



Ben Robbins attends the annual **NATD conference** and brings back a wealth of information on the theme of creativity in the drama classroom



In October this year, I made my way to the picturesque setting of Oriol College in Oxford for the annual 2008 National Association of Teachers of Drama (NATD) conference. If the dreaming spires and dramatic architecture of the seat of learning weren't sufficient to put you in a creative frame of mind, then the theme of the conference – creativity in its myriad forms of story, ritual, memory – should have provided necessary stimulus to trigger creative inspiration. The event, led by some of the world's leading drama practitioners, aimed to dissect the buzz word creativity through considering its use and application in education, as well as exploring how to create environments conducive to allowing it to flourish.

The event was opened by a keynote address from Ian Yeoman, artistic director of Welsh theatre company Theatre Powys. Yeoman's address focused on Theatre Powys' recent TIE tour round junior schools in which they delivered a programme to children, titled *Ribbon of Silver*. The piece looks at the plight of Romany traveller people; the Smith family, from Brecon mid Wales, lived in a lay by for a number of years and were subject to attack, sexual harassment and even shooting. The family were moved by the council to the town centre car park until a permanent site could be found. In early August of 2008, unknown members of the local community dumped a truckload of toxic waste, including human waste and animal carcasses, on the permanent site where the travellers were due to be resettled, rendering it uninhabitable. The TIE programme, aimed at Years 1 and 2, addresses issues of social intolerance without being partisan, and looks at the social issues raised by both the viewpoints of the travellers and the wider community by following the story of a seven-year-old Romany boy called Georgie's first day at school. Georgie flees back to his trailer from the classroom and the class are faced with tough decisions; should they try and find out more about him or go and visit him in the car park where he lives? The performance element is introduced when Georgie

meets his family and younger versions of himself in a series of flashbacks, thus confronting the shaping of his cultural identity. By performing excerpts from the work at the conference, punctuating it with descriptions of key social theories that informed the piece, Theatre Powys, as Yeoman expressed, demonstrated how children's 'creative imagination can be engaged by making them active agents in a story'.

Kieran Egan, a faculty member in education at Simon Fraser University, gave a stimulating talk on the role of imagination and story in learning. Egan's research examines how in the development of children's minds young people employ a range of cognitive tools. Current education systems tend to favour an approach which privileges the introduction of logical and mathematical models of learning. The talk explored how the device of storytelling, when employed in education, can facilitate learning by humanising knowledge and bringing emotion in to factual ideas, making sense of new concepts by linking them to children's own hopes, fears and passions, creating a sense of reality for students through narrative.

Jonathan Sharples, a neuroscientist from the Institute for the Future of the Mind at Oxford University, linked creativity to an examination of the brain. Sharples explained how different types of activity stimulate different parts of the brain; particularly pertinent to drama teaching is how movement stimulates a large proportion of the brain, aiding memory. So if you were to try to remember a phone number, but traced the number with your finger or visualised this action while committing it to memory, the information would be more likely to stick. Sharples went on to consider how there are two different components necessary in any creative process; firstly, ideas need to be generated almost in an automatic, brainstorming way and, secondly, these ideas need to be analysed in relation to the individual's original creative intentions. These two elements are associated with different types of brain activity, and it is no surprise

that many objective-centred methods of teaching in schools are completely ill-suited to the first generative aspect of creativity. In fact, the environment needed for this kind of creative thinking can often be found in drama lessons; students need to be in a relaxed state and teaching needs to encourage interruption and feedback, as the class helps to steer the lesson.

In other areas of the conference, the hugely influential drama practitioner Dorothy Heathcote, who Kieran Egan described as having the 'timing of a great comedian', gave an illuminating workshop on the Great Fire of London. In order to shape an environment that encourages creativity, Heathcote talked of a need for 'children to explain the world to each other'. When communicating a keystone topic in historical understanding, like the Fire of London, teachers must find methods to engage classes in the event by relating it to them on an emotional level. Heathcote demonstrated this through breaking down the term 'Great Fire of London' into its component parts; teachers at the conference had to brainstorm and illustrate their understanding of the scale, nature and location of the event *separately*, writing over, commenting on and ticking affirmatively each other's jottings on a large piece of paper as they continued to circle a table. This technique enabled a layering of the concept and encouraged what Heathcote called the 'beginnings of the possibility of consensus' among students.

All in all, the conference provided stimulating and refreshing food for thought on drama in education and I look forward to a similarly energising and progressive conference next year.

Web links

NATD conference: www.natdconference.blogspot.com

Theatre Powys: www.theatrpowys.co.uk

Kieran Egan: www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan

Institute for the Future of the Mind: www.futuremind.ox.ac.uk

Dorothy Heathcote: www.mantleoftheexpert.com

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