

Theatre in Education: It's a critical time for critical thinking

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ABSTRACT

Theatre in Education emerged in the 1960s from roots in progressive education and new wave theatre and developed a pedagogy heavily influenced by drama and education philosophy. At the heart of this theatre/education hybrid was a belief in the necessity for children to become critically engaged with the world. The best TIE offered children the tools to understand and to shape their world. This progressive approach to education has been marginalised during the last forty years. This article charts this descent into utilitarianism and asserts the need for Applied Theatre and TIE to enhance students' critical thinking skills rather than offering didactic messages and exercises in socialisation. The obstacles to working authentically with TIE are multifarious. Alongside issues of funding, timetabling, access to students and appropriate working space, there are problems associated with appropriate training in TIE praxis. Professionals no longer have the access to the necessary research and rehearsal time where facilitation skills can develop. The 'authentic teaching' lauded by Heathcote is out of favour at the time when critical thinking skills are of paramount importance. This article asks if there is a way for TIE to adapt to the new

realities of how children learn and play so that again it can offer a theatrical safe haven where critical thinking skills can be honed in order to equip young people with the critical skills to shape their own futures.

This article has been adapted from a paper of the same title given to the Educational Theatre Forum at NYU Steinhardt on 22nd April 2016.

When my abstract for the paper from which this article is drawn was accepted for the NYU Educational Theatre Forum, I was surprised to learn that it had been the only proposal to address the genre of Theatre in Education. A similar forum twenty, or even ten, years ago might have had a range of inputs on this approach to educational theatre. Theatre in Education, in the manner in which it evolved from the early experiments at Coventry in the mid-60s, has now largely been subsumed within a plethora of other educational applications of theatre. I want to champion this endangered species, whilst fearing that I am actually offering a eulogy for a beloved and eccentric relative recently departed.

In fact, in 2016, some fifty years after the 'birth' of TIE I even feel a need to offer a definition in order to proceed with my argument. My broad definition is 'using theatrical tropes in order to educate.' This definition takes in the wider applications of Applied Drama and Theatre. But I have a narrower definition of what is often called 'classic' TIE. This is the TIE of *participation* where young people are engaged at a personal emotional level, and yet protected into that participation by a theatrical construct. This is not the educational theatre that instructs and insists but rather it facilitates thought, presents dichotomy and frees young people to undertake critical analysis; it 'difficultates.' The TIE I am going to focus on is not an educational theatre that offers dire warnings, it is not children's theatre (with its primary aim of entertaining) and it is not even Youth Theatre (for which I have a huge amount of respect). Above all it is not about teaching theatrical techniques. TIE programmes are not acting classes. TIE is about an approach that uses the skills of actor/teachers (trained in both disciplines) in structured projects with young people that enable, non-judgementally, critical thinking.

It is generally accepted that TIE began in mid-sixties with Coventry

Belgrade's work in schools in the UK ([Belgrade Theatre, Coventry](#)). The genesis of the work was enabled by a fortuitous combination of social and educational conditions. Following the Second World War parents wanted a more egalitarian approach to education that nurtured as well as informed the young. Old style rote learning was being questioned and the undercurrents of educational philosophy coming from the likes of Montessori, Pestalozzi, Holt and Dewey were increasingly respected and gaining credence. Piaget and child psychology became central to teacher education and these ideas blended together to offer approaches based on group-work, child-centred learning, learning through play, heuristic education: progressive education. In drama the ideas of Caldwell Cook and Harriet Finlay-Johnson from the beginning century were taken up and systematised by Peter Slade and Brian Way.

Theatrical influence came from Brecht and from the desire of young actors to re-form theatre as a social art form outside the bourgeois red-velvet curtained provincial traditions, acknowledging the influence of the agit-prop theatre of the inter-war years. This was the era of Pinter, Beckett, Arden, Bond, Rudkin, Wesker and many others. The catalyst for these social, artistic and educational elements was the fire in the bellies of post-war actors and teachers who wanted to build a better world after the horrors of their parents' lives, their deprivations and the ever present threat of nuclear annihilation. That being said, TIE did not spring fully-formed into the world but rather developed over the next fifteen years. In that time the pedagogy underpinning the TIE programmes became increasingly sophisticated. Whereas originally the roles of actor and teacher were separate, each coming from their own training backgrounds, in time the roles became fused within a new discipline (predicted by Peter Slade in 1954) of 'actor/teacher (Slade, 1954, p. 272). Companies, of which there were scores by the mid-70s, insisted on both acting- and teacher- training for company members.

The funding regime also facilitated the growth and development of TIE. Monies were ring-fenced by Arts Councils to be spent on TIE and additionally the projects were educationally valued as is evidenced by the awarding of funds from local authority education budgets. A system grew up of partnership funding where both arts and education monies supported TIE in equal measure. This was to prove a great strength when either source of funding came under pressure for the loss of monies from one source would be doubled by the loss of the matching funds and companies were able to argue for the economic benefits of

their work to the local economy. The work of the companies in schools was largely respected and welcomed as part of the educationally progressive 'quality of life' agenda.

Not that funders always knew what they were buying. Fifty years on one will still meet teachers or members of the educational bureaucracy who think they are funding 'plays in schools' when they fund TIE. (And, to be honest, perhaps today they are.) But what *really* goes on when a group of children work with actors on a project in school remains a mystery to them. 'Classic' TIE has always been, of necessity, a hidden art form. The presence of visitors to programmes was discouraged since it detrimentally turns the children into performers. Additionally, in the early years, the technology did not exist to record the sometimes tentative responses of the children satisfactorily. Whilst it would be technically much easier today, we are beset by concerns about the exploitation of children through the use of their images. So, persuading themselves that TIE is just a theatre 'treat' for children, Arts and Education funders have, in more recent decades, found it easy to justify the removal of funding. I will return to the effect this has had on the development of educational theatre.

In Britain the companies that emerged in the 70s and 80s prided themselves on the developing sophistication of their pedagogy. Through the influence of Drama in Education (Heathcote, Bolton and others) often interrogated through the annual conference of the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre, companies encouraged themselves to hone their praxis and it was here that the work of Boal was introduced to companies by Chris Vine and ideas from Freire, Bruner and Vygotsky were shared and applied to the theoretical lexicon underpinning the work.

Despite its accepted value and contribution to the educational life of the child, there were always threats to the work and during these years companies came and went as funding ebbed and flowed. One of the greatest threats was the suspicion that the work was, at least in some cases, politically motivated. But this goes to the heart of the argument I want to present, for central to the progressive education movement of the 50s and 60s was the idea that we should be teaching children to think. And that, I'm afraid, is always going to be a political act. As Freire puts it:

[Education] will always be in the service of either the 'domestication'

of men or of their liberation.... Neutral education cannot, in fact, exist. It is fundamental for us to know that when we work on the educational curriculum... we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice. (Freire, 1972, p. 174)

TIE often failed to accept the consequences of the fact that teaching children to think critically, to question, to analyse and to reflect upon what *could be* rather than accept what *is*, was going to be seen as politically aggressive. This failure, along with the necessary isolation of the funders from the product, was to prove to have terminal consequences. Those who fund our arts and our education are not always interested in getting young people to look at the world afresh:

Education must be conceived as aiding young humans in learning to use the tools of meaning making and reality construction, to better adapt to the world in which they find themselves and to help in the process of changing it as required. (Bruner, 1996, p. 19-20)

The notion of changing the world for the better may have been acceptable in the years following the salutary horrors of World War Two and were even reflected to an extent in schools' curricula post-War, but as the consumerist agenda embedded itself from the 70s such idealistic concepts increasingly became mere electioneering slogans whilst the demands of realpolitik demanded that children think *inside* the box.

There has always been a tension between the economic need to have a literate workforce and the concern that once people can read they will access new ideas and, dangerously, start thinking. These were the perceived threats during the nineteenth century as demands for universal schooling grew, and they remain the arguments today, though in a more subtle form. The increasingly sophisticated consumerist market that evolved in the post-War years was not being served by the ideas of progressive education. These were increasingly seen as irrelevant, even dangerous, and much of the social and industrial unrest of the 60s and 70s was blamed on 'soft' educational ideas and a lack of school discipline. Industry demanded a trained workforce that could support and respond to the developing needs of the market. This utilitarian strain has always been present in education but, from the mid-70s onwards, governments of all colours were demanding that education should serve industry and the wider economy directly. The

mood of the time was epitomised by the Labour Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan who initiated 'A Great Debate' about education in 1976. When Thatcher was elected in 1979 her earliest priority was to undermine trade union power, but then she too turned her attention to education and in 1988 the Education Reform Act (ERA) was passed. It was to change the culture of education in Britain completely and, incidentally, totally undermine the foundations on which TIE stood. Edward Bond maintains that this attack on TIE was not only incidental but deliberate. The establishment, he argued, would ensure that the 'radical innocence' of the young was thwarted: "That is why they want to *stop* you and they *do* want to stop you... It is *necessary that you are stopped*" (Bond, 1989, p. 16).

ERA's primary aspect was to introduce a National Curriculum to British schools which divided schools years into four Key Stages with a list of Learning Objectives for each of the Core subjects. Drama was *not* one of these core subjects and became subsumed within English. The core subjects were separated and their delivery outcomes highly prescribed. Group or cross-curricula work was discouraged – and this alone made the approaches of TIE companies suddenly irrelevant. But there were additional factors at work. ERA also introduced the Local Management of Schools by which monies were taken away from the local governments and put at the disposal of the headteachers. Unless headteachers worked together to fund their local TIE company the funding would be dissipated and the match funding from Arts bodies would also disappear. TIE is not cheap and only through central 'top-sliced' funding could it be viable to provide the free service to schools that had become the norm. In the years following ERA many companies disappeared because their cross-curricula approach was not acceptable, because their funding disappeared or because they just had ideological objections to the new curriculum. Perhaps, above all, headteachers prioritised other resources over 'having a theatre group in to entertain the children' – such was the level of ignorance of the work in many cases.

By the end of the 1990s TIE had changed a great deal. There were many fewer companies and most were working in very different ways. Many had been forced to start charging schools. This was a painful concession for socially aware TIE companies to accept, for only the most privileged schools or pupils could afford to pay. It was felt therefore that those who would most benefit from the work were the first to be excluded

from it. The methodology too came under immediate pressure. Hitherto the ways of working had usually (though not always) involved children working with the companies in their class groupings. A small group of actor/teachers working with thirty children in role is a very different educational experience from that which now emerged. Economies of scale meant that 'audiences' (for such they quickly became) might involve a whole year group of perhaps 200 children. In this way the financial contribution of the children or school could be minimised and justified. But the praxis could not survive this change. End of show workshops or discussions became the norm with the children bereft of any protection into role. If they had an opinion to share they had to do it as themselves and in front of all their peers. There was little opportunity for critical thinking and analysis. It provided exactly what the education system was now designed to provide – easy responses to difficult questions and not the tools to shape the world.

If we accept (and I do not) that education is about fitting children to a predetermined role in the economic machine then some justification for this can be offered. In the 50s and 60s we were sold a vision of the future that was to be one of automated luxury and the prevalence of leisure time in which we could explore ourselves as creative human beings. What happened to *that*?! Automation and the digital revolution continue, but those in work are working harder and longer at more tedious jobs whilst those without jobs struggle with unnecessary poverty and the wealth gap widens. Are today's children being prepared for tomorrow's jobs? My adult life has seen the proliferation of occupations that did not exist when I was in formal education. I have little idea what many currently advertised jobs actually are. They were certainly not 'taught' at school. There was nothing on the curriculum called 'research analysis' or 'digital project management' or 'database support management' or 'campaign optimisation management'. So how do we prepare young people for *their* futures – when tomorrow's jobs will, inevitably, be different from today's?

Well, we could leave it to chance. As today businesses will complain that school-leavers don't have the skills they need; that they have not been taught the right things. But in the last fifty years what was the right thing to teach? Given that most of the jobs of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s no longer exist in the form that they did, what should we be teaching? I think we should be teaching adaptability, creativity, critical thinking. We should be offering the wherewithal for children to shape their world – to

mould it rather than be moulded by it. As Giroux has pointed out, currently schooling is not being measured by its ability to teach the 'skills of democracy' but is measured against the need to reproduce, "values, social practices and skills needed for the dominant corporate order" (Giroux, 1997, p. 119).

It will be clear where my argument is going; 'classic' TIE was uniquely placed to offer this holistic approach to examining and understanding the 'skills of democracy'. TIE (and especially participatory TIE) enables children to 'muse' upon possible futures, to conceptualise problems and envisage solutions. The imaginative use of play to place ourselves empathetically into the thought processes of another has given rise to the art form of theatre, but it also offers humans this continuing tool of self-development. 'What if' underpins all creative endeavour, enabling the visualisation of alternative outcomes. It is this second function of play that TIE exploits, whilst also drawing on the *theatrical* application of play to create a cauldron in which ideas and imagination are exercised in a catalytic fusion.

In a well-facilitated piece of Forum Theatre, for example, the young people will usually start as audience spectating a theatrical stimulus. From there they will offer, from their own subjective responses, an analysis of what is happening and why. They will start then to move into an objective analysis – supposing what may or should happen. Finally some of the audience will become players in the theatrical construct – *not* as actors, but as interpreters and conduits for the ideas under scrutiny.

The processes involved in a piece of participatory drama similarly draw on theatrical tropes but additionally those of play. Vygotsky has explained to us how it is the function of effective education to identify where children are in their conceptual maturity and to offer guidance to attain an understanding marginally beyond their reach. With the help of pedagogic scaffolding children can work within this Zone of Proximal Development to climb to more sophisticated understanding. In a piece of participatory TIE the scaffold is offered by the safe narrative theatrical construct offered by the actor/teachers. It is a 'real' theatrical situation into which the young people are invited. Here, in role, as observers, as commentators and advisors, they can explore, investigate and test out ideas and opinions without threat. In Heathcote's terms they are working in a 'no-penalty zone'. Above all they are not 'acting'. They are themselves within a fictive situation but are free to explore ideas. They

are not responsible for the story's outcomes but they can help shape them. Very often they will be dealing with historical situations where the outcome is known but they are able to explore the reasons for the outcome. They will consider 'why' and 'how' rather than the simple 'what' that a history curriculum will often require.

In doing so they are testing their own understanding against the motivations of the characters in the play, implicitly relating events to their own lives and experience. The narrative provided by the actor/teachers is explored by them in a way that offers a door to universal connections. In Vygotskian terms the children are scaffolded within a safe theatrical construct to connect what they know into the wider, universal, implications of their knowledge. They are enabled to move from the particular to the universal. And this insight is the first step to taking control and seeking change.

Such projects are now extremely rare. In my recent book¹ I have described some examples that are to be found in the UK, USA and Eastern Europe, but funding and pedagogical imperatives have made this work 'irrelevant' to the modern education curriculum which increasingly seeks to marginalise arts and humanities in favour of commercially relevant content. Alongside these issues of funding and curriculum there are also associated problems of timetabling, access to students (who must not be taken away from their examination studies!) and appropriate working space. Additionally there are problems associated with adequate training of practitioners in the disciplines of *both* performance and pedagogy. Professionals no longer have the access to the necessary research and rehearsal time and it is rare to find secure companies where a 'house' style – along with a 'house pedagogy' and facilitation skills are enabled to develop. In companies in Britain in the 70s and 80s it was not uncommon for team membership to be stable for many years at a time. In place of these close-working teams we now have disparate TIE workers (perhaps with no teacher training) who are presented with a commissioned script written by a playwright who has been asked to say something (rather than *ask* something) that they have to present and (possibly) workshop with large groups of students in inadequate spaces. These are some of the challenges to offering what Heathcote called 'authentic teaching'. There are

¹ Wooster, R. (2016). *Theatre in Education in Britain: Origins, development and influence*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.

companies which still acknowledge the need for an authentic teaching approach (such as [Big Brum](#), [Leeds TIE](#), [Spectacle Theatre](#), and [Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah](#) in the UK). Of these Big Brum and the Blahs continue to develop praxis within schools though under constant pressure from funders and perceived educational priorities. Spectacle and Leeds TIE increasingly take their methodology beyond the school gates into community situations where the constraints of formal education can be avoided. In addition to such companies though there are also a large number of mushroom organisations which appear overnight, grab some funding from a source with a narrow vested interest and then tour schools with a piece of ‘don’t do this’ theatre; *plays* which tell us what to do and how to behave. These didactic pieces, perhaps including a workshop, with the help of a quick questionnaire, can assure the funders that ‘measurable behavioural change’ has been achieved. Children know that smoking and bullying are bad and don’t need a play to tell them. Rather, they need a way of exploring how smoking is made attractive and why we feel impelled to bully. Education is a process and we are constantly climbing the scaffold to better knowledge and maturer wisdom. So much of the work that goes under the name of TIE seems to me to be glitz without substance; mere trumperies.

Some such projects emanate – and here I am going to tiptoe very gently into the lion’s den – from the more recent disciplines of Applied Drama and Applied Theatre. I have no intention of attacking these (more than I implicitly have already!) but I do want to note a few of the educational traps that lie in wait. If we can agree that education should be about empowering the young to develop their lives and their interests to the limits of their potential; if it is about enabling change and not settling for the status quo; if it is about facilitating the growth of humanness; about expanding horizons rather than socialising – then projects that just tell me what to think are *not* educational. They are also likely to be less satisfying artistic constructs and could actually undermine appreciation of theatre as an art form. TIE and other work in schools is often a child’s first (possibly only) exposure to theatre. They deserve to have something that will stimulate artistically and intellectually without patronising.

If TIE in its ‘classic’ form can no longer be afforded then the use of theatre and drama in education is impoverished – and that does seem to be where we are. Additionally, it can be argued that young people now

learn in very different ways. They play in different ways. The internet is the source of all knowledge and its 'facts' are unquestioned. There is a desperate need for critical analysis of this material but the forums for this analysis seem not to exist. Education has become a binary experience rather than a group exploration. However if the educational precepts of enabling the fullest development of potential remain in place then we must strive to create new forms of applied drama and theatre that respond to the economic realities and the digital environment without losing sight of the need for this authentic education. It is not enough to teach facts – whosoever those facts belong to – but to use TIE, Applied Drama and Theatre as catalysts for critical analysis and the moulding of a humanistic social reality. As Giroux tells us, critical thinking 'must be seen as a fundamental, political act' (Giroux, 1997, p. 26). Governments on both sides of the Atlantic seem intent on narrowing education and our discipline – theatre – is one of the surest ways to challenge that, since it is rooted in our basic human need to learn through play.

I still have moments of optimism when I think that sometime in the future an educational philosopher will sit down with a theatre director and come up with an idea for a fantastic new approach to arts and education in which the power of theatre is brought into play to enable children to understand the world in a way that is safe yet challenging. This new approach will perhaps draw on the methodologies of classic TIE but also embrace the digital world of gaming and social media². There are dangers here since on-line games cannot currently reflect the creative solutions of the unfettered human mind. 'Solutions' will be framed by those that the programmer has menued into the software. Critical thinking has never been more crucial to the humanness of human development. Is the Applied Drama and Theatre community able to develop approaches which engage the digital generation and then facilitate an authentic exploration of a world that we will moulded by them, not for them?

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² [Applied Theatre Consultants](#) have begun to experiment with these ideas.

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