

EPILOGUE

Roundtable on Drama Conventions – creative practices

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This is a continuation of the Roundtable discussion which was featured in the Editorial. The participants were David Allen, Mutasem Atrash, Stig A. Eriksson, Raja' Farah, Shiu Hei Larry Ng, Cecily O'Neill, Bob Selderslaghs, Tim Taylor, and Iona Towler-Evans.

Internal coherence

IONA: I think it's important to think about: we're using the convention because of the internal coherence for the young people; we're thinking about it in terms of the context we want to build; and we're particularly thinking about: what's going to work with those young people, at that moment in time? I was working with students in Port Talbot, who were marginalised. We were exploring the life of Richard Burton. We started with a convention. We were looking at images of where he was born, and where he lived (which is where they live), and at different diary entries. I was building the context there, but for me it was very much about what Heathcote said about, you don't want them to feel stared at, particularly if they're vulnerable students. So the convention there was a protection. At first, they didn't seem bothered about anything, really; but it was very slow moving, as a way of gradually moving into it.

LARRY: I also think that conventions can be used in another dimension, to bring the personal realities of the participants to the work, or to the process. For example: Heathcote's conventions are more about building the fictional context, the dramatic reality; but there could also be some context, to bring the personal experiences of the participant to the space, first, before they enter the dramatic reality - or after the drama; for example, in Augusto Boal's work, or in the use of Applied Theatre in social contexts. In my work as a drama therapist, I think in this way, about how to bring in the personal reality, and at which point - before or after the fictional reality. For example, you can use embodiment – for example, using still image to embody the participants' experiences, related to the theme; and then, going into enactment and reflection. For some clients or participants, sometimes you can start with reflection, and ask them to think about the topic first. For people who tend to be more cognitive, you can start with this approach that is more familiar to them, and then, bit-by-bit, bring them to the dramatic reality that is more unfamiliar.

IONA: I don't quite see it in the same way, that you have to tap into their own experiences, before they get into the fiction, or the context you're planning. If I take the example of the marginalised youngsters I worked with, they were being asked to honour the life of a man in their area that they'd never met, and some hadn't heard of. And it seems very distanced from them, certainly. But I think you do have to have that lure of familiarity; and there's always a connection between the lives that you're fictionalising, and their lives. I think that, when we did that first convention, they were looking at areas they knew about, they could talk about; they lived there, so there were things they already were familiar with, but there was distance, because it was protective. And certainly, I wasn't going to be involving them directly in sharing things about their own lives. But there were so many connections with Richard Burton's life, and their's. He was a celebrity, and at first, that was an attraction for young people. But more than that, he had a very troubled life; and the participants actually talked about, "Oh, he moved schools eight times. Do you know, I've been to about ten different schools?" So they were kind of intersecting their own lives, with the topic. The drama work we did was a metaphor, if you like, for their lives, and that's a great protection; they could see their own lives through the context.

LARRY: There's a flexibility in rearranging the order, and sometimes it works one way for certain participants, and another way for others. Bringing in the personal reality doesn't mean immediately bringing your personal story. Sometimes it's just a case of asking, what do you think about oppression; even a kind of stereotype. Conventions can help us to adjust how deeply, or how distantly to frame the work, even before the fictional drama.

Frame

IONA: I think, for Heathcote, it was very important, in using the conventions, that young people should have a frame or point of view, as they do in *Mantle of the Expert*, and also the power to influence.

TIM: Whenever I'm using conventions, I'm thinking: "What's the point of view that the students are exploring the context through?" Because I think the frame makes a big difference to the way that you use the conventions.

DAVID: Heathcote did not like 'hot-seating', in which students question someone in role (about their motivations etc.). She said that she wanted young people to learn to 'discourse' with roles. In other words: it should be an encounter, in which the participants themselves have a point of view; they are not simply asking questions. There is a context, and a purpose; and they also have to consider the person's feelings, and so on. The frame and context can also help to create coherence, linking different episodes together.

RAJA': In building our dramas, we take two areas. We have the area of dramatic moments, which need the students to be framed first – to be in the event. This focuses on Heathcote's first convention, which is an active representation of the person in the classroom. She saw this could be very powerful; so this is the first area for us, for exploring the meaning, and it is the first area that we choose in building the drama. The students are highly engaged, and can go on to find the meaning of what they are doing and experiencing. So the second area that we focus on is inquiry-based learning. There, we can choose

from the Neelands/Goode and the Heathcote conventions, to produce productive learning. We are not talking only about a theoretical framework; we are trying to talk about the experience itself.

Raja' and Mutasem offered an example of a drama in which the participants were in the frame of social workers, who were trying to help a woman from India who wants to burn herself, following her husband's death, in a ritual called "sati." For a detailed account of this drama, see the appendix below.

RAJA': We started to think: what is sati? The students researched it; then, they started to think: "Why should she obey this ritual custom?" Then, they went to the dramatic moment of meeting the woman, with an understanding of why it is important for her to be helped, why it was important to explain to her that she doesn't need to listen to all these voices, and she has her own life. So they had meaning and purpose for the task that they have as social workers. They were highly engaged, and wanted honestly to save her, because they felt that it is not what she believed, but she is following what the society made her believe in; and she's not made only of her own thoughts. They felt that, as social workers, they need to awaken her, and tell her that this is her life, and she needs to live, not die after her husband's death. And this high agency that they had in that moment, made them responsible to rescue her. And when they really succeeded, they felt really happy, and started clapping, and felt: this is an achievement that we did, and now we can go for further. We believe that if students don't live this dramatic moment, the other conventions which are for learning and inquiry, and finding out about the world that they live in, would not be powerful. As Mustasem says: their thinking would be cold, and there would not be any meaning in what they're doing next. Because in the next stages of the Mantle of the Expert, they were helping artists who wanted to make a manga comic, to explain the story through pictures and text. They made still images, to tell the story of the woman, and represent it in another way – to help the artists to make the manga comic. All these stages of her life were represented through still images: what happened to her when she was a child, then older, and when she became a widow. As the students made the images, they continued to listen to her voices and her memories, and to look at photos from her album. They represented her story, using their own bodies; and they learned how to make the manga comic. They made a small booklet with all the events that happened, and all the things that she said after she got out of the women's shelter and made her own life.

Frame distance

TIM: One of the things that that came up very strongly for me from this example, was the way that the frame distance was being changed. So there were moments when, as social workers, they were in direct contact with this poor woman who was going through this terrible trauma; but then, they were thinking more like artists, who were recording the events of her life, and making it something that others could learn from.

DAVID: Yes, it is not simply a question of frame, but the position in relation to the event. Heathcote called this 'frame distance'. She defined nine different positions, including: participant, guide, agent, authority, researcher, recorder, critic, artist, etc. They are all different ways of thinking about an event. So in a drama, the frame might remain the same, but the position that the participants take to the event can change – as this example shows.

Conventions and performance

DAVID: I would like to talk about conventions and performance work. We tend to talk as if there is a separation between process or participatory work, and performance work; but I think they slide into each other, or can do. Within Mantle of the Expert, for example, you can be doing work that is more demonstration-based. In the Archive, I found a chart that Heathcote did, called the “Four Levels of Drama Work”. On the fourth level, it's very much about working for performance, or rather, working to a level where the young people themselves have control over the conventions. They have an understanding of the conventions, and can use them themselves, in exploring meaning, and sharing meaning. I know that the Neelands/Goode conventions have also been used as steps towards creating a theatre performance.

BOB: My work focuses not only on drama in education, but also education in drama. I work towards non-scripted theatre performances with children between the ages of 6 and 12 years old, using Mantle of the Expert in different ways. I think there are lots of possibilities to work with the conventions also in a performance-oriented way. There is a model I designed of the “four worlds” of Mantle of the Expert. I call it “MoE 2.0,” where you don't only have the two familiar worlds of in-and-out of the fiction - the imaginary world, and the real world of the classroom. You have these two worlds, when you're working in a more process-oriented way; and two worlds, also, when the work is more product-oriented. I think that the conventions can be used in these four worlds. For example, in the more product-oriented world, out of the fiction, there are the actors, the performers, who are being educated in theatre and drama, and who learn how to use their voice, and also how to use the conventions - what the conventions are, and how can we use them. For the facilitator, it's really focused on being able to co-create. and not work just as a director who decides things for the performers or the participants; but making it possible for them to take decisions also on the performance they want to do. They need to know what the conventions are, and how you can apply them within performance work. That's just one “world”; and I think you can use the conventions in these different worlds, and they all need their attention. That's where the responsibility of the teaching artist comes in, where you don't approach the conventions just as a strategy, but within these four worlds; and then, I think, the understanding of what the conventions are will be much deeper.

IONA: I have been working with Brian Edmiston, with a class of children in Wales. We've been exploring the history of a mountain, Mynydd Dinas, where, apparently, the Welsh defeated the Normans. It is a little told story, and we're hoping it will change some of the history lessons in schools in Wales, because we don't see that kind of angle on it. They were in the frame of the Welsh troops in the mountains. We used a number of conventions: teacher narration; tableaux; teacher-in-role; a soundscape of the night on the mountain, when they thought the Normans might attack, and so on. We also used ‘Chamber Theatre’. This is a method that Heathcote developed, which she took from Robert Breen. It involves taking a literary text, and enacting or demonstrating the actions described. In our case, we took a moment when one of the defeated Normans was stoned by the Welsh. It is an example of how you can include an element of ‘performance’, in an integral way, as part of the process that you've been developing. It becomes a very meaningful – I suppose you'd call it a performance; it is

certainly a sharing for someone to look at. But it stems from everything they've been exploring. They've been the Welsh troops in the mountains, having to decide what should they do, faced with attack by the Normans: should they hide, should they surrender? "Surrender – never!", they said.

Following the Roundtable, Raja' and Mutasem sent us the following, more detailed account of the "sati" drama.

Appendix: The "sati" drama

Raja' Farah and Mutasem Atrash

In discussing conventions, we were not as concerned with the various approaches and orientations such as distancing, coexistence, or juxtaposition, as we were with how to employ them in practice and assist teachers in using them in understandable and straightforward ways. This required researching and working to understand the conventions and the best way to use them.

The challenge was how to use them within a structural framework rather than independently and fragmented. Therefore, we tried to employ some of the Neelands/Goode strategies outside and on the edges of drama to slow down time, build context and roles, and frame participants as if we were working in interconnected rings in a process of constructing and preparing for a dramatic moment.

Heathcote's conventions also slow down time, but additionally, they give students the opportunity to explore from a specific frame point of view in exploratory moments and experiment with options from within the event as if they were moving from outside to inside the event. We always believed that, as Tim pointed to¹, Enactive Representations conventions were the strongest for achieving our goals in creating meaning and were the most attractive to students. There, the students are brought into contact with a role who interacts naturally as if events are happening now, in real time but within a fictional situation collaboratively created by the teacher and students who can represent people within that fiction.

However, during practice, we found that using strategies or conventions is not what engages students and makes them reflective in the experience as much as how we employ these conventions or strategies and for what purposes. This is always related to the frame distance we think about. What concerned us was how we could benefit from conventions and related approaches to build a strong experience with moments of coexistence, exploration, and reflection for understanding and meaning-making, while also enhancing strong student engagement so that their feelings and thoughts are not cold in the role towards the subject they are exploring later.

We based the construction of experiences on an approach we tried to put into two parts or stages of application. In the first part of the experience, we place students at a close frame distance to the event to provide stronger opportunities for exploration and reflection. We then build on this in the second part of the experience with our educational focus, where students are at a further frame distance from the

¹ This is mentioned in section one in *'The conventions of dramatic action: a guide'* by Tim Taylor, illustrated by Jim Kavanagh

event to provide opportunities for inquiry and learning, as seen in the "sati" drama experience. In the first part of the experience, during the dramatic focus, the students in the role struggled to confront society and its traditions, which was represented in the dramatic moment of saving the woman. In the second part of the experience, the students in the role struggled to confront the traditional education system in learning English, producing a story in a language not their own through many sessions of discussion, review, evaluation, and production, in a high level of engagement, understanding, energy, and passion. This was all related to the high level of immersion at a close frame distance to the event in the dramatic moment.

In building our dramas, we take two areas. We have the area of dramatic moments, which need the students to be framed first – to be in the event. This focuses on Heathcote's first convention, which is **an active** representation of the person in the classroom. She saw this could be very powerful; so this is the first area for us, for exploring the meaning, and it is the first area that we choose in building the drama. The students are highly engaged, and can go on to find the meaning of what they are doing and experiencing. We don't want the students in this level to be immersed totally in the event because we want them to reflect on it; however, we don't want them to be like observers from a distance. Therefore, we try to "be" in the role in 'Metaxis'. The 'Metaxis' is the concept that Bolton represented as 'Davis' pointed to²; the students need to "be" in two worlds at the same strong moment where they "their selves" are present as participants reflecting on what's happening.

The second area that we focus on is inquiry-based learning. There, we can choose from the Neelands/Goode and the Heathcote conventions, to produce productive learning. We are not talking only about a theoretical framework; we are trying to talk about the experience itself – and we have an example here.



Here you can see the first convention, which is **an active** representation: the teacher (Raja') is in role, the students are participants. They can influence, they can practise, they can understand what's going on.

They want to help a widow from India who wants to burn herself, with her husband. in a ritual called "sati." They have been built into the frame or point of view as social workers who are responsible to rescue her, because she believes in 'sati', and she believes that this is her destiny: she needs to burn herself with her husband, because this is the custom of the village. But why would she do that?

² 'Imagining the real: Towards a new theory of drama in education' by David Davis, 2014

We started to think: what is 'sati'? They researched it; then, they started to think: "Why should she obey this ritual custom?" The students explored this first through other conventions, and they were prepared through these conventions, to be in this dramatic moment.

They had to consider: "What is this woman thinking?" They made a role-on-the-wall, to try to understand her.

They used this role on the wall, to write down her thoughts and feelings, and also the voices of the society that she heard. Mutasem was there, in this experiment with the students; and he felt that the woman, the widow that was represented in the role on the wall, was formed by the society's sayings, the signs and



words that had been said to her from being a child, to being a woman, and then becoming a widow, and starting to think: "This is my destiny, to burn myself".

Then, they went to the dramatic moment of meeting the woman, with this understanding of why it is important for her to be helped, why it was important to explain to her that she doesn't need to listen to all these voices, and she has her own life. So they had meaning and purpose for the task that they have as social workers.

At the dramatic moment when the workers go to meet the woman, there was another role present, which was the role of the woman's father. We wanted, through the presence of the father's role, to represent and evoke the perspective of society and its authority. The presence of the father means the presence of society with its authority and ideologies that formed that woman. We had two options: either to put an empty chair to represent the presence of the father as a 'Symbolic Representations' level; or as we emphasized above, to make the role present on 'Enactive Representations'. Raja was in the role of the woman and Mutasem was in the role of the father. At the beginning of the interview, the father appears strict towards the care workers, accusing them of rebelling against the customs and traditions



of society and that they are against the interests of his daughter. He tries to interrupt them and prevent the woman from speaking. Raja appears in the role with the body language of a helpless woman subordinate to the father. Through gestures, she shows that she cannot object. Whenever the social workers asked her a question, she hesitates and looks towards

the father. This increased the tension in the dramatic moment and raised the challenge for the students in the role as social workers trying to save that woman. The task seemed difficult.

The agreement during the planning was that at some point, before the workers felt hopeless, the father would begin to ease his authority and then withdraw. While he was standing up to withdraw, he would say to the workers: "Here she is in front of you, she is free and the decision is up to her". His body language and gestures made it seem as if he was not being honest or that there was a threatening tone in his voice and he would leave. At that moment when the father left, it was a distinct moment of liberation. The workers moved from their seats towards the woman and sat in front of her on the floor and gathered around her in a spontaneous reaction and held her hand and continued with her.



They were highly engaged, and wanted honestly to save her, because they felt that it is not what she believed, but she is following what the society made her believe in; and she's not made only of her own thoughts. They felt that, as social workers, they need to awaken her, and tell her that this is her life, and she needs to live, not die after her husband's death. And this high agency that they had in that moment, made them responsible to rescue her. The agreement during the planning was also that the woman would make the task difficult for them and speak with the voice of the society that shaped her perspective, but in the end she would sometimes start to be silent and respond to them and then agree to their request. That moment when she agreed to their suggestion was another moment of liberation. And when they really succeeded, they felt really happy, and started clapping, and felt: this is an achievement that we did, and now we can go for further.



We believe that if students don't live this dramatic moment, the other conventions which are for learning and inquiry, and finding out about the world that they live in, would not be powerful. As Mustasem says: their thinking would be cold, and there would not be any meaning in what they're doing next. Because

in the next stages of the Mantle of the Expert, they were helping artists who wanted to make a manga comic, to explain the story through pictures and text.

Here, the students are using conventions: they are making still images, to tell the story of the woman, and represent it in another way – to help the artists to make the manga comic. All these stages of her life were represented through still images: what happened to her when she was a child, then older, and when she became a widow. As the students made the images, they continued to listen to her voices and her memories, and to look at photos from her album. They represented her story, using their own bodies; and they learned how to make the manga comic. They made a small booklet with all the events that happened, and all the things that she said after she got out of the women's shelter and made her own life.



We would like to point out that this experience from Palestine is within the framework of the A.M Qattan Foundation program and the photos are from a published experience of teacher Raja' in the *'Experiences Guide for Palestinian Teachers'* issued by the Qattan Foundation.