



The Polar Bear Roars: A Report Into The Use Of Drama To Explore Environmental Themes At Kensington Primary School.



Introduction

This is a report into an environmental science themed performing arts project that took place in Kensington Primary School with Grade 4/5 students in 2007. The report is in three sections:

1. A brief outline of the project.
2. An analysis of Quantitative Data on the project's outcomes; there is data pertaining to student well-being and data from teacher and student evaluative surveys.
3. An analysis of Qualitative Data on the project's outcomes. This is the substantive part of the report and is based on evaluative interviews

conducted with students. These interviews give an insight into student learning and the complex outcomes of this project.

The most complex section of this report is the third section, based on the students' reflections on the program. The relevance of this section is that it privileges student voice and gives young people a chance to really express what they thought and felt about this work and its meanings.

Parental permission was given for the use of photos of the performance. Students are not identified as individuals in this report. SCRAYP is a program of Western Edge Youth Arts [WEYA] and sometimes the program is referred to by that name.

Origins of the Project

The School approached WEYA with a view to planning a project that would both support and develop a science curriculum module on global warming. It was perceived that there were some difficulties in teaching this theme to children in the Grade 4/5 age group, partly because of the complexities of the science, and partly because of the need to impart possibly disturbing information about the future of the planet the children will have to inhabit. There was recognition that arts processes would allow the exploration of complex and confronting themes in ways that were fun and empowering to students.

Aims and Objectives

Aims

The Program aim was to enable the students to investigate global warming through an arts process and to express some of their views, discoveries and questions about this issue through a community performance.

Objectives

Our objective was to produce a piece of theatre on the theme of the environment. As part of this process the students would:

- learn the basic science behind global warming;
- research the topic of climate change in class time in order to bring some of this information to bear on the play-making process;
- construct and write their own script material from research and improvisation;
- develop their oracy skills;
- improve their connectedness and engagement;

- engage with and perform text written in complex language;
- analyse and reflect on the meanings contained in the play [both before and after performance];
- analyse and reflect on the cultural significance of the stories used in the play.

The Process

The first session was with the whole cohort of 45 students. There were 2 lead Artists and 2 emerging Artists plus 2 class teachers, and an experienced, roving support teacher. The project took place over one semester with one 2 hour session a week and a more intensive rehearsal period leading up to performance. The process combined process drama with interactive presentations on the underlying science and current theories on global warming using interactive, multi-arts pedagogy. The process incorporated physical theatre, creative and reflective writing, ICT, student research into topic, use of complex written texts, team-building, acting/performance skills, voice work, singing and reflection built into the process.

Well I learnt that global warming is a lot more serious than I thought, it's not a myth [Boy, year 5]

The Plays - there were three plays, linked by the common theme.

Rapa Nui – a story based on the history of Easter Island. An environmental destruction story for our times, exploring the links between culture and environment. This project was based on the work of Jared Diamond¹ and his theory about the factors governing human societies' ability to adapt to environmental challenges. The story of the play tells how deference to the demands of Chiefs and Priests led to the complete deforestation of the island, which made it unviable for human habitation; the trees were cut to provide rollers to transport huge stone statues – 'Moai' – which became cult status symbols for the chiefs of various clans, and were associated with ancestor worship. Finally the people were driven to war and cannibalism.

The Last Polar Bear – set in an imagined future not too far away, the only surviving polar bear conjures a group of young people to venture to the Arctic in order to hear the bear's message for all humankind –

¹ Jared Diamond *Collapse How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (Allen Lane 2005)

I ask one thing and nothing else of you. Your people are killing my heart and my race. Global warming is a terrible thing. It has melted the ice. You must look after the environment not care about money. We need to stop global warming so the planet can keep growing and the animals can keep living. You should do this for nature, for the earth, for yourselves. You have the power to save us. You have killed all of my race and many other species. Save all other races before all hope is lost. It is every living human's fault, so it is your job to fix it. Look after the world, it is your future. You can change the fate of your planet.

(Students' creative writing)

The Tempest – using ideas from Shakespeare's play, refugees from rising sea levels in the Pacific find themselves shipwrecked on an island inhabited by three people: Prospero – a radical thinker and inventor, himself on the run from greedy corporations who see his philosophy as a threat to their profit margin; his daughter Miranda, and Caliban the indigenous first inhabitant, now virtually enslaved by Prospero. It featured a musical movement/physical theatre sequence in which Prospero conjured a nightmare vision of the consequences of human greed and environmental destruction.



Prospero's nightmare vision of human greed and destruction

Teacher-Artist Collaborative Partnerships

Teachers were present at all sessions, and took part in all activities. A fundamental principle of the WEYA model is that it engenders a *partnership* with schools and teachers; further, that it is a partnership that can be developed and extended long term, rather than a one-off event which loses much of its impact when the initial stimulus isn't followed up. Many models for working through an Arts process are offered to the teachers, and teachers have opportunities to try out ideas and have creative input into the process. For example, one teacher wrote and recorded a soundtrack for one of the plays.

New-media Artist

WEYA employed a new-media artist on this project who worked with students to source, select, download and sequence visual images that would provide a backdrop for the performance and would also provide a parallel text, enhancing the meanings being made in the stories.

The Performances



'Our boat is sailing on the wide open sea'

I was overwhelmed by what I saw. The way that the children were being taught new exciting ideas, that every child was included, no matter what their confidence or skill level, and the respect that the facilitators had for the children blew me away. I have seen a whole new aspect of my daughter's skills develop and her enthusiasm speaks for itself.

(Parent feedback)

The performances took place in a Community Hall near to the school; the first was a matinee for other students at the school (over 300), the second a performance for an invited audience of parents and friends in the evening. The evening performance attracted a community audience of about 250 people.

The technical support involved a Lighting Designer; a Projection Designer [using images sourced with young people to create a visual environment for the performance]; a Visual Artist – she made 3 'Moai' flats, which although specific to the *Rapa Nui* story, stood sentinel very effectively throughout the other 2 plays as a silent reminder of the consequences of environmental destruction. She also made a polar bear head-dress/costume. All three plays used pre-recorded music as a soundtrack, as well as live singing and group chant.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Teacher and Student Evaluative Surveys

Students.

Data collected from survey forms distributed at the conclusion of project to all students who took part, and completed anonymously.

Student Survey Data.

1. *I enjoyed coming to school when we had SCRAYP:*
92% Strongly Agree or Agree [SA or A] of which 60% Strongly Agree
2. *I felt better about school when we were doing SCRAYP:*
92% SA or A.
3. *I would like to take part in another SCRAYP program.* 95% SA or A,
of which 86% Strongly Agree. [Remaining 5% neutral]
4. *I got to know people in my class better.* 58% SA or A.
5. *I learnt that I could work with different people in the group.*
87% SA or A.
6. *I developed my ability to put ideas into words:* 79% SA or A.
7. *I felt happier speaking my ideas and opinions in front of the group.*
74% SA or A.
8. *I developed my ability to express and put forward my opinions.* 76% SA
or A.
9. *I developed my ability to use complex language.* 79% SA or A.
10. *I developed my ability to use complex language to express
complicated ideas.* 66% SA or A.
11. *I have more self-confidence.* 92% SA or A.
12. *I developed my acting skills.* 95% SA or A.

Teachers

Data collected from Teacher survey forms distributed anonymously at the conclusion of projects. [NB All teachers with experience of SCRAYP programs for the last 4 years were surveyed, not just the ones involved in this project]

Teacher Survey Data

1. *Students have a more positive attitude to school:* 91% SA or A.
2. *Attendance tends to improve:* 62% A
3. *Oral language improved:* 90% SA or A
4. *Written language skills improved:* 43% A

- 5. *Students developed ability to explore complex ideas:* 89% SA or A.
- 6. *Students developed their use of complex language:* 60% SA or A.
- 7. *Students social health improved:* 100% SA or A
- 8. *Students are better able to listen to others:* 86%
- 9. *Students worked better in small groups:* 91% SA or A
- 10. *Students have increased self esteem:* 100% SA or A
- 11. *SCRAYP programs have a positive effect on the whole school community*
85% SA or A

Interpretation of data

Students are strongly positive about all aspects of the program. Many added comments to reinforce their opinions, particularly with a view to doing another program next year.

Teachers saw the program as having a strong positive influence on students in terms of social health and social learning. They were less clear about impacts on attendance, however school data shows that attendance has in fact improved for student cohorts involved in the SCRAYP program over a four year period between 2004 and 2007. They also saw the program as impacting strongly on oral skills although they were less clear about impacts on written skills. Teachers saw the program as developing thinking about complex ideas, reflecting the values/content rich basis of the program. Teachers also agreed or strongly agreed that students had a more positive attitude to school as a result of the program.

I wait all week for SCRAYP to happen every single week
[Year 4 student]

Student Learning Outcomes

As well as the above learning outcomes there was also evidence of outcomes in the area of science at VELS level 3² - *developing an understanding of human impacts on the environment*, and in ICT at VELS level 3 - *the capture and use of images*. [Based on teacher and teacher-artist observation].

If you have a lecture [at school] its like 'yes yes yes' but you are bored; if you act it, you learn it on the way, and in 2 hours you can teach the audience about global warming too. [Year 5 student]

² Victorian Essential Learning Standards

Student Well-Being Data

Based on a survey of student resilience (PRASE) conducted by the school welfare coordinator, a majority of the cohort of students engaged in the project improved their resilience, confidence and coping skills during the course of the program.

22 children out of 41 were able to be tracked from June 2006 to December 2007 (this is due to new children arriving this year, some absences etc).

13 of the 22 children (59%) showed a positive increase in score of between 1 – 50%. 2 students maintained the same score. There were significant increases (more than 30%) in the scores of 3 children involved in the SCRAYP program this year.

Overall the grades of students involved in SCRAYP averaged a score of 79% for the PRASE survey which shows that a high level of resilience and skills are being developed by the children overall. This has occurred in spite of a **decrease** in both the environmental protective factors (11% in one grade and 12 % in the other) and the overall connectedness children report feeling to their teacher and grade this year (11% in one grade and 20% in the other).

In addition to these results, several children in the 4/5 grades also responded in the '*Whole of school wellbeing survey*' (carried out at the end of each year), that SCRAYP is one of the three things they enjoy most about school.

People at school don't get me, but SCRAYP people understand me. The acting process is different, because it's not exactly learning - but you do have to remember things - plays capture things in movement and words; it's the best thing in school - if people ask me in 10 years time what was the best bit [of school] it would be SCRAYP by far, no question. [Year 5 student]

QUALITATIVE DATA

Student Reflections on their experience of the Program

The interviews conducted with students were wide ranging and covered areas from their own personal development through the process, to their ideas of what the plays might mean and their importance.

The interviews took place in the weeks following the performances and their responses show evidence of learning outcomes outlined above.

VELS

There is evidence in this data to show that many of these Year 4/5 students are fulfilling the criteria both for VELS Thinking Processes and VELS Exploring and Responding in The Arts at Level 4, and several are approaching the standards for Level 5.

For example: *Students research, observe and reflect on their explorations to develop, discuss, express and support opinions about their own and others' use of arts elements... They compare, analyse, evaluate, and interpret the content, meaning and qualities in arts worksoffering informed responses and opinions....*

(The Arts: Exploring & Responding - Level 5)

One Year 4 Girl was able to talk about the journey of Prospero, the character she played in the final scenes of the play [all the main characters were divided up to be played by different people in order to give all the students a fair go and develop ensemble work], and make observations on the character's psychological development:

He's a strict character in the beginning, but by the end of the play he doesn't realise where he is in the world. He's realised how other people [have] felt. He's a bit mixed up. They've [the rescuers and refugees whom he's brought to the island to start a new community there] given him a purpose [to return the world outside and contribute his ideas to help combat global warming] but I don't think he realises what it is. He's been there [on the island] 10 years, all for his daughter, but now he wonders why he did it, he feels... ..misplaced somehow. At the end, when he says 'what have I done?' he's not concentrating on what his future could be, but on the past which he can't change. He's seeing behind him, not what is ahead.



Prospero & Miranda: *'He's a strict character in the beginning'*

This comment shows a degree of complex character analysis. When she arrives at the word 'misplaced' [in itself a word she would not normally use and one she clearly emphasised by her tone of voice] the thought begins to crystallise into the final idea, which is that Prospero at the play's end is ensnared by pointless regret, a sense of a wasted life, and an inability to move forward. For a year 4 student, this is an extremely perceptive analysis.

Similarly a Year 4 Boy, who suggests that while his character may not be the archetypal hero, he too can affect change in his world for the better:

Brendan is a leader, well, a mixed character. He's the odd one out to everyone at school, the nerdy one; they like him but they'd prefer someone different [as a friend]. [After the journey] He changed the world, not just for him but for his friends too, so they felt differently; he might not change the world, but they [the friends who take the journey with him] felt and lived differently because of what they did with him. Like if they were about to pollute the earth, they would stop and think.

Children were asked to talk about the differences between theatre as a medium, versus television. A Year 4 Girl speaks in terms of TV as a medium to convey information, about a war for example. She presents the idea that although a TV report on the News might be “fact” while the play is “fiction”, the theatre form holds a deeper truth for the viewer/audience member:

The TV is regular; acting is more expressive, powerful, strong – more REAL – because something on the news – well actors use their whole bodies to express emotion, it’s so intense, they’re not behind a TV screen; but a newsreader is not using sad tones in his voice, it’s the same voice for everything. In the play it’s actually them in that situation, which is more powerful. On the news....say you’ve got a war [news item] or a child with a puppy [news item] but your emotions between the two as a viewer don’t change. On the news, you’re not there feeling and seeing. You can turn the TV off but you’re not in control of theatre. A child watching a play could cuddle up to her mummy [if scared] but that’s not the same as turning the TV off. Movies – that’s the third element – you could see guns, that would be shocking, it can be intense, but theatre more because you’re seeing it there. [Year 4 Girl]

Another Year 4 Girl commented on the immediacy between audience and actors in theatre: “...because with film, that’s fake, it’s just a screen, but with theatre it’s LIVE, you can touch them!”

Further, it mattered to the students that the actors were youngsters, not adults; they felt that the impact of children acting out their own possible nightmare future was strong – this idea was generated entirely from within the group. Commenting on the impact of the ‘nightmare of human greed and environmental destruction’ sequence, one Year 5 Boy said:

This is what’s going to happen in 20 years time and it’s acted out by little kids who are normally playful, so it’s unexpected [the horror of it]. Kids are more meaningful, they capture the personality of the whole play. For the kids, it’s their future.

A Year 4 Girl thought that thei being children “*impacted on the way they [audience] thought – ‘if kids can do this play then we can change the world’*”.

Another Year 4 Girl thought that adults had a vested interest in keeping the status quo, where children were more likely to make radical changes:

Because we've still got the chance to grow up and change global warming, we have the power; adults are already making money so they don't want to change.

Interestingly, although some students admitted to being scared about global warming since they'd learnt how serious it was, all students were optimistic about the possibility of change and considered themselves to be the primary agents of that change. The process of confronting the issue through a play-making process actually empowered them to believe it was possible to change things, and they viewed the play as part of that process of change.

All students seemed to have a very clear idea that their play should inform and educate their audience. Some simply provided a single phrase which summed up the 'message' they wished to communicate; examples of these are as follows:

"Respect the earth!"

"Don't be greedy – there's only one earth"

"Be careful of what you do"

"Don't chop the forest!"

"Make the world a better place – there's too much packaging & plastic"

"People should treat everyone equally – not like a slave"

"We show people how we can change animals' lives, not just think about ourselves"

"Don't destroy the earth – there are easier ways instead of burning coal"

Other students were able to pursue their analysis beyond a simple didactic message:

[On the 'nightmare visions of greed' sequence]: *"Some people just want money and not to care for the earth, but they are shown to be pretty stupid and shallow. Money doesn't come first, the earth does"*

[Year 5 Girl]

At this point I was curious to know what sort of personal sacrifices the children might be prepared to make to help stop global warming, and asked how, for example, would they feel if the government banned cars for private ownership just when the students reached driving age?

Well I don't think John Howard will ever ban cars! [Yr 4]

"I'd be willing to ride a bike and take public transport if it meant helping earth" [Yr 5]

For another Year 4 Girl the question of a ‘message’ in *Rapa Nui* was complex:

It’s not completely obvious, it’s lots of complicated ideas. It’s not like you see elephants dying because the forest is cut down so the message is ‘don’t cut down the trees and save the elephants’. Like me before SCRAYP would have said ‘don’t build Moai: you’ll destroy your land’. But building Moai was out of respect for the ancestors, so now I would say ‘find a different way to respect the ancestors, they probably wouldn’t even like you to destroy the land’. It’s more complex than the bad guys and the good guys. [A year 5 boy] sums up the meaning of the play in his line at the end – ‘I will never follow your gods.....remember this when you cut down your last tree’.....it’s really powerful – it connects it to how the play affects us and climate change. Climate change is our equivalent to building Moai. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Our situation today is like Rapa Nui but bigger consequences, this time the human race could die out.

Here we can clearly see this girl meeting the VELS Thinking Skills Level 4 criteria where students: ‘*make observations about people and events within and beyond their own experience, and develop a growing awareness of the complexity of the world around them*’. She is also ‘*making links between ideas*’ – she begins the statement knowing it’s more complicated than the simple message but has not yet quite worked out how; then she finds the quote from the play which enables her to make the cognitive leap from the particular of Rapa Nui to the present world-wide crisis that she sees humankind facing – “*climate change is our equivalent to building Moai.....but bigger consequences, this time the human race could die out*” [not just the inhabitants of a small island]. There is also an interesting correlation in her analogy between the idea of human arrogance and folly as expressed through the building of Moai, and human arrogance and folly as expressed through our 21st century rampant greed and consumerism. [*There’s too much packaging and plastic!* – Year 4 Boy]

This interview took place 3 days out from the most recent Federal Election and interestingly the Year 4 Girl makes a further conceptual leap when she relates the situation on Rapa Nui to the ongoing process of democracy happening all around her:

Lots of people didn’t agree with cutting down the trees but the chiefs would kill them if they didn’t. They [the people of Rapa Nui] hadn’t got the capacity – is that the word? - to actually do what they [themselves] wanted to. Like if

there were elections on Rapa Nui, well the Chief and the Priest are like John Howard and Kevin Rudd and the people who want to save the trees are the Greens. But the Chief and the Priest don't take the Greens seriously.

Again to quote the VELS Thinking Skills Level 4 – *this demonstrates creativity in her thinking in a range of contexts, testing the possibilities of ...abstract ideas generated by herself.* She is also *transferring knowledge to new contexts.*

Social and Personal Development

The SCRAYP Program has a significant impact on students' personal and social development; in fact for the students themselves, it is the outcome they mention most readily when asked about what they got out of a Program. When surveyed:

- 92% strongly agreed or agreed that they had more self-confidence as a result of the program. Teacher and student comments support this data:

-SCRAYP helped me heaps in being more confident and it made me want do more things.

-I really like this play. And I used to be too shy to talk up, but acting could let me say things without speaking a single word. Plus I had loads of fun.

-SCRAYP helps shy quiet students to be more sociable

- 74% strongly agreed or agreed that they now feel happier speaking out their ideas in front of the group
- 76% strongly agreed or agreed that they had developed their ability to express and put forward their opinions – in other words their ability to *organise* and *communicate* their thoughts was improved.

A Year 5 Boy from an African background provides some interesting evidence of a personal journey through the process of making the play, *The Tempest*. During the devising process he could sometimes be non-committal or immature, as well as sometimes enthusiastic. The session I'm about to describe was when the group explored the character of Caliban, an indigenous person who has been oppressed by Prospero. This involved workshopping Caliban's big speech in the final scene where finally he stands up for himself against Prospero's tyranny. Students had listened to performances by the teacher–artist of the relevant sections from Shakespeare's text and were asked to brain-storm ideas for what 'our' Caliban would say. The Year 5 Boy became very animated and made most of the suggestions that were retained in the final version:

*No! Enough! I will not be a slave! People should learn to do things for themselves. Or perhaps Prospero, YOU would like to be the slave? After all, I have served you for a long time. Listen – once, this was my island, it is **still** my island. He has tormented me to keep it for himself, but he can't survive here without me. Why can't Prospero go back to his own country? He can't – do you know why? Because he is afraid of other people.*

Because of his ownership of the material, a decision was made (in consultation with the boy), that he should play the part of Caliban at this point in the play. It was recognised that it would be a difficult job for him, not least because his first language was not English, and he was not a confident performer, however, he assured me he wanted to do it. It became a huge challenge for him personally over the final days of rehearsal; he later told me that he was only able to meet this challenge after a considerable struggle with his fear of failure. However in the end, he managed a fine performance – his slow but purposeful delivery as he grappled with remembering lines added gravitas, and it was done with enormous conviction; the final words of the play are his as he states:

Now my slavery is ended, now to face an uncertain future, now to heal the land and be a custodian of its sacred places... .. the fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile... .. this is all I can do.

[He raises his arms up to the skies as if to call down a blessing on the land]

Caught in a single down-light as all else fades, he held this moment of blessing against a backdrop of Earth floating in space as a short musical phrase played out – *Our boat is sailing, sailing on the wide open sea.*

I was interested to find out his thoughts on the whole experience afterwards. I asked how he'd felt on finally doing the performance:

Doing this I want to make myself proud and other people proud. I was proud and scared playing Caliban. I was showing everyone who I really was, [they] realise I'm not a slave any more. I deserve the part. I felt like I was really him. I was so scared before it started I was crying in the car outside [gasps from his peers] – no really I was... ..I was so worried I [would] forget my lines, and I was sweating, my t-shirt was wet. Then I remember to be brave, then I come in and saw so many people [the audience] and I was scared again. When it was finished I felt relief.

Following on from the idea he expressed that he “*felt like he was really him*”, I asked about the character of Caliban: “*He is an island person; he feels like his mum is passing on something to him, but she died before she could finish. He’s sad. He wanted magic from her. He’s left with no power. To him Prospero is a dangerous man*”

This aspect of the play’s meaning had never been directly discussed in workshops; this Year 5 Boy is demonstrating an understanding of the nature of indigenous knowledge, cultural knowledge, and how Caliban is the poorer *culturally* for not having had the chance to complete that education. [See VELS Interpersonal Development Level 5 - *....identify the differing values and beliefs held by individuals in national and global contexts, and reflect on the impact these may have on relationships*]. This boy was also able to explore the duality of Caliban’s feelings for Miranda, who both teases him, and seeks out his company:

She never know about the outside world so she follows her father [i.e. his negativity towards Caliban], but she is a good person. [Why?] - because she says to Prospero ‘maybe you’ve been too harsh on him.’

As mentioned earlier, quieter students made strong gains in personal development from the Program. A Year 4 Boy’s voice had been simply too quiet in rehearsal, and since he had a major ‘narrating’ role, he was asked to stand at the front of the stage with a microphone for the story-telling sections. Within moments of his performance starting, he moved back to his fellow actors, away from the microphone and began to speak loudly. I asked about this decision:

I wanted to be with other people; it’s easier talking to other people if they’re around you. You feel more confidence when they’re around you. I knew I had to be loud – it would wreck it for the actors and the audience if you weren’t loud enough.

A Year 5 Girl in *The Last Polar Bear* played a character completely opposite to her personality:

I liked it when we were the hunters coming on with the loud music. We were powerful, the leaders of everything. It feels tough. I’m shy in real life - it’s different.



'I liked it when we were the hunters...'

A Year 4 Girl said:

"When I was the missionary, I felt really powerful, I was controlling the stage because I was the only one on it. Everyone was looking at me. It made me more confident. Before SCRAYP if someone had told me I'd be doing that, I'd be like 'no way!'"



“When I was the missionary, I felt really powerful”

A Year 4 Girl and Year 5 Girl were asked about important moments in the process and both offered examples of their personal development:

A session which was full-on for me was I wanted to prove myself –someone was away so I got more lines, it was an important session for me. [Yr 4]

I'm not loud or aggressive; sometimes I was embarrassed to think of doing a part. But when I tried out a part, it feels different. {Yr 5}

They both also stressed that the environment which the teacher-artists had created made it safe for them to step outside their normal comfort zone, into a *liminal space*³ where they were able to try out new things without fear of peer ridicule or judgement. This is a function of the drama process:

In your groups you feel comfortable – if you get something wrong, people won't laugh. [Yr 5]

Yes, it's safe, people won't laugh – you can try new things out.....it [SCRAYP] benefits you, it gives you confidence, can raise awareness of problems in the world. [Yr 4]

A Year 5 Boy was very keen that everyone should have a chance to take part in such a Program :

Yeah, everyone should give new things a go. When you act, you get into the groove, you adapt to a character and you learn from it.

Interesting here is this boy's view that imagining things from a different perspective through role-play is a learning process that in some ways changes the actor: i.e. if you have to *adapt* your thought process to play a part, you therefore *learn* from it.

A Year 5 Girl felt that not only was her hard work rewarded by others, but was a reward in itself:

My Miranda scenes took me a long time to memorise. It felt good when I did it, like a reward for all my practice. Mum recognised how much work I'd done on it – so it was worth it.

Function of Comedy

Comedy was a feature of all the plays and included a slapstick kung-fu sequence, a self-aggrandising rap by the overly vain Moai sculptor and a scene referencing 'Mission Impossible'. In interviews, the comedy was widely reported as being a favourite moment, or something the audience had responded to well. I asked why the students thought this was so:

³ See Schechner *Performance Studies An Introduction* Routledge NY 2002

Well people like comedy. [Yr 4]

It does a range of things. People are drained out because they're depressed [because of the content of the play] but the humour refreshed you and you could listen again. [Yr 4]

The Impact of Theatre

Leading on from this I was interested to find out if the young people thought that watching a play could change people's attitudes? All the students interviewed believed that it could, and here is a selection of their responses:

A Year 4 Boy: *If the actors put in all their effort and thought... [he is here physically gesturing forward with his whole body and then pauses; I offer 'conviction?']...yes, conviction, then they [audience] care. There is an impact on them. Also the storyline must be entertaining, not boring, to draw people in.*

A Year 4 Girl: [People watching the war scene] *would probably have thought that war is wrong. If people had had somebody die, someone close to them, not just die of old age but say in a war or something, well it would bring up emotion in them, they'd think 'why are people still killing?'* [She reflects on this answer and then comments that some families at her school may have fled from war and that is why she answered in the way she did.]

A Year 5 Girl: *Well a couple of days after the play my mum went out and bought green energy!*

A Year 5 Girl thought that *Rapa Nui* had an optimistic outlook in spite of its grim subject matter: *When [a boy] said that last line (to the missionary) – 'I will never follow your god. We are the people of Rapa Nui. We made terrible mistakes but do you think you are better than us? Remember us when you cut down your own last tree' – I felt strong and hopeful – if everyone had that attitude, we could change things.*

A number of children in *Rapa Nui* chose this line to illustrate their choice of 'most powerful moment in your play'; it contained within it the element of resistance that they held to be lacking in the people's response to their leaders. This idea generated an interesting exchange between two girls:

Girl 1: *When I watched the first Rapa Nui (an earlier theatrical exploration of the material by another group in the school), I thought ‘why would people do that to their island?’ but when I was doing it I felt really desperate. Like chopping down the last tree – I felt so sad. Why would you do it just for the ancestors? It’s like killing your **self*** [Yr 4]

Girl 2: *The content of our play was a bit full-on. The message was really strong. By the end they shouldn’t have listened to their leaders, I mean how could they ruin their island?* [Yr 5]

[I interject here with ‘at what point is it appropriate to resist authority?’]

Girl 1: *You would have got killed if you resisted the leaders. It’s a big risk. You would die.*

Girl 2: *But by the end I wouldn’t have wanted to live – there’s no point carrying on*

Girl 1: *I think these things in my head but I wouldn’t go against the leaders.*

[I interject with ‘do you think people have had to make similar choices in our own times or might have to do so again?’]

Girl 1: *Yes! Like Hitler! People died going against him.*

We can see here the girls trying to work out the complexity of a situation they themselves have never had to face, but grappling with the enormity of moral choices which involve life or death decisions; there is also one girl’s quiet realization that to live a compromised life is perhaps worthless. [See VELS Level 4 standards in Thinking Processes: *As students work towards the achievement of Level 4 standards in Thinking Processes, they make observations and pose questions about people and events within and beyond their own experience, and develop a growing awareness of the complexity of the world around them.*]

Conclusion: Powerful Learning

It seems to me that students grappling with the construction of their own moral framework was a feature of the making process of all three plays. Students were invited to question and deliberate upon the subjects of slavery, racism, war, attitudes to figures in authority, corporate greed, human dominion over animals, environmental destruction and many more issues as a result of making and performing these plays. Along the way they acquired and improved many skills that are transferable across subject domains and some of which are simply “skills for life”. But perhaps over and above all is their fierce engagement with moral

questions which not only drives their learning, but shapes how they think and whom they might become.

What this report aims to show is the multi-faceted nature and complexity of a project of this sort, and how it generates *powerful learning*. It is a holistic learning experience that generates learning outcomes in a range of curricular areas but perhaps more significantly has relevance outside the classroom to the young people's community and wider world. This was an experimental, pilot project and the learning outcomes, particularly in the area of science could have been developed a lot further, and more scientific investigation could have been integrated into the process and the performance. This highlights the need for experimental practice to be given room to grow and develop, leading to more complex, relevant and empowering learning for our students.

This kind of performing arts process can be a valuable vehicle for the exploration of complex and challenging content. The learning journeys are shared but are also different for each individual as they create their own narrative about the performance and their part in it.

(Jane Rafe /Dave Kelman: Western Edge Youth Arts 2007)



The Last Polar Bear roars.



Department of Education and
Early Childhood Development