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A robot who could not dance

Generating performative presence among performer, text, and audience through exploring and performing stories by children

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A cyclic performance project enabled Australian tertiary drama students and primary school students to connect through stories written by children in hospital in the UK. University drama students undertook a semester of puppetry and created performances of children's stories from Sextou's book. The university students' learning process involved exploring form and movement with inanimate objects to collaboratively create puppets which they allocated to the children's stories they selected. These stories were performed for an audience of children aged between 5 and 8 years of age. This project used participatory action research and applied theatre to facilitate the university drama students' exploration of puppetry, storytelling and performance. While the university drama students wanted to apply logic and chronology to the hospitalised children's stories, they were willing to be vulnerable and to accept that they may not completely understand the stories. The university drama students performed their puppet interpretations of the stories for young children. This co-presence of the university drama students with the children affected a new understanding of the stories for both groups.

1 Introduction

This collaborative cross-cultural research engaged university drama students and primary school students in regional Australia through live performance of stories written by children in hospitals in the UK. The young people in this project attend a university in a regional town in regional Queensland in Australia. The students come from smaller regional communities to study at the university. The course is a practical undergraduate performance course in Drama, through which students learn about drama, how to act and how to bring stories to life as performers. Most of the students have not yet travelled the world and through the course become curious about the world outside of their own experience. Prior to commencing university the students' understanding of what performance is has been predominantly determined by what they have seen online. Through this performing arts course students explore and discover their own creativity as they explore script and stories such as the children's stories in this study.

A complication for Australian performing arts graduates is lack of employment. The 2023 Artists survey in Australia found that 32.6% of Australian artists had completed a Bachelor

degree and reports that currently Australian creatives earn up to 43% of their total income from their creative work with the remaining income earned through arts-related or non-arts work (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2024). Undergraduate students across many disciplines do not connect the knowledge they acquire at university with skills for employment. University programs need to include activities that enable students to apply their developing skills to various real-life situations. These can be referred to as 'connecting experiences' that enable university students to apply the knowledge and skills acquired in their course to practical situations outside the class setting (Bock et al., 2021). This project's performance designed for children aged five to eight of age, is a connecting experience in which the university drama students apply their developing performance skills to a project for a specific group of people from the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic period has emphasised the need for undergraduate students to develop resilience and the confidence to apply their skills in different contexts. There is now a recognised distinction between gaining employment and having the required skills to do a job or create work (Bennett et al., 2016). In order for students to develop their employability their educator – the university – needs to develop the individual (Barber et al., 2013, p. 27). Students need to "(re)conceptualise their strengths, interests and goals" (Bennett, 2012, p. 27) with respect to themself and their potential career.

Lorenza & Carter (2021) found that the performing arts students reported "great anxiety about the future", greater than did Education students who were more hopeful for their future careers as school teachers. Bennett et al. (2016) argue that all undergraduate students need to develop generic skills. While some areas of study such as engineering, medicine or law have clear self-sufficient pathways into the labour market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), disciplines within the Arts and Humanities generally do not (Reid et al., 2019; Throsby & Zednik, 2010). Therefore, during their undergraduate studies students in Arts and Humanities disciplines need experiences that enable each student's increased capacity for creativity and problem-solving, proactivity in the learning domain, and that stimulate the student's own motivation to learn, thus contributing to the student's engagement and career curiosity (Barber et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2016).

The Bachelor of Theatre is a three-year university course presented face to face on-campus in Name withheld in regional Australia. The course meets the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) for level 7 – a Bachelor's degree and undergraduate qualification. The AQF is the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2023). Within the Theatre course students opt to specialise in one of three areas: drama, musical theatre or technical

theatre. Students must complete a total of five community creative projects during the three-year course.

Social innovation is one of ten graduate attributes to which Central Queensland University lecturers must align unit learning outcomes. The unit within which the university students explore puppetry also aligns learning outcomes to communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and information and technology competence. The university states that "students should be provided with opportunities to develop their understanding about social issues and learn how they have a role to play catalysing positive social change as a changemaker and future leader" (Andreeasson, 2021). Such consideration and action are social innovation education (SIE). University students who participate in SIE practices develop adaptive ways of thinking and using their knowledge and skills which develops their confidence and empowers them to contribute to, and to shape their world for the better (Kalemaki et al., 2021). In response to this determination, a creative community-based project was incorporated into five of the six semesters of the three-year Bachelor of Theatre course. The first semester was reserved for compulsory theatre safety training.

Community-based projects enable groups or communities to explore issues and concerns and find ways to reconnect or reinvent social interaction and social inclusion (Al-Yamani et al., 2016; Baim, 2020; Balfour et al., 2015; Cahill, 2010; Neelands, 2009). Programs for specific groups or communities that use creative approaches are inherently functional in offering new ways of thinking and ways of redirecting participants' energies (Balfour, 2000). Co-creation in social innovation education is a collaborative process through which all participants contribute to the decision-making, implementation, investigation and/or analysis (Bovill et al., 2016). Taking approaches from the arts provides opportunities for collaboration, increased self-validation and confidence among participants (Balfour et al., 2015; Rousseau et al., 2007).

Community projects such as this one, help the university students to think more broadly about their future careers. The inclusion of community-based creative projects in undergraduate curricula enables students to take their university acquired skills into the real world and work with real people in different situations. In this project the university drama students connected with primary school aged children. This connection helped the university students to consider that their performance can be thought provoking and entertaining as well as being a vehicle for communication for the unheard, in this case hospitalised children. In this project, we are interested in learning about life, wellness and illness through drama exploration. We discuss the importance of broadening the students' horizons about the powers of co-presence in performance in unconventional theatrical spaces and places.

2 This research project

This project involved three steps: 1) the university drama students read and selected five of the stories collected by Sextou from children-research participants during a research study at a hospital in the UK. Ten of these stories are published in a monograph by Sextou. 2) The university drama students self-directed and rehearsed puppetry performances of the selected stories. 3) The "bodily co-presence of the actors and spectators" (Fischer-Lichte, 2023) occurred when the university drama students performed the five selected stories through puppetry for an audience of children aged five to eight years of age in a regional community in Australia.

The aim was to bring to life the stories written by the hospitalised children and to observe the performative presence of the university drama students, their perceptions about childhood and illness through drama, and the response to the performance of an audience of children of a similar age to children who wrote the stories.

The selected stories originated in a previous research project, The Rocket Arts Project. The Rocket Arts Project enabled research into the use of arts-based activities with children in hospital, such as bedside theatre using puppetry, story-telling and digital assets identifying that such activities distract children from pain and can have a positive psychological effect on their hospital experience (Sextou 2022; Sextou & Kiosses 2024). Bedside 'performance' is a participatory exchange of ideas, stories and playfulness that takes place between one actor and one child next to the child's bed on the hospital wards.The Rocket-Arts project was led by Sextou and took place at Birmingham Children's Hospital with support from The Lottery Community Fund and BBC Children in Need and local charitable organisations. The project brought actors and children together bedside in one-to-one interventions, and through applied theatre methods for interactive storytelling, verbal improvisation with puppets, playmobile toys and objects the children composed their own stories (Sextou, 2023). The stories developed in The Rockets Arts Project have been published in this book, and are the products of creativity, expression of imagination, active listening and patience. Attention to the child as a co-player rather than as patient, saw empathy and compassionate communication between the actor and the child. Blends of emotions can be sensed in hospitalised children's stories. Each story transports the reader to the moment that a child participated in a bedside performance while waiting for a treatment or an operation, or while recovering from a procedure. However, the meaning of it remains uncaptured and open to interpretation.

It is here, in our study, that the work of the Australian university drama students, who used puppetry and shadow theatre to interpret these stories may be of value to explore Fischer-

Lichte's (2023) concept – the "co-presence" of the actor and audience. It is an opportunity to make sense of what it feels to be a child in a hospital and to help us better understand the personal experience of hospitalised children through the experience of drama students rehearsing for an audience of children aged five to eight years of age. The story we discuss in this paper is resourceful, providing us with symbolism and metaphor to enter the world of children indirectly. This paper aims to raise questions about whether experimentation with hospitalised children's original narratives, improvisation, puppetry, and light and shadow techniques inspires university drama students and audiences and offers them a pretext to build on children's stories and make new meanings about human strength in times of crisis.

3 Methodology

This project used a participatory practice-as-research approach, including aspects of applied theatre practice to facilitate the university drama students' exploration of puppetry, storytelling and performance. Arts-based research uses some form of art-making, in this case performance, as a mode of systematic inquiry (McNiff, 1998, 2011). Dramatic play enables the exploration of fictional worlds that enable imagination and exploration using characters (O'Toole, 1992). Furthermore, fiction can potentially "help us to get closer to experience and provide more freedom of description than literal case studies" (McNiff, 2011, p. 386). Using fictional characters in non-real-life circumstance protects the emotional and lived experience of participants (Baim, 2021) and in this work specifically enables the hospitalised children to express their emotions within the protection of the fictional context in dramatised stories (Sextou, 2023).

This arts-based research extends the interdisciplinary dialogue (Sextou, 2016, 2023) developed between applied theatre research and education in paediatrics. The process of reading, interpreting, improvising and staging the original stories written by hospitalised children is the focus of our discussion. The university students selected five of the hospitalised children's stories. These stories became the central resource of the journey that the university drama students worked upon with their tutors during their learning. We will discuss 'A Robot who could not dance', one of these stories in relation to the university drama students' experiences of developing the performance of each story, the experience of the stories for the children in the audience, and the university drama students' reflections following the co-presence with the children in the performance. The students' motivation for selecting these particular stories and why we have chosen to focus on one of these stories is explained below in section 6.

Through this process we sought to answer two research questions:

1. Can stories written by children in hospital in the UK become a stimulus and a vehicle for Australian university drama students and primary school students to connect?

2. Can learning processes of participatory artforms create the performative presence of the university drama students?

4 Participants

Four university drama students and their two lecturers engaged in the ten-week project. The university is in regional Australia rather than in a major city. The university intentionally focusses upon providing access to tertiary education for students from regional locations. The student cohort has always been small, usually eight to ten students comprise the drama ensemble. However, since COVID-19 pandemic enrolments have been lower. This year just four university drama students participated in this project.

A local primary school contacted the university in 2022 to ask if we could share a performance with their 200 students for "Under 8s Week". For the 2022 performance drama students performed some of the fairy story scenes from the play "Stories in the Dark" by Debra Oswald. Following the success of this first performance, in preparing a performance in 2023 we used the hospitalised children's stories in our unit on puppetry with a view to the performance for the primary school children. The university drama students selected five of the ten stories written by hospitalised children from Sextou's book. These were: The Moon Made of Cheese; My Grandfather's Wellies; Silence; A Park for the Animals; A Robot Who Could Not Dance. For this paper we have chosen to focus on one story, A Robot Who Could Not Dance, as it was performed using the largest collaboratively made and operated puppet, appealed to the university drama students from the first reading, and was much loved by the audience of children aged under eight years of age.

5 Anecdotal evidence as data

Data was predominantly anecdotal, drawing upon the workshop experiences of the university drama students and their lecturers as well as the experience of children in the audience. Anecdotal evidence can be reflective, observational and, for the educator may contribute to formative assessment and instructional planning (Bates et al., 2019). Anecdotal data included the university drama students' logbook reflections, in class discussion, tutor observation notes from rehearsals and classes, weekly group (focus) discussions and post-performance interviews with teachers and students from the children's audience. Gelman and Basbøll (2014) argue that stories may "take an active role in the development and evaluation of

hypotheses" (p. 548). For the needs of this study, we employed a story titled "A robot who could not dance" written by Lisa (pseudonym) who was a long-term patient in the dialysis ward.

> "There was a silver robot living on a rocky blue planet. The robot took pictures of the blue planet. Then, the robot climbed up the ladder of his spaceship, looking for other robots. There were no other robots on the planet. Then, the robot played football alone. It is no fun to play football alone. Then, the robot played a song. And then another one. And then another one. The robot could not dance and was bored and sad. The robot climbed up the ladder of his spaceship again, looking for other robots to play together. There were no other robots around. But suddenly, a flying robot landed right next to the spacecraft. The flying robot played a song and started dancing. The silver robot was sad. "I cannot dance," said the robot. "I will teach you to dance," said the flying robot and played the song again. The two robots danced together. Step, step, step, step. 1, 2,3, 4. Forward, back, on. One arm up, one arm down. One leg up, one leg down. Twist to the right. Twist to the left. Step, step, step, step. 1, 2,3, 4. The two robots danced and danced for many hours. That was fun. The silver robot was happy" (Sextou, 2023).

6 The process

One of the six drama specialisation units is puppetry. This ten-week unit was adapted into an online unit during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 with the unit returning to face to face in 2023. The guest lecturer for the term was Name withheld, an American born and trained actor, choreographer and educator who now lives between regional Queensland and Fiji. Name withheld introduced the students to movement initially through inanimate objects, then found objects and their own bodies, moving to larger scale collaborative puppets that the students made together**.**

Having previously taught this unit online during the COVID -19 lockdowns in Australia, we wanted to re-establish the collaborative possibilities of puppetry and storytelling that we missed in the online learning experience.

6.1 Week 1: Introduction to puppetry

The students learned about puppetry: hand, finger, sock, shadow and full body. The students keep a weekly logbook of their drama classes which helps them to record what they have done each class, reflect upon what they have learned and to consider what they might do with this in performance. Students individually created a short scene using all five styles of puppetry

before sharing their short experimental performances with the class. The next lesson involved the students collaboratively creating puppets.

6.2 Weeks 2 to 4: Experimentation with puppetry

Name withheld brought varying objects to each class for the students to experiment with bringing life to inanimate objects. Name withheld recalled, that as a choreographer he saw movement potential in objects, yet he found this was a new concept for the students and took them some time to let their minds imagine how an object could move and come to life. The students explained, “We created objects and things with only hula hoops. We started off by creating a flower on the ground.”

Name withheld challenged the students to work together to not only make a still piece but one they could manipulate. The students explained, “We were challenged to make a puppet we could manipulate. Next, we created an elephant and made the elephant walk about the space.”

Lastly, the students created a human-sized figure made entirely out of newspaper and tape. They explained that “the most challenging part was figuring out how to make their limbs and joints move. Overcoming this challenge, we managed to successfully create our newspaper human. They were then manipulated into many positions and storylines”.

6.3 Week 5: Storytelling-Reading stories by children

Having read Sextou’s book the university drama students explored collaborative story telling through performance, but of stories that were not originally written with puppetry or even performance in mind. The ten stories by hospitalised children in Sextou’s book were completely unique and unlike any text the university students had come across. For that reason, the stories from Sextou’s book served our aim to expose the university students to unfamiliar material, grow their curiosity about devising and experimentation with words and puppets, and make new meanings. Five final stories were selected from the 10 unique stories written by the UK children” Each of the four university students chose one story. The student who chose the story decided the style of puppetry they would use to interpret the story. Together the four students agreed upon a fifth story to develop as a group. This resulted in the selection of the five stories.

The university drama students found that each story had a different voice and was told in a unique way. In struggling to bring the story to life through puppetry the students found that in rehearsal they could not find a consistent voice through which to read the narration. The

students recorded the narration of the story and then rehearsed the puppetry to the recorded narration. Being a small ensemble of just four actors meant the university drama students had to take on multiple roles within the performance of each story. Pre-recording the narration freed up the students to focus on the puppetry roles in each story. The recorded narration created a rhythm for each story. The actors then improvised and learned a choreography for the puppets. This process had helped the students to truly focus on their craft of puppeteering in each story. The recorded narrations were used in the performance.

6.4 Weeks 6 to 8: Making meaning

The intention was for the university drama students to work together to bring to life the stories written by the hospitalised children. This challenged the university drama students to consider the context of the writers and to respect the imagination of each writer as evident in each story. The university drama students initially struggled with how they would bring these stories to life through puppetry. Having previously worked as the actors of scripts they had two new tools with which to work – puppets and the stories written by children. We were curious to observe how students adapted to these tools drawing upon their existing performance skills to do so. They had to consider the performance outcome that they were performing stories by children for children. Perhaps one of the hardest steps in this process was letting go of their own adult understandings and expectations of what their performance "should be" and staying true to the children's stories. We likened this to respecting the script and honouring the work of the playwright as written.

We also find that working with stories written by children activated the 'child spontaneous self' in each of the university students. Somehow, the humorous and true spirit of the stories gave them permission to be present, playful and curious (like children do) both in rehearsal and on stage.

6.5 Week 9: Dress Rehearsal and Performance

The university drama students gave one dress rehearsal performance for friends and family for the children, all of whom were aged under 8 years of age. The official performance for children of the same group from a local school followed.

6.6 Week 10: Post-performance reflections

Following the performance for the children, the students reflected upon their experience in the puppetry unit and their experiences in working with the hospitalised children's stories.

In reflecting upon the project, we return to our research questions.

1. Can stories written by children in hospital in the UK become a stimulus and a vehicle for Australian university drama students and primary school students to connect?

When selecting the stories each drama student considered what style of puppetry they felt matched the story. Whereas the student who chose "My grandfather's wellies" opted for finger puppets enlarged by projection onto a screen above the stage, the four students decided unanimously that they wanted to use their giant paper man as the robot for the story of "A robot who could not dance". The university drama students explained, "We each chose a story and decided which style of puppetry we would use to tell that story". One noted, "Our newspaper man became the robot when we wrapped his limbs in foil."

One of the students is also a dancer and so offered to be the flying robot. This student attached fluorescent strips to her body and then as she danced the other students matched her movements with the puppet. This movement was developed to match the description in the story.

While we did not go into the background of each of the authors of the five stories, before the performance, the drama students announced that the performance included five puppet shows they had devised for stories written by children in hospital in England.

The rehearsal performance for family and friends was the first time the drama students performed puppetry for an audience. Comments from the rehearsal audience included: "… but you weren't acting", "Sweet stories", "I believed the robot was alive" and "The robot could not dance was a special way to share messages of friendship and acceptance".

We were also curious to hear the responses of the children after they had attended the performance for "Under 8s". Would they suspend disbelief and engage with each story? The cyclic nature of the performance became apparent when the university students performed the stories by hospitalised children in the UK for an audience of children in Australia.

Lorenza collected the feedback from the school teachers, university drama students and children. Sextou was not involved in this part of the study.The children in the audience were mesmerized by the different visual representations of each of the five stories through different styles of puppetry. After the performance the university drama students talked to small groups of some of the 200 children to learn about the children's experience of the stories. Children are very honest and after the performance the drama students asked them "what did you like about the performance?" Several children commented about the "big

robot", "The robot was funny" said one. Another child said "I like how the robot made a friend. It shows you can be different" and a further child said, "Dancing is really good".

2. Can learning processes of participatory artforms create the performative presence of the university drama students?

The university drama students struggled with a story they had to script and respond to through improvisation. They didn't have the directorial guidance they had become used to working with in a structured playscript. The pre-recorded narration created a rhythm for each story. The drama students then improvised and learned a choreography for the puppets for each narration.

Part of the learning process is respecting the importance of turning up and being present for the ensemble. Being a small ensemble of just four actors meant the students had to take on multiple roles within the performance of each story. Pre-recording the narration freed up the students to focus on the puppetry roles in each story. Developing technical skills such as recording the narration helps the students recognize the breadth and layers of skills they are learning.

Wrestling with the children's stories was at the core of these university drama students' comments during the ten-week term. It really wasn't until they had an audience of children aged five to eight years of age that the university drama students felt their puppetry interpretations of the stories were working. In that moment as they sensed the focus of the children and heard whispers and giggles in the dark theatre, the university drama students realized their puppetry performances were communicating the stories and connecting with the children.

McNiff (2011) explains that arts-based research uses "creative expression as a way of knowing, communicating and furthering personal and social development" (p. 387). The university drama students came to understand and consider the complex experience of the hospitalised child author through working with the child's story. When they performed the story for a children's audience the drama students recognised the value of sharing stories through performance to help people understand different perspectives. They reconsidered their understanding of the connection between performer and audience (Lorenza, 2020). We often talk about actors stepping into someone else's shoes, this process for the drama students contributes to their social innovation education (SIE), as they start to consider how telling different stories can help people to explore perspectives and seek alternative solutions to problems or concerns.

Further to this last point, Sextou highlights the importance of caring for actors who work with sick children. It is important to "explore the emotional experiences of the actors and the audience to develop guidance for the actor in healthcare to support themselves and support the children with whom they interact" (Sextou, 2023). The university drama students as actors did not directly interact with the sick children who wrote the stories. But the university students did read about the situations of the child authors. For example, the student who selected "My grandfather's wellies" was particularly saddened as this child author was communicating the death's death of a grandparent. The student came to understand the metaphor for acceptance in "A robot who could not dance". While they did not meet the child authors, the university students needed to be aware of the impact these stories may have on them as actors. The university drama students learn about self-reflection as they develop their craft in the three-year course. With this arts-based research project, we felt the university students did not truly come to a depth of understanding of the stories and their potential impact, until they had the co-presence with the children's audience towards the very end of the ten-week period.

6.7 Responding to the Scenario Conference

When we presented this project at the 2024 Scenario conference, we shared the video of "A robot who could not dance" one member of the conference suggested that we share the video of the performance from Australia with audiences located in the UK which led us to create a YouTube video: A robot who could not dance from Sextou, P. (2023) (Lorenza, 2024). Another conference member raised the benefit of raising awareness amongst drama students and audiences about the experience of hospitalisation in young age. Based on the feedback we received, this study helped the university drama students and the children in the audience to consider what it feels like to be a child in a hospital. Sharing these stories through the experience of university drama students rehearsing for an audience of children helps us to familiarise and possibly empathise with hospitalised children. Through this project the university drama students' learning outcomes included these graduate attributes: communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, information and technology competence, and social innovation. By participating in community creative projects in their degree program students can further hone these attributes, which we believe helps them to seek and create work after graduation.

We propose the embeddedness of less-traditional teaching approaches in drama training at university level to extend the pallet of the students' skills and broaden their career options. Within the small size of this study, there are indications of promising outcomes using hospitalised children's stories as applied theatre by-products and experimentation with

theatre, storytelling and puppetry. This kind of drama training expands the conventional reading and staging of plays and enables each student's increased capacity for creativity and problem-solving, proactivity in the learning domain. This stimulates the student's own motivation to learn, thus contributing to the student's engagement and career curiosity.

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