

# DRAMA, THE IMAGINATION AND THE DESIGN PROCESS

*'Imaginative thought transforms knowledge of what is into insightful conceptions of what might be and is therefore a component of all forms of planning and design'* Stuart Richmond 1993.

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation discusses how drama can provide immersion in a rich sensory, emotional and physical environment that stimulates imaginative ideas and images to initiate and enhance design processing.

How learning in one discipline can be expressed, refined and extended in another discipline, is described as Transformational Learning, whereby physical and emotional experiences can be expressed in meaningful reflective tasks such as design conceptualising and art making. The learner's initiation into the fictional world of drama stimulates imagination, invites participation and provides emotional intensity and purpose through empathetic engagement.

This collaborative transformational learning experience gives the learners' time and freedom to play with and refine ideas to deepen the processing of their new understandings. A rich sensory environment also supports learners to essentialise their learning through symbolism and enhances compositional understanding through the physical exploration of space.

The Technology Education Curriculum encourages the imagination and lateral thinking through empowering learners with innovative responses. The transformative process described within this paper would be of interest to both primary and intermediate teachers of technology, linking with Ann McGlashan's research findings on the importance of immersion within creative processing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This oral presentation relates to a research project I completed as part of my Master of Drama Education in 2006. My dissertation investigated the commonalities that drama and visual art share that could promote a more holistic, transformational way of learning and this stimulated my interest in exploring how drama might provide an immersion experience to stimulate imaginative thinking and enhance the design process within a technology context. A pilot project was co-operatively planned with Ann McGlashan and trialed in two of her technology classes and these findings will be presented.

The research question is:

'Can immersion in drama stimulate the imagination and enhance design thinking?'

## 2. DISCUSSION

From previous experience as a drama, visual art and materials technology teacher, I used cross discipline approaches to create innovative learning experiences. When students combined disciplines within the same learning experience, their work was more imaginative and purposeful. My approach has been influenced by my own observations and the work of authors such as Anderson and Gibson (2004) who promote an integrated multi-sensory arts approach which embraces an aesthetic integration of pedagogy, process and product where subject barriers are broken down to make meaningful connections by exploring the commonalities between the disciplines. This, they suggest, can be achieved through collaborations with other teachers who have allowed themselves to be 'liberally influenced by each other's practice (p5)' while still maintaining the distinctiveness and integrity of their own discipline.

Bruner (1965) described transformational learning as an act of learning which involves three simultaneous processes: the acquisition of new information; the transformation of knowledge to make it fit new tasks; and reflective processing. In the drama context, Burton (1991) describes this process of transformation as a cognitive act involving the creation of symbols, which extend the significance of the person, object, or activity beyond the nature of the thing itself. O'Toole and Dunn (2002) further describe this transformational process as the ability to make implicit knowledge explicit by expressing the physical and emotional experiences in meaningful cognitive tasks. Based on these understandings about the transformational process, this project sought to investigate how learning in one context can be expressed and extended in another. Drama was used as the catalyst for transformational learning, whereby the sensory, emotional, and physical immersion in the dramatic context is used to enhance the design process.

Drama could be considered the most holistic of all the arts disciplines, as it assists and supports students to think deeply and imaginatively using movement, sound, images, and role to symbolise and make sense of their own and others' experiences. By engaging in a variety of roles and situations through drama, students develop empathetic responses, play with ideas and communicate and interpret meanings that connect the emotional, physical, and cognitive domains.

Play can assist students to process and make sense of the unknown and helps them make sense of the world. Student play and self-directed learning has significant implications for creativity and the imagination. Duffy (1998) embraces the idea that all students need opportunities to play with ideas and that play and creativity share many characteristics, as both involve the ability to cope with uncertainty, explore new ideas, and look at a problem in a variety of ways. Play promotes the flexibility and problem-solving skills needed to be creative.

Symbols can communicate the essence of ideas, experiences or a narrative. As Neelands and Goode (2001) discuss, working symbolically enables students to go beyond the immediate story, heighten the awareness of form and increase the emotional engagement. The use of symbols creates multiple layers of meaning and is a key area for development of transformational learning as students are given time and opportunity to extend and deepen their processing of the new understandings.

Transformational learning can be achieved by using body movements to symbolise experience and communicate meaning. Nicholson concurs with this '...it is through the body that thoughts, emotions, and experiences are created,

materialised, symbolised and represented in ways that are interactive, enactive and energetic'(2000: p.4). Through embodiment ideas are given a discernable shape as students express through movement their understandings about exploring space and form and these kinesthetic experiences can enhance compositional awareness.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

This presentation explores an innovative approach teachers of technology can adopt within the immersion or 'investigation of ideas' phase of the design process. Through drama, students are provided with a rich source of images and experiences, given opportunity to investigate multiple solutions to a problem and to share and refine ideas. They are encouraged to take risks, think laterally and are empowered to be more reflective in their practice, guiding them towards a liberatory technological literacy.

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