Reflecting on the wa(y)ves of learning to teach using drama

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This piece is drawn from self-reflective research on exploring enactive theory through learning to use drama in my teaching. It is further detailed in my Masters Dissertation (Bennie 2003). As a teacher wanting to improve my practice and believing that being able to use drama would be a step in that direction, I endeavoured to investigate the experience of learning to use this skill in my teaching. I found surfing to be a useful metaphor in coming to understand the difficulties in learning a skill that is sensitive to the many variables found in a classroom. Few learning experiences had clear answers. And while successes motivated more experimenting, failures were the greatest lessons.

I found myself standing on the beach watching surfers riding beautiful peeling waves and wondering if I could do it too as I stood alone entranced by the torque 'tween surfer and wave.

Drama educator Dorothy Heathcote eventually lured me into the ocean. Reading about her “conscious employment of the elements of drama to educate, to literally bring out what children already know but don’t yet know they know,” (Wagner 1979, 13) enthralled and motivated me to teach drama myself. Initially unsure that I could do it, I watched other surfers and read other writings. All were enticing in their narratives of tantalising success (FULL rides); riders exhilaratingly balancing the edges of falling and failing with soaring sensational success.

The beach that revealed these waves of possibility had also recently exposed me to theories of enactive thinking as developed by Varela et al (1991) and elaborated by Brent Davis:

The basis of cognition and hence learning is not to be found in the rationalist “I think” nor in the empiricist “I observe” but in the enactivist “I act.” Acting encompasses both thought and
observation: acting presumes both actor (subject) and acted upon
(object)...acting demands reunions of mind and body and subject
and object...cognition is inseparable from and fundamental to
perceptions and action (Davis 1996, 12).

Tempted by the waves and riders, I decided that I would explore drama in my teaching,
and at the same time, test these theories of the enactive that lapped at my feet.

**A Foamy on the Shore**

I would begin by first becoming aware of, and then study
my own embodied learning. Comfortable in a classroom,
and having read about ways to teach with drama, I had a
host of ideas I wanted to try. With encouragement, I found
a way to try to ride these promising waves with a few
other learners and an expert or two to guide the
experience.[3]

The next step had to involve my own (en)action.

Certain I could, I was determined to catch a big wave and let the learners, the children I was
working with, take over the balance of control—to direct the drama from within a situation I had
set up. But my supervisor did not want to let me or the others ride that wave. She insisted we try
a foamy on the shore. We were instructed, after a warm-up, to tell a story and then let the
children act it out. I resisted.

Where you are going in teaching is not to the end of a story but
through a story to an experience that modifies the children
(Wagner 1979, 50).

I could not imagine how giving children a story to act out, would allow for much modification.
What would they or I learn? Our instructions seemed too much like going to the end of the story
without any opportunity for the children to experience something new. Thus my first struggles
emerged, and with them my first questions about learning:

- Should I explore as I want or do as I am being told?
- What is experiential learning —following a structure or
doing my own thing and learning from my mistakes?
- What are the consequences of disobeying a supervisor?
- Who is in control here?
- Why should we start with a story?

**Trying for Clean Open Face**

I hung on the edge and pretended to follow instructions while trying to catch a real wave, to put
myself on the open face of possibility. But as I did this I noticed my determination to make my
board go in a certain direction wasn’t working. The learners were doing something else while I
tried to make them do what I wanted.

**School A - First Grade, Lesson 2, March 14 - Knocking control**

As I told the story, of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the children started
fidgeting. I paused and more started moving around on the floor, pushing
and complaining about each other, whispering, moving back, and
spinning around on the seat of their pants, and finding things on the floor

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to play with, or to point out to me. I asked/ordered them to quiet down and I carried on with the story. Most stopped what they were doing and listened. When I got to the part where the Pied Piper knocks on the door, I knocked on the floor and a few of them started knocking on the floor. Again I paused and asked/told them to stop knocking. One little girl said, “It’s Dillan, stop it Dillan.” I tried to carry on with the story as more children started knocking.

A friend who had been observing my class commented,

“When the kids started knocking just let them all knock once and then they get it out of their system. ‘Okay, everyone knock.’…Let it go a bit more, the kids can go—Don’t worry about control.”

Why could I not control my board, why was control such an issue?

My surf became a host of questions with little successful (en)action.

Why was I being so controlling when my aim was to let go of control; to go with the wave and try turning together? I thought I was the one being controlled. If I was being coached by John Mason (2002) using his “Discipline of Noticing,” he may have suggested that I mirror myself by questioning what things that I notice reveal about myself.

If Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) were coaching, they may have told me this was an aspect of a habitual pattern. I was “grasping,” the ninth link of twelve habitual patterns of the Wheel of Life, each of which reinforces the others to constitute "the pattern of human life as a never-ending circular quest to anchor experience in a fixed and permanent self” (Varela et al. 110). They would have explained that “grasping automatically sets off the reaction toward becoming, toward the formation of a new situation in the future” (114).

The wave had picked me up, I had ridden it but enforcing a pattern of control prevented me from flying free. Skills were needed that I could not gain by simply reading about them. Controlling the board is not about forcing it to follow a clear route. It is about letting it slide down the (hill) face of the wave and gently directing it by leaning parts of your body in certain directions depending on what the wave does. In class, those leanings may be as simple (or complex) as a question or musing out loud to subtly (re)directing the focus.

The first time I parachuted out of an aeroplane, I remember going blank; the experience was an overload that shut my mind down. When first learning to surf, the sensory overload can also trip the mind switch. As I became more and more accustomed to the sensory stimulation, space was made for awareness and then I let new possible responses creep in. Initially, my responses are automatic and based more on historical patterns of survival than possible future actions. The autonomy to act differently grows as Varela (1999) writes that “the key to autonomy is that a living system finds its way into the next moment by acting appropriately out of its own resources.” (11)

My resources as far as drama, acting and especially believing in what I am acting are simply undeveloped. The children and I are in the same position. (Journal Mar 8)

Varela et al. 1991, 80-81.

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experience does.

What I thought I knew I found I could not do. (I thought I had learnt from what I had read about how to do drama, but my choices of (re)actions and ability to enact them in the moment was limited, I believe, by a lack of experience. This, in turn, contributed to an inability to be mindful during these new experiences.)

My autonomy to act differently (let go of control) was limited because I did not have the resources to do so. Although I was constantly exercising and considered myself fit as a teacher, in new circumstances, I had to develop anew my fitness. In order to gain a range of responses to unexpected and unplanned situations, I had to practice doing what I was trying to learn. Fitness may also be seen in a genetic light. “When a gene changes so as to improve in this task, it improves its fitness….Fitness can also be taken as a measure of persistence” (Varela et al. 1991, 186-187).

Deep in a Barrel

The learners in the second place where I surfed were a bit older (all girls and mostly Caucasian—like me). We were instructed to start our classes by choosing a series of drama exercises that would grow from pair work to group work and finally to a class experience in some form of role-play.

Realizing my need to extend my resources, I made my way through these waves by focusing each lesson on different dramatic skills; slowly coming to know and trust each other as we (drama, learners and I) built belief in and knowledge of what we were doing, therefore being and coming to know. By doing drama, we were (be)coming to know it and how to do it.

The process of coming to know something is also a process of becoming: one becomes a surfer by going out and learning to surf as one becomes a teacher by stepping into a classroom and teaching. In the drama lessons we were (excitedly) being and coming to know ourselves as other characters in imagined situations.

School B - Grade 4, Lesson 7, June 13. Without silent attention

At the start of the lesson, I told the girls what I wanted them to think about their role (who they were, what their names were, what they looked like, what they wore and to remember what they did as they moved into the drama, as well as how they should move into it.) Immediately there were questions and as I started answering them, the circle broke into groups and the girls started talking to each other and asking me many questions. I noticed that where I would usually have demanded attention so that they could listen to each other’s questions, I just let them sort out problems in what was not a quiet and orderly way. I then loudly asked them to go into the next phase that I had explained and they flowed smoothly into the drama.

This moment stirred a feeling, a strange awareness without an immediate understanding of what was happening. I was breaking the pattern of “grasping” for control and, in turn, teaching this new pattern to students. I sensed a “reaction toward becoming, toward the formation of a new situation in the future” (Varela et al 1991, 114”). I felt vaguely uncomfortable with the noise and apparent chaos, which, I realize with hindsight, was actually structured as the girls organized themselves. What is interesting is how and why I resisted the urge to silence them, to overtly dominate and control the proceedings.

Gay[4] commented that I seemed much calmer and she probed by asking me whether it was because I was breathing, had practiced, or was beginning to trust the text, to trust drama. I thought it might be because, first of all, I had already established some control and authority in the first few lessons. Secondly. I felt that the drama was moving, that each step did not have to be controlled by me, that the girls knew what to do next. I now feel that they were sorting things out for themselves—as they needed
to. Perhaps in a strange subconscious way, I knew this and was happy to let it go as a result.

(Journal June 14)

I had given clear instructions as to how we were about to proceed. Perhaps I realized the girls needed to communicate to organize themselves. Clarifying questions through me would have slowed the whole process. Mostly, I think that having become more familiar with the girls, having set up some authority at the start and perhaps trusting their desire to do drama, to co-operate, I did not need to ensure that they remain focused. Perhaps I trusted the drama more. A story was set up, I knew where it was going, and the girls had a good idea of what to do too. I do not believe that practising my roles influenced this moment although it did have a great influence later in that lesson when I took on the role of the queen and felt a surreal floating feeling as my dress and manner changed and the girls all became intensely focused with awe in their eyes. We were riding the smooth open face of a real wave.

It seems obvious that I was always breathing. However, breathing also brings with it an image of an ebb and flow, control and release. By controlling initially, I could release later. The nature of the exercises we started with required my stopping and starting them, to direct the girls’ attention to the outcomes of each exercise. I rarely released either my breath or control. Once the story was set up, I aimed at directing from within the story as a character. I was no longer the teacher with tight constraints and objectives, having to make sure they were being achieved every step of the way by ensuring that everything went via me. Finally I was able to allow the girls to go where I always wanted them to go—to be able to discuss the lesson amongst themselves. Trust in myself, in the girls and in the process of drama along with more resources and hence increased confidence seemed to minimize my need for overt control of every step.

I exhaled at last.

A Clean Up Set

I had finally ridden a wave that I felt good about. I turned to paddle back out, only to see a huge set approaching in the form of six feet of churning white water: my first class at School C with a mixed group of Grade 6’s was a wave that took me by surprise.

School C—Grade 6, Lesson 1, August 5

It took about 10 minutes of coaxing and instructing to get their shoes off. Many did nothing when I told them to remove their socks and shoes while some objected and others just kept their socks on.

We eventually started by stretching and touching toes. I introduced the shaker, a tool I use to get students’ attention by having them freeze when I shake it, and then tried to get them to freeze by asking them what it meant to freeze. They knew but every time we tried, the students on the other side of where I was looking and often right in front of me, would not stop talking and murmuring. I got them to sit (as the ‘freeze’) and made the talkers stand. It got quieter.

We started ‘name echo,’ where one person steps into the circle, shouts their name and does an action. The others in the circle imitate this action and name in sequence. The game was fairly successful as most seemed to listen and repeat. I stopped them a few times to get them to listen and respond accurately, imitating the tone and pitch of the voice of the person saying his or her name.

I described how to do the next activity and asked volunteers to give an adjective with their name e.g. “Strong Sibongile, Clever Candice,” then proceeded to the next person. For those who could not or would not do it—I asked the group to help or made a suggestion myself. The class became more and more noisy as people on the other side of the group
talked and laughed about suggestions or who knows what else…so I did not proceed around the circle, but jumped around a bit, usually moving to where the disruption seemed greatest. I became more unsettled.

The secretary came in asking us to be quiet as the principal was in a meeting, then a teacher returned with the same request and then Gay reiterated it. I had little success in asking them to reduce their noise levels. They were noisy and I did not see how I was going to give a quiet drama lesson, let alone a quiet storm.

I asked them to walk around introducing themselves and to try and be the adjective describing their name. Most simply walked around, some introduced themselves without taking on any character. I was “crazy Kendal” and some were too scared to even shake hands with me. I went up to Gay half way and she said there was no way I could do a storm with them—I had already given up on that idea.

I have to wonder how Heathcote would handle a group so reluctant to listen to either their teacher or each other. I imagine she would have quickly assessed where their interests were and used that to gain their co-operation.

I find the best kind of guide to help me in considering material is (in) a short basic list: Drive (what makes a group want to do something)…[Heathcote 1971, 60].

I, on the other hand, tried to not lose my composure nor let them unsettle me. I felt an urgent need to be able to respond appropriately to the messages these learners were sending, but in the moment I found myself struggling to just stay calm and carry on teaching. After a few lessons of trying everything I knew with little success, I began to consider some of the (negative) opinions about this class that I had heard.

My failures with, and responses to, this class taught me more than any of my successes with the other classes. What I learnt, however, was more about myself, my teaching, and my assumptions about learning than about specifically using drama. I had not taken into consideration how great an influence context can have on a teaching situation. I suddenly experienced how much the weather affects the surf and even my attitude towards it. Davis and Sumara (1997, 122) suggest that “teaching and learning must be understood as simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the circumstances in which they occur.” In their teaching situation, they found that they “were drawn into collective patterns of expectation and behaviour” (Davis and Sumara 1997, 122).

The circumstance I was in and the learners’ expectations based on their history helped create the negative learning experience that they expected (and wanted?). My own history and the way I approached using drama in my teaching shaped the way I dealt with the class as with the way they responded to me. Co-emergence is the term Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) use to specify the reciprocal relationship between an organism and the environment. Davis explains this as “the world’s relationship to the organism is not merely uni-directional and constraining, the organism also initiates or contributes to the enactment of its environment (Davis 1996, 10).

I also believe that I may have created a new habitual pattern. Varela (Scharmer 2000) stresses the need to ‘let go,’ not only initially, but also to new ways of (re)acting that may come from an initial ‘letting go’ of a pattern. I had let go of some of my initial habitual patterns but grasped onto new ones to take their place.

I re-cognized that my learning about using drama would not progress in a linear fashion; it was far more related to context than I ever imagined.

Varela, Thompson and Rosch define what they call one’s structure (body, or self) as that which “comes about from the combined influence of biological constitution and one’s history of interaction in the world—a blend of inner and outer influences (Davis 1996, 9).
I thought I could develop the trust and group work needed to lead learners into a drama. Hadn’t I already successfully ridden a wave, venturing through drama into an imaginary situation from which I and my students had all learned? I thought I could do it again, easily. I hadn’t counted on impulsive winds that could cause erratic waves to knock me over or tumble me off when I did catch a wave. I learned from my experiences that different contexts could negate what I thought I had learnt and could enact.

Learning about the influence of different aspects of my environment on my teaching was a challenge and a benefit. Learning about the influence of different aspects of my environment on my teaching was a challenge and a benefit. My intended learning was diverted from learning to teach with drama to understanding the importance of context; coming to understand my threshold needs and that the non-linear progression of learning when my thresholds are not met accelerated when fresh insight was revealed. Although, as Reid (1996, 204) explains, what I do is determined by my structure, not solely by external influences. Those influences, in turn, those influences will affect and be affected by my structure and our interaction between.

Aspects of myself I would never have believed existed were revealed, sometimes in a reflection of my own struggle and also through others in a co-emergence I never expected. The possibilities for me to learn something new evolved through interactions that were not always either as fun nor exhilarating as they looked. “Learning to surf is teeth gritting trial and error” (Muller 2002).

With hindsight I now remember when I was the surfer on the waves:

While working in Taiwan, my husband and I often surfed at a tiny place called Ta Hsih with a beach whose name aptly translated to Honeymoon Bay. Standing shoulder deep in the water, you could see your feet on the black sand below, water so warm that bulky restricting wetsuits were only needed mid-winter. It was a beach break so mistakes didn’t carry the possibility of being dragged over rocks. I remember once catching a wave just big enough to be a challenge and just small enough to be fun. I took off in the perfect spot, and as the wave lifted me to the top edge of its lip, I dropped my shoulder and screamed down the face into a sharp bottom turn that took me straight back up again to the curling lip, which I managed to slip onto.

Holding on to the edges as the wave peeled along, I rode the very top lip until it pushed me over so that I floated back down to the sucking underbelly. Another couple of bottom and top turns sending fan-tailed sprays into the air and I started coming close to shore. I did a little barrel-role to end the wave perfectly and, knowing I would not improve on that wave, I let it carry me in.

On the shore, having witnessed the fun I had had—and it looked so easy—a flabbergasted stranger came up to talk to me about taking up the sport. I certainly encouraged him but omitted telling him that I had been doing it for three years at that point and that a wave like that didn’t happen very often.

It isn’t often that I manage to pull off spectacular successes in drama classes, but when I do, the feeling of adrenalin is remarkably similar. Riding a wave to a perceived perfection involves ‘torque’—a turning together, the wave and I. Context and response and an accurate reading of them is vital and extremely sensitive. It now feels like that must be what Heathcote left out of her stories about role drama. So inspired by what I had read, it all seemed so easy. Heathcote and the other drama theorists were so encouraging, just go and do it. (Heathcote talks about edging in to teaching using drama, by starting from where you are [Wagner 1979, 33].) I never imagined just how hard it is to ride that perfect wave.

This was one of the greater learning curves that experiential learning allowed me to ride. Reading narratives about bringing children to new realizations through dramatic experiences created a dream of possibility—one that I really struggled to come close to—actually doing it was so much harder. “The space of the possible doesn’t so much exist but evolves through our interactions with/ in the wor(l)d” (Hocking, Haskell, Linds 2001, xix). I did manage to touch the possible that I dreamt of when I rode the barrel, but doing it once was not enough to be able to do it at will. A constant interaction with both the world, through practice, and also with the word, in reflection and analysis, was and is needed to enhance the possibility of riding big barrels.

While more experience is sure to enable better torque ‘tween

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wave and I, I, (with more time in the moment to choose from a host of better responses), right now I wonder how anyone (but and teachers especially) can be taught how to do something by sitting and listening in a lecture theatre. No one learns to surf by talking, reading, and writing about how to ride waves. To really learn you have to get wet, and try.

Glossary of Surfing Terms

Foamy: A small wave rolling onto shore without any smooth face to ride, but only rolling white foam (Return)

Open Face: Just in front of where a wave breaks is a smooth slope, the face. (Return)

Surf: A trip into the ocean in which (hopefully) a number of waves are caught and ridden. (Return)

Barrel: When a wave becomes con-cave and water falls over you, surrounding you with a wall of crystal clear water as you ride the face inside a little (or big) aqua room. There is usually a hole at the end of the barrel when you are deep inside one, coming out of that hole (rather than falling off or having the wave implode on top of you) is a fabulous experience. (Return)

Huge Set: A set of waves is a group that is bigger than the majority and occurs at regular intervals. Many surfers will wait for the set, as the waves are usually better and if you surf them you don’t have to dive under them when they come at you in the form of churning white-water. A clean-up set is a particularly big set that will take all surfers by surprise, causing furious paddling for safety but resulting in most surfers being washed around underwater. (Return)

[1] In South Africa, a new curriculum requires that teachers teach drama, whether they have a experience of it or not.

[2] Dorothy Heathcore is a well-known drama in education specialist. She uses drama to create and share significant learning experiences. “Her aim is to build on pupils’ past experience and given them a deeper knowledge, not just of themselves, but what it is to be human, as well as an understanding of the society they live in and its past present and future.” (Johnson and O’Neill 1984, 12)

[3] Part of the UCT Drama Honours course involved going into schools and learning to teach drama by doing it, once a week. Each lesson was observed by some of the other students and a supervisor (either Gay Morris or Liz van Breda) with whom the lessons were later discussed.


About the Author

Kendal Bennie started her teaching career as an English teacher in Taiwan. So enthralled with working with children she quickly changed career path. Then, while studying an M.Ed at UCT she stumbled into using drama to teach and is still fascinated by the possibilities it presents.