

# International Research Issues in Arts Education

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Presented at the UNESCO Regional Meeting of Experts on Arts Education in the Pacific  
(Nadi, Fiji, 25-29 November 2002)

An important area of interest at this meeting is the contribution that research in arts education can make to the process of integrating the arts into the core curriculum at secondary level (examples, methods and practices), as well as in vocational and technical education. In my paper, I will consider a number of issues associated with research in the field of drama/theatre and education. Included will be the question of common terminology and the risk of cultural bias in research. I will also describe, from a North American perspective, what research in our field appears to be about and what methods we tend to favour. My discussion will embrace issues relevant to all forms of Arts education while my examples will derive from the specific field of drama/theatre.

Thirty years ago, when I began to work in drama/theatre and education, very little formal research had been done in the field. I certainly wasn't aware of any nor were most of the colleagues with whom I worked closely. We simply taught drama in the way that we had learned from our own teachers and we supplemented this knowledge by creative experimentation of our own. Eventually, however, we found ourselves facing questions that could not be answered on the basis of traditional practice, alone. There were theoretical questions for which there were no ready-made answers. There were questions about whether drama/theatre was really as effective an educational tool as we had always claimed it was. As competing approaches to teaching drama came to our attention, there were also questions about what drama/theatre education really was and how we could make our work accountable to school administrators and other decision makers. And we couldn't even begin to answer any of these questions without undertaking some form of organized research.

In the intervening decades, drama/theatre educators around the world have made significant efforts to answer some of these questions in a methodical way. This advance has been matched by achievements in other art forms. And yet, we continue to face a number of difficulties as we attempt to compare the research we have done in different parts of our globe.

## **Current Issues**

One important issue facing international researchers has been raised by John Somers of the University of Exeter. Teachers of drama/theatre and education need to be able to

discuss their work with one another and researchers need to be able to compare the results of their work. However, the terminology in our field is so ideosyncratic and inconsistent that it is almost impossible to compare similar work because it is described using a variety of different terms. To give a hypothetical example, let us imagine that one researcher does a study of creative dramatics (a term used widely in the United States) and another does a study of process drama (a term that originated in Australia). How valid would a comparison of these two studies be if the dramatic learning they describe is defined by two significantly different sets of criteria? The actual dramatic activities might be similar but the inconsistent use of terminology would interfere with a comparison of the studies.

The proposal made by Professor Somers was that drama educators from several countries collaborate on the creation of a common set of terms to describe aspects of drama/theatre education so that researchers will better be able to focus and compare their work. While I agree that carefully defined terms would be of considerable assistance to researchers in our field, I am not sure that the problem of international comparisons of research will be entirely solved in this way. This is because the purpose and methods of research are, themselves, cultural constructs. Even if we could agree on a common set of terms, our ideas about how we ought to go about researching our field are rooted in our national and regional traditions of research.

I am reminded of the social construction behind research methods when I speak with a respected colleague at Queen's University about the difficulties she frequently experiences when publishing research papers in North America. Because she was educated in France, her ideas about what constitutes credible research writing are strongly influenced by the French academic tradition. This means that she feels obliged to write relatively discursive papers in which the work of many authorities is cited even when this work has only a marginal bearing on the topic of the research. North American editors have difficulty accepting a discursive approach because the North American academic tradition requires a tightly focused argument, one that is narrowly clinical rather than broadly illustrative. Clearly, the scholarly cultures of these two parts of the world are radically different and my colleague is often the victim of this difference.

The point I am making, here, is that our understanding of research is influenced by cultural imperatives that we may not even be aware of. For example, my way of thinking about research in arts education is highly influenced by current, North American ideas. I have made a point of learning as much as I can about research traditions in other countries and I am confident that we can find ways of sharing our research findings and collaborating on international projects. But, we will not be successful if, in attempting to do so, we cannot recognize our own biases. So, I caution that, even when I write about research done outside of North America, I am still speaking from a North American perspective, one that I hope has been informed by the work I have encountered internationally.

In trying to describe the kind of research that has been done in arts education, I would like to address three questions which I consider to be of central importance to arts

education researchers at the present time. In the first place, we must give our attention to the question of what we mean by research in our field. I have found that arts educators are not always clear what they are getting into when they undertake to do research. We are sometimes prone to making unsupported assumptions which can mislead us and even undermine the value of our studies.

Because the field is relatively small, we have to ask what we can learn from research conducted both within our national borders and abroad. Research conducted in our own regional settings will provide us with insights into the theory and practice of arts education in a context with which we can all identify. Research conducted in other countries will enrich those insights while, at the same time, challenging some of the principles which underlie our national educational practices.

It is also important to ask how we can hope to communicate our own research to colleagues who may be able to benefit from it, while, at the same time, gaining access to the research of our colleagues in other countries. As educators, we may be doomed to perpetually reinventing the wheel. It can be argued that discovery and rediscovery are the essence of education. However, as researchers, we try to build a body of knowledge in such a way that each new study is based on the accrued evidence of its predecessors. To begin as if no previous studies had ever been attempted would be to waste valuable resources and to risk producing undigested or inaccurate information.

### **What is Research?**

I was privileged to chair a meeting at the first world congress of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) in Porto, Portugal in July of 1992. At this meeting, an assembly of drama education researchers from several countries shared their unique points of view and began the search for a common understanding. Perhaps what impressed me most about this discussion was the great diversity in how delegates looked at research. I quickly came to realize that the understanding I had cultivated over a number of years, was thoroughly North American - by no means universal as I had assumed. In some cases, the diversity resulted primarily from variety in topics and methods of research. Other differences seemed to reflect a profound distrust of theoretical analysis when applied to practical imperatives. For example, researchers in France were preoccupied with finding ways in which theatre artists and teachers could work in partnership. This preoccupation had been brought about by a government decision to send actors and other theatre artists into schools to work with teachers in establishing theatre education programs. Although I would have classified the work as "action research", one delegate was convinced that this kind of project had to be regarded as a new, non-traditional form of research. On one hand, the work could be seen as experimental. On the other, it appeared thoroughly pragmatic, unencumbered by theoretical considerations.

In spite of this divergence of thought, the delegates were able to agree on a number of recommendations to guide the continuing work of an international working party on research. These included the following.

To avoid adopting a hierarchical position, research should be about making sense of our practices in our own contexts. We need mentors, collegial support and references.

We also need research which results in action. Some of this action will be non-verbal in nature. It is inevitable that we will use language to describe what we do - but let's not forget the non-verbal dimensions and look for ways to record these. It is important that we don't exclude some countries because they are undeveloped in presenting material. We need to find a balance - third world countries are not represented here. We need to listen to countries who are developing different approaches to us.

I.D.E.A. 1992, Minutes of Research Meeting

Clearly, the international group was at pains to adopt a view of research which was inclusive of many kinds of study and a range of reporting methods, some of which might prove to be highly unorthodox.

An instructive contrast to this non-judgmental attitude is provided by a document which was drafted by the research committee of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (A.A.T.E.) and which has served as an informal guide to the field of research in North America. Intended for application within the United States and Canada, this position paper was entitled "Standards For Research in Drama/Theatre and Education". I find it to be an extremely valuable guideline in part because, like the recommendations of the international group, it tries to be inclusive, and in part because, notwithstanding this openness, it also aims to provide a rigorous framework within which researchers can validate their work.

This paper states that the major purpose of research in drama/ theatre education is "to increase and enhance the knowledge, aesthetic and moral bases of the field." It identifies five specific categories through which this aim is accomplished. These are:

1. To develop theory
2. To develop rigorous, appropriate methodology
3. To generate knowledge which can inform artistic and educational practice
4. To link drama/theatre research to the larger context of knowledge from related fields
5. To potentially provide a basis for advocacy

A.A.T.E. 1993, excerpted p. 3-4

I think the chief difference between the AATE draft document and the recommendations of the IDEA group lies in these two interdependent but discrete goals. The purpose of research in the AATE standards paper is, primarily, to generate knowledge. A major purpose of research in the IDEA recommendations is to promote action. Of course, action based on inadequate knowledge can lead to counter-productive results, just as knowledge which offers no prospects for future action may be dismissed as trivial or irrelevant. The two perspectives, when brought together are perhaps the most effective tool at our disposal for improving our work with young people and for clearing a space

for drama at the heart of education.

The AATE standards paper attempts to be comprehensive in its description of research in our field, identifying appropriate research settings and possible areas of research including theatre production for young audiences, literary and historical texts, informal drama in education, related disciplines, related dramatic genres and special populations. It also provides criteria for exemplary research to aid in evaluating individual and collaborative research, as well as ethical standards and a list of qualities considered desirable in a researcher.

The A.A.T.E. standards give a wide scope for researchers in drama and education within the orthodox view that the purpose of research is to generate knowledge (however defined). The idea that this knowledge can lead to change may be implicit in this description (at least to the extent that practice may be informed by new knowledge), but it is certainly not explicit.

### **What Can We Learn?**

In its discussion of research methods and areas of study, the AATE document goes a long way toward indicating what we can hope to learn from research in arts education. In an earlier paper, (O'Farrell, 1993) I listed a number of broad questions which have been frequently asked by drama education researchers in North America. These included the following. "What is going on in the field?" Researchers asking this question wanted to know how many people were teaching drama, to what grade or age level, and where. They also wanted to know who was conducting research and the kind of research being undertaken. "How did drama in education develop?" This question was asked by researchers interested in historical issues. "How do specific drama methods work?" Researchers interested in this topic were committed to analyzing identifiable aspects of drama practice to clarify the nature of drama in education. "What actually goes on in educational drama?" This question motivated some researchers to look directly into the drama classroom using qualitative methods. "Does drama actually teach anything?" Researchers following this line of inquiry were committed to demonstrating conclusively that drama does what its proponents say it does, or to disproving what may be unfounded and misleading claims.

The extent of this list shows that Canadian and American researchers have begun to learn a great deal through research. They have responded to theoretical and pragmatic needs, using a variety of methods. To a large extent, their interests have been similar to those of their colleagues working in other art forms and in other countries. This means that international communication can do much to encourage and guide the work of North American researchers. The possibility also exists that North American researchers can become involved in collaborative, international studies through which the field of arts education can be enhanced on a global level.

If such a collaborative project were undertaken, it could focus on a number of issues that are of particular relevance to the focus identified for this meeting, that of integrating the arts into the core curriculum at the secondary level. To begin with, the study might ask

what kinds of arts education programs are offered regionally, nationally and internationally. The descriptive papers being presented at this meeting can make an important contribution to research of this kind. The study might also ask in what ways these programs are related to the core curriculum. What examples can be found in which the arts are deeply embedded in the core curriculum? When exemplary programs have been identified, researchers can inquire into how these programs measure their success and what factors appear to have been instrumental in their success.

I believe that collaborative research of this kind would reveal the creative diversity inherent in arts education around the world while, at the same time, identifying common elements which reflect the human essence of the arts. I am convinced that research which honours the integrity of aesthetic expression in non-Western cultures as well as in pluralistic Western society will enhance drama education and promote international and intercultural understanding. It will strengthen arts curricula. It will provide a framework within which developing countries may revitalize traditional art forms while, at the same time, adapting Western forms to suit their own needs, should they choose to do so.

### **How Can We Communicate Research?**

Researchers have already learned much through their studies and they continue to push forward the frontiers of knowledge in our field. It is essential that the fruits of their labour be communicated - not only to practitioners who have may find reasons to alter their practices on the basis of the research or who can use the results of research to bolster support for their programs but also to fellow researchers who may be able to use these results in the planning of future studies.

A number of scholarly journals are actively publishing research articles on arts education in various parts of the globe. But scholarly journals are expensive to produce and generally do not reach the practitioners who can benefit from the results. To an increasing extent, the world is turning to the electronic media to facilitate the kind of communication that will allow practitioners and researchers to locate and read one another's work. A number of organizations (including IDEA) have developed websites as electronic sources of information. A good example of how publication on the web can enhance communication about research is the ready availability of papers from a recent meeting of Experts on Arts Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. UNESCO, the sponsor of this meeting, took the initiative to place all papers from the event on its website (UNESCO 2002).

One innovative and highly appropriate tool that drama/theatre and education researchers have begun to use in reporting their qualitative, case study research is the art of the theatre. Perhaps, as theatre specialists, we might have turned to our own art form much sooner than we did. Staged readings of data from interviews have been given at conferences for a number of years. However, the performing of entire plays based on research is relatively new in our field. One outstanding example is a performance of "Maybe Someday, if I'm Famous . . . an Ethnographic Performance Text" (Saldaña 1998) that was presented by Johnny Saldaña at the second IDIERI conference in Victoria,

Canada in 1997. The research behind this performance was a case study intended as a follow-up to a significant and complex longitudinal study that followed a single group of children as they progressed from kindergarten through the sixth grade. The longitudinal research was conducted by the department of theatre at Arizona State University. A qualitative component of the larger study was a series of interviews with the children to determine their interest in theatre. Dr. Saldaña was interested in learning more about the development of one particular young man who had continued to show a special interest in theatre during his high school years, after data collection for the longitudinal study was completed. The researcher decided that it would be appropriate to present a synthesis of this case study in the form of a theatre piece. He crafted his ethnographic playscript by editing excerpts from his interviews with the student, his family and his theatre teacher together with selected passages from his own field notes. This script was then performed in Arizona and later at the Victoria institute by Saldaña and colleagues from his department. A surprise conclusion to the performance was a revelation that the actor playing “Barry” (the subject of the study) was, in fact, “Barry”, himself. Saldaña (1999) acknowledges that the process of writing an ethnodrama of this kind poses challenges not faced by a conventional playwright, but he asserts that the performance text is a powerful way to bring qualitative data to life.

### **Summary**

In addressing the question of what research means to arts educators, I have distinguished between a North American perspective in which a comprehensive description of research was grounded in an orthodox concept of research as the generation of knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, an international perspective in which alternative approaches to research and reporting methods was encouraged. In several countries, a variety of research methodologies were already being used.

I found that much can be learned through research that could benefit the field of arts education. Researchers have been active in addressing a wide range of topics. The potential for international collaboration on research was raised. Topics for collaborative research might include the kinds of arts education programs currently being offered, the ways in which the arts have become embedded in the core curriculum, the characteristics of exemplary programs and the ways in which they measure their success.

The problem of how we can effectively communicate research in the face of language barriers and a widespread lack of information about research publications, led to a discussion of the advantages offered by electronic mail and storage facilities. Of particular interest was the use of ethnographic performance texts to present case study research.

In conclusion, I would like to observe that although research in arts education is new to many of us, already significant advances have been made. As practitioners and decision-makers gradually become aware of the scope of research in arts education, researchers can derive satisfaction from the fact that they have provided a solid basis for the production of knowledge and the introduction of constructive change.

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