



Children's creative understanding of drama education: A Bakhtinian perspective



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of creative understanding, this paper aims to investigate children's creative learning of drama education in a group of preschoolers aged 4–5 in a Hong Kong kindergarten. The research was designed originally to offer a case study to identify the emergence of creative learning during and after drama lessons, and investigate its relation to teaching. The field observations, however, noticed the contrary effect brought by a product-oriented and a teacher-centred approach of teaching. These approaches had strongly undermined the stimulus to imaginative and playful participation that drama education is able to generate purportedly. Not only had they restricted dialogic encounters in the lessons but also the feasibility of identifying children's creative response emerging from within. These observations led to a shift of the study focus to the method and data of draw-and-tell, which was used to enable children to creatively re-imagine and retell their drama experiences as a concluding reflection. The findings were analysed in three categories, namely Characterization, Re-conceptualization and Transformation to illustrate children's capacity and techniques of restorying drama experiences with their interest, knowledge, language and culture. The research process as well as the results of the study reveal a complex interplay between teaching, learning and researching affirming that a particular type of creative learning of drama education is not only shaped by a particular form of teaching, but also the research method.

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1. Background of the study: drama education and creativity

In recent years, with the growing popularity of drama education in Asia, there is also an increasing volume of research looking into its impact on children's development, in which creativity, in particular, is the major focus (Hui, Cheung, Wong, & He, 2011; Hui & Lau, 2006; Yeh & Li, 2008). To name but a few, in two experimental studies conducted by Hui and her colleagues (Hui & Lau, 2006; Hui et al., 2011), drama activities and strategies are integrated into the curriculum for enhancing children's creativity. In these studies, creativity is defined as novel behavior, personal characteristics and a thinking process. It is measured through the testing of children's drama and creative characteristics, and their ability of storytelling. The results show that children's creativity significantly benefits from the drama-enhanced curriculum. Yeh and Li (2008) argue children's creativity as a result of the interplay of the factors of personal characteristics, family and school experiences, as well as the individual's work and the social milieu. Creative drama contributes to its development. Although underpinned by

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different definitions of creativity and approaches of drama education, these studies provide persistent and strong evidence about the effectiveness of drama education towards creativity.

Nevertheless, drama education is only an umbrella term to name a wide range of strategies and approaches of drama application. Applications in different approaches, disciplines and contexts would result in different outcomes of creativity. Regarding the role of script and performance, the application of drama strategy and children's participation, many drama educators have mapped a spectrum ranging from product to process oriented teaching approach (Dunn, 2011; Sæbø, 2009). The former delivers best results in training of drama knowledge and skills for professionals, high-end and artistic performances; and the latter emphasizes students' engagement through improvisation, participation and creation with their own experiences, languages and cultural identities. The term drama-in-education or process drama is thus used for special purposes. Its application is usually characterized by using stories with integration of drama conventions such as teacher-in-role, pantomime, hot-seating, and so on (Neelands & Goode, 2000). In this paper, the studied application comes from the process-oriented family of drama education. Drama educators (Cremin & McDonald, 2013; Neelands, 2011) in this camp generally interpret creativity in and through drama education as learnable, ordinary and transformative. Many of them draw on Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Anna Craft's theories, which treat creativity as everyday experience and a learnable social process. In Anna Craft's (2001, p.45) term, it is the "little 'c' creativity" or "possibility thinking", sharing qualities of innovation, action, risk taking, imagination, and capacity to ask question and play. These qualities lie at the heart of children's subjectivity and culture. Drawing on the framework of little "c" creativity, Lin (2010, 2014) solicits views of pupils on the learning derived from drama education and finds that it is a playful, challenge-laden and participatory pedagogy. Lin's studies have shifted the research focus from effective measurement to giving an authentic account of the use of drama education from the perspective of learners. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of study to investigate how little "c" creativity is generated by drama education.

2. The teaching of drama education and creative learning

The latest research trend of little "c" creativity takes great interests in its actual practice and various ways of understanding it in different educational contexts, subject disciplines and pedagogies. The term "creative learning" was recently developed by Anna Craft and her colleagues (Craft, Cremin, & Burnard, 2008; Craft, Grainger, Burnard, & Chappell, 2006, p. 77). Thomson and Sefton-Green (2011) explain it as,

... teaching that allows student to use their imaginations, have ideas, generate multiple possible solutions to problems, communicate in a variety of media and in general "think outside the box" (p.2).

This definition suggests that creative learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin. The scholars urge for more studies to access, represent and evaluate creative learning and examine how it is fostered. These concerns are shared in this study which situates the investigation and discussion of creative learning in drama education. It is understood that even drama education is pertinent to creative learning and teaching, the connection between the two should not be taken-for-granted but it is complicated and even vulnerable. Numerous studies have found that the teacher's teaching play a vital role to realizing its value (Neelands, 2004; Kitchen, 2015). Moreover, Winston (2015) argues that drama education always takes place in an inductive, experiential and aesthetic process rather than a knowledge reproduction or skills transmission approach. It emphasizes on learners' imagination and participation along with which the teacher may only predict but cannot prescribe their responses to drama.

Nevertheless, an elaboration of imaginative and participatory elements of drama education can clarify the complex relationships between teaching and learning. To name but a few, learning in acting or mimetic activities takes form in an as-if mode, through which the learner could transgress the boundary of self and everyday life to think, act and feel differently in role (Neelands, 2010). Winston (2000) also describes how connecting oneself with others in role would result in a new understanding of both. Hence, the gist of creativity of acting does not lie solely in replicating imaginative elements of the story, but transforming what we have already known and going to know. Besides, a drama lesson is always structured in a participatory frame in which various drama strategies and non-drama activities offer children abundant opportunities for public expression, social negotiation and communal creation. In the process, the power of the teacher is often 'decrowned' (Tam, 2010b) and the children are sanctioned to make use of their own experiences, languages, feelings and cultural identities to respond and renew those given by the story and the teacher. Conceivably, drama education can bring about an open, playful and dialogic space within the classroom (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; Neelands, 2011; Tam, 2010b), in which no single text, meaning, knowledge type or voice can dominate the learning. The interpretation of drama learning as an aesthetic experience suggests that the creativeness of drama education does not only reside in the teacher's teaching but also the learner's learning. The question is how imaginative and participatory elements are practised and how they affect creative learning.

This study was contextualized in a natural classroom setting in a Hong Kong kindergarten in which drama education was taught to a class of four-to-five year old children. It was designed as a case study to explore and examine the interplay between the teaching of imaginative and participatory elements of drama education and children's actual creative learning experiences. Various methods including participant observation, teacher interview and children's draw-and-tell method were employed. Informed by the learning from the field, the focus of the study adjusted over time through two phases of analysis. It began with identifying the children's creative understanding emerged during the drama teaching, and then shifted

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