Into the sea of imagination: re-considering role and collaboration in the Sydney Water Reckoning Drama Project

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Abstract

This paper reports on the exciting Sydney study within the ground-breaking international rolling role project, which re-considered Heathcote’s rolling role strategy in a twenty-first century, web-based learning context. Using digital pretexts, notions of water sustainability and co-operation were considered through drama. The Sydney site comprised a secondary drama class and their teacher in an urban high school, working on a three-month drama programme with three academic teacher/researchers. This paper analyses the drama programme by examining the way teacher/researcher roles were renegotiated within this multi-dimensional drama project, working across drama classrooms and online collaborative platforms. It was found that teacher/researchers operated as curators of the drama learning experience and as role players and actors at key moments throughout the process drama as it rolled out across the multiple international sites. The study emphasises the importance of collaboration as scholarly activity and professional learning. Importantly it illustrates how the teacher/researchers, teacher and students were engaged imaginatively and critically in a new dynamic learning process, involving a reconceptualisation and reconsideration of Heathcote’s legacy in the digital age.

Keywords: drama education; Dorothy Heathcote; rolling role; teacher-in-role; process drama; practitioner research; digital technologies, sustainability
Applying Dorothy Heathcote’s teaching through role approach

1.1 Introduction
The Sydney Water Reckoning Project explored the effect on student learning of pedagogical models that use drama and digital tools repurposed for contemporary sustainability education. The Sydney researchers and authors of this article worked with a drama teacher and young people in a secondary school drama curriculum context and connected with four other education sites around the world (Noosa, Athens, Singapore and Seattle) in a larger project called The International Water Reckoning Project: www.water-reckoning.net. The international project explored the way Dorothy Heathcote’s rolling role strategy might work across digital platforms, enabling different classes to create a shared dramatic context about a community and explore different facets of that fictional community through a sharing of artefacts and creative responses (Heathcote 2002:6). All sites in this broader project built and used web-based platforms for the participants to share the drama work they had created and as a repository of ‘digital artefacts’ (videos, images, documents), shared and rolled between sites. Creative materials from other sites connected students to a central dramatic process and informed the way the drama then unfolded in the Sydney site. The project referenced and extended the digital learning work of drama educators Carroll (2002 & 2004), Carroll & Cameron (2003), Davis (2009 & 2012), Sutton (2012), Philip and Nicholls (2009), Nicholls & Philip (2012), Hatton (2013) and others. Findings from the Sydney Water Reckoning Project contribute significantly to art-based knowledge systems in the fields of sustainability education, place pedagogy and role-based drama learning. In particular, this article reports the practitioner research in a Sydney classroom of Years 9 and 10 drama students and critically examines the repurposing of Heathcote’s teaching through role approach for water sustainability awareness elaborating on imaginative role playing through both embodied and digital learning.

1.2 Applying Dorothy Heathcote’s approach of teaching through role
Dorothy Heathcote (1926-2011), a renowned drama practitioner, advanced the use of dramatic role play as a means of learning creatively and symbolically about the world in which we live. This method of learning through drama, where role players imaginatively step into the shoes of another by adopting attitudes and character traits, incorporates a range of role-based practices. The following Heathcotian practices are relevant to the Sydney Water Reckoning project: teacher-in-role (Wagner, 1979), students-in-role (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Simons, 2000), mantle of the expert (Heathcote & Bolton 1995) and rolling role (Heathcote in Johnson &
O’Neill, 1984; Heathcote, 2002). Teacher-in-role was used by the classroom drama teacher and the drama researchers to enrol students into the process drama (Haseman, 1991; O’Toole, 1992; O’Neill, 1995, Bowell & Heap 2001), respond to dramatic pretexts (O’Neill 1995), direct and shape the dramatic narrative, and help build belief in the fictional context of the drama.

Ardus Unda, the name given to an imaginary civilisation that had been submerged underwater as the result of an environmental catastrophe, provided a fictional context for the Water Reckoning Project, initiated in particular by Sue Davis (Noosa site) and Xenia Simou (Athens site). Striking photographic images of Jason deCaires Taylor’s ‘Human Nature’ underwater sculptures http://youtu.be/vKxrVmfU3-E/ were presented as if they were frozen people of the underwater society of Ardus Unda. From these digital images, the teacher/researchers crafted the fictional narrative of the imaginary people of Ardus Unda to accentuate the significance of water in the environment. Using a pretext to focus the dramatic narrative and enhance the in-role responses of the students is a drama strategy developed by Cecily O’Neill (1995) that emerged from the Heathcotian approach. The plight of the frozen people of Ardus Unda was rolled out from one project site to the next reminiscent of Heathcote’s rolling role approach (Heathcote in Johnson & O’Neill, 1984; Heathcote 2002) as a digital pretext. Other digital pretexts relevant to the Sydney project were a film clip of the plight of the Pacific Island of Tuvalu that is slowly being submerged by rising sea water; a video of the Seattle site town council meeting displayed on the Placestories website; and, a video from the Noosa site showing the Ardus Unda emissaries emerging from the ocean.

Roles adopted by the Sydney teacher/researchers in the process drama (Morgan & Saxton 1987; Heathcote & Bolton 1995) were that of provocateur and information seeker (investigative journalists from a range of media organisations), information giver about global water conditions (data controller), low-status assistant to President, (conference convenor for the fictitious Global Institute for Water and Sustainability) where the students enrolled as high-status scientific experts. Further roles adopted by the teachers were the chair of the town hall meeting (as Premier Larry O’Barrell), a returning officer for the town hall vote, and descendants of the fictional underwater society of Ardus Unda.

The Sydney project was unique in that it took place in a state-based curriculum context which focuses heavily on playbuilding as a core area of study. Process drama including the Heathcotian teacher-in-role methods were new to the students and teacher, so the research team adapted the drama learning design to suit this context. In this sense, what the Sydney project did was reconsider Heathcote’s ideas.
and strategies on learning through role play and operated within a process-based playbuilding form, allowing students to create and playbuild scenes and performances throughout the drama building their water sustainability awareness through in-role relationships.

2. Method of the Sydney secondary school project

2.1 Introduction
The Sydney Water Reckoning project set out to investigate Dorothy Heathcote’s practice of rolling role undertaken in two Australian schools as well as three other sites around the globe. The teaching and research materials were co-constructed within the pedagogical frameworks of process drama and rolling role. All international sites shared the common digital pretext of the Jason deCaires Taylor’s underwater sculptures to begin the drama about the disaster in a fictional community of Ardus Unda.

2.2 Participants and researchers
The student participants of the Sydney project were 20 Year 9 and Year 10 drama students aged between 14 and 16 years of age from an independent co-educational school in Sydney, Australia. This large secular urban inner city school enrolled fee-paying students from a wide socio-geographical area. This volunteer group of students, comprising a gender mix of nine boys and eleven girls, were studying a drama elective class. The early career drama teacher also participated in the study by co-planning the teaching materials and co-teaching with the researchers a unit of seven sequential drama sessions applying a digital rolling role approach.

In the Sydney site, the participant students were studying a 100-hour drama elective course endorsed by the New South Wales (NSW) Board of Studies as their first semester of formal drama curriculum study in their secondary schooling. For many, they had no previous experience with process drama and role-play, which is a way of working in the core NSW drama curriculum area of playbuilding though some of the students had been involved in the school’s extensive co-curricular drama programmes prior to taking this elective course. Similarly, the participant early career drama teacher had not had a previous opportunity to teach playbuilding through process drama. The three participant researchers, referred to in this article as teacher/researchers, provided a significant contribution to the study and teaching process by conceptualizing the drama classroom practice as well as planning, teaching, observing and recording the drama lessons.
2.3 Research materials and procedure
Central to the Sydney research study was the researchers’ endeavour to design an applied practitioner (Haseman 2006; Taylor 1996) seven-session drama programme for the Year 9 and Year 10 drama students at the Sydney school during May to June in Term 2, 2013.

Research materials included the common digital pretext for teaching of the drama programme, other digital and collaborative web-based learning platforms such as Placestories, Google hangouts, YouTube and Skype conferences. Data collection comprised an online pretest survey completed by the students, which gathered demographic data, participant's experience with drama and digital technologies, attitudes about sustainability and inter-cultural understandings. Data collected during the implementation of the drama programme included observations, field notes, planning/teaching notes, classroom video recordings, digital uploads of reflections, images and student drama products. At the conclusion of the drama programme, an online survey gathered data about students’ perceptions of what they learnt across the seven drama sessions and what tools and strategies contributed to their learning about drama and about water sustainability. Then four focus group interviews with students and an interview with the teacher conducted by the researchers provided an opportunity for all participants to extend their responses about what they learnt and how they engaged in the process drama.

This paper analyses the collaborative teaching and inquiry process that occurred through the rolling role process at the Sydney site. In the wider international project and in our own localized site, a juxtaposition of teaching and research materials occurred when the project extended the learning possibilities for participants beyond what is usually feasible within a single school context through creative, collaborative and interactive online web sites. Students, teacher and researchers ideas and materials were shared between other Australian and international project teams through social, conceptual and performative online sites that provided opportunities for all participants to interactively plan, share, exhibit and analyse the drama learning in an organic and responsive way. Peer monitoring between the researchers from the five global project sites occurred during fortnightly online meetings to consider teaching and researching processes and feedback on site products, research tools, data collection and analysis.

The Sydney teaching data and materials included the Jason deCaires images which established the fictional Ardus Unda community for the drama: firstly, in the future time as scientists excavating artefacts found at the bottom of the sea; secondly, as Ardus Unda people in the time of the ‘great disaster’; thirdly, the emissaries who
travelled into the future to seek help for their community; then lastly, in the past as ancestors of Ardus Unda sending messages to their descendants in a dramatic and symbolic ritual.

2.4 Analysis
Data were processed from a variety of sources – the teacher interview, four student focus group discussions, two student surveys, drama programme, video footage, fieldwork notes of teaching and observing the drama, web uploads and online interaction. The fieldwork data gathered in the Sydney school was analytically processed using a ‘coding paradigm’ (Strauss 1987:5), which enabled the qualitative data to be organized in a graduated system. Analytical coding took the form of exploring and understanding rich qualitative data, discovering patterns, constructing new concepts and linking of these into theoretical frameworks (Saldana, 2003). The analytical process built cumulatively on the insights derived from the data at both the textual and conceptual levels. For the purpose of this article, these concepts were synthesized to determine the effect on student learning using teacher-in-role in embodied forms and digital spaces within the social context of environmental sustainability. This paper reports on the impact of teacher in role as a significant strategy for student engagement within the rolling role process.

‘Digital pretext’ emerged as a significant category in this study, which involved crafting and re-contextualising a series of provocative photographic images, endowing them with social and dramatic significance and introducing them through the teacher-in-role method. Analysis of the ‘multiplicity of roles’ adopted by the teacher/researchers formed the concept of ‘curating’ the complex artistic learning process with social, aesthetic and subjective learning outcomes. These, and other categories such as ‘collaborative team’ of teacher/researchers, and students as ‘active citizens’ emerged from the broader concept of learning through drama.——

3. Findings and discussion about teaching through role

Three key findings for discussion in this paper are: the re-positioning of teacher/researcher as curator of the learning experience; the primacy of teaching through role for student engagement; and the importance of collaborative teaching and research in a rolling role project. These findings suggest a more expansive conceptualization of the role of the teacher and ‘teaching through role’ in a multi-dimensional project such as the Water Reckoning Project. Due to the multiple sites, number of teacher/researchers, use of digital technologies, various co-creators and audiences, and the different modes of working, teachers served many functions during the drama learning programme. Throughout the project different roles were
adopted by participants and importantly by the teacher/researchers both inside and outside the fictional context of the drama.

3.1 Drama teacher as curator of the learning experience
The Water Reckoning project highlights the changing roles of the teacher/researchers to manage the competing demands, both artistic and educational, that were present. In many ways the teacher/researchers operated as curators of the learning experience: curating past rolls of the drama; curating and creating the learning process; crafting and distilling the pretexts; as well as curating and manipulating digital technologies for different audiences over time. The concept of curation is useful in capturing the complexity of tasks and roles the teacher/researchers adopted within the learning process as it helps to develop and connect intimate knowledge of heritage works and geo/socio/cultural contexts albeit in a fictional drama world. In terms of this analysis, the role of teacher/researchers as curator is one that is endowed with the mantle of learning advocate through the art form of drama by way of bringing the old art represented by the digital pretext of the frozen underwater images to life through role-play and improvisation to make emergent new online art as a surprising outcome (Sylvester, 1999). In these curatorial ways the teacher/researchers demonstrated how we “know art, collect it, care for it and delight in sharing it with others, helping them to see it in ways they may not have discovered if left on their own” (Eeds and Peterson, 1991). If the teacher/researchers are the curators in the Water Reckoning Project, then, as Jacobs (2013) has observed, the Sydney drama students take on the role of the artists who respond to the curator, not by merely replicating their brief, but adding to it with imagination and creativity.

Curating past ‘rolls’ of the project
Although being the last international site in the sequence of the roll, the Sydney team was active planning participants across time in the months that preceded our ‘roll’ and across space, with the four other sites around the globe, to design the curatorial brief for the Sydney drama students. In terms of the design of the learning experience for the Sydney Water Reckoning Project, ours was very much a synthesis and a curation of what had gone before at the other sites. Drawing on the teacher/researchers’ pedagogical knowledge, expertise and interests in the drama that was developing across the other sites, the team worked with and interpreted the overall collective international drama and developed a series of teaching episodes that were tailored to respond to the Sydney site and its NSW drama curriculum context. As the Sydney class was the last site to join the rolling drama, all the prior learning, experiences and episodes that preceded it was rich terrain to use and build upon. It was a position that enabled us to synthesize the insights gained by
other drama teacher/researchers and students, so we could select aspects of prior moments from other sites for our own investigation.

**Creating, curating and managing the learning process in the Sydney ‘roll’ of the drama**

In her original conception of the rolling role strategy, Heathcote used the strategy to drive the learning through role-play and utilize the dramatic processes to unite different curriculum areas across a single school on a common project or fictional endeavour (Heathcote 2002). The Water Reckoning project focussed on a common educational project where different groups of students around the world engaged in a common dramatic purpose and narrative but the educational contexts for our projects were very different and our teaching decisions were tailored to suit the groups and contexts in which we worked. So this project was working across sites, countries and contexts, but also within specific school contexts. Unlike Heathcote’s earlier work, the Sydney project did not involve working across subject areas or connecting and weaving the drama into different curriculum areas. For the Sydney project we were working inside the drama curriculum, where drama was an established subject positioned as a Year 9/10 curriculum unit, led by teacher/researchers who were specialist drama teachers. Working with a state-based curriculum which foregrounds playbuilding and a more theatrical conceptualisation of drama education, the rolling role process drama was re-interpreted to serve the local curriculum context of the Sydney site and the learning needs of a class in their first semester of elective drama study. This involved structuring opportunities for students to develop their understandings of drama elements as they worked, using them explicitly and providing numerous opportunities for students to learn and practice playbuilding within the drama. Drawing on established playbuilding strategies (Hatton & Lovesy 2009) this project positioned students as artists, devising the action at key points in the narrative. Given the curriculum context, students needed to develop their capacities in manipulating the aesthetic form and extending their role and performance skills.

Heathcote referred to rolling role as ‘a soap opera of sorts as many people add to the complex developments which arise from servicing the story’ (Heathcote 2002: 5). By the time the Sydney project joined in the whole sequence of the rolling role, much of the narrative had been explored in different ways in the projects done by other sites. Rather than pick the narrative up at the end or take a new direction within the overall drama of Ardus Unda, the Sydney team believed it was important for the Sydney students to be given the opportunity to engage with the narrative on their own terms before they viewed materials created by other sites. Like the other sites’ preceding work, we used the core frames developed for the main drama and moved...
students through these phases of action. As curators of the learning experience, the teacher/researchers made strategic curriculum and pedagogical choices to ease the Sydney students into the role-based inquiry and simultaneously address the curriculum content of the NSW 7-10 Drama Syllabus. (An example of students playbuilding short scenes of Ardus Unda families giving keepsakes for the future for the emissaries, midway through the Sydney Water Reckoning project: http://placestories.com/project/8501#l=v=stories. A key feature of the curation/teaching process was its fluidity as the teacher/researchers needed to be responsive to the process of meaning making that was unfolding in the Sydney drama and the international contexts. In the Sydney project this involved managing a range of purposes and dramatic functions within the drama, to position students as inquirers, audience (for real information and creative works from other sites) as well as creative artists in the dramatic process.

**Crafting and distilling pretexts**

The Sydney project highlighted the role of the teacher/researcher as a curator of the various pretexts that served to drive the dramatic action. The team chose to establish the students in role as scientists reviewing strange artefacts from the lost fictional underwater land of Ardus Unda prior to using the Jason deCaires Taylor visual pretext. These artefacts were chosen by the teacher/researchers, who engaged a local theatre designer to make items for this collection. Students received a letter inviting them to the Global Institute for Water and Sustainability. Students then self-selected a ‘scientific expertise’, such as that of an archaeologist, marine biologist, seismologist, for example. In role, students were presented with a box of mysterious objects and artefacts sourced from beneath the sea. Students were given gloves and instructed to unpack the artefacts and tag them with suggestions of their purpose and history. The students responded to this task enthusiastically, adopting roles of expertise demonstrated through their voice, movements and gestures.

‘….the one I found challenging I think was the one where we were professors and we were studying archaeological things cause it really makes your imagination work and sometimes you’re just a bit stumped because you think it will sound fake and you know that if you just say it in a confident way then it will probably come out that you know what you are talking about.’

(Student focus group interviews)
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Figure 1: Collection of artefacts used in the first whole class role-play as scientists and experts.

Figure 2: Identifying and tagging the artefacts
It was after this activity that the teacher/researchers showed the students, remaining in role as scientists, the Jason deCaires Taylor images ‘Human Nature’ sculptures and encouraged them to make links between the images and the artefacts they were investigating as a means of developing the dramatic context.

Due to the amount of digital images, artefacts and stories that were being generated and uploaded onto the web-based Placestories platform simultaneously around the world throughout the larger project, the teacher/researchers had to make clear choices about what the Sydney students would be shown given the tight time frame of the project. This ‘crafting’ was necessary to ensure that the drama remained meaningful for our students and had some continuity to it rather than just becoming a series of one-off reflections in response to others’ work. By the third lesson the teacher/researchers introduced students to the Tuvalu video [http://www.thesinkingoftuvalu.com/the_documentary_king_tide_trailer.php](http://www.thesinkingoftuvalu.com/the_documentary_king_tide_trailer.php). Now the fictional world of Ardu Unda was merged with the real plight of a Pacific island close to home. Students were deeply moved by this video, particularly the concept of some community members choosing to remain on the island and not be relocated despite the environmental consequences. The focus group data reflects the impact of this ‘real world’ connection:

> When we watched that thing about that island that’s going to get sunk. That was sort of like what made me think the most and one of the things that hit home. It was one of the most emotional pieces that we did, so it really helped me connect to the project.

> Well it was when you showed us a video of the people who actually have that in real life, like the islands going under water it kind of made like a stronger connection ‘cause it actually could be real.

(Student focus group interviews)

From here the tension in the drama rose considerably, as students now in role as Ardu Unda residents had to make choices about ‘who would be saved’. (See detailed vignette about this drama activity in section 3.2 of this paper). As their own drama had been firmly established, the teacher/researchers chose to show the Sydney students more of the work that had been created from international partners, particularly the work of students from the other Australian site in Noosa. Later students returned to the artefacts in a series of roles plays. The artefacts now became objects of significance to specific families from Ardu Unda and finally, gifts for the ‘chosen ones’ to take forward into the future.
Curating and manipulating digital technologies for different audiences over time
This project also identified shifts in the way the teacher/researchers engaged with the digital technologies and the notion of audience. Technologies enable the capture, sharing and viewing of drama content in new ways and in new places. Creating work in class which is then posted within the larger project online, expands the sense of audience and reach of the work created on the classroom floor. Being students used to social media, the Sydney students accepted the online postings that was part of this project, and were generally comfortable with the knowing audience ‘out there’ in the ether. Given the nature of the sharing of the rolling role process online, the teacher/researchers needed to constantly create and curate the materials being generated in each workshop. This involved filming, editing and posting the digital artefacts drawn from the key stages in the dramatic process. The collection became an online archive of the project and evidence of the Sydney site’s participation in the larger international drama. The posted objects (photostories and videos of improvisations and playbuilt work) were crafted with the curator’s eye, in line with the overall narrative of the people of Ardus Unda and with an understanding of the work from other sites. Once the drama was underway, these digital records of the enactment were then viewed and discussed as a means of orienting the group back into the project at the start of each workshop, so they served the site as well as the whole project.

3.2 Teacher in role as a key strategy for powerful drama learning
The Sydney Water Reckoning project stretched our understandings of the role of the teacher within the drama learning process and specifically, the way teacher-in-role works as a critical strategy for rich drama learning. Working with a teacher and a group of students who were inexperienced in this strategy provides an interesting case for analysis. Despite the additions of digital technologies and online publishing to the drama process used in this study, the students identified the role-based inquiry where they worked alongside their teacher, as the most critical learning moments within the project as a whole. The immediate impact of teacher as actor and co-creator of the fiction was notable for students in terms of deepening their engagement and raising the stakes of the enactment. Although inexperienced in process drama and teacher-in-role, the classroom teacher did have substantial experience and training in acting, which he clearly drew upon when improvising alongside his students.

The pioneering work of Heathcote and Bolton and others on the uses and transformations made possible by the teacher-in-role strategy are still incredibly
relevant in a twenty-first century drama classroom context. Teacher-in-role serves various functions in shaping the ‘experience’ of drama learning for students (Bowell & Heap 2001). In ‘Signs and Portents’ Heathcote (1984) outlines some of the different ways teachers might work in role such as – clarifying the now time of the drama; signing the role to contract students into the drama; framing the encounter; sharing and giving information; negotiating power and shifting the position of the class so students adopt a point of view within the developing action (in Johnson & O’Neill 1984: 161-165). Drawing on the work of Heathcote (1980) and Bolton (1998) and analysing her case studies of the role work of O’Neill, O’Toole and Shaw, Judith Ackroyd (2004) presents an insightful analysis of the connections between acting and teacher-in-role. Her study shows that there is much to be learned from continued analysis of the strategy for drama education, particularly when we now blur definitions and practices between drama and theatre. Unlike the divisions of the past (Fleming 2003), teacher-in-role and other strategies are less confined to an either/or, process drama/theatre binary. As drama curriculum and pedagogy continues to develop across the world, the concepts and practice tends to be more elastic than in the past.

Ackroyd’s research highlights the problem of conceptualising teacher-in-role as a ‘static concept of practice’ (2004: 166) that is inherently value and/or ideologically neutral in the drama learning process. In Ackroyd’s terms teacher-in-role is a complex strategy used carefully and aesthetically in different ways to fuel the learning in specific moments within the dramatic process. Drama teachers use teacher-in-role to serve different functions - director, designer, playwright as well as teacher in the moment of learning. Effective teachers working in/through role use signs, contexts and audiences for different purposes. In role, teachers position their role in the drama along a spectrum of broad functional role (such as ‘I am presenting an attitude to bring you into the dramatic situation’) to more complex, nuanced and rounded ‘acting behaviour’ (Bolton 1998) where teachers utilise more sophisticated representational roles within the fictional context of the drama. Aitkin notes that when teachers work in role, they do so as relationship managers, where they use the same languages to set up and sustain the terms of the relationship with their students as their counterparts in theatre do with their audience members (2007: 9).

When teachers work in role with students both the imagined of the drama and our everyday social roles are at play in the shared role-play. Edmiston (2003) reminds teachers to be conscious of this interplay as a means of providing a generative space for dialogue to occur. This is particularly important when the dramas may travel through difficult terrain, complex problems or conflicts, such as the sustainability themes within the Water Reckoning Project.
In the Sydney Water Reckoning project the teacher in role strategy at this point allowed for the dramatic stakes to be raised; it pressed the students to commit and respond to the context. It allowed them to enter into relationship with the problems embedded in the narrative and negotiate the fictional crisis at hand. The teacher repeatedly pressed students to step up and set the priorities for the group. The vignette that follows describes a crucial moment within the Sydney Water Reckoning project, using data collected from the town meeting (filmed) and also post-project focus interviews with both teacher and students. (An edited version of this role play is available on Placestories: http://placestories.com/project/8501 - lv=stories)

**VIGNETTE : The town meeting - a critical moment of role-based negotiation**

As the drama developed, students agreed that a catastrophic environmental water disaster was imminent to their community. Not everyone could be ‘saved’. Students were asked to work in groups to make choices and selections of particular individuals. Tableaux were created of ‘townspeople of Ardus Unda’ elected for their skills and expertise, with commentary about the stories of their skills in action and expertise. These chosen ‘representatives’ were put forth at the ‘Town Meeting’ as part of a final selection process chaired by the teacher-in-role (TIR) as the local premier, Larry O’Barrell (a play upon the name of the existing premier of NSW). His role was one of a busy politician, with the purpose of bringing the community to consensus on the issues at hand. Of interest are the skills set the students in role (SIR) chose for potential candidates: Nuclear Physicist, Linguist, Army General, Doctor (Veteran of one of the last wars), Farmer, Robotic inventor, Adventurer, Politician, Historian and Peacemaker. From these nine community members only five would be chosen as emissaries to be ‘frozen in time’.

**TIR:** ‘Yes we do have the technology. Yes it has become available to us. No we can’t afford to freeze everyone. I realise this is going to cause a lot of stress and disappointment and heartache to your families.’

During the course of the 20-minute role-play, students put forth and argued for the selection of their nominees. The teacher-in-role used a number of strategies to involve the students emotionally in the drama. At all times the focus was on the sense of community – community decisions, actions, and consequences.
TIR: Part of the reason my friend, we are here today is to discuss that very question. What are we looking for? We need to come to a decision as a collective community here.

And again:

TIR: I feel that bringing the community in on these issues is the only way forward. It’s times like these where I think we need to band together, to look to each other for support. Yes?

The teacher in role reminds students to consider the benefit to the whole community in their decision-making. Early on, one student challenges him in role and astutely questions the politician’s motives:

SIR: Have you nominated yourself for this preservation project?

TIR: I’m going to open that up for discussion, there are various skills sets here. I’m not saying I am any more skilled than anyone else here. We are going to put all these issues on the table today.

The teacher deflects this challenge and keeps the direction of the drama open, deferring to the group to make their own decisions. He positions himself as a possible candidate but also suggests others may be more qualified to go forward. Here we see the teacher’s intention overtaking the acting function, where the teacher in role is steering the dramatic action to fulfil its possibilities, as it is unfolds.
In a ‘mantle of the expert’ approach, students debated which roles/professions were important to ‘rebuild a future’ when at a later time, the ‘frozen ones’ could re-enter the world after the disaster. The sophistication, quality and intensity of this negotiated debate surprised and intrigued us. The final choices the students made are worth noting. The politician was quickly culled by the group, as was the historian, after some argument about taking one’s past into the future for fear of repeating it. The linguist was voted essential to building a post-catastrophic society as was the farmer, the doctor and the peacemaker.

SIR: She is the multilingual translator that we need to send into the future. She will push us forward in social status and she will help us communicate with these people who don’t know who we are and won’t know what we do.

SIR: I don’t think we should be putting forward someone with the mindset that they are ready for war. I think our friend here, Greg...as the head of a peaceful army, he is there to protect, not to destroy.

In the footage of this lengthy role-play it is apparent the students’ role engagement is fluid but for the most part, with teacher guidance drawing on his strong actor’s sense of timing, the students remain committed to the dramatic moment at hand. They argue and negotiate in role, questioning the methods and motivations of their Premier and what could be important for their future. For many of the students, this role-play was one of the highlights of the Water Reckoning Project whole experience. As researchers who filmed it, it was an exciting chance to observe 21 teenagers and their teacher immersed in the fiction of the drama. The stakes were high as only five community members would be chosen. The students in role were alternatively curious, nervous, respectful, angry, demanding, and ultimately jubilant during the action of the drama. For students whose first attempt at sustained role and characterisation only began with this project, the level of engagement, commitment and belief in the situation was high.

In focus group interviews, students were asked what they thought about their teacher being in role. Typical responses follow:

It sort of gives you the standard...he’s like the teacher and he just jumps into this role that he’s obviously never played before and he’s really setting the standard for everyone. Like everyone else is like, ‘Alright so, this is how into it...how a teacher is...so, its not going to be embarrassing if we are the same as him, because we can just, like go and be in character...’ and no one is going to care.
It was really inspiring to get up to it...go up another level to see if you could be as into it as he was...get that level of authority.

I liked it because he teaches us drama but we haven’t really seen him act. So it was different and it was also really really good for us to look at him acting, so like we can strive to be like that...try to work as hard as he got into it straight away.

(Student focus group interviews)

The willingness of the teacher to share his skills in acting as well as his knowledge of the students meant that all voices were heard and acknowledged. In role, the teacher alternatively questioned, agreed with and challenged the students, constantly raising the level of tension within the drama with such lines as:

TIR: ‘Time is of the essence’ and ‘I put it to you my friends, what are the priorities here?’

When interviewed about his role in the drama and the effect it had on the students, the teacher said:

......at first I think there was a little bit of insecurity or unsureness about how they were throwing themselves into role. And that’s something that they’ve become quite confident in doing now, they can go straight into the shoes of another character without having any inhibition. I think a lot of that has dissipated, which is really good to see. They are taking risks, creative risks, which is nice to see.

(Teacher interview)

This vignette shows an early career teacher working authentically in role, signing to the students within the drama and ‘allowing them to bring their profound experience to bear in interpreting the scene’ (Heathcote in Johnson & O’Neill 1984: 162). Despite his inexperience with this strategy, he stretches the students to commit to the problem at hand and negotiate in the imagined moment as community members on the brink of environmental disaster.

3.3 Collaborative drama teaching and researching in the rolling role methodology

In many NSW secondary schools there are few drama teachers on staff, hence the opportunity in this project to have four drama teachers who were also researchers was a luxury on various levels. Members of the team relished the opportunity to craft the drama and implement it together ‘on the floor’ as creative comrades, co-
collaborators and practitioner researchers (Haseman 2006; Taylor 1996). Negotiating ideas, practice and research for our site occurred around the larger project development. Teacher/researchers needed to keep the broader goals and project in mind whilst also crafting the project specifics for the Sydney site. Of most importance was the need for all members of the team to be adaptable. It was virtually impossible to plan each workshop in detail due to the rolling nature of the project. Each workshop was designed with a number of drama activities. The classroom teacher and the teacher/researchers often took turns in conducting an activity, or took on roles within the drama. At all times at least one adult was videoing the lesson. At times two videos were used and a stills camera. Outside workshop hours the teacher/researchers edited and shaped the workshop artefacts for online publication. In a project with such limited time it was necessary for the teacher/researchers to process the online content. The digital artefacts were uploaded on Placestories (often within 24 hours) so students could view their work at the next lesson (http://placestories.com/project/8501#lv=stories).

Teachers/researchers participated in Google hangouts and Skype conferences with other teachers from around the world also participating in the project. These meetings were used to share stories about the work created to date and to plan online interactions between the students where they could be managed.

Working as a team of teacher/researchers in the classroom allowed us to guide the work as it emerged in creative, critical and purposeful ways. As the workshops unfolded the teacher/researchers led the drama activities; questioned students to shift the work into critical analysis; gave feedback about the role work or students’ playbuilt scenes; and worked in role alongside the students and at times alongside each other to guide the focus of the drama as it evolved.

4. Conclusion

This paper reports on key findings of the teacher/researchers on the Sydney Water Reckoning Project, within the wider international rolling role Water Reckoning Project developed in honour of the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote. Key findings from the Sydney study include: the way teacher roles were reconsidered in this multi-dimensional project where teacher/researchers became curators of the pretexts and learning experience; role players and actors at key moments in the drama; and, creative collaborators in terms of both teaching and research as the project evolved over time. Researching this study has illustrated the importance of collaboration as scholarly activity and professional learning. The collaborative design of the curatorial brief for the students demanded multifarious artistic responses to the water disaster, implied by the first digital pretext of Ardus Unda’s underwater civilisation, which were exhibited online for all student participants of the
international Water Reckoning Project. The drama students in this site demonstrated complex embodied and online artistic expression as they played in role and developed their knowledge about active citizenry. New teaching ideas emerged as a result of the Sydney project in relation to the use of digital technologies and online platforms alongside more traditional ways of working ‘on the floor’ in drama. This created new collaborative connections for students and stretched the teacher/researcher team to think both inside and outside the work as it developed in response to the other international sites. The ongoing consideration of the other site participants and audiences in the rolling process, and also the wider online audience ‘out there’ across the web was a new and exciting dynamic to bring to the dramatic process and gave the locally curated project a much wider impact.

Initial analysis of the Sydney Water Reckoning project points to the reconceptualisation and reconsideration of Heathcote’s legacy of rolling role in the digital age. This study significantly reminds us of the primacy of the live embodied learning experience alongside the use of web-platforms and technologies. As Heathcote demonstrated so cogently, role based inquiry extends contexts for learning, particularly when the teacher is working alongside the students in role. This rolling role project has shown twenty-first century drama teachers can be flexible in response to the demands of the online ‘roll’ of drama across school sites and the digital artefacts generated and shared within the dramatic process. Exploring water sustainability issues through a rolling role drama demonstrates how drama can cast us into the sea of the imagination, providing the aesthetic transport where imaginative creations can be used to explore complex real world problems and for students to consider themselves in the shoes of another. As one student aptly wrote in the post-project survey...‘through drama we can transport people to places they can only imagine’.
References


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