Affirming Dissonances: Apprenticeships of a Career

Brian Edmiston

"Naming, articulating, affirming the dissonances and contradictions in our consciousnesses we may be able to choose ourselves as ethical in unexpected ways."
Maxine Greene

Throughout my career I have learned, researched, and shared the power and potential of drama in the classroom. Though my path has often seemed to meander, at each major turn I have changed in ways which have made me more connected to people and a more reflective teacher and scholar. These changes have happened as I have encountered, and accepted, troubling dissonances between conflicting perspectives on events. These contradictions came to the fore in the various "apprenticeships" of my life — in Ireland, the law, education, and academia.

Questioning the Ideologies of Childhood

I grew up in the splintered society of Northern Ireland. I swam in a sea of disrespect and intolerance barely sensing how it touched me. Without knowing it, I was "apprenticed" to acquire a cultural identity with a sharp negative edge—as a child in the Protestant community, I knew that I was not Catholic and not Irish. The two communities lived in different areas of the town, went to different schools, and judged each other from an emotional distance even when people intermingled in public. Those "others" were demonized in mostly subtle but often inhuman ways. "They" were too different from "us" so it was better not to know them. I was never encouraged to see the world as they did. To do so would have been laughable or even dangerous.

Drama Matters, v. 2, n. 1, 1997
It was not until I moved outside the world of my childhood—when I went to college in England and later moved to America for my doctoral studies—that I gained increasing distance and seriously began to critique the bigoted values I had internalized as a child. As I lived outside the country and read history and literature written from other viewpoints I began to see that I had grown up in a colonizing culture which had shaped not only my social and political views but had also offered me tangible socioeconomic benefits—from schools and housing to playgrounds and work. I had not had to recognize these contradictions as a child. I now feel more able to embrace complex and paradoxical identities. I see myself as British and Irish and American; rather than bound to any one tradition or position I feel more on the edge of religion and on the borders between several cultures and ideologies.

**From Law Office to English Classroom**

Though I had wanted to become a teacher, I followed others’ advice and pursued a career in law. After receiving my undergraduate degree in law at the University of Bristol, I went to law school for a year and then began a two-year internship in a law (solicitor’s) office. I learned to sift arguments for flaws, weigh evidence, interpret and select legal sources in order to best represent a client’s interests. Yet, near the end of my internship, I felt uneasy about a long-term commitment to the law. For example, I represented one terminally ill wheelchair-bound client who was suing his former negligent employers while at the same time I advised a corporation about how to limit future claims for their negligence. I realized that I was being paid to discover what was legal whereas I was much more interested in what was just. This was an irreconcilable contradiction for me; thus, I was forced to examine the discourses that had pushed me into the law and those that moved me toward education. I made an ethical decision to leave the firm. I returned to college to pursue my love of literature and to become a secondary English teacher. I anticipated exploring ethical and social questions as I read literature with students.

*Drama Matters, v. 2, n. 1, 1997*
My years as a middle and high school classroom teacher were fulfilling and largely successful. Yet, over time, I was aware of another nagging dissonance. I worked hard to interest students in literature, yet I rarely managed to engage them as deeply as I had hoped. Though I encouraged them to discover their own interpretations, I sensed that they still felt that only teachers and texts—not students—held the keys to authentic interpretations. I wanted them to own their interpretations and see them in relation to others; so I began to experiment with innovative methods. I remembered that, as an undergraduate, I began to question some of my sociopolitical positions in lively discussions after my first trips to the theatre. Recognizing that dramatists exploit the theatre’s potential to show audiences alternative views of their society, I wondered if improvisational drama could work in a similar way.

In the autumn term of my sixth year of teaching the students became captivated for longer than a single class period. Their relationships to texts, to each other—and to me—were transformed when I replaced our textbooks with documents I created. Drawing on my research of local history for collaborative teaching with the social studies teachers, I created authentic-looking historical documents and suggested to students that they imagine they were the jury in trials of local, infamous historical characters. The students were almost instantly engaged: they read the letters and statements and seemed to care about the fate of these people; as jurors they had heated discussions with me and one another about the eighteenth century justice of transporting or hanging people who had stolen property. Following our discussion, they suggested that they conduct interviews, do library research, and then create and enact scenes from the lives of the accused, their families, and victims. In this work, the discourses of law, literature, history and ethics converged.

I met Dorothy Heathcote that same autumn while the students, weeks after our first discussion, were still deeply engaged in the work. I introduced myself to her after a lecture she gave
locally. She asked me about my classroom and I told her about the effect of the documents. I wanted to build on my success so I asked for her advice. She responded that she would hold a place for me on what would be her last master’s program the following year at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. That year I moved to Newcastle to study with her.

**An Apprenticeship in Drama in Education**

The master’s program was run on an apprenticeship model—we worked almost exclusively with one master teacher, Heathcote, and our learning was always tied to teaching situations. By the end of the program my understanding of teaching and learning and the power of drama in the classroom were unsettled and profoundly reconfigured.

There were interesting professional parallels between how we learned to become master teachers and how I had previously learned to become a qualified lawyer. In both, learning was always situated in thinking about the urgency of professional contexts, for example, court appearances and classrooms. It was assumed that we were knowledgeable and competent, that apprentices would work together, that we would make errors of judgment, and that expert assistance was always available. Though there was direct instruction, most teaching was inductive and most learning occurred indirectly via observation and analysis.

Though I learned strategies and skills I also learned about core discourses of each profession. In the law office I learned that certain perspectives were privileged over others, that evidence was always interpreted, and that our antagonists were also our colleagues in a lively game of argumentation. At Newcastle I learned how to be an artist in the classroom: we learned how to be selective, how to make images significant, how to shape and sequence our work, and how to juxtapose rather than judge students’ perspectives.

*Drama Matters, v. 2, n. 1, 1997* 57
When Heathcote introduced us to the ideas of "frame" and "mantle of the expert" I recognized key reasons why my work on local history had been so successful. There had been subtle but radical alterations in the teacher-student power relationship in the classroom as well as the students' relationships with each other and with the content.

Apprenticeship was her model for learning whatever age students happened to be. In the classroom, students and teacher were "framed" as experts, taking on a "mantle" of expertise to run an enterprise. Different frames endowed students with different relationships and a sense of responsibility toward other people and toward content—they had a responsibility to share what they already knew and discover what they realized they needed to know. As architects, detectives, townplanners, or museum curators the students' learning was "situated" as they created and interacted in complex life-like situations. As they interacted with more knowledgeable adults and children they also learned the information, discourses, practices, and ethics of a particular field.

**Apprenticeships in Academia**

During my doctoral program I was able to draw upon my experiences in Newcastle and develop a deeper theoretical understanding of drama's potential in education. At the Ohio State University I learned to be a scholar while growing as a teacher: Robert Donmoyer and Cecily O'Neill were the most influential of my guides. Donmoyer encouraged me to consider the broad philosophical and curricular implications of drama as a methodology. Others helped me reposition drama in contexts of language learning and literature exploration. O'Neill clarified the intricacy and delicacy of drama as art as she outlined her theory and practice of "process drama" in education.
I decided that in order to understand the potential for drama in an everyday classroom context I would need to research my own teaching in a context where drama could easily be integrated into the curriculum. I accepted a position as a third/fourth grade teacher and over a two year period I gathered and analyzed data for my dissertation research. My conversations with Donmoyer and O'Neill during this period were seminal as I learned to be on the edge of and balance multiple discourses: the social needs and academic questions of students, the demands for rigor in research, the district's policies, the lives of students' families, and the sociocultural world of the wider community.

As an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison I was challenged to explore the dialectical relationship between drama and education. I learned to become both master and apprentice and thus develop my theoretical understandings. As a faculty member in two departments — Theatre & Drama and Curriculum & Instruction—I was continually in dialogue with colleagues—and myself—about the interconnections between drama as an art form and drama as pedagogy.

Through my research in my own and others' classrooms, I began to recognize a pattern related to the inherent "conflict" in drama which made certain drama sessions successful. Bakhtin's theories of ethics, action, and language became crucial to the development of a "dialogic" theory and practice of drama that would engage dissonant perspectives rather than simple opposition between people. I know, now, that ethical dilemmas always arise in drama no matter what the curricular objective may be; I have learned to turn into and toward those dilemmas rather than away from them. Even in the dramatic play with our son, I am willing, now, to go into Dracula's castle with him, and wonder how to act in the face of evil.
Conclusion

It has been a long journey from the child who thought little about his position in society to the teacher researcher and scholar who is committed to learn how teachers can create conditions for learning which have ethical dimensions. After growing up in an unquestioning culture I want students and teachers to become both proactive in shaping the culture of the classroom and productively critical of the cultures and ethical dilemmas which permeate their lives, in and out of school.

Footnotes


2. Heathcote drew on the writings of Goffman (especially 1974) and Bateson (1972) in developing ideas about frame.

About the Author

Brian Edmiston has recently joined the faculty of the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University after five years with the Drama/Theatre Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The American Alliance of Theatre Education *Distinguished Dissertation Award* was presented to him in 1992 and while at Madison he won a Lilly Teaching Fellowship. He has presented workshops around the world and published numerous articles in the field of Drama Education. A co-authored book entitled, *Imagining to Learn* will soon be released by Heinemann press.