

Reaching Out To A Larger World

An Investigation into Narrative Meaning and Performance Dynamics

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between narrative and meaning in young people's dramatised stories and how social meaning is generated in community performance. Research into drama projects with young people in a secondary school in west Melbourne revealed that a carefully constructed dialogic process enabled young people to construct complex narrative meanings. There was a dialectical relationship between each part of the evolving narrative and the narrative sequence as a whole. Where young people had not devised their own story, it was essential to develop their ownership of the work. In performance the audience has a dual relationship to the performers: they see them simultaneously as fictional characters and as themselves. Meaning is generated out of this complex dual relationship.

Author's biography

Dave Kelman is Artistic Director of the artists in schools program of Western Edge Youth Arts in west Melbourne. He has been a drama educator working in multicultural, inner city contexts in Australia and UK for the last twenty years. He is a TIE actor and playwright who recently completed a PhD thesis at the University of Melbourne researching his own drama education practice.

Introduction

This paper is based on research I conducted into my own practice in a secondary school in Melbourne's inner west and concerns the meanings generated through performance of young people's dramatised stories. The methodological approach was reflective practitioner and case study research involving field based data collection. The study was conducted over a four-year period from 2004 – 2007 and involved seven discrete project case studies and approximately one hundred and fifty culturally and linguistically diverse young people, some of whom were involved in more than one project (Donelan et al, 2005). The teenage participants, boys and girls, were recent migrants to Australia from a range of countries, predominantly African and South East Asian, including significant numbers from refugee backgrounds. The projects in this study were part of an arts education partnership between Western Edge Youth Arts, a community arts

organisation, and the school where the study was based; they formed part of the school curriculum. As an artist-researcher leading these projects I wanted to try and generate socially relevant work as well as interrogating and developing my own praxis.

The fictional, dramatised stories that these young people created offered an insight not only into contemporary Australian society but also into how the conscious construction of narrative meaning can be integrated into a play building process.

Meaning is the essence of a story but the meaning of a story is contextual: it depends on who tells it, where, how and to whom it is told. Jerome Bruner sees stories as “viable instruments for social negotiation” (Bruner, 1990, pp. 55-56), seeing them as the means by which we negotiate social values and cultural meanings. The framing of experience as narrative is integral to these processes; Bruner sees our ability to do this as hugely significant: “If we were not able to do such framing, we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species” (p.56). This assertion is similar in tone to MacIntyre’s (1981) view that stories are strongly linked to social understanding:

Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. (p. 216)

Narrative meaning is a cultural construct: “meaning itself is a culturally mediated phenomenon that depends upon the prior existence of a shared symbol system” (Bruner, 1990, p. 69). Narrative meaning is generated by its socio-cultural context: “Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it” (Barthes, 1977, p. 115). Barthes sees the meaning of narrative as being determined by its interaction with “other systems (social, economic, ideological) whose terms are no longer simply narratives but elements of a different substance (historical facts, determinations, behaviours etc.)” (p. 115). For Barthes, “meaning” is a “higher order” connection that holds the essence of narrative, for without meaning a narrative is nothing:

Narrative does not show, does not imitate; the passion which may excite us in reading a novel is not that of a ‘vision’ (in actual fact, we do not ‘see’ anything). Rather it is that of meaning, that of a higher order of relation which also has its emotions, its hopes, its dangers, its triumphs. (p. 115)

If we apply this literary theory to the construction of a dramatised story for performance then it becomes a process of exploring and developing meaning in all its contextual complexity so that the young people understand and are responsible for the meanings they create. The aim of this complex and demanding process is to create an authentic and unique narrative voice that reflects the emerging values and perspectives of the group of young people engaged in the work.

A Dialogic Play-building Process

A pedagogic process of creating socio-cultural meaning through performed narrative involves a delicate balance of power between a teacher-artist and the participants. Two key facets of this process concern the narrative voice – whose language is used – and narrative structure. The following is a broad outline of this type of process, although it is important to note that any such a process is strongly dependent on context and is continually evolving:

1. An exploration of an open question through drawn images, poetry and movement: for example, ‘How does it feel to be a teenager in your community?’
2. An initial story-building phase, involving young people working in small groups, developing stories through improvisation. This phase also includes process drama techniques to develop a dialogue within the process drama form between teacher-artists and young people about the underlying values of the story. For example, using the device of the ‘empty chair’¹, young people collectively represent the voice of a mother challenging her husband (teacher-in-role) who has reported his car as stolen to the police when he knows that his son has taken it without his permission. Characters are generated through this process of story development.
3. Writing workshops are linked to the drama process, involving the young people in a script drafting process.
4. Structuring the narrative. Young people work in groups to convert a prose version of their developing story into a structured sequence of dramatic scenes before an initial draft of the script is written. This structuring process involves a dialogue about narrative meaning because the narrative sequence impacts upon it.

¹ In this convention an empty chair is used to represent a character in a scene and the whole participating group can become the voice of this character in dialogue with a teacher-in-role.

5. First draft of a script is written by teacher-artists, using edits of the young people's writing, carefully noted improvisations and a narrative structure developed by the young people.
6. The first draft of the script is workshopped by the young people and by teacher-artists, demonstrating and critiquing key scenes.
7. Script is redrafted based on the young people's suggestions, criticism and re-writing.
8. Rehearsal phase, intensive work on character and meaning occurs alongside the feeding in of performance skills, developing the young people's ownership and understanding of the story.
9. Changes continue to be made to the script, based on new young people's writing. For example, flashbacks developing character backgrounds to add layers to the work.
10. Performance to peers and a wider community audience.
11. Evaluation and analysis of meaning, developing young people's meta-cognition.

The key aspect of this process is that it is dialogic, but the dialogue is conducted, as far as possible, within the structures of process drama. If we consider some of the qualities of a pedagogic dialogue, as outlined by Paulo Freire (1998) we see that dialogue is a complex interaction. At the centre of Freire's pedagogy is the dialogic relationship between teacher and learner. Freire states that "we may speak of a dialogic atmosphere" which he describes in these terms: "Dialogue...is full of curiosity and unrest. It is full of mutual respect between dialogic subjects. "Dialogism presupposes maturity, a spirit of adventure, confidence in questioning, and seriousness in providing answers" (p. 99). An aspect of the dialogic process that seems very pertinent to this study is Freire's statement that the agents in the dialogue retain and actively defend their own identities; it is not, therefore, a process of reducing everyone to a common "right" answer. In this analysis, Freire states that dialogue is destroyed by either "authoritarianism" or "permissiveness" on the part of the educator (p. 246). As arts educators we must continually and consciously place ourselves on this continuum between authoritarian and permissive practice and move along it according to the particular demands of the context.

In the process used in this study, there were a series of role-based interactions between teacher-artists and young people using process drama conventions, including various adaptations of forum theatre. New challenges were also offered through teacher-artists presenting short model scenes to provoke and challenge the young people. Young people interacted with and built

upon these scenes. Underlying these interactions was the shifting and developing narrative meaning. It was important that any input made to the narrative by a teacher-artist was taken on and owned by the young people. A key-role of the teacher-artist was that of storyteller, framing and feeding back the evolving narrative to the young people. The teacher-artist was the keeper of the young people's unfolding stories who, through storytelling, allowed the young people to shape the evolving narrative meaning. Inevitably there were times in some projects when the teacher-artists made interventions that changed young people's stories, leading to complex negotiations about which version of the story should be accepted. This occurred particularly in relation to the representation of violence or risk-taking behaviours, creating good opportunities for dialogue between teachers, teacher-artists and young people about possible impacts of the work on communities, but also forcing me to accept ultimate responsibility for the work and censor material that I considered to be harmful to the young people and their wider community. Such decisions are heavily dependent on context but are an important feature of negotiating meaning with young people (Kelman, 2008).

Young People's Dramatised Stories

Some examples of how meanings were developed through narrative in a play-building process working with young people's own fictional (i.e. not autobiographical) stories will help to illustrate the relevance of this theory. These examples come from a case study of one of the projects, titled *Broken Pieces*, with a group of around twenty 14/15 year olds from diverse, recent migrant/refugee communities participating in weekly workshops over a six-month period. The project culminated in a community performance of three short dramatised stories exploring race, gender and identity. One of these stories, *Viva*, tells of a young woman and her attraction to a young man who is involved in illegal street car racing. I had cast a girl named Tuey² as *Viva*'s mother, an important and challenging role that had been developed through process drama, exploring her relationship with her father and her daughter. As part of this exploration, I suggested that Tuey could write a flashback scene of the mother when she was *Viva*'s age, giving Tuey a chance to act a different sort of role and at the same time adding another layer to the story. Two weeks out from the performance of the play, Tuey came to me with a long and

² All young people's names have been changed.

complex piece of writing for this flashback. This is an extract from it, in which the mother, as a teenage girl, talks to her own father who has been involved in dealing drugs:

You think I'm proud of having a dad like you? You hang around places that aren't appropriate so you can take drugs. You think hiding those things in the bin then I won't find out. I'm just keeping quiet because you're my dad I still love you. But I have just one acquirement (sic), just let me be with someone I love and let me make my own decision. Then you can have granddaughters and grandsons. Don't you want that? Dad, I don't want you to take over me. I just want to be myself. Being someone who can have wings, just fly free. I don't want to be trapped in my own world.

Although this piece was too long to use in its entirety, the subtlety and beauty of the writing—"being someone who can have wings, just fly free"—made it a very significant contribution to the narrative voice of the play. The speech by Viva's mother is addressed to her father, Viva's grandfather; the grandfather is an ambiguous figure in the play – an ex-criminal who has spent time in jail, as well as a traditional patriarch. Tuey's writing was read out to the group and used as the basis of a series of short scenes, which were developed through improvisation, to explore Viva's mother's relationship to her own father and to Viva's father. These scenes also gave the actor playing Viva's grandfather a chance to act him as a younger man: a new arrival to Australia who spoke in heavily accented English. This flashback scene enabled the young people to explore the changes over time in a migrant community, as well as changes in community attitudes to young people and their degree of freedom. It gave the audience backgrounds to the characters of the mother and the grandfather and helped them to understand and sympathise with them. By enabling us to see the mother as a young woman, this scene altered the narrative centre of the whole play, making it more complicated and more difficult for us to take sides in Viva's struggle against her mother and grandfather. This shift in meaning slowly permeated the whole play, as the scene was perceived at both a surface and a deeper level and its ramifications spread through the narrative as a whole.

This process of developing and uncovering narrative meaning was frequently manifested within the rehearsal process, as the young people started to experience and understand the story *as a whole* in more depth. To further develop this understanding, we presented the group of young people with a prose version of all the narrative material they had created through

improvisation and asked them to shape it into a sequence of scenes as a basis for a script, emphasising what they considered to be important and leaving out less significant episodes. In undertaking this task they were able to see that as a narrative sequence unfolds, the meaning shifts and develops. In the construction of a dramatised story there is a dialectical relationship between each new narrative development and the meaning of the narrative as a whole. Each new narrative development is contextualised and given meaning by its positioning in the emerging narrative sequence but it also changes the meaning of the whole sequence. Engaging young people in sequencing their dramatic narrative helped to deepen the work and generated a sophisticated dialogue about meaning.

The young people's own analysis of their work gives an insight into the type of complex meanings that were generated through this process. For example, this is how Lucy, the girl who acted Viva, saw the play in relation to her own Asian-Australian identity and her wider community:

It didn't connect to my life, it might connect to other people around us, more like the people around the community. Australians are really different to Asians, the different culture they grow up in, they have different ways of dealing with things and its quite different. It could be everyone's story though because through different layers of *Viva*, there's like, even though its one whole story, there's like mini stories within Viva's story. Between grandfather and father – even though they have their own story about their relationship – it's also a relationship between a boy and a girl and between friends and stuff, so it's quite big.

Lucy saw herself reflecting trends and conflicts in her society and placing them in a “big” and complex picture of interconnected stories. The play is *not* about her directly telling us how it feels to be *her*, but is a conscious attempt to reflect and, to some extent, comment on her society. She went on to broaden her analysis into an interpretation of the play that transcends its immediate context:

Even though the characters in the play were very different and were surrounded by different people, it showed that they could reach out. We think we are only a small part of the world but in fact we can reach out to a larger world and grow.

This type of complex analysis gives an example of the hermeneutic nature of a dramatised story. What may have been a simple morality tale to some young people carried a

broader meaning for Lucy. A character or action that is morally repugnant to one person may be more ambiguous to another. If we can engage young people in a process that explores the full complexity of narrative meaning making then we can enable them to craft dramatised stories that embrace this complexity. In the example of *Viva*, Lucy was engaged in the creation of a story that explored cultural identity through the development of a layered, morally complex narrative that enabled her to ‘reach out to a larger world and grow’.

A second example is from a different play, *Proof*, part of the same *Broken Pieces* project. It concerns the development of the character of an Old Man as a symbolic figure. *Proof* is the story of alienated refugee boy, Karim, who is befriended by an Old Man. In a writing workshop I encouraged Van, a shy, recent Vietnamese migrant to Australia, to explore the Old Man character. Through the play-building process, this character had progressed from merely being a “hobo”—as he was originally referred to by the young people—to being a character who is trying to reach out to Karim, who feels excluded by his peers. This scene had first been explored on the floor through improvisation and involved Karim looking at the Old Man’s collection of photographs, but through Van’s writing it took on a sharper focus. This is part of what he wrote:

Karim: Why do you take pictures?

Old Man: If I didn’t take pictures, I wouldn’t have a purpose to live.

Karim: Why don’t you have a purpose to live?

Old Man: Everyone I know is gone. I was lonely, struggling on the streets. I don’t know why I’m here in this world.

Karim: Don’t you have any relatives or family?

Old Man: All of my family died in the civil war.

Karim: Which civil war?

Old Man: It was just a war. There’s lots of wars but people forget them. Anyway boy, where’s your friends, don’t you have any?

Karim: No, all of the kids around here hate me. Last time I popped one of the kids ball.

Old Man: (Laughs) Why did you do that?

Karim: They weren’t being fair. Why am I always the one left out? Why is the world being cruel to me? I hate my life.

Old Man: Everyone is unique.

Karim: Do you think I have something special or unique?

Old Man: Yes you do. Everyone does.

This is how Van later reflected on this piece of writing: “Oh the writing, just think of some serious thing—like they talk about their life, some people. It makes people think deep about people and that.” This powerful and complex dialogue gave an insight into the character and role of the Old Man in the story, who was later described by Daniel, the boy who acted the part of Karim, in these terms:

Yeah he was an important person, yeah, he wasn't like just to me only but to the whole thing, the whole, all of us. All three plays cos he's telling them to do the right thing, he tells the boys to do the right thing, yeah.

For Daniel, the Old Man character became the moral voice of the whole performance. I have included Daniel's analysis here to try and show how the artistic contribution of one young person feeds another and builds the complex meaning of the work as a whole.

Externalisation and Moral Stances

When young people create a dramatised story, they create a vehicle for meaning that is external to themselves, so their story becomes the subject of interpretation and negotiated meaning. Dramatic storytelling explores social conflict—what Bruner (1996, p. 142) refers to as the “centrality of trouble” in narrative—and externalises the moral values of the young people. Bruner argues that the production of cultural items – speech based, movement based, sound based, a physical artifact, etc.—gives us access to reflection and generates the public negotiation of cognitive activity creating access to meta-cognition: the ability to think about thinking. The externalisation of internal thought processes is an essential component of process drama. In externalising a social conflict, however, we do not simply represent it, we also comment on it: we take a moral stance in relation to it. Bruner (1990) elegantly sums up this connection between narrative meaning and morality: “To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances” (p. 51).

If we return to Bruner's (1990) assertion that the primary function of narrative is the construction and negotiation of socio-cultural meaning, then the development of an understanding of how narrative works—it's qualities, nuances and ambiguities—becomes an important tool for understanding and shaping a moral discourse. An understanding of narrative and an ability to craft its meanings in complex cultural contexts was an important part of what

the young people learned through the culturally aware, dialogic play-building process of this study.

Taking Ownership

Of course there are many different approaches to play-building and the adaptation of existing stories is just as effective as a way to generate narrative meaning. In a process in which the young people do not initiate the narrative, *ownership* is a key concept. Ownership involves young people taking on a narrative offered by a teacher-artist but investing it with their own meaning. Ownership in this context means a sense that the young people feel connected to the narrative events being told; that these events hold meanings for them and that they are willing to publicly commit to these meanings in performance.

For example, a different project case study called *New Start* involved a process in which teacher-artists wrote a script specifically for a group of 17/18 year-old refugees from the Horn of Africa (Sudan and Somalia). I wrote this script with Australian-Iranian writer Afshin Nikoueresht based on the experiences of the young people and their families as refugees, as obtained through interviews and explored through a limited devising process. The majority of the script was the creation of Afshin (himself a refugee) and myself, trying to write in a style that would be accessible to a cast with very limited literacy and spoken English.

An example will illustrate the process of developing the young people's ownership of the script. In one scene, a group of soldiers are joking about who has been seeing whose girlfriend, when one of them starts to describe how he got hold of a valuable necklace.

Soldier 1: (*pulls a gold chain out of his pocket*) I'm going to give this to my daughter when I go back home.

Soldier 3: Where did you get that?

Soldier 1: There was this girl in the village crying. Her mum was dead. She looked confused. I went to see if she was ok. Then I saw this gold chain on her mother's body...(*he takes it*). (*To the girl*) Sorry about that.

Initially, when the scene was read, it meant little to the young people, but when I suggested that the soldiers should re-enact the moment as they told it, it took on a different energy. One of the soldiers became the dead mother, another the little girl who looks up piteously at the soldier as he reaches down and takes her dead mother's necklace. When the soldier got to his punch line—

where he says “Sorry about that” to the child whilst robbing her mother’s corpse—the flashback ended and we remerge into the “present” of the story, where he is boasting to his friends about the theft. This is how the young actor Abdi described the moment in performance:

I like when the necklace was taken off, there was fighting. When the girl was crying and the mother dead and I tell the girl “Sorry about that”, they laughed a lot.

This moment is redolent with dramatic irony. In performance, the audience laughed at one of the soldiers representing a young girl and the pathetic pleasure the soldier takes in seizing the necklace. They laughed because conventional morality, as expressed in the narrative build-up, suggests he should give the necklace to the girl and help her in some way; but this is a world where such morality does not exist. Abdi’s description illustrates the excitement he felt in having successfully pulled-off this complex moment in performance and there is a sense of his immersion in the story and his pleasure at its impact. This connection to the work was developed in the rehearsal process, when I encouraged the young people to enact the story as it was told. They did so with real commitment, generating the pathos that is so abruptly broken, prompting the dark humour that was generated in performance. Although the scripted narrative did not come from the young people they had a close relationship to it because it reflected their families’ experiences. By embodying the story, they controlled the interpretation of the scene and ultimately its meaning.

Performance Duality

For some of the young people in the *Broken Pieces* project, the relationship to the narrative could be described as “intimate”. To illustrate this, I want to look at a monologue written by Omar, who is from an Ethiopian background, working with Cuong Nguyen, a Vietnamese-Australian artist. The monologue is an exploration of how it might have felt to be one of the first African refugees to arrive in Australia:

People can be cruel, Especially kids, they always notice what’s different about you first. It’s not easy being black. When I came to this country, there wasn’t any cafes and cool cheap restaurants, just looks and stares. I felt like the first African person in town, I know I was the only one in my suburb, because around my streets, no one looked like me. One time when I was at the bus stop, and every one was standing around, and I could feel I was different. Everyone’s eyes were on me and not just looking, but full on staring at me.

And I kept thinking: “Why are they staring at me? What have I done?” I started to get more frustrated and my heart beats faster. I know the bus was late, but that wasn’t my fault. I thought I could hear what they were thinking: “What are you doing here?” and if I had a choice, I’d tell them, but I can’t. My palms are getting sweaty, because I’m clenching them into a fist, getting angrier and angrier. Then I notice this little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, looking up at me, and in this innocent voice she says: “Why are you black?” At first I was shocked, not knowing what to say. In my head thinking, please girl, don’t make people notice me like this. She asked again “Why are you black?” And for the first time in my life, I wished I wasn’t black. Then I look at my hands and I realize I can’t hide this. So I lean down to her and say: “Why are you white?”

When it was first performed back to the group of culturally diverse young people involved in creating *Broken Pieces*, this speech had a profound impact. It was watched in reverent silence and celebrated with cheers on its conclusion. Later interviews revealed that it was a narrative with strong resonance for all the young people in the group, not just the Africans. In my opinion, a significant part of its impact came out of the *intimacy* of the story. Omar is a tall, lean sixteen year-old boy who tells a story about racism in character as a middle-aged African refugee called Mandela (his choice of name). Watching it, we were simultaneously aware of the fictional context, an uncle explaining to his nephew the sort of society he has come to, and the “real” context: Omar talking to his culturally diverse peer group, his own African community and the wider community about how he feels, through the metaphor of this story. This type of intimate relationship to the fictional context makes a performer vulnerable on stage, because it reveals something deeply personal about her or him. If, as an audience member, we know Omar personally -whether we know him as a high status member of our own school community or as a young person from a community with which we have little or no contact – then our relationship to the fictional story he tells will be different.

In written audience feedback we received after the performances, many young people described the plays as “real” and many older people described them as “authentic”. I believe that this sense of “authenticity” that was generated in performance was a product of “performance duality”: the simultaneous awareness of the actor as her/himself as well as their fictional character. This is how performance theorist Carlson describes this interplay between reality and illusion:

Both theatre and performance, however, continually play with the boundary between the actual and the imaginary. Objects and actions in performance are neither totally “real” nor totally “illusory,” but share aspects of each. (Carlson, 1996, p. 53)

It is my contention that this dual nature of the performance experience holds the key to its effectiveness as a mode of meaning making in community contexts. This fundamental aspect of the theatrical experience, the simultaneous awareness of the performer as themselves and as a character in a dramatised story becomes more significant when one is dealing with young people from the margins of our society telling stories of importance to them, which are embedded within their own hybrid culture. The characters and the stories created by the young people were projections of themselves, as older adolescents or adults, in situations exploring contradictions and conflicts in Australian society as *they* perceived them. The contextual meaning of the stories emerged out of the audience’s awareness of the intimate relationship between the young people and the particular story they were telling. When young people create a complex dramatised story it becomes a lens through which we can see the performers and their perceptions and values; this generates insight into our society as a whole. As the dramatised story unfolds, audience members develop a growing realisation of the relationship of the fictional story to the performers and the values that they are expressing through the metaphor of the narrative. This realisation, in turn, engages the audience in an exploration of its own values. This process is described by performance anthropologist Victor Turner (1986, p.24) as “performance reflexivity”, the process of a community, led by its most “perceptive members”, reflecting on its own core values through performance. Whether this reflection ultimately affirms or critiques the values of our society and its underlying power relations is a moot point and depends upon our interpretation of the dramatic narrative in the particular context of each performance. I see my role as a teacher-artist as helping young people to create narratives that generate the complex, layered social interactions that lead to performance reflexivity. Beyond that, the meaning of the work lies in its socio-cultural context and how individuals and communities choose to read it.

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