collaboratively-centered disposition. Because of the potential benefits that drama and theatre can have on the ongoing development and classroom experiences of Canadian teachers, teacher candidates and students, this “Note from the Field” will offer some background on what is happening in drama and theatre education in Canada. In this piece, drama education is referred to as a process-based subject. In drama education, students explore their bodies, minds and voices through a variety of games / activities. This work can lead to the development of self-awareness, creativity, imagination and community-mindedness. Theatre education is focused on preparing students for production or performance of some sort. This generally means that there is greater emphasis on the professional, aesthetic aspects of a theatrical production.

In a Canadian context, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to describe one single and unified way that drama and theatre education (from Kindergarten to University) is prepared, taught and experienced. However, if one were to compare the curricular documents of the provinces on these subjects, then similarities and overarching objectives and outcomes between provinces might nevertheless be seen. The difficulty with compiling data based upon intended curricular outcomes is that this kind of analysis does not account for the importance of *currere* or the running of the educational course: where the lived experience of students and teacher(s) with the material to be learnt is considered. Thus, to make the assumption that simply “understanding what a soliloquy is” might be checked off someone’s assessment criteria in two provinces, one cannot assume that each educational experience was / is the same.

However, because of the similar training that some theatre and drama instructors have received, and because of the common influences which Canada’s albeit as yet young history in drama and theatre education has inherited, from countries such as Britain, some assumptions as to what common practices might go on in classrooms can be surmised. As a trained conservatory-style actor, a/r/tographer, Learning through the Arts teacher and drama / theatre methodology professor for pre-service teachers, I bring multiple perspectives and experiences to this “Note from the Field.” After careful consideration as to how to begin this particular conversation, I have created the following chart, as a compilation of the information provided in *Canadian Drama Mosaic* (Burke, 2004) (See Appendix 1). *Canadian Drama Mosaic* was developed by drama and theatre education specialists from across Canada and highlights some of the similar and contrasting trends in drama and theatre education in each of the provinces except for Nova Scotia (as this province was not included in the document). The information foregrounds selected research and writings from theatre and drama workers across Canada. From the easy-to-understand format of this chart, in Appendix 1 we might arrive at some grounding as to what is and is not happening provincially in K-University level drama and theatre education.

If one is to compare the provincial programs for similarities and differences, one can see that generally:

- Drama as a methodology is supposed to be a part of most provinces’ elementary programs and in fact some provinces such as Ontario, Quebec and BC have in place provincial documents with specific, measurable outcomes that teachers must cover. (However, the consensus seems to be that it is still up to the individual teacher and their level of comfort with this subject whether or not drama is offered).
- Elementary theatre appears to occur at the teacher’s discretion (i.e. for Christmas plays or alongside work with community theatre artists).

- At the secondary level, it generally appears as though for grades 9-12, drama is offered as one of three electives (alongside music and art) that students must take in order to graduate. (These classes are often offered by English teachers).
- Theatre as an extra-curricular activity is generally offered on a school-to-school basis.
- Generally at Canadian universities, it appears as though drama / theatre for elementary teacher candidates is only sometimes offered.
- Theatre / drama courses are offered at some universities for teacher candidates wishing to specialize in high school drama / theatre as a teachable subject.

Based upon these generalizations derived from one compilation document, I would have to surmise that the reason drama and theatre are not always taught at the elementary levels has a lot to do with the training that teacher candidates receive when doing their BEds. I think that if drama / theatre were a required course for all elementary teachers (like Language Arts and Math are), the number of teachers who brought drama and theatre into their classes would increase simply because they would feel competent to teach this subject.

I also understand that at the high school level, drama / theatre is an elective that is sometimes offered as a choice alongside art and music. The problem with this is that oftentimes, the drama / theatre teacher is not specifically trained in this subject. This suggests that despite new curricular documents being created by the provinces that place drama and theatre in a more prominent position within the curriculum, teachers still appear to be the key to the implementation of such programs. When teachers are not comfortable with this subject, they are not likely to teach it.

NEXT STEPS

In *Against the Flow*, Peter Abbs (2003) makes an argument to establish a new arts paradigm that will help our culture and society to heal and recover from the media- and consumer-laden one that currently exists. He suggests that the arts provide the only way to do this since the arts are a vehicle for understanding and getting in touch with the spiritual and emotional springs which are currently untapped in each of us. Outlined below are three suggestions that outline potential pathways for the growth and development of drama and theatre education in Canada and generally.

I. Know ourselves

Your problem is the world's problem. As the problem is new you must approach it anew; there must be a revolution in thinking. This revolution is not based on any formula but on self-knowledge, knowledge of the total process of your whole being. (Krishnamurti, 2008, pp.1-2)

Conversation occurs both intersubjectively and intrasubjectively, in rooms of our own. There we turn away from the maelstrom of everyday life, and in solitude we can hear ourselves, including the otherness, the alterity within. (Pinar, 2004, p.251)

Krishnamurti suggests that in order to change the world we must change ourselves from the inside out starting with our own thoughts. William Pinar writes that in rooms of our own, we must spend time with our thoughts in order to find a way to quiet the noises of the world around us so as to listen to our inner silences. I believe that this deeply personal work is the only place from which to begin before venturing “out into the world” to share of oneself in an effective and truly engaged way. Arguably, some might suggest that reflective practitioners are the educational equivalent of critical self-awareness. But I am not convinced. When writing about the activated self, Arne Naess, the deep ecologist says:

to do a great many things is not enough; what is important is what we do and how it happens. It is those of our actions which affect our whole nature that is called activeness... and it is this activeness that develops our essence and touches our soul. (Naess, 2002, p. 76)

We need to have space and time away from busy-ness to allow ourselves to be transformed. This is not often the case for a teacher in today’s educational system. So how can critical self-reflection and awareness take place if distractions, deadlines, ambitions and the busy work of teaching fill our days? How can we cultivate a life that includes space and time for exploring meditation, yoga, art and the like unless we collectively value and set aside moments such as these? How can we move in new directions together until we consider the tensions that exist not only within our institutions and structures but which dwell within ourselves?

2. *Build a community*

Philip Bishop’s (2010) synthesis of John Dewey’s “great community” concept suggests that for a community to exist as something other than an association or organization that is based on people getting together around common needs or goals, a trust needs to be developed. This trust based on natural association occurs as a result of mutual respect and is suggested to occur organically. Dewey’s second condition for a great community is mutual benefit. This means that everyone in a community is growing as a result of being in it (with an ideal benefit being an individual’s experiencing freedom as a result of the trust they feel). This is a result of not only the possession and distribution of social knowledge (the third condition) but of this knowledge leading to active participation of all members being able to help direct the community with which they are a part (fourth condition). As one might guess, this would lead to the full integration of individuals in a community (fifth condition) and then subsequently, their ability to communicate through a series of signs and shared symbols (sixth condition).

Building a community in relation to the development of drama and theatre education is important because without a community, the potential for true change growing from tensions and disagreements filled with contradictions and concerns cannot exist.

It is often said that to work in the arts means that one is automatically assumed to be an advocate. However, sometimes taking on an advocacy role can connote trying to speak about a topic convincingly in order to garner support for your particular position. To me this is an inaccuracy because I think that when one is doing what they love, one speaks about it with pleasure and passion. In my experience as a K-University teacher and professor, I have most often met great support from colleagues for passionate conversations across the subject areas. What has been difficult for me is to connect with a community of other drama and theatre educators because there are often very few of them at one educational institution at one time. Luckily, new media technology has helped to overcome these hurdles and has allowed for greater collaboration and community building within the arts to occur across institutions. An exciting new undertaking that will extend and update the situation / information presented in this particular "Note from the Field" is an accepted-for-publication book I am co-editing with Dr. George Belliveau (Professor in Drama / Theatre Education at The University of British Columbia) and Dr. Monica Prendergast (Associate Professor in Drama / Theatre Education at The University of Victoria), *Canadian Perspectives in Drama and Theatre Education* (in press). This text will bring together voices of new and respected drama / theatre practitioners across the provinces in Canada as a way of highlighting the diverse and complimentary work being done in this country. We are working on creating a great(er) community!

3. *Work on / in the edges*

It is a long and complicated road to policy and curriculum changes at the public K-12 level in Canada. However, we must all continue to believe that our voices in these related matters are important and significant. Thus, after understanding oneself and then firmly becoming a part of a larger community, the next step is to work through curricular and policy changes so as to end the shaky relationship that drama and theatre have within various levels of the Canadian curriculum. Increasingly, there is an understanding of the way that knowledge generated from higher institutions can be mobilized and used across society.

Additionally, I think that Canadian BEd programs need to (minimally) require all elementary teacher candidates to take a drama and theatre education course at some point in time during their degree. There are several reasons for this suggestion:

- Increasingly, students are experiencing school violence such as bullying. The development of socio-emotional learning and the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes that drama specifically fosters can positively create a classroom community that helps not only address issues of self-regulation and awareness but also can potentially prevent such concerns.
- Collaboration, innovation, imagination and creativity are increasingly seen as skills that the next generation is encouraged to develop in order to succeed in our increasingly fast-paced and ever-changing society. Drama and theatre classrooms create an environment where risk-taking, possibility and change are commonplace. This means that students can develop the abilities to respond to the unexpected and co-create meaning within a variety of contexts as preparation for future participation in society.
- Given the higher levels of stress and standardization that students currently face, engaging in drama and theatre allows students to "learn through play" while simultaneously having fun!

Turning inward to understand one's own views and positions, reaching out to be a part of a larger drama / theatre education community and then taking the risk to dwell on the unknown edges of policy change and advocacy roles for including drama and theatre in all levels of schooling are the next steps that I suggest Canadian educators begin to take to help and develop a more consistent and unified Canadian drama and theatre education scene.

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APPENDIX I. DRAMA AND THEATRE EDUCATION IN CANADA (BURKE, 2004)

Province / Territory	Elementary Education	Secondary Education	University program(s)
British Columbia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not as much happening now as there was 25 years ago (when there was lobbying to firmly establish drama in the curriculum) - Elementary drama is often subsumed in language arts curriculum - Focus on performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1939: Drama and Oral Expression is created by the provincial Department of Education - By 1951, 855 students (34 classes) were taking drama in grades 11-12 & a new course was being offered to Jr. High students - 1960's saw greater drama enrollment & new courses added but, NOT an increase in trained drama/theatre teachers - 1980's-1990's saw increased Asian immigration to BC and this is thought to have led to a decline in interest in drama classes - 2004, new curriculum introduced 	<p>U of Vic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drama education is required for all elementary B-ed students - Required drama education for secondary drama specialists <p>SFU:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 elementary drama class (not required) <p>UBC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drama education is offered for all levels of BEd students
Alberta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1985: first drama curriculum in gr.1-6 was published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1936: drama became a high school course (but, teachers could not be certified to teach it until after WW 2) - 1959: British creative drama educator Brian Way conducted workshops throughout the province - 1970: grade 7-12 curriculum guide was released - Currently not a core subject, but offered in some schools as an elective (program dependent on teacher) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community theatre led to the University of Alberta's fine arts program in theatre - Baniff Centre for the Arts has a dramatic affect on the province's theatre - University of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge offer combined BFA/BEd degrees in drama education

APPENDIX I. DRAMA AND THEATRE EDUCATION IN CANADA (BURKE, 2004) CONT.

<p>Saskatchewan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1980-90's: K-12 arts curricula implemented in Saskatchewan schools - 2004: currently a core component of provincial curriculum (K-9), students are supposed to have 50 min. of drama/week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1936: drama/theatre first appears in curricular documents (as an option for gr. 9 & 10) - High school play festivals are a focus from 1950's-1990's - Collective play building is a large focus in the 1970's & 1980's in Northern Sask. - Collaborative work based on Augusto Boal is popular (1990's-2000) - 2004: Theatre is currently an option for grades 10-12 	<p>Not stated</p>
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