

**Article No. 2**

**CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM A DRAMA CLASSROOM**

**by Penny Bundy (Australia)**

**Abstract**

This article adopts the position that one of the values of engaging in process drama is that it affords the possibility of aesthetic experience. The author's view on the nature of such an experience (developed following a six year reflective study) is outlined. The paper then turns to consider how the author, working in a process drama context, might best offer her students opportunities for aesthetic engagement. The paper draws on the theory developed in the earlier research and reflects on experiences with a 'reluctant' drama class as well as one which is more experienced in the form.

Cet article propose que l'une des valeurs de la participation dans le théâtre de 'procédé' est qu'il offre la possibilité d'une expérience esthétique. La position de l'auteur sur la nature d'une telle expérience (développée à la suite d'une étude de réflexion menée sur six ans) est présentée. L'article considère ensuite comment l'auteur, qui travaille dans le contexte du théâtre de procédé, pourrait mieux offrir à ses étudiants des possibilités pour un engagement esthétique. L'article s'appuie sur la théorie développée dans la recherche antérieure et réfléchit sur les expériences vécues avec une classe de théâtre 'réticente', ainsi qu'avec celles d'une classe plus expérimentée dans la forme.

Este artículo adopta el punto de vista de que una de las ventajas de involucrarse en el proceso del drama es que permite la posibilidad de una experiencia estética. Se detalla el punto de vista del autor en relación a esa experiencia (desarrollado a través de seis años de estudio reflexivo). Luego el ensayo considera como el autor, trabajando en un contexto del proceso del drama, puede ofrecer a sus alumnos las mejores oportunidades para involucrarse estéticamente. El ensayo saca conclusiones de la teoría desarrollada en la investigación previa y reflexiona sobre experiencias con una clase de drama 'poco dispuesta' y otra que tiene más experiencia con la forma.

**Author's biography**

Penny Bundy is a senior lecturer in drama education and drama co-ordinator at Griffith University. Before joining the academic staff of Griffith University, Penny worked as teacher/actor, director, youth theatre worker and playwright. She was a founding member of KITE Theatre and maintains a strong interest in theatre for young people, in process forms and theatre for change.

## **CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM A DRAMA CLASSROOM**

Views about the nature and centrality of aesthetic response in the field of drama education are diverse. Some writers separate the concepts of knowing through drama and engaging aesthetically, seeing no apparent link between the two. In this paper, I adopt the view that it is through aesthetic engagement in drama education that significant learning experiences occur. This happens because aesthetic engagement offers opportunity for participants to see the human world in which they operate in a new light.

This paper draws on the findings of a six-year research project (Bundy, 1999) and is extended with reference to recent student written responses to process drama experience. It begins with a brief discussion of the key characteristics of aesthetic engagement before turning to highlight some factors relating to the drama process which impact on the likely experience of aesthetic engagement.

### **The nature of aesthetic experience**

The findings of my earlier research (Bundy, 2003) indicate that the key characteristics of aesthetic engagement are animation, connection, and heightened awareness. When we claim to have experienced aesthetic engagement, we are probably most consciously aware of the feeling of animation which is central to our response. Animation is the feeling of stimulation, perhaps exhilaration, experienced during (and possibly after) a drama experience. The person experiencing animation feels more alive, more alert. A heightened sense of self is experienced - we are more aware of ourselves, of the world around us and of the relationship between the two. Some people equate the experience of animation in response to an arts activity with aesthetic engagement. This is insufficient. To engage aesthetically, the percipient must simultaneously experience connection and heightened awareness.

Connection occurs when percipients engage with the idea of a work at a metaphoric level. The idea is not contained in the work itself - but in the minds of percipients as and/or after they experience it. For this to occur, the percipients must make some association between the world of the drama and their real world existence. The idea emerges in the association. For instance, in the First Fleet process drama which will be mentioned later in this paper the participants explore ten minutes in the life of a convict. Following the drama they are often left pondering and questioning the idea of justice, although this is rarely directly addressed and explored in the dramatic action. Percipients connect to an idea they create in their own minds. As Gavin Bolton (1979:128) asserted: 'Drama is metaphor. Its meaning lies not in the actual context nor in the fictitious one, but in the dialectic set up between the two.' The process of connecting to the idea of the work in the manner described offers the opportunity for significant learning to occur. If our aim as teachers and artists is to offer students the opportunity for aesthetic engagement, we must work the medium to encourage connection at a metaphoric level.

The third key characteristic of aesthetic engagement is heightened awareness. Heightened awareness is experienced when participants reduce their conscious focus on the events of the drama and become more consciously aware of the relationship between these events and the greater social world in which they exist. They become consciously aware of the idea of the drama. Although this process offers the possibility of new knowledge emerging for the participants of the drama, it is only a possibility. In the process of experiencing heightened awareness, a participant may experience affirmation of previously held values and beliefs. Is this new knowledge? Some would suggest that it is. Bentley (1965:53/54) claimed that art is not a matter of cognition but of re-cognition: '...it does not tell you anything you didn't know... it tells you something you know and makes you realize.' On the other hand, Fugard (in O'Toole, 1992:169) suggested that humans might only come to see the world in a new way if the questions raised for them by the drama could not be answered by the dominant ideology of their society. Such a drama would leave the participants with more questions than answers. It is possible that only challenges to previously held beliefs result in the emergence of new knowledge.

All three characteristics (animation, connection, and heightened awareness) must be simultaneously present if a drama percipient is to engage aesthetically. Animation is influenced by the rhythm of the drama and by the percipients judging the work to have truth-value for them. Connection requires the percipients to respond to the idea that emerges for them as they form an association between the events of the drama and their real world existence. Heightened awareness is experienced when percipients cease to focus on the direct action of the drama and start to focus on the questions emerging from the idea of it. As teacher/artists we must aim to create opportunities for the simultaneous experience of these key characteristics if our students are to have the possibility of aesthetic engagement.

### **Creating opportunities for aesthetic engagement**

In the first section of this paper I claimed that the key characteristics of aesthetic engagement are animation, connection and heightened awareness. The findings of my research project (Bundy, 1999) indicated that the simultaneous experience of these key characteristics was most likely to occur when participants undergo particular qualities of experience.

Three very important qualities are free choice, systemic detachment and playful engagement. To experience

free choice, participants must be willing and able to suspend disbelief and engage with the work. Systemic detachment is experienced when participants maintain a sense of self whilst simultaneously engaging in the drama. When we maintain a sense of self, we remain aware that we are not the system in which we engage. In doing so, we accept responsibility for our own actions but not for the rest of the group. Playful engagement occurs when participants engage in the spirit of the action. By engaging playfully we can achieve systemic detachment.

I found seven further characteristics of human experience to be present when drama participants experienced aesthetic engagement. These included self-acceptance, self-responsibility, risk-taking, other-acceptance, personal surrender, attentiveness and presence. In the following table, each is briefly described.

Self-acceptance	Participants are able to withhold self-judgement and accept themselves (and their reactions) without
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	censorship.
Self-responsibility	Participants are able to accept full and total responsibility for themselves.
Risk-taking	Participants are willing to let go of preconceptions to the extent that they risk being changed by the experience of tuning into another sense of reality.
Other-acceptance	Participants are willing and able to withhold judgement of the drama - including individual aspects, the actions and responses of other participants and the work as a whole as they experience it.
Personal surrender	Participants are willing and able to give themselves to the moment of the work – to allow the work to be what it is without feeling the need to control its direction.
Attentiveness	Participants remain open to hear and see and experience - they do not respond before they experience
Presence	Participants experience total conscious focus on the 'here and now' (similar to descriptions of the experience of 'flow')

**[EDITOR: This table is corrupted owing to unrecoverable platform transcription issues. We apologise for this]**

Participants experience total conscious focus on the 'here and now' (similar to descriptions of the experience of 'flow'). Participants are more likely to experience aesthetic engagement if the drama offers them the opportunity to simultaneously experience these qualities. As a teacher/artist I need to ensure that both my planning and implementation offer the best possible opportunities for this to occur. To do this, I must work with an awareness of the factors that enhance and inhibit their likely experience. To illustrate how I approach this, I will draw on my own journals to describe a typical first lesson with a group of 'reluctant' drama students. Throughout this section, I will also draw on the written reflections of a first year tertiary class who recently completed a one-semester process drama course.

It is the first day of a new semester. Thirty 'new' students cautiously enter the drama room. They look warily around before heading for a position as far away from me as they can get. I ask them to come forward and join me in a circle. They edge forward reluctantly. We go around the circle introducing ourselves. I ask them to tell the group about their previous drama experience and why they are taking this drama subject. I get a mixed response. Some have no drama experience. Others have memories of drama they would rather forget. A few are enthusiastic. All are here because the subject is compulsory.

One of my aims as an artist and educator is to offer these students significant aesthetic experience through the drama process. I want to offer them opportunities to experience animation, connection and heightened awareness. Before that can occur, they must experience free choice. They must be willing and able to suspend disbelief if they are to engage at all. Discussing her understanding and experience of 'free choice', one of the drama students commented:

*I have never really done drama before and feel a little intimidated to just let myself go.*

Few artist/educators would be surprised to learn that the experience of free choice is affected by the attitudes participants have developed through previous drama experience and by their desire to do drama now. The presence of free choice is also significantly affected by the relationships that exist between the students and the teacher and between and amongst the students as a peer group. Many of the students commented on this. For instance:

*Through the distraction of new people in the group it was hard to focus.*

Another said:

*As the group got to know one another it became easier.*

The ability to experience free choice and engage in the drama is also affected by the perceived relevance of the idea being explored in the workshop and the relationship between this idea and the values of the participant. A student commenting about a time when she felt she hadn't experienced free choice, stated:

*I felt too uneasy being 'family'.*

Another said:

*I had trouble relating anything back to personal experience and felt lost.*

Most of these comments are from more experienced drama students who elected to study drama. The other class I have been discussing did not make this choice. The findings of my research indicate that significant aesthetic experience will not occur until the workshop leader (in both groups) works to build their trust. They need to trust the leader, themselves and each other.

With my less experienced class, I spend the first two hours allowing the students to get to know each other and me. I monitor their responses carefully. In my journal I note:

*I sense that many are uncomfortable about having to do anything physical. I get the feeling that they don't want to be looked at.*

I work slowly and carefully trying to create a safe and relaxed atmosphere. For their first lesson, I choose stimulus material that I think might engage them without challenging their values. I want them to enjoy the experience. By the third hour I am introducing theory related to role-play. By the time the session finishes, they are adopting role and interacting in these roles. The comments they make as they leave indicate that many have surprised themselves by realizing that they are capable of doing something they thought they could not - and that they actually enjoyed the experience. The mood as they leave the classroom appears significantly different from the one present when they first entered.

My attempts in the first lesson with such a group are not for them to experience aesthetic engagement. As a group they are unlikely to be ready for this. Rather, by working slowly and carefully, trust is beginning to be built. Over the coming weeks, I will continue to offer opportunities for this to occur. One student discussing 'getting into the drama' commented:

*After a couple of weeks I allowed myself to do this as I became more comfortable with my surroundings.*

Before the participants can experience aesthetic engagement, they must experience trust on multiple levels. My earlier research indicated that, in order to fully experience trust in a drama workshop context, participants need to feel sufficiently comfortable with their image/perception of themselves. This includes feeling comfortable with their body shape and mass and with their perception of their place (membership and status) in the group. Again this was reinforced by a recent student comment:

*Meeting new people I found that I judged the things I did in the hope of not making a fool of myself. I was always wondering if I was doing it right.*

The drama participants also need to accept that it is appropriate to publicly or privately question the ideas being explored in the drama. Three students who wrote about the difficulty of engaging in some of the drama work commented:

*Sometimes I felt restricted by my beliefs.*

*I got annoyed because people weren't very sensitive about the rape/abuse issue. People didn't seem to understand sensitive issues and the effect it had on others.*

The earlier research also indicated that the participants must trust me as their workshop leader. They must also trust that what they do, feel or say will be appropriate and acceptable to me, to their peers, and in their own sense of community. Again this was reinforced by a recent student comment. The student claimed that she had been unable to really get involved because she felt controlled by 'peer pressure'. The participants must trust the physical, emotional and intellectual responses of other participants and also have sufficient trust in the group process. For many students undertaking drama for the first time, these are very new demands in a classroom context. To expect that they will be instantly experienced would be to place an unreasonable demand on the group and on myself. In the initial weeks with a new class, I continually monitor the demands I place on the group and on my communication with them so as to enhance their comfort in the drama sessions.

In the second week, I note in my journal that the reluctant class appear more relaxed as they enter the classroom. I sense a cautious but eager anticipation. I judge that many have begun to feel a sense of trust. We spend the full three hours of the session engaged in process drama. For their first drama, I choose a pre-text which will encourage their interest and a structure that will enhance the likelihood of their experiencing those aspects related to trust mentioned above.

While many of the aspects I have discussed so far relate to the relationships developed within and amongst the group, the pre-text and the structures and strategies I use also affect participant engagement. In what way does the pre-text impact on aesthetic engagement? How do drama structures and strategies affect this? The earlier

research indicated that the choice of pre-text impacts on several of the qualities of experience mentioned above. At the most basic level, it encourages interest in the ideas being explored and impacts on the participants' willingness and ability to suspend disbelief. Recent written student responses confirmed this. Some talked about the increased interest they felt because of the choice of pre-text, others made comments such as:

*I didn't like the drama and I couldn't get into it.*

The earlier research also indicated that the degree to which the pretext engages participants affects the likelihood of their letting go of preconceptions and thus their willingness to withhold judgement of the drama (including the ideas being explored and the behaviour and responses of other people) as it is occurring. These are prerequisites if the participants are to be sufficiently open to be changed by the experience. The earlier research also indicated a relationship between the quality of the pre-text and the likelihood of participants experiencing playful engagement.

The way I structure the drama, the strategies I use, and the way I introduce these to the group are also important if the participants are to undergo aesthetic engagement. The participants must understand the ideas being explored and why we are exploring them in this way if they are to experience self- acceptance, i.e. their willingness to withhold self-judgement and accept themselves (and their reactions) without censorship. One student who usually did engage in the drama work claimed:

*In the Crucible drama I just couldn't get into the old style religious beliefs.*

The process drama leader must judge the level of confidence of the students and thus the degree of freedom they require within the structure if they are to experience self-responsibility (i.e. accepting full and total responsibility for oneself). A drama experience that is strongly directed by the leader and which positions the participants to follow the teacher, rather than feeling open to exploration, can inhibit this. One student commented that her:

*engagement in the drama was reduced when the teacher was 'a little overpowering'.*

Another noted that:

*engagement was reduced when the structure of the drama prohibited the character she had built from doing and saying what she believed the character would in that situation.*

On the other hand, a lack of knowledge and experience in the form can make the participants tentative. The process drama facilitator needs to balance the freedom to explore with student confidence to do so. My earlier research also indicated that the facilitator needs to scaffold the experience by carefully introducing new strategies and ideas. The more playful I am able to be as their teacher, the more likely the students are to feel that what they do and say are valued and needed.

The process drama facilitator should also lead the drama in such a way that participants do not feel that they must guess a predetermined direction. As a teacher, I attempt to be as open as I can be and to communicate my ideas carefully to the group. If, for the purposes of the drama or the teaching goals I have, I feel that I must have a predetermined direction, then I must also be clear and honest about it. Several students commented in their written responses that when they were focused on trying to work out what was in the teacher's head or wondering what the facilitator was likely to do next or expect them to do, they were less likely to be open and their engagement was inhibited.

Let me return to the classroom of less experienced drama students. By week three, I note in my journal that many appear more enthusiastic. Their journals support this. They have more experience in the form of drama and appear to have more confidence in me, in each other and in their own abilities. We undertake a more challenging process drama. The pre-text is a data-base listing the convicts who were sent to Australia on the First Fleet. For the three hours of the drama, each of the participants takes role as one of these convicts. Within the drama, strategies are used that encourage the participants to experience all of the qualities of experience necessary for aesthetic engagement. In this drama, the form is worked to 'delay the action' and encourage the students to remain in the moment of the work. As their facilitator, I pay particular attention to the rhythm and mood of the work.

By the end of this drama, attempts to create opportunities for the participants to undergo the necessary qualities of experience begin to have an impact. Many students claim to have developed a more positive attitude towards drama. In a group discussion at the end of the drama, many say they have been profoundly moved as a result of having engaged in the work. The post-drama discussion indicates that the students connected with the ideas being explored. They felt invigorated as (and after) they explored them. Their reflections indicate that many leave the drama questioning their previously held beliefs about the idea of justice.

As I asserted in the introduction, the ultimate possibility of an aesthetic experience is that it offers people new ways of seeing and understanding the world in which they operate. By week three, this has begun to happen for some of the 'new' drama students. As the course continues I will attempt to offer all participants further

possibilities to engage aesthetically. To do so, I continue to pay attention to the needs of individuals in the group as well as to the group dynamic. I try to choose appropriate pre-texts that are increasingly challenging but that will entice them to engage playfully. I must be playful too. I must monitor their readiness for new challenges in form and content and gradually increase the skill demands I place upon them. By heightening opportunities to experience simultaneously free choice, systemic detachment, playful engagement, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, risk-taking, other-acceptance, personal surrender, attentiveness and presence, I will also increase their opportunities to engage aesthetically. As Dewey (1958:290) claimed, knowledge is transformed in an aesthetic experience. If it is through aesthetic engagement in drama education that significant learning experiences occur, then aesthetic engagement must be central to the drama process. By paying attention to form, content and context in this way, the drama education experience offers students the possibility of aesthetic engagement.

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