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# Aroused from a "false sense of neutrality"

## A photo story

Fiona Dalziel

> All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions–and society–so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom (bell hooks, 1994, p. 34).

## 1 Introduction

At the January 2021 Scenario Symposium, during the discussion about the possible implications of the RISE manifesto (Cañas, 2015) for drama practitioners, I found it easier to relate the 10 points to certain areas of my work than to others. I have for many years co-facilitated an English-language drama group for university students in Italy, most of whom are majoring in English. More recently, I have been involved in a number of different projects for adult migrants, all with a focus on language learning. As regards the latter, the manifesto provided me with a valuable framework through which to look back on my previous practice and a checklist of considerations to make before embarking upon new projects. Yet the aim of this issue is to push the manifesto out of its original context, that of refugees and asylum seekers, to explore how its tenets may form the basis of work with different kinds of learners, ones who are not necessarily marginalized, or depicted in common narratives as vulnerable and lacking in agency.

My question, at the time of the symposium, was how I could feed Cañas' points into my drama practice with my university students, young people, privileged enough to be studying the subject of their choice at a higher education institution of their choice. This brief photo story represents my attempt to do this. Yet rather than simply looking back at my experiences of language teaching through drama and trying to categorize them anew, albeit through a different lens, I am using the manifesto as a way of uncovering possible gaps in my language teaching practice. When describing my drama practice with university students, I tend to focus on issues such as learner autonomy, overcoming language anxiety, and fostering collaborative learning. What I have perhaps neglected are ideas which can be found in critical language pedagogy, in other words "a perspective on teaching second, additional, heritage, or other

languages that is based in values of social justice” (Crookes, 2021, p. 247). My practice has tended to view language learning as an overly neutral practice; I have focused on student agency in their language learning, rather than their agency as socially-responsible citizens in democratic societies.

With this in mind, during a meeting in which students had been discussing their own interpretations of the motivations of the female character of the short story we are adapting for the stage, I introduced them to the themes of the manifesto and then asked them to represent by means of tableaux the final point “Art is not neutral”. This brief photo story shows how I set out to challenge neutrality in my drama class, by getting students to take a step back and interrogate their own positions with regard to art. The three groups of students, two in person and one in Zoom, gave very different takes on the prompt provided. I now present the three photographs accompanied by the students’ own descriptions, followed by some reflections of my own.

## 2 Photography

*Image 1: Art is not neutral – Group One’s Tableau (F. Dalziel)*

Sofia[1]: It was meant to underline the contrast, between who cares for art, and who doesn't. Art is not neutral, it expresses things like an undressed body represented in an artistic way, without sexual interest. The person on the phone is censoring herself in a way, not looking, not interested. She’s closed in her point of view (body language). We also got inspired by the censoring that happened on Instagram with Greek statues. Jacopo, the statue, has a message, and everybody else but me are trying to touch that message, trying to sustain it as well. Milo's Venus was the inspiration.

*Image 2: Art is not neutral – Group Two’s Tableau (Zoom meeting room) (F. Dalziel)*

Lisa: We wanted to work with these backgrounds in Zoom so we thought it could be a nice idea to think about the different contexts in which women were in the past because the context influenced how women were portrayed in every period […] so we gathered something about suffragettes, other protests.

Caterina: It’s like art can bever be neutral. Like the way women are portrayed now has to do with everything that has happened to women in the past. Like having conquered certain rights surely has had an impact on how we can be seen.

[1] All student names were replaced with pseudonyms.

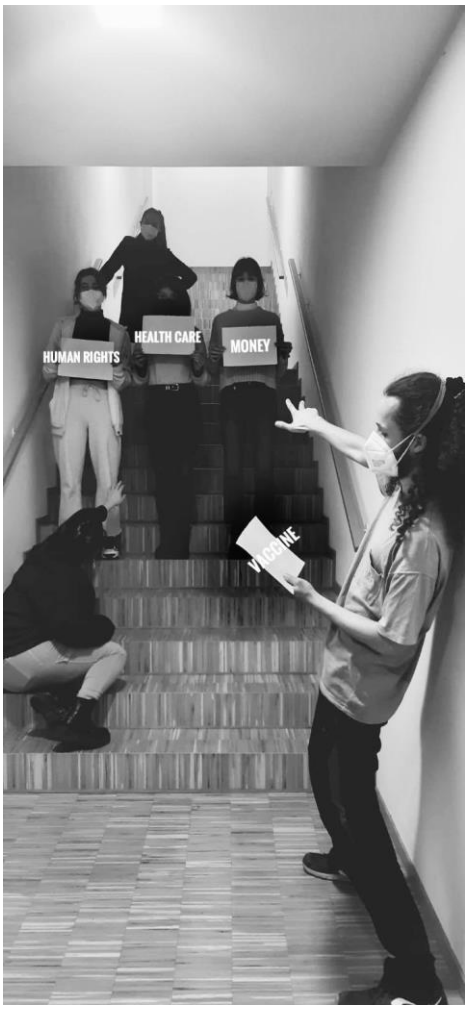


*Image 3: Art is not neutral – Group Three’s Tableau (F. Dalziel)*

> Güneş: This one is about power structure and the attainableness of basic human needs between countries. And the recent crisis, COVID-19 made it more than visible than ever. There are still countries that cannot reach any vaccine for protection from the pandemic because they do not have enough economic sources, enough to reach healthcare and therefore human rights. Yet, for the richest countries it is not even a question. Victor [standing at the front on the right] is the painter. He is in control and he has the power. So this is how art is not neutral.

## 3 Final reflections

The first photograph ties in with one of democratic values that critical language pedagogy seeks to enhance, that of freedom. The students’ intention was to make a statement about censorship, which interferes with our freedom to interpret art as we wish. Those who “care” for art will accept its lack of neutrality while the hindering our fundamental right of freedom

of expression is seen as a lack of caring or indifference. The participants in the group producing the second photograph decided to use the background function of their Zoom space metaphorically, to refer to where they were coming from in terms of the portrayal of women. Their approach to the question of neutrality mirrors Cañas’ call to beware of the single narrative; it is clear that they read stories as “whole humans with various experiences, knowledge and skills”. The final image, with the artist’s three fingers standing for the three COVID vaccine shots, shifts Cañas’ “Realise your own privilege” from the artist/practitioner to the students themselves. It is they who display awareness of their own powerful position in society, with the fundamental human right to health care portrayed as privilege for those with money.

All in all, this brief photographical exploration shows how language students can go beyond their language learning, finding a voice with which to cry out for social justice. Drama practice has the advantage of being able to make this voice embodied and performed collectively: “Drama forces us to engage in communal endeavor. Making or participating in drama is, in itself, an act that has at its core, the effect of making the world more socially just” (Freebody & Finneran, 2016, p. 11).

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