Adults' work? Process drama in the context of adult learning and creativity

Viv Aitken
Adults’ work? Process drama in the context of adult learning and creativity

Dr. Viv Aitken

Abstract

Drama is a powerful medium on many levels – physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Process drama’s emphasis on embodied experience, imaginative engagement and cycles of action and reflection means it can offer rich experiences on all these levels. Much has been written about this in the context of drama for children. This paper, however, asserts the particular and unique potency of process drama in the context of adult learning and creativity. Drawing on personal accounts of facilitating process drama in the contexts of teacher-education, community drama and professional development, the author reflects on process drama’s capacity to liberate bodies, facilitate cognitive understanding and increase emotional capability in adults from a range of backgrounds including Māori students, and adults with intellectual disability. The paper suggests that for adults, creative tensions can emerge around concepts of adulthood and play, social self and fictional role, intellect and imagination and the aesthetics of artful pedagogy. At the same time, for the particular groups of adults mentioned, notions of ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ may have particular socio-cultural associations, all of which can enrich and deepen the drama in unique ways.

This paper focuses on how process drama may be used to promote learning and creativity with adult participants. Without in any way seeking to diminish the value of process drama for children (for whom the process drama approach was originally conceived and for whom there are unique educational, social and even quasi-political benefits to be had), it is the aim of this paper to suggest that there may also be particular and unique qualities to the learning and creativity experienced by adult participants in process drama.
Much has been written about the potential for process drama as a means of promoting meaningful learning and creativity with children. A brief review of the literature reveals an ever-growing range of research on the value of process drama as a tool in children’s education: there are numerous international studies demonstrating how process drama has enhanced children’s learning both in the arts (Holland & O’Connor, 2004) and across other curriculum areas from literacy and literacy studies (Crumpler & Schneider, 2002; Hughes, 2006) to mathematics (Fleming, Merrell & Tymms, 2004), history (Long, in Schneider, Crumpler & Rodgers, 2006) and second language acquisition (Kao & O’Neill, 1998; Liu, 2002). Other researchers have argued for process drama’s value in promoting more holistic competencies including the development of children’s imaginative processes (Cremin, 1998), ethical thinking and behaviour (Edmiston, 2000) higher order thinking (Riddoch, 2002) and spirituality (Winston, 2002). In addition, there is a body of scholarly writing that seeks to theorise aspects of children’s experience of process drama, including the shifts in status and power that can occur (Edmiston, 2003), the nature and potential of teacher-in-role (Ackroyd, 2004), the impact of frame, and its interaction with elements of role and context (Bowell and Heap, 2002), the nature of the relationship between teacher and student (Aitken, 2007), the tensions between form, aesthetics and content (O’Neill, in Taylor & Warner, 2006), and the position of process drama in relation to theatre and other forms of dramatic activity (Fleming, 2003; Ackroyd, 2004, Bolton, 1998). However, amongst all this rich reflection and analysis of the power of process drama, there is very little specific research on the nature and value of process drama for adult participants.

One piece of work that comes close to addressing the matter of adult participation in process drama is a chapter by Joe Norris entitled ‘Creative Dramatics as adults’ work’ (in Wagner, 1999). In an impassioned piece of advocacy, Norris asserts the case for process-based drama (in this case, the Canadian approach he refers to as ‘creative dramatics’) as a tool for adult learning, based on his own successful use of drama strategies within his tertiary teaching. Norris asserts:

Creative drama ... not only has its place in the education of the young, but in the education of all adults. It is a powerful tool to determine and create meaning at various levels ... It has the power to change hearts and minds ... [it] is an integrative discipline which continually operates at the cognitive and affective levels. It is indeed adult’s work.

(Norris in Wagner, 1999, p.235)

Norris laments the paucity of research into the value of participation in drama for adults, noting that ‘the only extensive documentation of creative drama with adults is in the realms [of] drama therapy and popular theatre’ (Norris in Wagner, 1999, p.219). One might, perhaps, add ‘applied theatre’ to this list, as another place where drama is, often, designed for adult participants. While not denying the value of drama in these contexts Norris laments the fact that drama is not embraced more widely:
If drama is the powerful learning medium we claim it is, we must use it with all ages and with all peoples. The tools we use as drama teachers are underutilised and misunderstood. Until we bring them out of the cupboard with the banner, “all play is work” we are denying our society the rich potential our art form has to offer in improving the human condition.

(Norris, in Wagner, 1999, p.219)

At first sight, a review of the literature would seem to contradict Norris’ assertion. For there are a reasonable number of studies of process drama in which work with adults as participants is described. On closer examination, however, it can be seen that the contexts in which such studies have been written are limited and also that such accounts do not move much beyond description; the distinctive quality of the adult participation is not discussed. A number of studies refer to the value of process drama for particular purposes, including the enhancement of adult literacy (Exley, 2005) or in therapeutic contexts associated with abuse, such as the ‘Moving on Project’ run by Griffiths University and others in 2003-20061 or in dealing with attitudes to mental illness (O’Connor, 2003). In addition, there is some advocacy for the usefulness of drama as a tool for people working with senior adults, both as a promoter of physical health and mental alertness and as a social and creative activity (Burger, 1980). Particularly notable, though perhaps not surprising, is how many descriptions of adult participation in process drama are drawn from the context of preservice teacher-education (Norris in Wagner, 1999; O’Neill in Taylor and Warner, 2006; Wright, 1999; Brindley & Laframboise, 2002; Heyward, 2006; Kana & Aitken, 2007).

Often, student teachers are exposed to the process drama approach as part of their education in how to use it – and some research has been carried out into how this encounter feels for students, and how it helps them reconfigure their preconceptions and fears about drama (Wright, 1999). As well as learning about process drama for its own sake, within the context of curriculum arts, there is some evidence of research into the value of process drama as a tool for learning and exploration elsewhere in the wider preservice teacher-education program - to challenge students to re-examine cultural beliefs (Brindley, Laframboise, 2002), to explore exclusive practices in the classroom (Kana and Aitken, 2007), to encourage the taking of multiple perspectives on a political issue (Heyward, 2006) or more fundamentally, as in Norris’ work, in an attempt to encourage a teaching and learning environment where multiple perspectives are encouraged and the fundamental constructs of learning, and reality itself are exposed and examined (Norris in Wagner, 1999 p.234). The fact that such cross-departmental

1 The ‘Moving on’ Project was a joint initiative between Griffiths University and the Aftercare Resource Centre (a programme of Relationships Australia), formed to research the benefits of using counselling and process drama with survivors of institutional child abuse. More information can be found on the website: http://www.aftercareresourcecentre.org.au/arc.asp?PID=20
collaborations are happening within a teacher education context is, presumably, a consequence of institutional proximity and staffroom conversations: by which teacher-educators in one department are open to, or persuaded of the pedagogical value of process drama by their colleagues in the drama education or arts education faculty. However, while the value and power of process drama has documented in preservice teacher education, evidence of its use as a pedagogical tool in other tertiary contexts is hard to find, and apparently limited to the contexts of literacy and language education (Exley, 2005).

There is no question, then, that process drama is happening with adult participants, and is being found to have its benefits with such participants. However, it is fair to say that though adult participation is mentioned fairly frequently in the literature, there has been little attempt to date to theorise the quality of adult participation, and how that might differ from that of children or young people. Where adult participation is mentioned in a particular book or article, the focus of the study is invariably on the value of the approach (ie process drama itself) rather than the fact that these are adults engaged in it. This is true even where quite sustained descriptions of adult responses to process dramas are recorded. For example, Taylor and Warner’s study of the work of Carily O’Neill, in Structure and Spontaneity (Taylor & Warner, 2006), contains a detailed account of a process drama experience with a group of adults: graduate students described as ‘a combination of full-time teachers, teaching artists and novices in drama education’ (O’Neill, in Taylor & Warner, 2006, p.5). The account carefully includes comments and responses from the adult participants. However, even with this inclusion of responses, the main focus of the authors remains fixed on questions of how process drama works with children: the pursuit of engagement and detachment, the building of belief and commitment to the action, the taking of multiple perspectives and so on. The comments from the authors, from O’Neill and from the participants themselves, all demonstrate an assumption that process drama is ‘really’ about working with young children. At one point, for example, O’Neill comments, ‘I am in the business of dislocating young minds...’ (O’Neill, in Taylor and Warner, 2006, p.21 – my emphasis), while the participants’ comments on the drama’s anti-war messages, show how much they, as adults, are almost entirely focussed on the ways children would react to the drama: ‘kids tend to glorify violence. We need to help them de-glorify it’ and ‘Children are ... seeing war on television all the time. Doing this process drama can help them come to an understanding of what war might be like’ (O’Neill, in Taylor and Warner, 2006, p.24). Here, as in other studies of process drama with adult participants, any consideration of what the adult participants themselves may have brought to the exchange by virtue of being adults, or how their responses might have been affected as a result, remains very much implicit. I would suggest that these adult participants were engaged in the drama in an important and unique way that was distinctly different but just as valid as children’s responses would have been.

So, how can we begin to describe and perhaps theorise the quality of engagement of adult participants experiencing process drama? It is perhaps helpful to begin with
existing ‘child-centric’ research and to consider the particular resonances that occur when we focus on the adult experience. It is also helpful, perhaps, to focus on the particular, rather than the general – in recognition of the fact that ‘adults’ (just like ‘children’) are individuals rather than one homogenous group. To this end, this paper aims as much as possible to illustrate with specific examples or quotes from adults with whom the author has worked, either as a fellow participant (at conferences or professional development workshops) or as a facilitator. In particular, close reference is made to two groups of adults who have agreed to be part of the research. The first of these groups is the IDEA drama club from Hamilton, New Zealand (IDEA in this context stands for Intellectual Disability Empowerment in Action). This is a group of adults with intellectual disabilities and their support staff and friends, who participate in process-based devised drama once a week as a social and creative activity. The second group referred to are students from the University of Waikato engaged in process drama as part of their preservice teacher education. In particular the paper will refer to the experiences and comments of the students on the Kakano rua (meaning ‘two shoots from the same seed’) programme. These students have made the choice, out of a strong commitment to Māori education and tikanga (cultural practices), to study and learn together. As we will see, both these groups of adults bring their particular socio-cultural experiences and viewpoints to the drama work in particular, and uniquely adult ways. Whilst largely anecdotal in style and drawing chiefly on examples from the experience of working with these specific groups, the paper also aims to make a case for a more general theorising of the adult experience of process drama, and to take a few tentative steps in that direction. To provide some organisation for these musings, and to honour the themes of the conference, the points are organised under extended headings related to ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’.

**LIBERATED BODIES: Life experience, play, power and status**

The first, and perhaps most self-evident point to make about adults as participants in process drama is that, simply by virtue of having lived longer and generated more life experience, adults bring a different, potentially richer set of personal and life experiences to draw on than children can. When modelling lessons with student teachers I frequently notice the adult students taking the material in directions that explore complex ‘adult’ themes appropriate to their own age level. For example, asked to predict where Goldilocks might end up in the future, children of nine and ten have often presented images of Goldilocks sitting in jail, carrying out break-ins of other houses or, more ‘happily’ making friends with the bear family. Adult student teachers, on the other hand, exposed to the same drama structures, have depicted Goldilocks as a ‘P’ addict (under the headline – ‘from porridge to P’), working the streets as a prostitute or giving birth to a hairy baby (‘here’s what happens if you climb into too many bear’s beds’). The fundamental exchanges of process drama – ‘hooking in’ to an imagined experience, committing to an imagined role and building belief – all depend on an ability to draw on prior experience as well as imagination, and adults may have a richer mix of
such experiences and knowledge to draw on. And such prior knowledge may also include experiences of other drama forms from theatre, movies or other sources, which may enrich the drama further. Norris supports this assertion when he comments on the ease of working with drama majors ‘as they are used to playing’ even if sometimes they need help ‘to break their performance only syndrome’ (Norris in Wagner, 1999, p.219). Greater life experience, then, may enrich adult participation in process drama or it may hinder it. What seems incontrovertible, however, is that life experience will make adult responses different from those of a child.

Through their richer life experience, many adults also bring a higher level of self-awareness than that expected of a child, and thus may have an enhanced ability to protect themselves from emotional impacts that might arise in the course of a process drama. Of course one cannot generalise, and as facilitator one always has a duty to use framing and other devices to provide safe ‘distance’ for participants of any age when dealing with difficult material. At the same time, it is sometimes possible to work with adults, particularly those familiar with process drama, to explore content that one might not use with children or to move into emotional territory that one might not enter with children. Often, working with adult participants one can use statements such as ‘I trust you to take care of yourselves here’ and can anticipate that they will be able to articulate their needs or emotions more successfully than children can.

It is widely acknowledged that a core value of process drama, at least for children, is its close link to socio-dramatic play (Holland & O’Connor, 2004). To use the image of the ‘drama continuum’ implied by Kitson and Spiby and others – in which all dramatic activity is seen as having a place on a continuum from ‘Wendy House’ to ‘Opera House’ – we can see that process drama has an affinity to the ‘Wendy House’ end of the spectrum and as such, may be considered to be more developmentally appropriate for children, particularly young children (Kitson and Spiby, 1997). The idea that different forms of drama may be appropriate for different stages of development was posited some years ago (Alington, 1961) and has received some support since (Cook, 1984). ‘These might seem to imply that process drama is less appropriate for adults. However, the advantage of the image of a continuum is that it reminds us that all drama, and all participants in drama are on the same continuum. If some children can, and do perform on stage in scripted, formal performance, then it is surely even easier for adults, who have all been children, to visit – or rather revisit the ‘Wendy House’ end of the spectrum and successfully ‘buy in’ to an experience of playfulness. The adult university students that I teach regularly express surprise at their capacity for the kind of playfulness offered in process drama and the special kind of enjoyment that comes from rediscovering it. Here one student comments on her experience of being invited simply to play ‘pretend’:
I found that as soon as we started we really went well together, we listened to each other and took cues from each other so we found that our [socio-dramatic] play just flowed really well and we all enjoyed it. (student journal 2008)

Even if, like Norris, we wish to avoid aligning with a specifically therapeutic agenda, it is possible to suggest that there is a special value for adults in rediscovering the fun and spontaneity of play, particularly when we note how crucial ‘playfulness’ is deemed to be in many models of creative process (Russ, 1993), and how notions of ‘creativity’ are increasingly valued in the adult world, including the workplace.

Even if we do not seek to make a particular claim for the value of play for adults, it is worth acknowledging the different quality of playfulness involved when an adult participates in process drama. For a child, process drama is about ‘tapping in’ to something that is part of their day-to-day reality and an ongoing reference point for their understandings of the world. For an adult the quality of experience could be described as more akin to ‘tapping back in’ to a capacity for play. Further research might explore how this difference in nuance impacts on the experience of adult participants in process drama and whether facilitators of drama need to plan in different ways to allow for it. As a purely anecdotal comment, and based on my personal experience as a facilitator and a participant in process drama, I find that adult participants (including myself) can feel quite a strong initial resistance to ‘giving in’ to the appeal to be playful, and so may need more time to build trust within a group, and more time to build belief before being asked to engage in the tensions or problems of the drama. Once engaged, however, it is my observation that adult participants can engage very deeply in the issues of the drama, enjoying the sense of ‘liberation’ that the playfulness of process drama brings.

For some adults with intellectual disability there may be a particular value in rediscovering the power of play and playfulness – or discovering it for the first time. For according to Peter O’Connor (quoted in Stinson and O’Connor, 2008) the good intentions of their parents and teachers can sometimes mean that adults with disability may not have experienced much play as children. O’Connor asserts: ‘opportunities for imagination and creativity are often rare or absent in the lived experiences of children with special needs because the major focus of their learning is on instrumental life-skills’ (Stinson and O’Connor, 2008 p.1). He suggests, too, that this situation persists in schools today, recalling an initial uncertainty from teachers in one school at his own ‘playful’ way of working with these children: ‘I sensed the teachers were confused by what I was doing and not very impressed. They thought I would play language games and show the students how to ‘act’ stories or, even better, do simulation role-plays about shopping and catching the bus...’(Stinson and O’Connor, 2008 p.2). O’Connor’s assertion would seem to be backed up by the experiences of the adults in IDEA drama group, since only one of the group (who attended a mainstream school) has any recollection of doing drama before – and none had any prior experience of process drama. Several members
of the group found they took time to adjust to the whole concept of ‘playing’ or imagining – a fact that we can attribute less to the nature of their disability as to the fact that this particular aspect of themselves had not been fully utilised in the past. This is unfortunate when we consider the value of drama in the social, cognitive and human development of every person. It may be going too far to suggest that to deny people with intellectual disability the opportunities for play and playfulness provided by process drama is to carry out yet another form of discrimination, but it does seem reasonable to assert that the approach has a particular and unique value with adults in this category.

As well as this sense of liberation through play, another of the particular values of process drama for children, identified by Edmiston, (2003) Aitken, Fraser & Price, (2007) and others, is the opportunities it can offer to explore ways to shift the traditional knowledge, power and status relationships in the classroom. As Edmiston writes:

One of the core reasons why as a teacher I use drama is because when we create an imaginary world we can imagine that we frame events differently so that our power and authority relationships are changed. A long-term aim of mine as a teacher is as much as possible to share power and authority with students. I want students to have opportunities to use words and deeds to act appropriately but in ways that are often not sanctioned in classrooms

(Edmiston, 2003, p.225)

This concern with the creation emancipatory environments recalls the notions of pedagogical ‘oppression’ of children first described so famously by Paulo Freire, (Freire, 1970) and echoed in the work of Augusto Boal with his Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) As Boal’s work, including his latter concern with drama in therapeutic contexts, (Boal, 1995) reminds us, adults’ experiences of oppression are very real. Though some issues confronted by adults may be common to both adults and children (for example, living with racial or gender prejudice or coping with attitudes towards illness or disability), other issues may be particular to adults – part of the pressured reality of being a ‘grown up’ in the modern world. Adults experience unique pressures to do with the seduction of materialism, personal, workplace and familial relationships, financial constraints, struggles for political representation or concerns about mortality and spirituality. As such, process drama may offer adults a different kind of emancipation – a two-fold version involving both the freedom to be someone else for a while and freedom from the pressure of their everyday social roles.

Aaron, a member of IDEA drama group, articulates very clearly his personal sense of the two-fold emancipation offered by process drama. His first comment acknowledges his enjoyment of the high status ‘expert’ roles he inhabits in the fictional worlds of the drama: ‘In my real life I’m a trolley collector at a supermarket. But in the drama ... I like to be a boss’ (Interview with Attitude TV, 2007). Meanwhile, on another occasion he expresses the sense of relief from social and familial pressure that he gets from
participating in the group: 'I work so many hours. This [drama group] is the only thing I get to do for myself. I’m here for me.' (interview with author, 2007). As I have argued elsewhere, there may be a case for suggesting that ‘authentic’ (in inverted commas) experiences of status within sustained process drama, have a particular significance and currency for adults, including those with intellectual disabilities, for whom opportunities for authentic (no inverted commas) high status roles in everyday life are uncommon and often tokenistic (Aitken, 2006). However, it is possible to suggest that many adults, even those in the highest status positions in society, might recognise and value the two-fold emancipation offered by drama.

STIMULATED MINDS: Cognitive–affective learning and ‘meta-metaxis’

As Anderson (2004), Edmiston, (2003) and others have observed, a key feature and value of process drama is the way it provides opportunities for participants to have ‘lived-through’ experiences in which learning and thinking occurs in a particular way – from the ‘affective to the cognitive’ (body to mind, feeling to thought, imagination to intellect) rather than the other way round. In educational contexts, this can be enormously powerful and liberating for children, particularly those with learning styles that favour interpersonal, intrapersonal and kinaesthetic modes of learning, or ‘intelligences’ (Gardner, 1983). Adults, too, can benefit from process drama’s affective to cognitive flow of understanding. An illustration of this is provided by the following story about Hemi, from the IDEA drama group.

Hemi (not his real name) has found really successful strategies for coping when he does not cognitively understand what is being asked of him – instead of looking blank or confused he’ll say “hmm, you’ll need to help me a bit there”. And he needs to say that quite a bit as he finds dealing with abstract concepts quite tricky. During one drama session, I asked Hemi if I could try something with him – a bit of on the spot empirical research – hardly scientific but I found it revealing. First I asked him “Hey, Hemi, if I was to give you twenty dollars, what would you buy?” His reply, “You’ll have to help me with that Viv”. A little later we took another tack – both stood up and turned around on the spot (our regular signal for a shift into the drama world) – he followed my cue and we started walking down the street of an imagined town looking in the imagined shop windows. I turned to Hemi, held out my (empty) hand and said “here’s twenty dollars Hemi – what do you want to buy” – to which he replied “I’ll start with some of those pies – and I need a new watch, too.”

It is impossible to extrapolate from one example, but further research might investigate whether process drama may offer adults a means of reaching understandings or learning new skills through the affective – cognitive pathway. It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest that drama, with its basis in imagined intangible worlds, helps to lift interactions out of the abstract and into the concrete but the example above illustrates how, in one sense, this may be so. For Hemi, it would appear the imagined objects in the
shop were much more concrete and graspable within the frame of a drama than the elusive and abstract concept of ‘what I might spend my money on.’ The particular resonance here for adult learning, as distinct from child learning, is that for someone like Hemi, the frustrations of not understanding have been there for so long, and become so entrenched, that strategies have been established to deflect the need to even try to understand. I suggest that for an adult in this situation (or for those supporting him) to be furnished with a tool to facilitate understanding is particularly refreshing and liberating and has a quality of empowerment somewhat different than might be identified in the context of child learning. The potential of cognitive-affective learning for adults (whether with or without impaired cognition) would seem worthy of further investigation.

Another rather different claim might be made for the special quality of cognitive engagement in process drama that occurs where the adult participants are teachers, teacher educators or student teachers. Earlier in the paper, I referred to an example from Cecily O’Neill’s work describing a process drama (which dealt with the impact of a war on a small community) where the participants were teachers, teacher educators and student teachers. What is notable about this extract is the way these participants are able to focus not only on how the drama impacts on them personally at that moment but also on how they might make use of parts of it, or learnings from it in future with children in their classrooms. Indeed, they seem if anything to place a priority on the imagined responses of the children they will teach – as seen in the comments quoted earlier: ‘kids tend to glorify violence. We need to help them de-glorify it’ and ‘Children are …seeing war on television all the time. Doing this process drama can help them come to an understanding of what war might be like’ (O’Neill, in Taylor and Warner, 2006, p.24). This kind of meta-cognitive awareness and prioritizing of an as-yet non-existent ‘them’ – an imagined future ‘audience’ for the work is a familiar phenomenon to teacher-educators; a logical consequence of the fact that we are teaching with a mind to teaching others. My students call this ‘keeping their teacher hat on’ and they probably do it in all their classes at university. However, if we frame this phenomenon in terms of the multiple realities unique to drama we can see that it takes on a particular resonance.

As Boal (1995) taught us and as O’Neill (1994), Edmiston (2003), Morgan & Saxton (1987) and others remind us, drama is all about real and imagined worlds and the human capacity to move freely between these realities whilst retaining an awareness of both, which we can call metaxis. If we admire children for their capacity for metaxis (‘Mummy, I’m a tank and can I have a biscuit?’) and for being able to attribute as much or even more value to the imagined world, then we must also admire or at least acknowledge, the additional layer of meta-cognitive awareness brought to a drama by a teacher who, whilst participating fully is also looking out for the structures, conventions and strategies at work and thinking ‘how could I use this with my lot?’ Teachers who respond to the drama in such a multi-levelled way (could we call it ‘meta-metaxis’?) are demonstrating a complicated response whereby, in addition to their participant
response – where they might move in and out of a range of roles during the course of the drama, they retain an awareness of their social role as teacher, and in a sense retain a cognizance of the potential responses of an as-yet unlived through future reality in which they will take a further role as facilitator of the drama.

Another, associated phenomenon which may be worth mentioning here, is the particular pleasure to be felt when, as an experienced teacher of process drama, one has the opportunity to participate and observe the technique and artistry of another teacher. As O’Neill has pointed out, it is in the nature of process drama that its participants are always both makers and receivers of the drama and as such, all participants including children may gain an awareness and appreciation of the formal qualities of a drama:

Although they are the agents of the drama – ‘the makers of the future’ – they are also, in some sense, receiving the embodied meaning of the work almost as an audience would. In the drama, they must act and decide, in response to the demands of the situation. But, since the situation is a make-believe one, they are free to reflect on and evaluate their actions and to “contemplate forms – the formal arrangements of feelings and events and … of ideas, and the forms of language … in which the whole is expressed”


If this is so, and all participants in process drama may gain some insight and pleasure from contemplating the formal qualities of drama, then how much more enjoyable the experience can be for the experienced teacher-as-participant who can relate to the artistry required to weave these formal elements together in an effective way. I would attest to this from my own experience at conferences, in classrooms and perhaps most notably on a recent trip to New Zealand by Carole Miller and Juliana Saxton. Quite apart from the enjoyment of participating in a drama which, for once, I had not had to prepare and plan and resource and facilitate, and quite apart from my engagement with the pretext, or subject matter of the dramas, and quite apart from enjoying the sociability of the experience, shared with friends and colleagues from around the country, I also experienced a sensation akin to aesthetic pleasure in observing, hearing and feeling the artful way in which these teachers used the strategies and conventions of process drama and the way they personally spoke, moved and ‘performed’ their role as pedagogues. If, has been argued elsewhere (Ackroyd, 2004; Aitken, 2007) it is possible to view all teaching as performance, and if teaching in role can be seen as an even more conscious manifestation of that, then there is possibly room for phenomenological or other studies to explore the special quality for adults in experiencing and appreciating artful pedagogy in drama. Alternatively, perhaps reception-based study akin to the audience response theories of theatre performance could be undertaken.
CONNECTED SPIRITS: Ritual and ownership

There are a number of ways in which one might discuss the notion of adult participation in relation to the concept of ‘spirit’. For this paper, I have opted to consider ways in which adults I have worked with have brought what might be called ‘their own spirit’ to the drama – making it ‘theirs’ in ways I had not anticipated. With the Kakanorua students, the most immediate and most noticeable way in which this occurred was through students’ spontaneous inclusion of cultural references and practices in their drama work. For these adults, ritual practices such as mihi (formal introductions), karakia (opening blessings) and waiata (songs) are a familiar part of the fabric of interaction in the Māori cultural context. In their verbal reflections, students noted that this familiarity with ritual made it more comfortable for them to enter into ritual or ‘heightened’ moments within the drama such as statementing or creating a soundscape. Students also identified out of role reflective discussion, or korero, as extremely important to them too and my personal observation was that the level of engagement from the Kakanorua students was of a different, more self-reflective quality than in other classes. I certainly learned to allow longer for out of role reflection with this particular group. Of course, the observations made here relate to the culture of participants rather than their age and children, just like adults, will always bring their cultural context to their drama. At the same time, might we suggest that as adults ones cultural identity is more fully realised and therefore may be more manifest in drama work?

These students took ownership of the drama in other ways too. Even where the material we were dealing with was extremely Euro-centric (a process drama based around the traditional tale of Goldilocks, for example) students took ownership of the material and created roles that resonated in meaningful ways for them. For example, in one hotseating session, one of the students (a male) took the role of Goldilocks’ mother and played her as a Samoan with strong family values, struggling with her decision, made some years ago, to adopt her baby out to family in the islands. In another, more light hearted exchange, a student (female) in role as poppa bear used gangster slang and body language to describe how he and the whanau (family) were on an obesity programme set up by the local council and how they were trying to stick to it despite hating the taste of porridge and finding it hard to stick to the regimen of daily walks in the bush. Once again, this is an example of ownership based on culture rather than age – but I would suggest that these students’ maturity was a strong contributing factor in the confidence, assurance and humour with which they made the stories their own.

Such was the skill of the group in taking ownership of the material (assisted of course by the open ended permission-giving nature of the drama conventions in use) I found myself in an interesting dilemma. Conscious of post-colonial discourses and challenged by my own tendency to represent European values, stories and artefacts, I felt I wanted to find ways to work with more indigenous material. At the same time, students fed back to me that they positively enjoyed the opportunity to renegotiate and recast some
of these traditional tales – a reminder, perhaps, of the complexities of negotiating what Greenwood has called a ‘third space’ – a productive meeting ground between two cultures where complex issues of power and understandings can be deconstructed (Greenwood, 2001). In the event, this group’s expertise in Māori tikanga led to an interesting research relationship whereby students, supported by their program leader and mentor, Pare Kana, gave ongoing professional feedback and advice to me on how responsive my drama classes were to their needs and cultural perspectives. The notion of working in this way emerged from the values and practices of process drama where participants are cast in the role of ‘experts’ – which, in this case, they clearly were. The findings of this project are still emergent but on the group’s advice I have now started to incorporate pretexts from Māori ancestral stories as well as European tales. I have also appreciated discovering which aspects of my teaching were valued by these students and which things I could work on. In particular, I have recognised the value of the ‘relational’ aspects of my teaching style and am working to enhance those with all my students (Aitken, Fraser & Price, 2007). Here, I suggest, is an example of an enriched teaching and learning relationship where because the students were informed adults, they could be invited in as co-researchers and have a formative influence on both my teaching and the direction of the drama programme in future. Such possibilities for co-construction and formative feedback from participants is possible, and valuable with children but again, I would suggest takes on a special quality in the context of adult participation.

For members of IDEA drama too, there has been a genuine experience of taking ownership of the drama and these adults, too, have endowed their work with their own ‘spirit’. Members of the group have influenced the way we work: after twelve months of working weekly, and extremely productively in process drama, one of the group was heard to say: ‘this is all very well, but when are we doing our first play?’ So, we started creating a devised performance. We found a semi-improvisatory way of working whereby the ‘spirit’ of the participants and the ‘spirit’ of process drama, as a spontaneous experience, were both honoured. The form and content for the show was developed through a series of process drama episodes based around a supermarket – a context chosen by the participants because many of them work, or have worked, in supermarket jobs. Rather than trying to write a piece that told everyone’s stories, the ‘spirit’ of the participants was left to shine through the high status characters that they created. The narrative, on the surface, was a light hearted tale concerning the lives of various shop managers and their responses on discovering a ‘beast’ living in the store; a beast who roamed the aisles at night eating out of the bulk bins and disrupting the preparations for the staff Christmas ‘do’. On a deeper level, the piece touched on issues of social isolation, prejudice, communication difficulties, aspirations and dreams. Working as adults meant we were freed from curriculum requirements or timetables and this, combined with the rich life experiences of the participants, resulted in a successful public performance. In addition to this, members of the group went on to appear on TV and radio programmes and co-present lectures describing the process and the work of the group. Again, whilst this kind of approach might be attempted with
children, I would suggest that opportunities for co-research and co-presentation have been enriched because of working with adult participants.

The ‘taking of ownership’ that can occur with adults may manifest in surprising and unpredicted ways, as I have discovered with both these groups. For example, at the time of writing, the IDEA drama group is working on our next devised production, the storyline for which was conceived in its entirety by Derry, one of the members of the group. Having watched my role as facilitator in the previous production Derry decided he would like to have a turn and he wrote out an entire story (A Wild West drama) in great detail. During rehearsal he takes the role of narrator and, where possible, director. My role is to provide overall facilitation and to negotiate opportunities to use drama structures and conventions to add ‘twists’ of tension and action to his tale. As for the Kakano rua students, I was delighted when two of them asked to re-attend drama classes with this year’s intake of students. They will not gain any credits for the paper. They want to attend because they enjoyed the classes, but also to assess the changes I have made based on their advice. To return to the notions of power and status shifts discussed earlier, I would suggest that these examples illustrate the shifts in status, control and ownership (both in and outside of the drama) that can occur with adult participants. It could be argued that similar shifts might be managed in a classroom with children, but I would suggest that the implications of age difference and knowledge and authority hierarchies make this more likely with confident adult self-advocates.

Conclusion

This paper has been highly anecdotal in tone. It has told stories of particular groups of adults from particular cultural, political and social contexts in a particular country, New Zealand. Nonetheless, it is hoped that these specific stories might illuminate a general truth: that there is a case to be made for more research and consideration into the distinct quality of adult participation in process drama. I have tried to suggest that adult participants in process drama may have different aesthetic, social and imaginative experiences in response to process drama as compared to those experienced by children. This is seen as a consequence of adult participants being at a different stage of emotional, social, political and imaginative development and because of drama’s potential to liberate participants both into and out of complex roles. Whilst taking a few tentative steps towards a theorising of adult creativity and learning the paper does not pretend to proceed very far down such a path. The intention, rather, is to suggest the need for further examination and theorising of this area to enrich and deepen our understanding of process drama and how it plays on the bodies, minds and spirits of us all.
Bibliography


Attitude TV, report on IDEA drama group ‘The Beast of Pak n Stack’, originally screened on TVNZ, June 2007 retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ot3s88ja0dk&feature=related


