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The quest for the heart-shaped diamonds: dilemmas arising from teaching drama as therapy

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The educational project presented in this article was carried out at The University College of Nesna in northern Norway. In the 2007 autumn term a new course module that focused on drama as medium in Special Needs Education was offered as an option to students on the Bachelor degree program. The course was run by an inter-disciplinary team from the departments of drama and education. The rationale behind the curriculum was to create an educational space that gave the students the opportunity of having personal experiences with drama and theatre based processes as applied in dramatherapy, educational therapy and Special Needs Education, mainly focused on children. The students were taught and worked together for one intense week, six times, throughout the academic year. Their backgrounds differed. Some were experienced social workers, teachers and health workers. Others were full time students studying to become teachers who were keen to learn how drama could be applied within Special Needs Education. Finally there was a group with mixed backgrounds and different motivations who seemed generally curious about the course and how they might benefit from it themselves without having a clear picture of future professional identity and role. The teaching methodology combined practical drama work with reflective discussions in and on practice. In general and from the beginning the students seemed aware of the importance of risk-taking in play and the necessity for theoretical reflection.

In Norway the field of Special Needs Education spans a broad area of practice that aims to cover a range of different perspectives concerning the development of people who, for some reason, have

difficulties within the normal educational and social framework as defined by the culture. Preschool- and school children, with and without learning difficulties, were the main focus of this project. A general assumption in the student group, that educational and therapeutic processes are somehow polarised, needed to be overcome. This perhaps reflects a broader cultural context and educational tradition in Norway, more than in Britain. There is a tendency to regard clinical and educational work with children and adolescents as essentially different professional fields of practice and training. The course presented here is an example of innovative practice that strengthens inter-disciplinary thinking in higher education.

The drama practice covered four aspects of the subject matter. This quadripartite way of looking at drama is often used within the field of drama in education (for example Christiansen 1986) and it advocates the following four aspects of learning:

1. the thematic (learning *about something* through drama)
2. the social (learning *about ourselves and others* through drama)
3. the personal/therapeutic (learning *about myself* through drama)
4. the aesthetic (learning *about the art form* of drama through learning about drama).

These four aspects of drama as a subject can be linked to different pioneers, practices and traditions which are important to know about. However there is a risk that this *theoretical* framing creates dichotomies and hierarchies that do not foster a drama practice where the whole psyche, mind and body together, are perceived as one. But on an introductory level, it seems to be helpful for students to be presented for this kind of thinking as it encourages a reflective awareness of the complexity of what is going on, when it's going on!

Simple improvisation exercises and drama games seemed a proper way to introduce drama as a subject in this context. Step by step the group became secure, developed trust and the ability to take new risks together in play. At the same time the field of Special Needs Education was presented and linked to

the drama practice. After focusing on Sherborne (1990) and Laban through an introduction to movement and touch, students were led through work on metaphorical stories, fairy tale and myth. Parts of the Russian folk tale about Vassilisa and the witch Baba Yaga was dramatised in different ways to introduce the group to some of the creative richness and potential of working with metaphors and thus at an obvious imaginative distance from our everyday reality. This oblique approach to individual and group exploration characterises much of dramatherapy practice. It is the spine of the Sesame Approach to drama and movement therapy. The following vignette illustrates the students' work at this point during the course:

The session leader (myself) is re-telling the story slowly and attentively while the group of students, all in roles they have chosen themselves, acts out the story. The space is a relatively large black box in which the different fictional locations have been marked out beforehand.

- "The forest lay in front of her, black and impenetrable. Once more the doll told her what to do. She took one of the skulls from the gate and put it on a stick. When she ran through the forest the eyes of the skull were glowing as if it were in the middle of the day."

A and H are both Vassilisa running through the imaginary forest that other students improvise on the spot. Another student, V, who plays the skull, is running along side A and H. B, who has chosen to play the tiny doll Vassilisa given to her by her dying mother, is also running with them.

At the other side of the forest/room are three other students waiting in an installation of tables and chairs covered with scarves. They are playing the two step-sisters and the wicked step-mother waiting in the step-mother's house. They are all burnt to death by the glow in the skull and then transformed into a beautiful rose bush. It is the character of the skull 'herself' that invites the three dead characters and one by one forms them into the rose bush. This is the end of the story – for the moment.

In a space of their own and still in character, the students are asked to imagine that he, she or it would be the main character in another, new story. What would it be? Where and with whom?

After a couple of minutes they all write down the title of this new adventure on a piece of paper. Afterwards, and out of character, some of the story titles are shared, while others are kept private.

The students seemed to become more aware and get insight of the relationship and potential of self-reflection that drama work entails through structured work in role and improvisations. In the story the theme of the helpful doll is important. This was pedagogically mirrored later as everybody made a doll each to use as a well-known trust-building tool in communication with clients. Furthermore, the group work seemed to enhance the outcome. Most drama educators work consciously with the relationship between the individual and the group and know through experience how the one can profit from the other in the maturation process of the group members. In this kind of educational project, the hardest pedagogical challenge seems to be how to engineer a learning process where the students understand and acknowledge the *conditions* necessary to experience drama as an *art form*. For this to happen it seems to me that they need to experience themselves, at one and the same time, as creators and created in a flow that touches them on a deep personal level and surprises them with its potency. To understand the ontology of drama one needs to experience that its aim *is* the experience itself where artistic communication and self expression are one.

It is however also important to reflect cognitively to make distinctions and theorize according to professional standards. It is useful to do this with students who, in their future work, will plan, structure and lead drama sessions; for example, to reflect on and discuss the term *resilience* within a framework of social competence, personal development, physical skills, imagination and so forth. Furthermore it is useful to look at the drama practice and the kind of exercises that will potentially give the child, client, pupil or student the opportunity to develop in the areas just mentioned and gain self awareness and knowledge to act confidently and appropriately. All this is useful as long as the epistemology of the art form is respected and understood, whether drama, music, dance, poetry, painting or other visual art forms.

The ultimate aim in using the arts as therapeutic tools is to support the client or pupil in his or her *own* developmental process, where self-regulation (Jung in Stevens 1994: 72) is more important to learn and practice, than immediate behavioural results. These risk being acquired superficially, not through the whole psyche, but by the cognitive mind alone. The holistic learning process that drama and the arts *can* provide is potentially transformational and confronts the human being with its existential loneliness, as well as its universality and connection on the transpersonal level. I would argue that learning about drama *for real* is not possible without experiences that result in some kind of individual in-depth transformation. Drama is an art form and the aesthetic experience is at the core both as a learning medium and expressive art form.

At the end of the course the students were organised in groups for their practical exam. They all planned a drama session for a hypothetical client group and carried this through with the rest of the student group as participants. One can say that this in itself was drama since it was framed as a form of role play between drama practitioners (teacher/therapist) and a group of potential child/adolescent clients. One example of drama practice the students chose for this day is illustrated in the following vignette:

- "Steady! I am holding you. You can board the ship safely. Sit down quickly and find your place. Get the oars ready. All aboard. Ship a' hoi!"

Student C is guiding the group into an imaginary ship and once all 13 have settled on the floor she goes in front and initiates the joint effort of rowing the ship. Each with one imaginary oar they find a rhythm together and start rowing across the ocean at a steady pace.

C's group is leading the rest of the group on a journey through the four elements making sure that aims such as social inclusion and physical awareness are achieved. The fictional universe is full of roles such as pirates, explorers, map readers and so on. After a year of training it seems natural for everyone to play and they seem comfortable in exploring the fictional reality through a character. The transformational power of play seems obvious for me when watching the group.

Not only do they seem to have acquired knowledge and insight in how to structure a drama session for special needs education, they also appear confident and playful together.

In an academic educational setting it can be a challenge to create a learning environment which provides the necessary conditions for transformational processes to take place. Assessment format, time schedule and curriculum risk jeopardising the natural flow and timing of any organic process. Working as a drama educator is different from working as a dramatherapist. To me it seems important to respect the educational space and make it clear to the students that it is not a therapeutic space. The therapeutic space would demand a different relationship and contract between us. However, in order to convey the idea of drama as therapy, we need our students to take risks and 'forget' that they are students. My experience, both as a drama lecturer and as a student, is that this double reality is undoubtedly possible to relate to. It mirrors a general 'dramatic' aspect of life of *being in* and *reflecting on*, not dis-similar to Winnicott's concept of me and not-me (Winnicott 1972). The learning outcome paradoxically encompasses both life processes and art processes when drama as the subject-matter is in a safe space for exploration

Working with the arts provides open opportunities for experiential transformational processes. *Personal development* has been an important aspect in the history of drama education, not only through the work and writings of pioneers such as Slade (1954), Pemberton-Billing/Clegg (1965) and Way (1967), but also through Ward (1930), Spolin (1963) and Heathcote/Bolton (1994). Dramatherapy is a growing professional field due to pioneers such as Slade (1954), Lindqvist (1998) and Jennings (1990) and others. One dilemma arising from teaching drama as therapy is that the educational space has to be able to embrace both education and therapy. Working with creative processes is a risky business as it should be. To be able to take risks it is important and necessary to create a space that allows the participants to temporarily put aside their social role as students, to be able to experience themselves, also as clients. Every student needs to get in touch with his or her 'inner child', in order to be able to develop his or her inner supervisor (based on Jennings 1990: 52). At the end of the day intuitive knowledge and empathy

with our clients is based on our self knowledge and awareness. This is consequently an educational aim, yet it also works therapeutically and self-regulative. It broadens the student's self-insight, self-awareness and feeling of Self.

The quality and level (complexity) of reflection depends on our ability as educators to allow the permissive space to unfold and guide the reflective process responsibly and adequately. On the one hand the reflective process is a 'looking on' process, looking from the outside and analysing with objective knowledge. On the other hand it is also a 'being *and* looking in' process, not looking away from ourselves, but rather *into* ourselves. There is a connection to humanity which is a shared feeling of belonging to something meaningful and bigger than the individual, and yet where I experience my individuality as unique, whether I am the adult therapist/teacher or the child/client. I believe it is in this way the child experiences being *seen*, in the sense of *Esse Is Percipi*, pointed out by Hillman in *The Soul's Code* (1996). The role of the mentor, according to Hillman, is to "see beyond" (113), and in that lies the power and gift of perception, since it reveals to the supervisee his or her uniqueness or *acorn*, in Hillman terminology. This is something we can read, write and talk about, but as most of us know: "the proof is in the pudding".

I would like to also draw attention to the limitations of any course or university module of the kind I am presenting here. Many dilemmas are perceived when teaching drama as a *tool* to social workers, teachers, health workers, counsellors, therapists and others. There is a constant risk of making too many compromises and reducing the field to becoming "a useful bag of exercises". Furthermore the field of dramatherapy practice is characterized by an eclectic abundance of theatrical traditions. Some are more theatre-based, such as Jennings; others more play-oriented, such as the Sesame Approach (Lindkvist, Slade). As a common denominator they appear to all be deeply rooted in ritual. There are also different traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. Little of this was made part of the course that I have presented here which was a basic introductory course to the field of drama and Special Needs Education. Still I have intended to show that it was possible to convey the core of drama in its own right. When drama is taught as an instrumental tool *without* the necessary in-depth experiential study to really *know* the tool, it

becomes in my view a *bad* tool. This is similar to what Peter Slade named in his book *Child Drama*, as *bad drama* (Slade 1954: 25). This does not refer to doing drama right or wrong, or even better or worse. It is related to the relationship between the individual's inner impulse and need to express himself and the way of communicating this in the art-form. One useful theoretical framework on this relationship between the aesthetic impulse and the medium is developed by Malcolm Ross (Ross 1982). An experiential understanding of this relationship will prevent misunderstandings about the concept of drama as only a tool.

Another practitioner who has met challenges similar to those I have described is American John Nolte in the book *Drama for Life* (Lepp 2000). Nolte who has worked clinically with psychodrama for many years, writes about his experience as a course educator in similar settings as the one I have presented. He discusses similar dilemmas that arise when teaching psychodrama and wonders whether his experience of drama being used as a tool superficially is restricted to psychodrama (221). My experience over the years as a drama educator is that this is a general problem in drama training. My impression is that this happens regularly and that there is considerable value in querying the effectiveness and learning outcome of short training modules where drama and theatre based processes are considered an instrumental *tool* for whatever purpose, be it therapy, political emancipation and in other contexts. This may particularly be the case in training modules similar to the one I have presented. It seems important to create a learning environment where respect and risk-taking are equally encouraged. There is a danger of future malpractice if the core of the art form is not experientially understood in depth. I believe that in the project I have presented the team of educators was conscious of this danger and addressed the problem by providing a permissive educational space that allowed the students to challenge themselves and experience the power of transformation in drama and theatre based processes.

The role of student can be an obstacle to the adoption of a position as an experiential group member. Working in the art form with metaphors and obliquely exploring one-self and the group is a useful way of overcoming this resistance. At the same time this is an exemplary way of communicating

and making a point about how drama as therapy has a special power and potential. The distance within the metaphor creates a passage or bridge to the deeper Self that tricks the rational ego so to speak. During the last session of the course led by the students with the rest of the group as participants there seemed to be examples of this taking place. The presence of external examiners may well have increased the need for the group to meet and relate to each other in the metaphoric realm one last time before the end of the course. After a year the students seemed to have expanded their professional knowledge theoretically and practically, also on a personal level. However personal change is a complex phenomenon. Changes of behaviour exhibited in groups may act as precursors and initiate deep level shifts of transformation which often can only be understood retrospectively. By the end of the course my co-educators and I could conclude that we had succeeded in dealing with the dilemmas arising from the tensions field of drama and therapy in a constructive way. To their exam the student group demonstrated that they were able to lead and create a drama session that allowed for flexibility, choice and for each individual to contribute freely. After a year we could conclude that the students seemed ready and able to use drama in their further professional careers as Special Needs Education teachers, health workers, educational therapists or drama practitioners in cultural settings. By applying dramatherapy practice as a learning medium based on an oblique approach and working from within the art-form, the educational and self-regulating therapeutic processes had run concurrently and overlapped during the teaching program. One last example of the student-led drama practice at the end of the course illustrates the result of this learning process:

The whole group is standing close together in a circle, listening to music symbolising a time machine. It takes them to the planet of the 'heart-shaped diamonds'. They arrive and it seems empty until D, dressed in a long blue cloak with a crown on her head, comes out from behind a curtain welcoming them as the Queen of the planet. She asks the travellers about the journey and challenges on the way. She then leads them to a strange silvery tree decorated with the heart-shaped diamonds. Before leaving the planet in the time machine everyone is offered a

heart-shaped diamond to take back to the present day earth..

Once everyone is back on earth one of the facilitators gives everyone the opportunity to think about what the diamond can be used for. All the students are now sitting in a circle. The examination board of four people is sitting behind tables by the wall, taking notes, looking at their watches and keeping time.

- "The diamond will help me to be generous to my mother today," says P.

B next to her says: - "I will use it to remember this journey."

Words like warmth and positive energy pop up around the circle. Some are silent.

H says: - "I will look in the old album with photos of my dead grandfather and remember the things that we used to do together."

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