

LEARNING THROUGH
THEATRE

ROUTLEDGE

Teaching and Learning through Dramaturgy

Education as an Artful Engagement

Edited by Anna-Lena Østern



TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH DRAMATURGY

The aim of this book is to contribute a dramaturgical perspective to education. The authors write from a dramaturgical perspective about the planning of teaching, leadership in the classroom, the teacher-body, the teacher's oral skills and ethics, communication, and about the spaces in which teaching takes place. The book is written with the pre-understanding that the ways in which art creates knowledge need to be illuminated and articulated more clearly in educational thinking, thereby enhancing artful engagement in education. Dramaturgical perspectives are presented as such a way – a form of knowledge that the artform of drama/theatre can contribute to teaching and learning in general.

Through examples and analyses of empirical material, as well as through theoretical perspectives, the authors show chapter by chapter how dramaturgy and dramaturgically inspired language and concepts create more possibilities of choice for teachers in planning and carrying out their teaching. *Teaching and Learning through Dramaturgy* brings to the forefront what will be enabled in teaching and planning of teaching, by making use of a dramaturgically inspired language and action, what in principle is possible in every subject.

Anna-Lena Østern has since 2007 been Professor of Arts Education in the Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She has educated drama teachers towards becoming general teachers and teacher educators. She was the academic leader of a national doctoral school for teacher education in Norway, NAFOL, 2010–2015. She is now professor emerita at Åbo Akademi University.

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Edited by Anna-Lena Østern

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TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH DRAMATURGY

Education as an Artful Engagement

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FOREWORD

Imaginative leaps and a new language for teachers and artists

John O'Toole

To English speakers' ears, the word 'dramaturgy' is still quite unfamiliar, or has only recently become known – so for those who have still to become acquainted with it, Wikipedia has helpfully and simply defined it as 'the study of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the stage'. Similarly, few of us really know what dramaturgs are or what they do (or is it 'dramaturges'? – we're not even sure of the spelling). This is quite widely true even in the worlds of anglophone professional theatre, where there are not many companies that choose to afford a paid dramaturg, and of academia. In recent years university theatre studies departments have started to espouse the theory and practice fairly enthusiastically, but the word is still virtually unknown or unused by practitioners in drama education and applied theatre, who often co-habit in education faculties, but with little interaction with their theatre studies colleagues. That is particularly significant for this book, because of course drama teachers know intimately the world of education and schooling, and spend considerable efforts trying to embed our practice in it.

Not so in Europe, where the word originated – invented in Germany in the eighteenth century by playwright Gotthold Lessing, who was employed by the Theatre of Hamburg as the world's first dramaturg. There, both theatres and academia are quite differently regarded. Typically, they don't just have 'theatre studies' (usually, here, sequestered within an English or Arts Faculty and still just emerging from a 'lit. crit.' tradition that privileged written literature over performance), but a long, robust and assertive tradition of theatre *science* – *Teaterwissenschaft* in Germany, *Teatervitenskap* in Norwegian. This is not to underplay the continuing respect for, and systematic study of Art and the aesthetic in these European academies. By contrast, the word 'aesthetic' in English was appropriated for many years by the visual artists and until recently largely forgotten by many drama and theatre scholars. In the same way, the word 'science' was studiously avoided by the generations

of drama scholars who were influenced by and products of the ‘two cultures’ (arts versus sciences) damningly identified in C. P. Snow’s memorable phrase back in 1959.¹ The European tradition of scientific, analytical thinking in the arts is continuously being applied to developing dramaturgy into new forms that respond to the post-modern revolutions in contemporary theatre practice.

And in Norway at least, the Teatervitenskap experts do talk to – and collaborate with – their colleagues in education. As a vivid example: at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, drama and theatre can be studied in the Faculty of Humanities, and drama and theatre education for teacher legitimation can be studied in the Department of Teacher Education in the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences. (Note the institutional titles here, which unself-consciously give the lie to Snow’s crippling categorization.)

It is therefore highly appropriate – from the horse’s mouth, as it were – that this book is written by a cast of distinguished European educators and artists, and its ideas had their first incarnation in Norwegian. Two of these, including their inspirational lead author Anna-Lena Østern, are experienced also in European dramaturgy. This has inspired them to make the imaginative leap that is at the core of the book. The whole book is imbued with a deep understanding of education, art and theatre, underpinning this creative breakthrough.

As a drama teacher and educator for over half a century, I have instinctively and through observation of practice long realized that drama has more to offer the world of formal education than just another subject to clutter up the timetable. Especially for those constructivist teachers and educators who see learning as a collaborative and social activity, of dialogical transactions rather than one-way transmission of teacher’s knowledge; those who strive for the democratization of education, and look (often in vain) for a more embodied pedagogy, and one that can recognize the emotional and affective content of knowledge and understanding. These are the teachers for whom drama has plenty to offer, but until they actually experience drama themselves, most are unconvinced as I struggle to explain to them that there is an important, almost unrecognized aesthetic component to all teaching, because a teacher is a performer, etc., and a classroom is a place for dramatic dialogue, scripted and improvised (isn’t it?) ... They look around their classrooms, and they examine their practice – the practice they have learned in conventional education – and they don’t really get the connection, other than that drama does engage the kids and seems to keep them occupied.

This book can therefore come as a godsend, because it takes our timorous efforts, and turns the whole argument upside down, quite assertively taking the challenge to the teachers. As you will see throughout the book, pretty well the whole of the action in the classroom, the classroom itself, and especially the teacher’s planning, can be both explained and improved through the practice of dramaturgical thinking. The book constantly emphasizes the aesthetic in all teaching – as one of the basic and usually unacknowledged principles of pedagogy. It’s a bold as well as an imaginative claim, and the authors back it up with plenty of examples that are rooted in their practice. Not just in drama and arts lessons, but across the curriculum, the teacher

becomes simultaneously the playwright, the director and the actor, performing and improvising a giant dramatic dialogue called a school day. As the book vividly explains, this is not just a handy metaphor, but one that can be literally brought to life.

John O'Toole
August 2020

Note

- 1 In 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', Rede Lecture, Cambridge University, UK, May. Snow was himself both a distinguished novelist and scientist.

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