

[Flip to Text Version](#)[Print this page](#)

Ethical Issues in Drama/Theatre Education Research and Practice

Introduction

One day when I was doing my dissertation research, I was shadowing a teacher in a performing arts high school in the United States while she was on lunchtime hall duty. We found a small group of students who appeared to be in the building without permission. The teacher confronted them, asking them what they were doing in the building. Their responses were also confrontational. While this exchange was taking place, I continued taking field notes. Noticing this, one of the boys challenged me, demanding to know what I was writing down. When I continued to write without responding, he became angry. He cursed at me and told me to be sure I got that written down. The teacher had no choice but to give him a disciplinary referral.

This incident took place in 1990, but it still haunts me today - primarily because I do not think I responded appropriately at the time. Because my research stance for that project was one of observer, I was probably within my 'rights' as the researcher to continue to record when the boy spoke to me. But I also had the option to put my pen and pad down and record my notes later. I did not do this. When he challenged me, I had the opportunity to tell him who I was and what I was doing since he obviously did not know I was a researcher, but I remained silent even though I knew that my silence might escalate the confrontation. If I had to do it over again, I surely would stop writing and try not to make the situation any worse for the student through my actions.

For four years, I have explored ethical issues in our research and practice with a group of international colleagues at a series of international conferences - the International Drama/Theatre in Education Association (IDEA) World Congress in Bergen, Norway in July 2001; Researching Drama and Theatre in Education Conference at the University of Exeter in April 2002; and the International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI) conference at the University of Northampton in the United Kingdom in July 2003. Over the last year, I have tried to assimilate what I have gained from this conversation and to make applications to my own work.

We discovered that most of us have, at some time or another, faced similar dilemmas while conducting research, teaching or supervising others - those 'Did I do the right thing?' dilemmas that keep us all awake at night. Another discovery was that ethical dilemmas frequently arise when cultures and cultural roles come into conflict with one another. We found that sometimes the researcher role itself creates conflict, but more often than not dilemmas arise when the culture of drama/theatre comes into conflict with the larger, more dominant culture of the society or the culture of schools.

In this paper, I explore some the ethical issues surrounding drama/theatre education research and practice. I begin by looking at ethical standards for research practice and publication, then briefly discuss some issues that arose during the three conferences.

Ethical Standards

My interest in the ethical aspects of drama/theatre education research and practice began in 2000 when my colleague at Arizona State University, Johnny Saldaña, and I were developing a monograph looking at ways to include the perspectives of young people in research about them (Saldaña and McCammon, 2000). One portion of this document addressed the ethical responsibilities of the researcher, both in the design and in the implementation of the study.

Zeni (2001), drawing on other research in the field (e.g. Kimmel, 1988; Newman and Brown, 1996), defines ethics as follows: '*Ethics* is the branch of philosophy dealing with decisions about right and wrong actions. Ethics may be used as a synonym for *morality*, although the term *ethics* is currently applied most often to codes of conduct.' (p. xv). Those who write about ethics most often address ethical practice in a given profession. Rigid rules have been developing for some time in a wide variety of professions such as medicine and psychology because researchers in these fields have not always been very ethical in their work. As a matter of fact, many ethical codes were established primarily because of abuses in these fields. I follow the ethical code of the American Education Research Association (AERA, 1992, 2001) and, as a member of the faculty at the University of Arizona, I am obliged to have all research approved by a Human Subject Review board (like many colleagues worldwide).

Despite our diverse backgrounds, perhaps the most universal rule we all follow is this one: 'First, do no harm.' (Graue and Walsh, 1998: 70). That was the rule I forgot when I encountered the student in the

story described earlier.

Publication Standards

Just as there is a continuum in drama/theatre work with drama at one end and theatre at the other, I have come to see that there is probably a similar continuum when it comes to reporting research, especially the inclusion of the ethical guidelines followed in the research. Standards differ from country to country, depending on the research tradition. In North America, parts of Europe, and Australia and New Zealand, the research tradition in education and the social sciences is long-standing. Most of us learned how to do research in a university setting. In our masters and doctoral theses and dissertations, we were obliged to follow rigorous ethical standards. As a result of my doctoral education, and the beliefs and practices instilled in me by my professors, I am undoubtedly at the most rigorous end of the research continuum.

Standards vary, though, when it comes to reporting research. Recently, I compared the research reports in two leading scholarly publications which are international in scope: the *Youth Theatre Journal* (*YTJ*) published in the United States by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) and *Research in Drama Education* (*RIDE*) published in the United Kingdom by Carfax (McCammon, 2004). In comparing the research reports, I elected to use the reviewers' guidelines employed for *YTJ*, knowing that I was probably demonstrating a bias towards rigorous reporting; however, these were the standards that I knew and was comfortable with. When I applied these guidelines, I regretfully had to eliminate many of the papers in *RIDE*.

As first Vice President of AATE, one of my responsibilities is research and publications. I am also the current *YTJ* editor and have served as a reviewer for *YTJ* and many other international arts education publications and for conference proposals for organisations such as the Arts & Learning Special Interest Group (A&L SIG) of the American Educational Research Association. Recently the AATE Publications Committee reviewed the submission guidelines for *YTJ*. We included the following statement in the call for papers:

For research involving 'human subjects', authors must verify that they have met the Ethical Standards for the Reporting and Publishing of Scientific Information (see *APA Publication Manual*, 5 th edn, Appendix C) either in the text of the paper or in the cover letter to the editor.

While in some fields it is assumed that ethical guidelines have been followed, we did not feel that this was a safe assumption in a field like drama/theatre education research, which is still emerging as a discipline.

Doing research, publishing the results and applying for grants have become an expectation not only for college and university faculty, but also for arts organisations and arts companies. I believe that it is important to encourage those who are new to research to follow the accepted guidelines for planning, implementing and assessing research. Whenever I speak to colleagues who are beginning to do research, I have always encouraged them to do the *best* research possible. It is my personal belief that drama/theatre education on the whole has plenty to gain from both good research and practice. We can encourage this practice by establishing clear publications guidelines and by requiring high standards. I also believe that those of us who have strong research backgrounds should accept the responsibility to mentor new researchers. While I work within a North American context, I also serve an international field as the newly elected Director of Publications for IDEA and as one of the editors for a book from the IDEA 2004 World Congress in Ottawa. As we were assembling the guidelines for submissions for IDEA publications, we realised we needed a broad, inclusive approach, and therefore included the following statement in the publications guidelines:

If the paper is a research report, authors are expected to provide documentation that appropriate ethical guidelines were followed. (see examples at www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm or www.aare.edu.au/index.htm) The editorial team is committed to respecting the context of author(s) where ethical guidelines may be concerned.

The key word here is *context*. Some may accuse me of capitulating to the dominant hegemony of research and publication. While I freely acknowledge that is probably the case, I am also looking at a bigger picture here - that of trying to *raise the status and visibility* of drama/theatre education research and practice in the United States and elsewhere. In my opinion, this can happen best with strong, rigorous research!

Questions about Ethical Practice and Research

When I first thought of bringing together an international group of researchers and practitioners to explore ethical issues, I posed a variety of questions. For example, how do ethical considerations apply to drama/theatre education research and practice? There are times when accepted drama practice could come in conflict with community expectations and community values. When young people engage in drama - especially in role-play, for example - they can begin to see life from multiple points of view and to solve problems for themselves. But what if the society does not want its children exposed to multiple points of view? What if it does not want children to think for themselves for fear that they will choose not to act in a way valued by the society? What if drama practice goes directly against religious teachings? Is this still ethical practice?

Most ethical codes are based on the idea of *informed consent* - that is, someone who is a research participant must be told exactly what will take place and what are the potential benefits and risks. During drama activities, however, is impossible to anticipate all the situations that might possibly occur. Let us say that we devised a theatre-in-education (T-I-E) piece about the hazards of smoking cigarettes. Should only the young people who want to participate in this

T-I-E be the ones to do so, or do schools have the right to select and mandate student attendance? Where is the informed consent in mandatory attendance? Is this ethical? What if the T-I-E were in support of 'safe sex practices'? or 'abstinence'? What if a Theatre for Development piece was developed to promote rights for women and girls and this piece was directly opposed to the practices and beliefs of the community where the play was performed? Is it ethical? Or would it be unethical *not* to take such a play to such a community?

Normally, when people attend the theatre, they know they are going to see a play and have agreed to be audience members. If they do not like the play, they are free to leave. One could argue that this might not apply when children have been taken to see a play, but when children do not like a play, they find ways to signal their discontent! The same applies to street theatre - people can stop and watch if they choose, or they can move on. There is freedom of choice and informed consent here. What about Invisible Theatre? The whole idea here is that the audience does not know that they are witnessing a 'play'. This form of theatre is designed to raise consciousness about certain key issues, but if the audience has not consented to be a part of the performance, is it ethical?

Johnny and I have frequently debated these ethical issues surrounding Invisible Theatre. I have always been uneasy about 'tricking' an audience, while Johnny takes a different stance:

In Invisible Theatre, the big question is: Is it ethical to manipulate the 'audience' covertly with an improvised, albeit prepared, dramatic text in public on an issue of the actors' concern? It depends on how radical one's personal politics are. What is unethical to you may not be unethical to me. What is important to me may not be important to you, but I may nevertheless still feel it's my own personal obligation to heighten your social consciousness with my art. (email, 25 June 2001)

Sometimes in drama/theatre education research and practice, there are more questions than answers. But as more and more drama/theatre education research is published some questions deserve, if not answers, then more thorough exploration.

Personally I take great comfort in the fact that over the last ten years, a vital and vigorous drama/theatre education research community has emerged with the introduction of new journals such as *Research in Drama Education*, *Drama Research*, *IDEA Journal/The Applied Theatre Researcher* and the *International Journal for Education in the Arts*. Conferences also play a vital role. AATE was the first drama/theatre education organisation to recognise and support research especially, with awards for distinguished theses, dissertations and research, and for a lifetime achievement in research.

Participation in these award processes is now international in scope. AERA has long had an Arts and Learning SIG, but when I first attended a meeting in 1992, there were only two drama/theatre persons in attendance; now there are many. Other conferences like IDIERI, Researching Drama and the Theatre in Education Conference at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, as well as the IDEA World Congress have gradually built a strong community of researchers. Email and listserves have allowed for the 'conversation' between conferences to continue.

The Bergen Panel

As I thought about the field of drama/theatre education, I wondered what ethical guidelines and issues existed worldwide. To explore international perspectives, Margret Lepp and I, then co-chairs of the IDEA Research Group, organised a panel of nine international researchers and practitioners for the 4th IDEA World Congress in Bergen, Norway in July 2001. Besides Margret and myself, the panel comprised John Carroll (Australia), Debadutta Das (India), Warren Linds (Canada), Shifra Schonmann (Israel), Shu-hwa

Jung (Taiwan) and Christine Warner (USA). Our ninth member, Abuelgassim Gor from the Sudan, was unable to attend the Congress at the last moment. Gor's absence was unfortunate, as his work on a peace-building project between two Sudanese tribes, the Dinka and the Missarya, would have added provocative ideas to the discussion.

Margret and I wanted to look at issues that arose with drama practice in inter-cultural and cross-cultural situations. We hoped that, by beginning this conversation, the field of drama/theatre education internationally could also begin to develop new understandings of ethical practice. We asked each member to address these questions:

â€¢ How do you define ethics?

â€¢ Where did you learn about ethical practice?

â€¢ What is the nature of your work?

â€¢ What ethical dilemmas do you face?

â€¢ What ethical questions do you have for an international drama education community?

Because there were so many panel members, we divided into three groups, with one person designated as the chair. Each panellist presented their prepared remarks, inviting discussion from those in attendance. All present signed a sheet agreeing that elements of their discussions could be used in future publications. Unfortunately, it did not prove to be practical to craft a paper based on the discussions in Bergen.

Common themes emerged, but most of these themes related more to practice than to research:

â€¢ the struggle to work with sensitivity within another culture - this topic was discussed to some extent in each group and seem to be foremost on the minds of many in attendance;

â€¢ challenges presented while using drama for conflict management or to explore racism;:

â€¢ introducing drama to new populations such as nurses in Sweden or educators in Taiwan, where teachers feel they lose face when they take on a lower status role in a drama.

John Carroll (2002) criticised reality television, stating that it is unethical because there is no dramatic role protection for participants, meaning they are exposed to unprotected emotional response. Participants also had powerful stories of their own reactions to situations they encountered. For example, Debadutta Das described working with college students in India who had developed a play to protest the sale of alcohol. The performers - especially the women - were subjected to such harassment that many chose to withdraw from the drama.

As a result of these discussions, it was clear to me that drama/theatre education researchers needed more of an outlet to *talk* about this issue of ethics and share stories of ethical dilemmas - conversations that rarely take place in the drama/theatre education 'academy'. That was when I looked for another group of colleagues to participate in a panel at the Exeter conference in 2002.

The Exeter Panel

Some of the Bergen participants were part of the Exeter panel: Margret Lepp, Shifra Schonmann, Christine Warner and myself. Pam Shaw (UK), Lorenzo Garcia (USA) and Heather Smigiel (Australia) were the other participants. This time, each of us prepared a paper. Heather and I wrote a paper together, although she was not able to attend in person.

There were several common threads in the Exeter papers. First, at their centres were stories of ethical dilemmas that made strong impressions on the authors. As in the example that began this paper, the dilemma was usually something that author encountered 'in the moment' and had only a split-second to consider before choosing a course of action or reacting to the circumstance. I like this description by Reagan, Case and Brubacher (2000) of what constitutes an *ethical dilemma*:

A dilemma is an instance in which we do not wish to accept any of the possible options. In other words, a true dilemma exists only when we are choosing among undesirable choices. There are, in short, no 'good' solutions or 'right' answers; rather, there are only more or less 'good' solutions or 'right' solutions. (2000: 63)

Second, the dilemma arose directly from the *role* or *stance* of the author. In my story, for example, my

role as researcher came into conflict with my role as guest in the school. In hindsight, I think my researcher role also conflicted with former teacher self and role! In the papers, all of us reported struggling with how to react in a role.

Third, the authors had the advantage of both time and motivation to reflect on the conditions that caused their dilemmas. It is in this reflection, in a shared community, that we all learn from our lived experiences.

Some of our papers explored a series of activities over time. Heather and I considered what we had learned about eliciting teacher stories and using them as dramatic texts. In particular, we discussed the power relationships between university professor and pre-service and in-service teachers (McCammon and Smigiel, 2004). Pam described how she solved some of the ethical dimensions of work she had done with teachers and prisons, and Margaret explored ethical dimensions of two projects - Drama for Caring (DRACAR), with student nurses, and Drama for Conflict Management (DRACON).

The other panellists looked at what they learned from a single incident or program. Lorenzo described his efforts to position himself, as a Mexican-American college professor, in a reflective storytelling project with two African-American pre-service teachers. He found it very difficult to simultaneously be teacher/mentor, researcher, person of colour and faculty member. Chris described how stunned she was when students and teachers in school on the Crow Indian Reservation suddenly confronted her after she joined a research team. Shifra related an incident where an Israeli Jewish drama student chose to seek retribution for the injury to his brother, an Israeli soldier, by physically attacking his Israeli Arab classmate during a drama rehearsal.

[Editor's note: This incident is explored further by Schonmann in her paper in this issue of the journal.]

As stories often do, our stories triggered responses and other stories from those who heard them. Several of those in attendance thanked us for sharing our stories, as they had had similar experiences and were relieved to know that they were not alone.

The IDIERI Workshop

Lorenzo, Chris, Shifra and I decided to extend this work one step further by developing a workshop to explore *solutions* to dilemmas, rather than just raising them. Our goal was to draw out the stories of the workshop participants and to discuss them in a collegial group. Since one story often begets another, we thought we could best do this by beginning with a case study of our own, about a page in length, to start the conversation.

Chris's narrative, entitled 'Ethical Dilemma: Sabotaging Students for Future Learning', described what happened after a research project was concluded. Working with a team of seventh grade teachers, she developed a project where they would use process drama to promote narrative inquiry. A year later, the students, now in eighth grade, found themselves unprepared to work in a classroom where the teacher used only structured inquiry. In the end, the process drama approach had to be abandoned so students could prepare for state mandated standardised testing using traditional methods more comfortable for their eighth grade teacher. The question Chris raised was: 'Would these students have suffered less in their eighth grade experience if they had never had the process drama as a means of supporting and implementing open and full inquiry?' This also led to another question: 'What are the implications of research on students once the research project is completed?'

The title of Shifra's story was 'Teaching in a Minefield: Ethical Dilemmas Inherent in the Role-Playing Element of Working with Drama'. It described the problem one of her students had with using process drama to explore the experiences of Jews incarcerated in Treblinka, one of the Nazi concentration camps. Students did not treat the role as seriously as their teacher would have liked them to. The question Shifra raised was: 'Should we put our students in life experiences that are beyond their capacity?' But, in exploring this issue in her class, new conflicts arose between the Arab Israeli and Jewish Israeli students.

Lorenzo's case described a moment in his storytelling project with the two African-American students when some of the white students had questioned why the two of them met with Lorenzo every Monday night. Ironically the other students felt threatened when three persons of colour separated themselves to 'talk'.

In my case, I posed the question: 'What do you do when there are "data disasters" in a research project?' The case explored a recent research project where the tape of one interview was lost (and so was the data), and another tape was accidentally erased. It examined such circumstances impact on the data analysis and research reporting.

At the end of our small-group discussions, we compared notes about themes, ideas and further questions that arose. Here we discovered that often dilemmas arise when drama/theatre education work comes in conflict or challenges a larger, more dominant culture such as the culture of schools or the culture of race. Other discoveries were made that shed light on the ethical question - in Shifra's group, for instance, the majority analysis was that the ethical question raised itself in the first place because the drama planning was faulty, according to the tenets of effective preparation for classroom drama.

For Shifra, Lorenzo, Chris and I, these were significant discoveries. We have now gone full circle by taking the results of our three year 'conversation' and applying new insights to our own work - especially our work in drama/theatre teacher education. I believe we have emerged stronger and better prepared to face our dilemmas and find those uneasy solutions in the future. This ability to reflect in a shared community is another indicator of the growing strength of the voices of drama/theatre education researchers and practitioners.

References

American Educational Research Association (1992, rev 2001). *Ethical standards of AERA*. www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm

Carroll, J. (2002). Theatre of Surveillance: invisible theatre for invisible audiences. In B. Rasmussen and A. Åstern (eds), *Playing betwixt and between: the IDEA 2001 dialogues*. Bergen/Straume: Grafisk Trykk AS and IDEA Publications.

Graue, M.E. and Walsh, D.J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

McCammon, L.A. (2004). A survey of published research reports in *Youth Theatre Journal and Research in Drama Education* 1996–2003. In L.A. McCammon, Chair. *Drama/theatre education research: An international perspective*. Panel presented at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education Annual Conference, Salt Lake City, UT.

McCammon, L.A. and Smigiel, H. (2004). Whose narrative is it?: Ethical dilemmas using drama with teacher narratives. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. 5 (1) <http://ijea.asu.edu/v5n1/>.

Reagan, T., Case, C. and Brubacher, J.W. (2000). *Becoming a reflective educator: how to build a culture of inquiry in the schools*, 2 nd edn. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Saldaña, J. (2001). Email correspondence, June.

Saldaña, J. and McCammon, L.A. (2000). Finding the voice of the child: Strategies for interviewing children. Paper presented at the International Drama in Education Research Institute 2000, Ohio State University.

Zeni, J. (2001). Introduction. In J. Zeni (ed.), *Ethical issues in practitioner research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

These cases do make good discussion starters, especially for graduate seminars. Anyone interested in getting copies can contact me at mccammon@email.arizona.edu.

[Back to Top](#)