

Speech given by Dave Kelman at the IDEA Congress in Belem Brazil in July 2010 on the subject of ‘Can we transform schools?’

Can we transform schools? No!

Recently the Australian Government brought in the My School website that assesses schools in relation to basic literacy and numeracy tests. Failing schools are shown in red. All the schools I work in are shown in red although they are good schools dealing with strongly disadvantaged communities. One school I work in told me this year that they couldn't do any drama until after the tests because they were teaching for the tests. In this way schools are reduced to teaching dumbed-down functionalist skills in ways that are antithetical to deep learning.

To make an impact on schools we must find the cracks in the system where we can work subversively undercover as teachers or artists coming into schools to collaborate with teachers.

To do this effectively, my friends we need theory. We need both artistic and pedagogic theory so we can understand and develop our work because without theory is no progression. We also need to research our practice so we understand it better and can demonstrate its value and understand our failures.

We need to strive for excellence – if we are going to be critical of the established system we must be demonstrably better than it – we must create quality arts projects based on original and complex work that engages and challenges our young people that resists dumbing down and low expectations.

We need to give young people access to the classic, foundational texts of their culture and other cultures – not forgetting the oral folk traditions of many cultures including the indigenous cultures represented here today. These texts – the works of Homer, Shakespeare or Brecht for example – in a European tradition – can be made accessible and immediate through our work. Drama is an excellent method of achieving this.

Foucault tells us that knowledge is created by power. Those stories are told – the dominant discourses of a society reflect the power relations of that society in a given historical moment. Bruner – among other theorists – tells us that we create our identities through the act of narration – through telling our own stories. If young people have no access to the foundational stories of their culture then they are shut out of the social discourse of identity. If young people cannot use classic texts to generate their own new and original stories then they are forced into identities that are chosen for them by corporate consumer capitalism.

The key to responding to this situation is praxis – the combination of theory and practice in complex, powerful and constantly evolving processes. I'd like to stress the importance of process drama – an art form that has emerged from my own cultural tradition – this is a unique and powerful art form in its own right and we shouldn't marginalise its place in this movement.

As the great Brazilian educator – and apologies for my pronunciation – Paulo Freire – tells us these processes are dialogic. This should be a fierce and complex dialogue

between teacher-artists and young people about the world, about ethics and values and to a lesser extent about politics but always about the dramatic story because it is through stories that we make meanings.

Schools need to reach out in many ways to their communities. One way they can do this is through performance work that is specific to the local situation. If such work achieves its potential it can create what the performance anthropologist Victor Turner called performative reflexivity. This is a process of a community coming together to engage in deep reflection on its identity and core values. I think that if we can create these cultural spaces in schools then we at least begin a process of transformation by giving us a deeper sense of personal and communal identity and basis for seeking greater change.

Thank you for listening to me.