Challenges of Drama Performance Assessment

Rachael Jacobs
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Abstract

As with any subject area, Drama’s inclusion in the secondary curriculum must conform to curriculum policies and procedures, including those related to assessment and certification. In Drama, students’ creative work is assessed formatively and summatively through a range of assessable instruments, including performance. However, the assessment of performances presents unique challenges, as the processes used are highly dependent on a wide range of interrelated contributions. This paper is a literature review which explores numerous challenges associated with drama performance assessment. These challenges include subjective judgments in the assessment environment; the departure from traditional assessment methods; the role of the teacher-assessor in the performance assessment environment; the presence of the audience; and the appropriateness of criterion referenced assessment to performance assessment tasks. This paper responds to these challenges using literature that engages in deep discussion of the tensions, and considers approaches that address the tensions.

Keywords: performance, drama, assessment, drama education
Introduction

In the last few decades, prompted by the rise of new digital media it may be argued, Drama education is multifaceted in that it connects to the human experience, engages learners in imaginative and aesthetic growth, accesses technical skills and allows for vocationally orientated experiences. Learning in Drama is creative and dynamic, using assessment tasks to gauge dramatic responses upon the learning trajectory. As with any subject area, Drama’s inclusion in most schooling curricula must conform to curriculum policies and procedures, including those related to assessment and certification. It is arguable that ongoing and regular assessments are critical components of the Drama classroom.

It has long been suggested (Gardner 1985; 2006) that teachers should vary their instruction styles and learning experiences in order to reach as many students as possible. Similarly, Eisner & Bird (1998) have long argued that assessment tasks should also be similarly varied. In Drama, students’ creative work is assessed formatively and summatively through a range of assessable instruments, including individual and group performances, journals and logbooks, design portfolios (e.g. costume, set or lighting design), director folios, script development, improvisation tasks, video production, self-reflection, theatre reviews and interviews. This paper is primarily concerned with assessment of performance, specifically group and individual performances in the context of secondary school Drama courses. These performances may be self-devised or text-based, and it is acknowledged that each of these tasks have their own unique features that affect the assessment experience. However, for the purpose of this literature review, the nature of various performance tasks will be considered collectively. It must also be noted that other associated Drama tasks, as mentioned previously, are appropriate to assess students’ creative capabilities and often face similar challenges.

Cockett (1998) once asserted that the assessment of performances presents unique challenges, as the processes used are highly dependent on a wide range of interrelated contributions. Performance assessments can are complex because of the variations between performance sites, the requirement for ensemble or group work, the nature of the ensemble or group, the access to technical equipment and the composition and reactions of any audience that might be in attendance (Oreck et al. 2003). There are other challenges associated with drama performance assessment, many of which also apply to the wider field of arts education, and other disciplines as well (for example, dance performance, creative writing or design). It can be argued that the formal and widespread assessment of artistic creations can result in a stifling of individual expression, imagination, creativity and originality, while not allowing for the fresh pursuit of ideas (Hanley 2003). A wide range of responses are also plausible to a particular task. Despite these challenges, system-wide assessment in the arts is achievable and necessary to establish the credibility of the field of drama education and to provide systems for identifying student achievement within the formal school curricula.
This paper is a literature review which explores numerous tensions in drama performance assessment. These tensions include subjective judgments in the assessment environment; the departure from traditional assessment methods; the role of the teacher-assessor in the performance assessment environment; the presence of the audience; and the appropriateness of criterion referenced assessment to performance assessment tasks. This paper responds to these challenges using literature that engages in discussion of the tensions, and considers approaches that address the challenges of the drama performance assessment environment. Having said this, this paper also takes the position that some challenges are inherent to drama performance assessment, and actually create a rich and nuanced assessment environment that must be negotiated by the stakeholders.

**Objective and subjective judgments in Drama**

Landy (2006) asserts that assessment in Drama has two purposes, both of which are related to drama education’s aims. These purposes of assessment are to determine student readiness for certain dramatic tasks and to gauge students’ competency in Drama. It would be fair to say that most students do not engage in the study of Drama purely for the purposes of being assessed. Most have chosen Drama with an interest in engaging in performance or creative work. They simply love to ‘do’ (Lovesy 2002:85). Additionally, Drama students are generally able to perceive the broader aims of performance assessment and they can see the relationship between performance tasks and their broader lives, as shown in studies by Hatton (2004) and Smigiel and Barrett (2005). These studies attest to students being able to acutely perceive the bigger picture of the purpose of drama education through engaging in assessment.

One of the biggest challenges identified by Harris (2008) is that ‘creativity’ is not easily defined and therefore difficult to assess. Assessment in aesthetic domains also utilises personal responses to stimuli, which can be unfamiliar to those more accustomed to assessment tasks with previously defined answers. This is where the duality of objective and subjective constructs comes into play. Haynes (2008) and Ross (1993) describe traditional assessment methods, as identified by Hyde (2013), as being focused with objectivity, whereby assessors are expected to discard their own feelings in favour of strictly set criteria in which interpretations are not required. A focus on objective judgments is contrary to drama education, as O’Toole et al. (2009) remind us,

‘Knowledge and learning are of course never objective nor value-neutral, much though ultraconservative groups and politicians might wish them to be seen as such’ (p. 108).

Jackson (2006) justifies the validity of creative assessment tasks, arguing that
‘it should be possible to separate subjective judgments of creativity from judgments of technical goodness and from judgments of aesthetic appeal’ (p. 169).

Tomlinson (2001) argues for a healthy balance between subjective and objective judgments in order to create informed judgments on performance assessment that provide the most

‘individually sensitive, accurate and comprehensive evidence’ (p. 15)

of student learning. Misson (1996) goes so far as to identify Drama as a site for the construction of subjectivity, which he argues operates at the nexus of intelligence and emotion.

‘Thought is charged with feeling, while feeling is refined and strengthened by thought’ (p. 11).

In this respect, it has long been argued that Drama teaches empathy (Holland 2009; Trinder 1977). Similarly, Bolton (1984) describes Drama as a process of ‘unselfing’, which makes subjective and alternative responses a valid part of the dramatic response.

The assessor is concurrently an audience member, but they are more active than other audience members. Dunn (2005) argues that Drama is unique in that much of the work is both ephemeral and fragile in nature. Therefore, the ability of the assessor to capture their thoughts on the quality of work as it occurs is vital to the integrity of the assessment process. During a performance, the assessor is required to make judgments about the quality of the work and physically notate their thoughts in relation to given criteria. The assessor makes cognitive links between student choices based on the assessment criteria, balancing their judgements with their own implicit criteria, which are necessarily based on their personal experiences (Baptiste 2008). While an audience member is permitted to make purely subjective judgments, the assessor aims to make informed judgments, which may result in marks or grades being recorded. Teachers in the arts develop expertise in assessing the outcome of the aesthetic process or the manifestation of the individual aesthetic experience. The product is therefore viewed from a number of perspectives and informed judgments are made by the assessor based on set criteria and personal discretionary judgements in relation to, and the quality of, what is produced (Ross 1993).

Leach et al. (2000) argue that assessors are consciously and unconsciously biased by their own values, preferences and dispositions. In this respect, personal responses from both the assessor and the student can widen the possibilities for interpretation (Ross 1993). Rather than command that assessors discard these personal responses, it is preferable for students to be taught to use individuals’ insights to reflect upon, and if necessary, make adjustments to their performances (Soep 2005). Students do not perform solely for the purpose of being assessed; rather they engage in Drama to pursue their own artistic expression. Therefore, students should be encouraged to
assess feedback and apply their own artistic decisions to their work. Both Drama students and teacher-assessors should be aware that subjective responses are natural, as they are rooted in

‘culturally authorised criteria’ for judgment of the level of achievement (Ross 1993, p. 164).

However, the assessor’s judgement is recorded in quantifiable terms such as grades or marks, therefore, the student has a heightened awareness of the assessor’s responses in the high-stakes assessment environment.

**Comparisons with traditional teaching methods**

The challenges presented by creative assessment tasks that use aesthetic engagement can be disconcerting to those more accustomed to ‘traditional’ (Hyde 2013, p. 190) assessment methods. Hyde states that traditional assessment methods (such as multiple choice tests, short or long essay questions) are often noted for ensuring reliability and fairness, but receive criticism for their reductive tendency to ask students to show evidence of pre-determined knowledge (Ross 1991). Eisner & Bird (1998) identify tensions between traditional testing and assessment in the arts.

Testing aspires for all a set of common correct responses; in the arts, idiosyncratic responses are prized. Testing typically focuses on pieces or segments of information; artistic work emphasises wholes and configurations. Testing emphasises the acquisition of products produced by others; the arts emphasise content growing out of one’s personal experiences, especially those concerned with matters of feeling. Such matters of emphasis are so fundamental that it seems as though testing and the arts reside in different worlds. (p. 2)

Since Eisner & Bird’s (1998) lucid comparison, the assessment landscape has shifted, and a broader range of assessment types are employed education. However, Eisner & Bird’s comparison of traditional testing methods and the attributes of arts assessment emphasises the importance of individual responses in the creation of art. Drama performance involves creative processes which are multi-faceted with many interlocking variables (Thomas & Millard 2006), emphasising originality, creativity and innovation. In order to create drama performances, students are not only required to interpret theatrical traditions, but synthesise their own ideas with theatrical conventions, while showcasing their performance skill, all while engaging their aesthetic senses, as appropriate to the task. Performers make decisions each second as they engage simultaneously in performance and reflection (Baptiste 2008). Attributes such as flair, imagination and originality, as appropriate to the style concerned, feature strongly in assessment criteria used to judge the quality of performances. Additionally, performance assessment requires students to demonstrate – and assessors to evaluate – not only what students know, but also what they can do (Bergen 1993).
Clearly, assessment in the Arts presents challenges for educational administrators. Using an international example, under the 2001 United States policy of ‘No Child Left Behind’, achievement could only be demonstrated by


The term ‘scientifically rigorous’ is a style of measurement that is easily subjected to testing but unsuitable for aesthetic domains. While this policy has now been superseded, it is worthy of discussion. The writer of this paper is situated in an Australian policy context, where high-stakes testing and comparative analysis of schools have been recently introduced. UK policies are now moving away from this style of testing regime, but the tensions associated with assessment in the aesthetic domain are still active. Taylor (2006) argues that arts experiences are

‘constructed by contextual circumstances and the social health of any given classroom’ (p. xvi),

and characterised by physical realities and subjective aesthetic encounters. This philosophy is well developed, but Taylor goes further to add that, even in the field of Drama, most assessment insufficiently takes the aesthetic dimension into account. Secondary Drama educators are required to be overly concerned with technical skills, due to the ‘outcomes’ orientation of the education system. Taylor’s criticism is a reminder that performative assessment in Drama is a complex phenomenon. It has been argued that the promotion of innovation, experimental ideas and autonomy can create incomparable measures of success. For example, Fowler (1996) celebrates the fact that the arts develop what he describes as ‘non-measurable accomplishments’. Macgregor et al. (1994) explain that

‘there is tension between the need to demonstrate skill mastery and the desire to embrace autonomy and incomparability’ (p. 3).

However, there is much literature that argues the benefits of assessment in aesthetic fields and attests to creative work as being able to be assessed with a high degree of integrity (Colwell 2003; de la Harpe et al. 2009; Fleming, 2012; Pistone 2000; Willoughby et al. 1995). Assessment in the arts involves the demonstration of skills and craftsmanship (Hanley 2003) and requires students to create original work that will ‘energise us with some previously unseen thing’ (Kleiman 2005, p. 1). Recognising that the assessment of original works presents challenges, Treffinger (2009) argues that educators should abandon attempts to make the assessment of creative products ‘easy’ (p. 246). It is preferable to maintain the complexities of creative assessment tasks as assessment helps to heighten awareness of the challenges of assessing creative work, thereby bringing about greater transparency (Hyde 2013).
Role of the teacher assessor in Drama

The relationship between teacher and student takes on an interesting dynamic in the drama performance assessment process in secondary schools. Bird (2006) describes this teacher-student relationship as multifaceted and periodically ‘intense’ (p. 80). At times, teachers direct their students; at times, they actively assist in the editing process; and at other times, they are required to challenge the artistic content of student performance pieces. Kempe (2000) believes that the success of student-devised work relies on the teacher developing independence in their students so they are able to collaborate with each other in performance making, without direct leadership by the teacher. Warren (2003) adds that it is the place of the Drama teacher to structure independent work but then intervene, asking ‘good and significant questions’ (p. 33). Harris (2008) adds that care should be taken to ensure the work is not unduly a product of the teacher’s influence, and that student ingenuity emerges, not just ideas and practices developed under teacher guidance.

During the performance assessment process, the Drama teacher becomes the teacher-assessor who is required to be both the facilitator of learning experiences and the assessor of creative work. This creates a tension. Treffinger et al. (2002) argue that it is essential that teachers create an environment in which students feel safe and are encouraged to express their ideas, if creativity is to develop. They state that the learning climate should be one that is open and values new and different ideas; allows and promotes playfulness and humour; offers challenge and encourages involvement; builds trust; provides both idea time and idea support; and promotes freedom and risk-taking (Treffinger et al. 1996). These statements sound like the natural order in the Drama classroom. However, in the high-stakes assessment environment, particularly in the senior years of high school, it is questionable as to whether students feel comfortable taking creative risks. Ultimately, the Drama student knows their work is made for the purpose of assessment, and to act upon that understanding.

Presence of the audience

By engaging in performance-based tasks, students learn numerous drama conventions, including that of the relationship between the performer and the audience. Aitken (2007) emphasises the relationship between theatre-makers (performers) and audience members within a performance space and context. He suggests that for a performance to ‘work’, a number of shared understandings are required, including that between theatre-maker and audience member. Both parties require a loosely shared sense of how the performance will be read and what will be valued, or considered of quality. These can differ in different circumstances, but ultimately, the control of the terms of the performance lie with the theatre-makers. They should have an understanding of the expectation required in their construction of a piece, and then consider the level of interaction or direction called for from the
audience. It is always the theatre-makers, as relationship managers, who are in control within a successful performance (Aitken 2007).

A particular power relationship between the actor and audience is present during an assessed performance. Theatre-makers are required to dictate the terms of the performance to the audience; the student is the theatre-maker. The teacher (who may also be in the role of the assessor) maintains some degree of control over the performance event and performance environment. Although the theatre-maker maintains a degree of autonomy over the terms of the performance, the teacher-assessor will probably have prescribed the boundaries within which the theatre-makers work, theatrical style and the subject matter that can be dealt with. Additionally, the teacher-assessor may halt a performance which is deemed inappropriate or unsafe.

During drama performance assessment students have a unique relationship with their audience and student performers are aware of their dual purpose when they perform for the purpose of assessment. Students aim to achieve favourable results for assessment, but also to impress their audience with a strong performance. The concept of authentic assessment is has can be found within drama performance assessment tasks. Authentic assessment is characterised as having conditions that mirror the ‘real world’ (Frey 2012, p. 1) where discipline specific cognitive processes are developed and a product is created that has value inside and outside of the school setting (Palm 2008). The presence of the audience is one of the factors that provide the conditions for drama performance assessment to be considered authentic. The audience also provides dual scrutiny to the performance. Students receive feedback from the teacher-assessor and their audience of peers. Feedback from the audience is immediate and subsequent. It consists of emotional or affective responses to the art, manifesting in actions such as laughing, clapping, coughing and fidgeting. Audience members also offer comments or critiques to student actors after their performances, reinforcing the notion that art is viewed from multiple perspectives.

Criterion-referenced assessment for performance

To assist the assessor to make informed judgments about work that engages the aesthetic senses, it has long been suggested (Ross 1993) that grading in the arts should be criterion-referenced (interchangeable terms include the use of a ‘rubric’, ‘marking criteria’, ‘marking and standards criteria’ or ‘grading criteria’) and not based on normative structures in which students’ achievements are assessed in relation to their peers (e.g. using a ‘curve’). Well-designed assessment criteria can help to inform students of the expectations before them (Baptiste 2008; Stemler 2004). Almost inevitably, the development and interpretation criteria and standards in creative fields are highly controversial. Criterion referencing, by its nature, is predicated on the known. Creativity researchers Amabile (1996) and Sternberg (1988) argue that any products derived from a known formula or pre-determined set of instructions can never be considered creative. Kleiman (2005) similarly argues that
a criterion-referenced framework is a ‘closed system’ that perpetuates non-creative outcomes (p. 21). However, Boulter (2004) argues that criterion-referenced assessment is a key to our existing understanding of measurement as it is demonstrably fair, enabling students to prepare for assessments, engage with judgments and appeal against results. Tierney and Marielle (2004) suggest that criteria should be stated explicitly; the attributes for each performance criterion should be clear and the attributes that are differentiated from one level to the next need to be set out and applied appropriately. The continuum of performance levels should assist students to engage in a critique of their own skills, while also increasing their knowledge and assessing their personal growth (Arter & McTighe 2001; Goodrich Andrade 2000; Hyde 2013; Lindström, 2006).

Griffin and Nix (1991) add that

‘the same principles that apply to the development of objective essay and affective assessment tasks also apply to the development of performance or practical tasks’ (71).

As with all learning areas, it is vital that Drama assessment follows the guiding principles of ‘good’ assessment (Brookhart 2011; Hyde 2013; McMillan 2000). ‘Good assessment’ is fair and ethical, uses multiple methods, is valid and feasible, and it enhances instruction. Just as for any other subject, the alignment of learning and assessment is imperative. Boyle (2003) declares that the first step in assessing higher order thinking in Drama is ensuring that the curriculum (what is taught), pedagogy (how it is taught), and assessment (how the content is assessed) are in alignment. Hence, arts assessment is a judgment of the outcome of artistic styles of learning, discovery and creativity (Sadler 2009) rather than a confinement of students into responses that are predictable and iterative (Ross 1994).

It is useful to explore research assessment in other arts disciplines such as Music and Dance, as they too manage similar tensions in the assessment of performances. In the related arts field of Music, Dixon (2000) and Asmus (1999) contend that assessment criteria often lack details when describing the elements of artistic accomplishment that are valued in creative tasks. Ross (1994) and Gordon (2004) assert that assessment criteria across art forms are created by teachers who may have a background as artistic practitioners. It can be difficult to place this practitioner wisdom in a grid that is meaningful for students. As an example, Gordon explains the difficulty when dealing with responses that work ‘beyond’ the brief, containing what he explains as the ‘wow’ factor. The wow factor is

‘an elegance, which will arrest and satisfy the reader, in the terms of the medium, beyond the norm demonstrating innovation, ingenuity, independent thought and divergent thinking’ (Gordon, 62).

Dixon also calls for performance assessment criteria to recognise stage presence, which can be an intangible mixture of ‘charisma, talent and ego’ (Roberts 2011). Dixon (2000) suggests that passion, soul and spirit are often omitted as criteria within Drama assessment, yet these qualities lie at the heart of a great performance.
The Drama teacher, who is also the assessor, negotiates such challenges in the drama assessment process and identifies skills and qualities that they themselves may not have anticipated.

Clark (2002) adds that well-constructed assessment criteria provides a way for student performances to be evaluated easily and equitably, without compromising on the divergent qualities of individual creative processes that arise in student responses to Drama assessment tasks. Ross (1994) suggests that the key qualities of assessment criteria should address the links between the generation, realisation and response to Drama, using methods that allow the use of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993; 2006). Work produced in relation to aesthetic qualities should also be grounded in content knowledge. The student needs to apply content knowledge with creative skills to address the task (Pritchard 2004). Divergent responses are permissible and assessable, and in some cases, encouraged.

As with all styles of assessment, student and teacher understanding of criteria are important to the design of fair assessment. Thus, assessment processes should not be shrouded in mystery (Biggs & Tang 2011). The ‘knowing it when they find it’ (Gordon 2004, p. 62) approach to assessment is no longer acceptable in contemporary education. To aid transparency, there have been further developments in the language used for Arts assessment criteria. It is now, for example, acceptable to use simpler, less descriptive grids, less formal language or holistic criteria (Sadler 2009) while still communicating expectations using acceptable formal terminologies.

Similarly, feedback as a result of the assessment process should be easily understood by students. Students’ ability to understand their feedback is one of the measures by which they judge the quality of an assessment process. A study by Wojtas (1998 in Weaver 2006, p. 381) claimed that students were more likely to improve their work if they understood their feedback and assessment criteria. Weaver adds that the value of feedback depends on the student’s ‘particular conception’ (p. 380) of what is being assessed. If a student does not have a similar understanding of the assessment criteria to the teacher, they have difficulty in understanding and using feedback. A lack of understanding of feedback can result in disappointed and disheartened students, who lack confidence for future learning (Harris 2008). In a drama performance context, this can manifest in students either being unwilling to develop their performance skills or in performance work that repeats past shortcomings without improvement or progress.

**Conclusion**

As a subject taught in schools, Drama is somewhat unique because students’ experiences of performing and learning are intertwined (Schechner 2003; 1981). The combination of embodied learning, artistic processes and the demonstration of specific performance skills are also utilised in other performing arts subjects, such as Dance. In subjects such as these, performance is fundamental to learning and
assessment. This paper has outlined relevant literature exploring the challenges associated with drama performance assessment. While it also considers approaches that address those challenges, those responses are not definitive and more research into the subtleties of performance assessment are warranted.

The literature suggests that subjective judgements are endemic in the performance assessment environment and can never be divorced from the process. At the same time, the ‘healthy balance’ (Tomlinson 2001, p. 15) between subjective and objective judgments are ideally what the teacher-assessor should deliver. Subjective and objective perspectives combine to create informed judgements that broaden interpretations on the students’ art. This can be somewhat challenging to those not accustomed to assessment in affective domains, using aesthetically charged mediums. Academic work is traditionally associated with rational and quantifiable modes of thinking, therefore arts educators should take care to make their language accessible and their assessment processes transparent. Drama assessment’s challenge to traditional learning and assessment paradigms is also important because it broadens the educational community’s understanding of the nature of learning. Discussing the merits of creative assessment tasks is also important as it allows for the rigour and complexities of the tasks to become visible to those outside of artistic fields.

The teacher’s role in the creative process contains tensions, which become even more apparent as they move to becoming the assessor of the artistic product. The teacher may have directed, edited or collaborated on the art, which they are ultimately required to assess. The teacher-assessor’s main role throughout the artistic process is to develop independence so that each student can present their skills, ideas and creative work for assessment. The final performance should not be simply a set of practices produced under direct guidance from the teacher, as this compromises the integrity of the assessment results. Another influence on student performances is the presence of the audience. Students’ dramatic work is made to be publicly displayed and receives critique from the assessor and the audience. Rather than viewing this scenario as a ‘servant of two masters’, the presence of the audience should be embraced as it allows another avenue of feedback for the student.

The presence of the audience and assessor reinforce the notion that art is viewed from multiple perspectives. However, the assessor makes quantifiable judgements (such as awarding marks or grades) in accordance with predetermined criteria. It is questionable as to whether divergent responses can be valued on this scale, which is predicated on the known. The literature cited in this paper also argues that well-constructed criteria does allow for performances to be evaluated equitably without compromising on the individual creative processes that arise in drama performance assessment. Transparent criteria that is easily able to be understood is important for the development of students’ drama performance skills. Criteria can be used as a learning tool to steer students away from the belief that ‘talent’ or innate acting ability are being assessed.
The challenges associated with drama performance assessment, like drama itself, are heavily nuanced. Teachers and students do not engage in drama assessment to have a complete and full understanding of all its nuances. They engage in drama and performance to experience the joy of creative expression and artistic creation, to play ‘pretend’ in a range of roles and to build a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience through an array of lenses. There is also joy within challenge; Drama performance assessment contains areas of ambiguity and subtleties that lack definitive answers. The subtleties add to the richness of drama performance assessment, challenging drama educators to engage in meaningful discussions in order to find ways to enhance fairness and equity amid the ambiguity.
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http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=8


London: National Drama


Notes on Author

Rachael Jacobs lectures in Creative Arts Education (Dance, Drama and Music) at the Australian Catholic University. She has previously been a Secondary Drama teacher and a Primary Arts specialist. Rachael has made advances in educational research in the arts, particularly in the area of assessment, which is her research field. She has completed several arts education research projects addressing social justice issues as they intersect with artistic engagement. Rachael contributes to the arts community as a dancer, choreographer and physical theatre practitioner. She has her own cultural dance school and has volunteered her time running arts programs in prisons, improving the mental health of incarcerated women. Rachael is also an environmental activist, a speaker on international development and multiculturalism and a freelance writer. Her columns about education, politics and social commentary can be read in the National Times.

School of Education
Australian Catholic University
1100 Nudgee Rd
Banyo Qld 4014
AUSTRALIA

rachael.jacobs@acu.edu.au
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