

## **From ‘discovered’ to ‘constructivist’ in applied theatre programmes: Preparing postgraduate students as future artist-educators**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Applied theatre as a named field is still relatively new yet ‘the range of applied theatre practice is vast; it happens all over the world as part of a grassroots movement involved in social change and community reflection’ (Prendergast & Saxton, vi: 2009). This article explores the underlying teaching philosophies inherent in the published course descriptors of a sample range of eight graduate/postgraduate programmes in applied theatre across three countries. The selection of these programmes, although somewhat random, has been based upon their prominence within academic parlances and those that provide programme documents in English. Consequently the representative sample survey is across one cross-section of postgraduate provision and is analysed in order to extract a range of philosophical themes underpinning learning and teaching. In distilling these philosophies the article presents a discussion of how the subject knowledge of applied theatre work ranges from ‘discovered’ to ‘constructivist’ in nature. In turn these themes are interrogated against published research in the field*

*and postulate on how applied theatre programmes might further consider the ways in which they adequately prepare their students as future artist-educators to work in this diverse and challenging field. An outcome of the survey revealed grand claims made in the published programme descriptors.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Within the last two decades we have seen the proliferation, albeit modest compared to other disciplines perhaps, of university applied theatre programmes at both undergraduate and graduate/postgraduate levels. Within more generalist drama programmes we have also seen the inclusion of modules or units on applied theatre to be studied at all levels of higher education. Finding a purpose for drama outside of more traditional theatre environments has kept drama/theatre academics occupied both in their theorising and in their community-based practice. However it is this term 'applied theatre' that has continued to particularly capture the special attention of educationally or socially-focussed academics rather than performance theorists *per se*. Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton's comprehensive text *Applied Theatre: International case studies and challenges for practice* bring together a broad survey of the field. They acknowledge that 'the range of applied theatre practice is vast; it happens all over the world as part of a grassroots movement involved in social change and community reflection' (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. vi).

With the global interest in applied theatre the marketplace of universities offering such programmes has grown considerably. In the United Kingdom there are currently around ten Master's programmes that have 'applied theatre' in the title, even if only a pathway of a more general master's degree in theatre or drama. There seems to be less obvious MA in applied theatre provision in the USA and Canada. Across the UK, USA, Canada and Australia there are many more undergraduate programmes on offer than Master's programmes that address applied theatre either as a full degree or form a component of the degree. Most of the UK acting conservatoires now offer alternative undergraduate programmes, and applied theatre features strongly amongst them with a perhaps unsurprising emphasis on practical work rather than theory.

It is the purpose of this article to explore the underlying teaching

philosophies inherent in the online published course descriptors of a sample range of eight graduate/postgraduate programmes in applied theatre across three countries: UK, USA, and Australia. Consequently the survey is not meant to be exhaustive but rather a sample representation across one cross-section of postgraduate provision in order to extract a range of philosophical themes underpinning learning and teaching within the field.

The range of programmes in this study, broadly speaking, share similar concerns, although each contain their own distinctive nuances that will be explored later in this article. According to Prendergast and Saxton (2009) 'Applied theatre works overtly either to reassert or to undermine socio-political norms, as its intent is to reveal more clearly the way the world is working' (p. 8). Using the Prendergast and Saxton definition this article seeks to identify a range of epistemological assumptions about applied theatre education through the published MA programme descriptors. Whilst these brief descriptors do not fully inform us of each programme's detail, they do offer us a headline summary of what it is that makes each programme both distinctive and possibly appealing to potential students.

Before revealing the analysis of the data gathered from the online published programme outlines, it is helpful to briefly examine some of the encompassing educational and philosophical assumptions generally made in the field of applied theatre literature.

## **INFLUENCING MODELS OF EDUCATION**

There has been a growing orthodoxy in educational thought that has led to the proliferation of applied theatre as an alternative theatre form. Prendergast and Saxton (2009) remind us that 'across many cultures and traditions over time we can trace patterns and instances of groups of people using the stage as a space and place to tell their stories and their lives' (p. 7). Tony Jackson (2006) says of applied theatre's antecedent Theatre in Education (TIE):

...it has excited and inspired, and at times unnerved, actors and teachers alike, and has marked out for itself a territory that overlaps the domains of theatre and education in ways that are important and unusual. It is moreover part of a much wider development that has taken place across the world in the latter decades of the

twentieth century as the theatre looks for new audiences and new ways to speak to those audiences. (p. 1)

From these basic beginnings applied theatre has gained popularity with those who have a belief that change or transformation takes place within individuals when they participate in an applied theatre event. It is not the role of this study to validate or in invalidate this premise. However, the philosophical assumptions surrounding applied theatre provision is of key interest.

### *Experimentalist education*

Fundamentally, 'applied theatre', as a term, has grown out of TIE, drama education and community-focused theatre, which in turn broadly grew with the philosophy of Experimentalism, an explicit and systematic theory of education stemming essentially from the work of US educational philosopher John Dewey. He and others of his time gave us insights into the practical nature of knowledge – that by *doing*, we can come to *know*. He urged educationalists to understand that the business of education is to replace randomly chosen tasks or chance activity with activity that leads to genuine knowledge and to fruitful understanding (1938). Experimentalism places the importance of *direct* experience in education. According to H. Gordon Hullfish (1963) 'intelligence, operating in quite human ways in relation to quite human problems, will give the answers that are needed to bring the newly born infant to maturity' (p. 11). He goes on to suggest:

The experimentalist believes also that the values which men [sic] have developed in their past are the values with which they must start at any given time. Because of this interrelationship of the individual and the transmitted culture, the experimentalist further affirms that the quality of the relationship in society will be reflected in the quality of the individual human experience. Thus, the experimentalist asks what kind of social structure, of social values, provides what is best for the most people. (Hullfish, 1963, p. 11)

This overall approach to education, espoused in the early 1960s, clearly resonates with today's values and philosophical beliefs evident in the broad principles of applied theatre. As Philip Taylor in 2003 writes:

Applied theatre became a particularly useful description given it encompasses the breath of work that theatre programs were creating inside and outside of educational settings, mostly in nontheatrical environments for diverse purposes – raising awareness, posing alternatives, healing psychological wounds or barriers, challenging contemporary discourses, voicing the views of the silent and marginal. (p. xxi)

What applied theatre offers in its ideals is a motivation to change or at least critically reflect from multiple perspectives using role and audience involvement. Knowledge within this context, therefore, is thought to be constructed through the act of participation and critical observation.

## **THE SURVEY DATA AND ANALYSIS**

Eight MA programmes in applied theatre were selected for review in this study. The basis of selection was arrived at by a simple Internet search, one that any potential student may carry out to locate prominent MA programmes in applied theatre. This method of selection has allowed the study to examine the most prominently placed programmes in the English-speaking sector. The number of sites reflects the number of programmes most apparently obvious using the search term 'MA Applied theatre'. Of course cognate programmes will exist and may adopt variant degree or programme titles. The delimitations of this project are, as a result, confined to UK, USA and Australia. Further, the study is only concerned with the outward advertising and does not seek to examine detailed programme curriculum beyond that which is presented by each institution in the promotion of their respective programmes in order for potential students and the wider public to make judgement.

The various MA Applied Theatre programme descriptors in this study (Table 1) appear to reflect the interests and understandings of their undisclosed authors. At one end of the spectrum the descriptors reflect a theoretical bias and at the other end the descriptors emphasise practice and the skills required to be a practitioner. However all descriptors make mention of the importance of both theory and practice within their programmes. The combined theoretical and practical position has long been an accepted practice in applied theatre education.

<b>Institution</b>	<b>MA Degree Title</b>
1. UK	Master of Arts in Applied Theatre
2. UK	MA in Applied Theatre: Drama in Educational, Community & Social Contexts
3. UK	MA Applied Theatre and Intervention
4. UK	MA in Applied and Participatory Theatre
5. USA	Master of Arts in Applied Theatre (MA)
6. USA	Applied Theatre Arts (MA)
7. AUS	Master of Applied Theatre Studies
8. UK	MA Applied Theatre & Community Drama

**Table 1: Programmes surveyed (numbering is used for on-going reference)**

### **How applied theatre is described/defined**

Most of the descriptors studied provide either an explicit definition of applied theatre or an inferred definition. These descriptions (Table 2) generally show an agreed way of defining applied theatre that is frequently very broad but distinguishes the work from mainstream theatre practices. Applied theatre is widely purported to be a direct agent of personal and social change. There is some considerable lack of distinction between applied theatre and applied drama with one definition explicitly including drama in education (applied drama). Institution 3 makes its programme distinctive to the rest by claiming it takes an ‘interventionist’ approach. There are frequent mentions of health related uses of applied theatre. Institution 6 mentions therapy as being included under the applied theatre umbrella.

<p><b>1.</b> transformative and rehabilitative</p> <p><b>1.</b> make a difference to people by engaging with issues, dramatising relevant stories, representing role models</p> <p><b>1.</b> possibilities for action, and involving participants in processes that they find useful, informative or exciting</p>
<p><b>2.</b> Applied theatre is an umbrella term for a range of exciting worldwide performance forms concerned with personal and social change.</p> <p><b>2.</b> The term embraces: theatre of the oppressed, community theatre, theatre-in-education, drama in education, theatre for development, prison theatre, intercultural arts, intergenerational arts, theatre in museums, archives and heritage sites, story-telling, reminiscence theatre, conflict resolution. The work often moves across art forms. This is not a definitive list, as it is a field that is dynamic and changing.</p> <p><b>2.</b> theatre and performance is created by diverse groups of people in a variety of community, social and educational settings: in schools or on the streets, in children's homes and elderly care, in conflict zones, conferences, crèches and youth clubs, pupil referral units and prisons, women's refuges and refugee centres, hospitals and hostels – anywhere groups of people meet and interact.</p>
<p><b>3.</b> The programme's focus on intervention signals a distinctiveness that separates it from other applied theatre programmes. The emphasis here is on the potential of theatre and performance to interrupt, confront, subvert, transform, transcend, reconfigure and re-imagine.</p> <p><b>3.</b> applied theatre in all of its forms including community theatre, theatre-in-education, theatre and health, prison theatre, theatre for development and the arts therapies.</p>
<p><b>4.</b> Applied drama/theatre is an umbrella term, which includes the practice of drama in a wide range of settings. These include drama and theatre education, young people's theatre, drama, health and healing, reminiscence and heritage theatres, theatre in prisons and theatre for development.</p>
<p><b>5.</b> Applied theatre is a specialized field that uses theatre as a medium for education and social development. It involves the use of theatre and drama in a wide variety of non-traditional contexts and venues - in teaching, the justice system, healthcare, the political arena, community development, museums, social service agencies, and business and industry.</p> <p><b>5.</b> Applied Theatre involves the use of theatre and drama in a wide variety of non-traditional contexts and venues, such as in teaching, the justice system, health care, the political arena, community development, museums, and social service agencies.</p>
<p><b>6.</b> Applied Theatre Arts explores the intersection of theatre and cultural fieldwork, encompassing the fields of theatre and therapy, theatre in education and theatre for social change/community based theatre.</p> <p><b>6.</b> Practitioners of applied theatre arts supplement their work as classroom teachers, therapists, social workers, case managers, community organizers and social activists to engage public groups to obtain their goals and desires by using the tools of theatre to expedite dialogue and foster an atmosphere of greater critical consciousness and increased agency.</p>
<p><b>7.</b> [No definition provided however inference is made in the following] A Master of Applied Theatre Studies allows you to refine your professional and academic skills. Examples of careers that can be assisted through a Master of Applied Theatre Studies include professional theatre direction and production, arts management, the teaching of theatre and performance and entrepreneurial theatre making.</p>
<p><b>8.</b> It encourages the research and practice of theatre and performance that engages in non-traditional and/or community sites, and combines artistic exploration with a social, political and educational focus.</p> <p><b>8.</b> We particularly support theatre projects that engage with issues relating to transformation, critique and social responsibility.</p>

**Table 2: Applied theatre descriptors (numbers correspond to institution)**

### Key skills/knowledge claimed to be developed

There is mention in the descriptors of various skills (Table 3) although the precise nature of these in many of the programmes is unclear. History, theory, practice and politics are generally flagged as areas of study. Attributes such as being a reflective practitioner, having technical and creative skills are highlighted. Given these are Master's level degrees there is predictable emphasis upon the development of research skills in many of the descriptors. Programme 5 grandly suggests it will contribute to students 'becoming future leaders in the field of applied theatre'; how this is achieved is unclear from the descriptor however.

<p>1. support current practice at work, or a particular field of interest in applied theatre and drama.</p> <p>1. learn key practices in applied theatre,</p> <p>1. engage with new ideas in the field,</p> <p>1. undertake project-based study examining specific professional work with a range of client groups, or specialise in working with people whose lives have been affected by the criminal justice system.</p>
<p>2. develops your ability to contextualise, critique and create.</p> <p>2. prepare students to be collaborative, responsive, imaginative, politically engaged and culturally aware artist practitioners.</p> <p>2. An advanced understanding of the history, theory and practice of Applied Theatre practice</p> <p>2. each student's development as a critically rigorous, reflective practitioner who has the vocabulary and skills to make and reflect on Applied Theatre practice.</p>
<p>3. The programme will provide students with the opportunity to study Applied Theatre and Intervention</p> <p>3. new approaches to radical interventionist practice...as well as the more conventional pedagogical contexts associated with applied theatre will be explored and developed.</p> <p>3. You'll gain a broad understanding of some of the wider issues faced by applied theatre practitioners including ethics, boundaries, evaluation, policy and funding and have the opportunity to apply your learning in a placement context.</p> <p>3. Core modules will look at practice-based workshop techniques and the development of facilitation skills; concepts and theories underpinning applied theatre and interventionist practice; and research training.</p>
<p>4. will inform and be informed by the core courses where you'll experience radically different approaches to performance-making in both conventional theatre spaces and in non-theatrical settings.</p> <p>4. enable you to consider the relationship between innovative performance practices and work in applied drama.</p> <p>4. theoretical issues</p> <p>4. opportunity to develop the practice and research aspects of applied theatre in which you're particularly interested</p> <p>4. develop your own practical project</p>
<p>5. scholar practitioners to become future leaders in the field of applied theatre.</p>
<p>6. training practitioners in the art of popular theatre with primarily marginalized communities.</p>

**Table 3: Key skills/knowledge claims (numbers correspond to institution)**

<p>7. Students will be able to extend their knowledge and skills in the areas of theatre production, dramaturgical research, and academic writing.</p> <p>7. This is a creative practice as research course integrating theoretical and practical study.</p> <p>7. Students take part in a performance or other theatre event as playwright, director, actor or designer, and produce a short dissertation which builds on the knowledge and understanding gained during the practical work on the production.</p> <p>7. allow students to further develop their academic skills in writing, contemporary theoretical approaches, research methodology and/or the study of theatre history.</p> <p>7. Knowledge of a Discipline: Graduates will be able to demonstrate an advanced and integrated understanding of theatre theory and production and apply knowledge at an advanced level in professional contexts or to solve problems.</p> <p>7. Communication Skills: Graduates will be able to demonstrate expert cognitive, technical and creative skills in theatre and performance to interpret and transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences.</p> <p>7. Information Literacy: Graduates will be able to research, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories and apply established theories to different bodies of knowledge or practice.</p> <p>7. Life-Long Learning: Graduates will be able to show initiative in exploring career and further learning pathways and opportunities with a high level of personal autonomy and accountability; consistently take responsibility for seeking improved learning and maintaining accurate evidence of learning achievements from within formal course experiences; and demonstrate the ability to plan a course of action for further learning and continuing professional practice.</p> <p>7. Problem Solving: Graduates will be able to plan and execute a substantial research based performance project, capstone experience and/or piece of scholarship.</p> <p>7. Social Responsibility: Graduates will be able to demonstrate professional and ethical conduct in their theatre practice and in providing balanced and accurate research.</p>
<p>8. research methods course and an advanced performance theory and practice course that explores contemporary and historical examples of applied theatre</p> <p>8. gain experience in a 'real-world' applied theatre context; a number of MA study options; and a 'directed reading' course.</p> <p>8. enhance students' capacity to engage in advanced research and practice in theatre and performance, both on an independent basis and in collaboration with their peers.</p> <p>8. The programme will prepare students for further academic study and/or employment in the field of theatre and performance and applied theatre practice.</p> <p>8. The MA fosters students' skills in critically evaluating current and advanced scholarship and practice in applied theatre: students learn how to develop critiques of that scholarship, and offer original, independent responses.'</p>

**Table 3 Continued: Key skills/knowledge claims (numbers correspond to institution)**

## Learning and teaching processes

Unsurprisingly, practical workshops, group learning, lectures, seminars, tutorials, fieldwork and independent learning all feature in the programme descriptors (Table 4). Institution 7 in Australia was a notable exception to the other programmes in the class's integration; however as it is delivered off-campus via distance education, this is understandable. Institution 7 also mentions directing school plays, which is unusually included as applied theatre.

Programmes purport to be student-led, staff-led, and visiting

tutor/practitioner-led with much emphasis being placed upon the practical side of applied theatre study. Implicit in the various descriptor texts is that knowledge and understanding is constructed through the act of doing. The connectedness to real life practice is a continuous theme throughout and may reflect the applied nature of the work.

Programmes generally appear to be broken down into thirds with the first part being delivered on campus with lecturers, the second part is generally a placement with an applied theatre company or self-directed project and the final third is generally a written dissertation that may be based on practice.

<p>1. designed to support current practice at work, or a particular field of interest in applied theatre and drama.</p> <p>1. Students will participate in workshops and seminars to explore practices</p> <p>1. undertake project-based study</p>
<p>2. Together we explore...</p> <p>2. programme structure employs a range of learning and teaching methods to support the learning outcomes: seminars, mini-lectures, presentations by visiting practitioners, tutorials, practical workshops led by staff and visiting tutors, laboratory workshops led by students, placement project; and the dissertation.</p> <p>2. The programme is augmented by selected visits to theatre companies, productions, workshops and public seminars and debates. The programme takes full advantage of its London location and of the work that is happening in and around the city. We have a number of highly experienced and innovative Applied Theatre professionals who support the programme as Visiting Tutors.</p> <p>2. Student led practice is fundamental to each student's development as a critically rigorous, reflective practitioner who has the vocabulary and skills to make and reflect on Applied Theatre practice.</p> <p>2. students will be expected to organise ways to continue to reflect on areas that they have encountered on the programme, to share their specific skills with each other and to negotiate a space to test and develop new ideas.</p>
<p>3. Students following this programme will benefit from those relationships, finding placement opportunities, internships and potential career paths as a result.</p> <p>3. It is envisaged that new approaches to radical interventionist practice that address the wider frames of the political, the social, the personal and the artistic as well as the more conventional pedagogical contexts associated with applied theatre will be explored and developed.</p> <p>3. Through practice and theory you will explore applied theatre</p> <p>3. We use a range of teaching and learning methods including practical workshops, group learning, lectures, seminars, tutorials and fieldwork. Independent learning is central to this programme, allowing you to integrate your learning and develop your understanding and skills.</p>
<p>4. develop your own practical project in your chosen field. For this project, you're encouraged to be creative and innovative, and to apply your understanding of drama and theatre to specific educational contexts, communities, sites or settings.</p> <p>4. reflect these theoretical issues by considering drama as a social intervention, questions of place and community and the aesthetics of participation.</p> <p>4. the opportunity to develop the practice and research aspects of applied theatre in which you're particularly interested and to share your research findings with others.</p>

**Table 4: Learning and teaching processes (numbers correspond to institution)**

<p>5. Practice actor-centered, collaborative approaches to leading creative teams and playbuilding original theatre</p> <p>5. Study a range of artistic, educational, and social theories that inform progressive practice</p> <p>5. Collaborate as a member of a student ensemble to support creative risk-taking</p> <p>5. carefully sequenced courses with an emphasis on the unity of theory and practice</p> <p>5. Devise and perform theatre-in-education interventions</p> <p>5. Develop work alongside the renowned XXXXX Team</p> <p>5. Research, implement, document, and evaluate an original applied theatre thesis project.</p>
<p>6. This combined area of study weaves all three disciplines together under the aegis of training practitioners in the art of popular theatre with primarily marginalized communities.</p> <p>6. A written and oral examination is required upon completion of course work.</p> <p>6. All students will participate in an international externship during the summer following their academic year. This externship takes place in an approved overseas site where the practice of applied theatre arts is well established, with whom the university has a contractual agreement for supervised observation. This externship intends to provide a supervisory, logistical and theoretical container for students to explore cultural fieldwork in the international arena.</p>
<p>7. This course is only available off-campus (distance education).</p> <p>7. Candidates are required to take a creative role in a practical theatre project as part of their studies. In the case of school teachers this could involve working with pupils in a school production (of an appropriate scale); for theatre practitioners it could involve taking part in a production with an established theatre company. The XXXXX cannot provide facilities or resources off campus for the practical component of the course - it is the responsibility of the candidate to arrange this.</p>
<p>8. Mandatory elements (totalling 60 credits) include a research methods course and an advanced performance theory and practice course.</p> <p>8. You then select a further 60 credits drawn from the following: a 'Professional Practices' course, offering an opportunity to gain experience in a 'real-world' theatre or applied theatre context; a number of MA study options; and a 'directed reading' course (independent study with one to one supervision). MA study options based in Drama typically include (depending on staff availability): Performance and war; Creative learning; Making culture; Staging the New Sex; Popular theatre and entertainment 1820-1890; Body and text in contemporary theatres.</p> <p>8. Finally, you complete a 12-15,000-word dissertation on an area of your choice. Your dissertation can involve practical research, with a shorter written component accompanied by a practical project.</p> <p>8. Students are taught in seminars, small group tutorials, workshops and surgeries, offering opportunities for lively and engaged discussions.</p> <p>8. One-to-one supervision is offered on all dissertations.</p>

**Table 3 Continued: Learning and teaching processes (numbers correspond to institution)**

### **Knowledge types evident in applied theatre programmes**

Whilst there are many knowledge types in general existence, there are two generic knowledge types that are frequently seen to be evident in the applied theatre programmes reviewed in this study; they are 'discovered knowledge' and 'constructivist knowledge'. Both knowledge types combine to underpin both the philosophy and practice of applied theatre programmes.

### *Discovered knowledge*

Discovered knowledge or Discovery learning, advanced in various forms by the likes of Jerome Bruner (1961), Jean Piaget (1972) and Seymour Papert (1980) is a theory that suggests that a body of knowledge is available, and that teachers/lecturers can help students discover this knowledge for themselves by implementing pedagogical tasks in the classroom, studio or through independent but guided learning tasks. Bruner (1961) argues that 'Practice in discovering for oneself teaches one to acquire information in a way that makes that information more readily viable in problem solving' (p. 26). This 'learning by doing' approach is pivotal in drama education and has by extension made its way to applied theatre practice. It is therefore perhaps less than surprising that we see this approach being used as a philosophy of education and as a teaching method in the programmes reviewed.

Pure discovery learning would be without lecturer assistance, however the practice in the applied theatre field has been to offer guidance and sign-posting by the facilitator-instructor. The tenants of the applied theatre draw upon critical pedagogy and constructivist methodology bringing the participants into direct engagement with their own learning experiences, and as adult learners these same participants bring a wealth of perspectives that further affect how they interact with an applied theatre experience (Dawson et al 2011).

### *Constructivist knowledge*

Constructivist theory, a theory describing how learning happens or knowledge is internalised, is generally attributed to Jean Piaget (1972) where play and exploration are essential components of a student's cognitive development. As Prendergast and Saxton (2009) assert, 'participation throughout all stages of a performance project is an ingredient that makes applied theatre work markedly different from mainstream theatre' (p. 187).

In describing how learning happens, this theory operates regardless of whether or not learners are using their experiences to understand a formal lecture or, for example, by following the directives of the instructor-facilitator in creating an applied theatre event. Essentially constructivists suggest that we cannot be certain of any absolute truth but rather people construct, or create, knowledge based on their lived experience or interactions within their experiential reality. Perceived

'truth' or 'knowledge' is socially constructed and arrived at when people agree on particular values that appear to be consistent with their collective experiential reality and may, of course, vary with different groups and may vary over time. Therefore these 'truths' are not 'universal truths' as such, but maybe quite particular from which generalisations may also be made.

As far as it relates to applied theatre, constructivists would argue that the collective set of rules, conventions/procedures, and underpinning beliefs we use to understand the application of 'applied theatre' are also not, in fact, universal truths but rather mutually agreed upon constructions derived from the applied theatre and drama community rooted in both theory and practice. It might be argued that the strong advocating rhetoric used in the advertised postgraduate programme descriptors point to applied theatre as something akin to a panacea for curing all social and personal problems. This point was not entirely missed by Prendergast and Saxton (2009) either when they state 'Applied theatre practices tend to be seen as always beneficial and certainly, it is unlikely that anyone would want to engage in a social practice that was not so' (p. 188). Whilst it is acknowledged that these programme descriptors form punchy advertising copy, it is none-the-less significant to understand the importance placed on the use of language and the subsequent accepted messages that these descriptors send out more broadly.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLIED THEATRE EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Considerable knowledge in applied theatre processes is predicated on discovery learning as the learner is positioned to draw on his or her own experience and prior knowledge. Whilst this may be a legitimate process for learning there are questions surrounding the previous knowledge and undergraduate experience students bring to the Master's programmes in this study. It is likely that many have undergraduate drama or theatre arts experience but when these Master's programmes mention 'intervention' and 'therapy', can we be confident that students are being adequately prepared in a limited number of modules? How are these Master's programmes adequately preparing students to engage with the disciplines of sociology, psychology, therapy, and public health? Are students naively being led to believe they are 'qualified' to address

these issues? The language used in these programme descriptors run the risk of over simplification and do not provide immediately clear distinctions between applied theatre and therapy.

Prendergast and Saxton (2009) raise further important and related questions:

...how do we value what we do? By what criteria do we judge the effectiveness of the work? What are the implications of short-term results when laid against what traces remain years later? What claims can we make for “transformation” when the money has run out, the project is over and the facilitators have moved on? What is the language we are using to describe what we do and how is it helpful? (p. 188)

There is also a question of ethics. Philip Taylor (2003) raises more questions than answers on this issue of ethics. He, like Prendergast and Saxton (2009), believe there are enormous ethical considerations surrounding the use of applied theatre. Following James Thompson (2000), Taylor finds it useful to see that ‘a central principal in applied theatre is its break with certainty, that rather than pushing a moral platitude or a statement of political correctness, the applied theatre practitioner is working toward ambiguous and incomplete moments’ (2003, p. 98).

There is a need to carefully examine the language applied theatre uses to describe what it does and how broad this might be. It would seem that the field may be better served by higher education institutions offering more specialist applied programmes rather than using the umbrella term of applied theatre as the general or generic programme title.

Of equal interest is the nomenclature of those engaged in delivering applied theatre work. Taylor (2003) uses the term ‘teaching artist’ to describe the practitioners, bringing ‘both the skills of presenting theatre work and the rare ability to act as educators who can help process the program’s teaching points with diverse groups’ (p. 53). Taylor goes on to state that:

In the applied theatre, the artists’ teaching skills are just as important, if not more so, than theatrical presentation for it is in the teaching ability of the artists that the *applied* nature of the work will

be realized. (p. 53–54, original emphasis)

No matter how you wish to frame or term applied theatre practitioners, the *educational* or *teaching* (pedagogical/andragogical) aspect of applied theatre practice would seem to be a necessary component. Therefore any higher education programme might essentially need to contain thorough preparation for education and training along with the individual possessing the necessary personality to become an artist-educator. However distinctions between therapy and education should be made, and in the case of therapy it would be imperative that programmes demand particular personal qualifications which were not immediately evident or transparent in the programme descriptors surveyed in this study.

## CONCLUSIONS

This brief study has sought to distil the defining qualities of graduate/postgraduate applied theatre education and the advertised learning and teaching philosophies referenced in the online programme descriptors used by eight Universities across three countries. Overall, these higher education applied theatre programmes universally model approaches of moving from discovered to constructivist modes of knowledge acquisition.

On the evidence drawn from the programme descriptors it was further revealed there are some significant gaps between the advertised aspirations of Master's level applied theatre programmes and the type of preparation required to achieve those ambitions. Whilst it would not be expected that the online course information would provide all the details that module, unit or course documents might, it does raise issues of transparency and how clear the advance details of the programmes might be for prospective students.

If the field is to adequately prepare professionals for future practice, there will need to be greater regard given to the component parts of programmes and the essential appropriate prerequisites for the types of programmes on offer. If Master's programmes are making therapeutic claims then adherence to codes of conduct by registering bodies and strict attention must be given to the relevant cognate disciplines that should likely inform a deeper understanding of therapy. Can generic applied theatre programmes claim to adequately prepare graduates for

therapy work? On balance, it is doubtful they can or should.

In support of moving toward a less 'evangelical' view of the work, Taylor (2003) states clearly that:

Applied theatre workers cannot be conned into thinking that they are the saviours of the community. It seems clear that the issue of sustainable change in people's lives is not going to be adequately addressed through isolated applied theatre demonstrations. (p. 99)

Currently the somewhat grand claims being made in these advertised university programme descriptors are in very real danger of overstepping an authentic qualification to engage in the work they purport to do. It may also seem prudent to suggest that applied theatre practitioners, or teaching artists, first possess an educationally focussed qualification before qualifying at Master's level in applied theatre as the work has strong pedagogical and andragogical foci. These are all-important considerations if we are to adequately and honestly prepare students as future artist-educators using the applied theatre form.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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