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Taking risks and being creative: Assessment in Drama and Theatre

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Introduction

In this article we discuss the concept of creativity and its assessment. Creativity is critical to many subjects in secondary education, including Drama and Theatre, but is not easy to assess. Whilst there is a need for reliable assessments at General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level (A level), the validity and integrity of what is taught are also essential. We describe a small-scale study in which four course leaders at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were interviewed about Drama at undergraduate level. The aims of this study were to gain an insight into undergraduate assessment practices, and to identify any lessons to be learned and applied at A level.

Creativity as a concept

A varied range of creative subjects are on offer at GCSE and A level, and whilst the term 'creativity' is broadly understood and widely used in education, its precise definition has divided opinion for many years. In 1969, Barron defined creativity as "the ability to bring something new into existence" (as cited in Gallagher, 2007, p.1230). However, Bruner (1979) put forward the notion that creativity "confirms something that we already knew subconsciously" (as cited in Gallagher, 2007, p.1230). Gallagher (2007) discusses the concept of creativity in the context of Drama education, and after reviewing the literature in detail, still comes up short when trying to find an applicable definition, or in finding suitable studies that attempt to define creativity in Drama.

Politically, creativity gained importance during the rise of 'New Labour', when the economic benefits of creativity were highlighted (Buckingham & Jones, 2001) and the term 'democratic creativity' was introduced. This term was used by the National Advisory Committee on Creativity and Cultural Education (NACCCE) in its report *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* which argued that creative and cultural education was the key to unlocking "Britain's economic prosperity and social cohesion." (NACCCE, 1999, p.5). The report defined creativity as "imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both

original and of value" (NACCCE, 1999, p.30). Within this definition, the NACCCE clarifies that creativity relates to four characteristics: *imagination*; *purpose*; *originality*; and *value*. *Imagination* refers to generating new ideas or to approaching ideas from a new perspective. *Purpose* refers to the creative process an individual undertakes when developing a product. The third characteristic, *originality*, is relative and refers to ideas or thoughts that are original compared to an individual's ideas, a group's ideas, or historic ideas. Lastly, *value* refers to the judgement of the work in relation to the purpose. It can refer to self or critical evaluation of the finished art form, and can be individual or shared. The NACCCE definition of creativity coheres more with Barron's definition than with Bruner's, focusing on the originality of ideas and their subsequent value.

Regardless of differences in definitions, the common themes revolve around new ideas or remodelled ideas that have value and purpose and are explored through a clear creative process (Beghetto, 2005). However due to its multi-faceted nature, creativity does not seem to be an easy skill to teach, let alone assess. Unlike the ability to add or subtract numbers, creativity cannot be taught explicitly, and is also difficult to measure systematically. The NACCCE draws on research by Woods (1995) to suggest that teachers can encourage creativity by ensuring autonomy and respect on both sides of the student-teacher relationship, authenticity in initiatives and responses, and fulfilment. Moreover, an element of trust is necessary, as the aims of so-called 'teaching for creativity' are to encourage self-confidence, independence of mind, and the capacity to think for oneself (Woods, 1995).

The teacher-student relationship is particularly important as it can foster creative thinking in students, enabling them to take risks and develop new and original ideas. The research literature indicates that positive perceptions of teacher support increase individuals' risk-taking in, and motivation towards, many subjects, including those that are not widely viewed as creative, such as Mathematics and the Sciences (Alonso-Tapia & Pardo, 2006; Kalchman & Koedinger, 2005; Nickerson, 1999). Those teachers who do not welcome students' ideas discourage students from taking risks and being creative in their classrooms (Kennedy, 2005). Furthermore, risk-taking and consequent creative

thinking also seem to be fostered by “positive competence-related feedback” (Beghetto, 2009, p.214). Taken with the definitions of creativity, this evidence suggests that formative assessment is integral to assessing creative subjects, as there is a need for continuous feedback during the process of creative production.

Assessing creativity

The concept of creativity focuses on a process leading to a unique outcome. Arguably, it therefore lends itself more to assessment for formative purposes than to assessment for summative purposes, and formative assessment is usually conducted internally rather than externally. Although the general criticisms of internal assessment such as its proneness to bias are well-rehearsed, there are still some important advocates in the research literature. For example, Beghetto (2005) explored the effects of assessment type on students’ creativity in the context of American classroom assessment. He found that (internal) formative assessment was the best method of fostering both creativity per se, and the risk-taking that is associated with creativity.

In her review of assessment in Drama, Schonmann (2007) discusses the conceptualisation of Drama in the curriculum, and proposes two appropriate approaches to its assessment: a directive approach; and a dialectical approach. The directive approach evaluates individual achievements against predetermined criteria. The criteria are developed in relation to specific aims set for a successful performance. The dialectical approach aims to create a profile of a student’s progress to becoming a professional artist and their knowledge and skills. This approach uses formative feedback and a set of introspective questions on the students’ progress. Although Schonmann states that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, she feels that they can appropriately reflect students’ achievements based on their own journeys.

An important example of the use of large-scale external assessment in Drama and Theatre can be found by looking at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the USA, which is a nationally representative and continual assessment of American students’ knowledge and skills in various subject areas. In 1997 the NAEP conducted a large-scale assessment of students’ achievements in the Arts, and in particular Theatre. Its assessment framework for Theatre identified two main themes: content; and process. Content referred to “knowledge and understanding of theatre and perceptual, technical, expressive, and intellectual/reflective skills” (Vanneman, 1998, p.2). Process skills, on the other hand, included “creating/performing and responding” (Vanneman, 1998, p.2). The NAEP used both paper-and-pencil and performance tasks, which were developed by the Educational Testing Service under the guidance of a committee of theatre education experts. The paper-and-pencil task assessed students’ responses to Theatre and justifications for a variety of creative decisions. Students were exposed to Theatre through multiple media, such as video clips, photographs and paper excerpts, and responses were predominantly assessed through short and extended response questions. One question, for example, asked students to choose between an abstract or realistic set for a play they had been given, and to justify their choice.

The paper-and-pencil task appears to assess their knowledge and understanding of the technical aspects of Theatre and encourages reflection and evaluation. On the other hand, the performance task required students to work together in small groups to develop a short performance which was then videoed for assessment. Students were

further encouraged to comment on their work, their achievements and their success. Due to the collaborative nature of the task, students’ scores comprised of an individual score and a group score.

The NAEP has a longstanding reputation for using external assessment to determine national educational progress, and it is perhaps telling that, in order to effectively assess creative aptitude in Theatre, a paper-and-pencil task was not sufficient. Whilst it acknowledges that “creating and administering a national performance assessment was very challenging.” (p.6), the assessment was developed by experienced professional and subject experts, and provides a useful, if somewhat rare example of how external assessment can be used to assess creativity in Theatre.

The assessment of Drama in England

England is currently in the midst of a series of major reforms to its general qualifications. Significant changes are being made to both GCSEs and A levels in terms of the content that students study, and how it is assessed. The Government has stated that the purpose of taking A levels is primarily for entry to university, and that changes are needed to ensure that students are better prepared for their undergraduate courses. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicates that in 2011/12, 3,705 students were enrolled to study Drama at university – either as a single or joint degree. Among those, 2,625 students were enrolled to study Drama only¹. 58.2 per cent of them had an A level in Drama and Theatre Studies and 2.2 per cent had an AS level only. Among the students with no A level in Drama and Theatre Studies, the most popular A level choices were: Performance Studies, English Literature and Media/Film/TV Studies². Considering the high percentage of students pursuing Drama at university who have an A level in Drama, ensuring that the subject facilitates development at HE is clearly of great importance.

Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) is developing a new A level in Drama and Theatre to meet the new national criteria. It will be taught in schools and colleges from September 2016 onwards (OCR, 2015). The new A level will be fully linear; assessment of a student’s knowledge and understanding of the whole course will take place at the end of two years of study. To support this development work, we conducted a small-scale study to ascertain the types of assessment that are used in Drama in HEIs and whether these practices are relevant to A level. The aim of the study was to address three main questions:

1. What assessment practices are used by HEIs in England?
2. Are written examinations used by HEIs, and what are their views on them?
3. What are HEIs’ views on the skills that students with A levels possess?

Method

We contacted lecturers who teach Drama and Performance Arts at four highly reputable HEIs in England. Four course leaders for undergraduate Drama courses consented to be interviewed. Three of the four HEIs were

1. Numbers of students were rounded to the nearest multiple of 5, following HESA’s rounding strategy.

2. Source: HESA Student Record 2011/12. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited 2012. HESA cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties.

self-described as schools that focussed on training students to become professional actors. The fourth HEI was more traditional and taught Drama in a more academic, rather than a vocational sense.

The interview schedule was semi-structured (see Appendix A). It comprised several questions addressing assessment practices within the HEI, including moderation, group performance and individual marks. We also asked for participants' views on external assessment; specifically, written examinations and their appropriateness in Drama. Lastly, we asked participants to comment on the skills acquired by students at A level and their relevance to undergraduate study. All questions were designed to elicit detailed responses and maximise discussion. We conducted the interviews face-to-face or by telephone. All four interviews lasted approximately an hour.

Analysis

The entire interview data generated was transcribed. We coded the transcripts into themes and analysed them qualitatively using MAXQDA (a software package for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis). The three main themes were aligned with the three research questions and the structure of the interview schedule:

1. assessment at undergraduate level;
2. written examinations; and
3. skills acquired during secondary education.

Subcodes within the first theme covered procedures for group performance assessment and moderation procedures, as well as participants' views on quantifying performance. Subcodes within the second theme covered skills valued by participants that could be assessed by a written examination, and participants' views on reflective writing, grades from written examinations, and learning specific texts. Subcodes within the third theme related to participants' opinions on examinations and the secondary education system, and skills that are detrimental to the further study of Drama.

Results

Assessment at undergraduate level

Group examinations were used regularly in the HEIs of the four lecturers interviewed, and usually individual students were marked on their own performance within the group. Generally, the 'marks' provided were descriptive and used as a basis for formative feedback. Unanimously, the lecturers felt that the size of the role did not make a difference to the mark, and stated that they chose particular performances so that no student would simply have one line in the whole production. The lecturers commented:

We mark every single assessment individually even though our students are often doing group performance work... We don't have any assessments where we say, "This is a group mark come what may so you will all get X." They're all individually marked against the criteria.

What an actor is able to reveal will be as much revealed in a smaller role as it will in a bigger role.

Assessment of performances at all HEIs in the study entailed second and usually third markers. There were multiple stages in the marking

process, including markers' meetings and internal discussions. External examiners were also used to moderate performances.

I would then check [the marks] as a first point for quality as course group leader and then they all have to get sent to our external examiners.

We have two people present at all of [the performance] assessments...and then we moderate and mark based on those things... If we can't come up with an agreed mark then it goes to the head of the department for mediation as it were and final agreement. If that doesn't work it would very unusually go to the external examiner for final arbitration.

There will always be a minimum of two markers for any assessment... but often there will also be a third moderator there... We often have whole panels of markers so it's not uncommon to have five people marking an assessment all at the same time and then having a marks meeting afterwards.

[The] External examiner is a professional director who has contacts with the school and who sees as many of our public performances as possible.

The lecturers felt that it was not necessarily possible to put a quantifiable mark on a creative performance, and in some cases they thought grades were irrelevant. They also felt that marks would foster competition and remove focus from students' ability to develop creativity and originality. Success and failure were perceived in terms of employment and success in students' careers, as opposed to their mark for an assessment.

What is relevant [is] whether they manage to take on board enough of what we can teach to give themselves a chance outside. And I'm not going to put ...a C- against something like that.

If students start getting obsessed by what marks they are getting, then it creates competition... Rather than being open to take risks and develop, students start using the marks as an indicator of their progress.

Essentially our students don't fail. That's not because we connive to pass them... failure is for them, if it's failure, several years down the line when they find nobody will employ them.

Written examinations

The lecturers valued some skills that could be tested through a written assessment. The main skill they looked for in students was research and evaluative skills. They felt that these skills could be taught better at A level, and should require students to be more original and creative. However, the lecturers felt that a prescribed answer and a sense of correctness or incorrectness often removed students' abilities to take risks and generate individual thought.

When we need to assess their evaluative and analytical understanding of work ... we really expect them to be drawing on and synthesizing research.

[Written assessment] needs to test knowledge, understanding, their ability to critique their findings and those of others. It needs to demonstrate independent research and thinking... draw on analysis and evaluation... apply critical thinking to examples.

They devise a research question, they do a load of research, they have to do a literature review, critique their research, do a bibliography... identify and select appropriate research sources... engage critically with sources... construct a persuasive argument ... write in coherent prose with accurate referencing.

The lecturers were not enthusiastic about students producing reflective writing under examination conditions as they felt the time and pressure of such a setting is not conducive to reflection. They also felt that reflective writing is a self-development tool and should not be marked.

We don't reflect under pressure.

It's a reflective thing. So it's really for their own purposes [so that] as they are doing their work. They work very intensively. It's very demanding work, so we want them to have an opportunity to think as they go along about the stuff they are doing and how it's helping them or how it feels not to be helping them, potentially – the work that they really respond to, the work that they don't.

The lecturers felt that grades at A level were not a deciding factor in accepting students onto their courses. They were more interested in the abilities demonstrated by students in the audition process.

Any student coming here will not be at an advantage because they have done well in a written exam.

*So if we get a student coming in with three A*s, irrespective of what subjects they're in, it does say something about that student's academic potential for learning... that they can probably work independently, revise, work well under pressure, shape their thoughts, recollect information... However we would equally value someone with no A level grades who had a very different experience of education who could still demonstrate potential in the Arts.*

Similarly, the lecturers felt that students were not at an advantage for having learnt particular texts. Whilst they valued the extra information and knowledge that texts can bring, they were more interested in the students' ability in performance as witnessed in the audition process.

It would be really limiting if we said, "You can only come if you've read the six greatest Shakespeare plays and you know how to write about Hamlet," because immediately you will say, "All these people out here are off our radar. We're not interested in them. So all those people who haven't ever had the opportunities, let's keep it like that and make sure they don't get them and these people here who have had a very specific kind of relationship with the education system, we'll take them."

Skills acquired during secondary education

The lecturers were concerned about the reforms to A level because they felt they emphasised rote learning and discouraged creativity and risk-taking. Three out of four of the lecturers felt that they had to 'un-do' some of the learning taught in schools to encourage students to think innovatively and beyond 'right and wrong answers'.

The other thing that's very problematic with written assessments is they're predisposed to a right or a wrong answer, and that's reflected in the marking schemes that I see used for A level and GCSE... We spend a lot of time in the first year of university undoing an approach to learning that's been embedded in students through their GCSE and A level experience.

... because of an over-examination of children from a young age [...] children and young people think that education is about the

regurgitation of knowledge and they don't understand how to learn; they understand how to be taught... and what we need is to encourage our students to learn and to trust that they can learn and to not depend so much on us to be taught.

Furthermore, the lecturers felt that putting a student under examination conditions would result in reduced motivation and interest in the subject and the work studied. They felt that the subject of Drama allowed students to escape from the routine of traditional academic subjects and express themselves; where in other subjects they may not have had the opportunity to do so.

I think as soon as you say, "And now you have to write about love and revenge in Romeo and Juliet for 500 words at 9am on a Thursday morning", then you deaden that student's relationship with the work...It will stop them going anywhere near Drama because Drama is their opportunity to actually be expressive and for many students... it's the only thing that has got them through school... So I think if you then say, "Well, actually, now it's going to be the same as all the other subjects", then it's a serious misunderstanding of what Drama as a subject is...

Lastly, as a subject, lecturers felt that Drama was more vocational than academic, as many HEIs trained their students to be professional actors.

We're not in education. We're in training

What we are doing is introducing them to the industry... They have all had an opportunity to be seen by agents and casting directors in roles which sufficiently reveal their skills and aptitudes and castability.

Discussion

The assessment of creative subjects such as Drama is currently under scrutiny, with concerns being raised about internal assessment being prone to bias. Creativity as a concept in itself is defined in multiple ways, but common themes from definitions emphasise the artistic journey or process as well as the original product created at the end. The assessment of creativity should therefore assess both the process and the output, which in the case of Drama and Theatre, usually refers to a live performance.

The aims of this small-scale study were to gain an insight into the assessment practices used in undergraduate Drama courses at HEIs in England, and to identify any lessons to be learned and applied to the study of Drama and Theatre at A level. The four interviews provide a rare insight into the assessment of undergraduate Drama at HEIs in England. They also reveal that the views and experiences of the four lecturers overlapped extensively. Whilst it is difficult to generalise from such a small study, the findings hint at some likely generalities which could potentially be confirmed with further research.

The interview data suggests that stringent procedures are in place within HEIs to ensure that Drama students are graded fairly on their performance. Lecturers at all four institutions stated that they had two or three markers for all performances, plus external examiners to further moderate the marks given. Although group performances are common, marks are allocated individually and not for a group as a whole. Care is also taken to ensure students are not given minor roles. However, the lecturers at the three institutions that emphasised vocational training explained that marks were not treated with the same value as they are at

A level or in secondary education in general. Instead, they are provided as a means of feedback, and students are not told their marks unless they specifically request them. The lecturers felt that adding quantifiable values to students' performances would create unnecessary competition and not be reflective of their creative processes, which have peaks and troughs and cannot be measured at a single fixed moment in time.

This emphasis on the creative process and regular feedback reflects the NACCEE definition of creativity and how it should be taught.

When discussing written assessment, the four lecturers unanimously felt that a traditional examination setting was not 'fit-for-purpose' for the study of Drama. They felt that students cannot reflect under pressure and felt again that marks should be awarded not just on the final product but on the student's journey there. Even the course leader from the more academic HEI stated that there were plans to remove reflective writing from the Drama undergraduate course as the teaching staff found it not to be beneficial to the students and increasingly difficult to mark. This finding raises concerns over the current external written examinations of Drama offered by some awarding organisations; If true reflection cannot occur under timed conditions, then arguably this should not be attempted in A level Drama and Theatre. Perhaps an amendment to the examination paper that matches the style of the NAEP assessment would be more suitable, as it would require students to apply their technical knowledge of Drama and Theatre to a particular text or stimulus provided, rather than to reflect on their own or a professional performance.

Whilst reflective writing was not favoured in written examinations, the lecturers felt that students needed to develop their evaluative and research skills at school, as this is often something they were lacking when they started university. Furthermore, the HEIs in this study all used an audition process to shortlist students accepted onto a course. Therefore, they did not put as much value on the grades achieved through external examinations in Drama or other subjects, as other university departments might. The lecturers' main focus was on the applicants' demonstrated abilities on audition day, and whilst high grades in Science, Technology, and Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) subjects were indicative of their intellectual ability, they were not an indicator of their creative ability. As the institutions that the lecturers represented were highly inclusive, they did not feel students needed to learn particular texts prior to coming to university. They were more concerned with a student's ability to evaluate, critique and research a topic or text, and ensuring that they take risks to explore the subject. Furthermore, the lecturers felt that aligning Drama to other subjects in terms of assessment would reduce uptake and interest towards the subject for many students. The lecturers felt that often students of Drama found refuge in the subject due to its expressive and artistic nature, and that adding a traditional external examination to the subject would 'deaden' that relationship.

The lecturers also felt that current teaching styles at A level are too prescriptive and focus students on attaining the highest grades. As a result, students do not learn how to take risks, learn from mistakes and explore topics. Instead, they are taught to follow a set procedure, such as an essay format or argument, which hinders their creative development. This notion of risk-taking and creativity is echoed in the literature, and risk-taking has even been shown to decrease as students' progress further in education (Beghetto, 2009). This reduction in risk-taking could be due to the education system placing higher importance on attainment and creating a culture where there is a minimum tolerance for errors. As students strive for 'success' in these terms, taking risks and chances is less important as it may not secure them the best mark. This behaviour can often limit

creativity in individuals and reduces the opportunity for independent thinking. The lecturers in this study felt that they had to undo this thinking in the first year of students' undergraduate courses, in order to enable students to perform to their best creative potential.

Appendix A: Assessing creativity: Higher Education interview schedule

Assessment at undergraduate level

- What types of assessments do you use at undergraduate level (performance, group, written, journal) and when (end-of-term, course, year)?
- Do you think that assessments are of equal difficulty/standards year-on-year?
- How do you ensure that assessments are of equal difficulty/standards year-on-year?
- How do you assess group performances? How are these marked?
- How are group performances moderated (such as between examiners)?

Written examinations

- Do you use written assessment? What kind? Summative/Formative?
- If you use written assessment, how much emphasis or weighting is put on written assessment?
- If you use written assessment, how do you ensure the written examinations are of equal difficulty across years?
- What skills in Drama (if any) do you think are appropriate to test with a written examination?
- What skills aren't suitable for written assessment?

Skills acquired during secondary education

- Would you value A level grades based on performance in a written examination?
- What would a mark on a written exam at A level tell you about a prospective student?
- What are the basic requirements or skills new undergraduates need to meet/have?
- Is it important for students to have studied a specific text(s)/practitioner(s)/time period(s)?

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All in good time: Influences on team leaders' communication choices when giving feedback to examiners

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Introduction

In the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) awarding body, senior examiners with responsibility for monitoring the marking performance of other examiners in a marking team are called team leaders. Prior to examiners being cleared to mark examination scripts, they undergo a standardisation process. This involves the most senior examiners aligning all other examiners to their decisions around how to apply a mark scheme. At the end of this standardisation process the team leaders verify that each examiner can apply the mark scheme appropriately.

Throughout standardisation and subsequent live marking some team leaders and examiners work remotely from each other in a digital marking environment. This environment supports a number of important marking quality assurance functions: Team leaders can see examiners' real time scripts and mark submissions; they can also easily compare examiners' marks with preordained definitive marks on special monitoring scripts to check marking accuracy. The digital marking system also allows team leaders to give examiners feedback on their marking.

My previous research has looked at some of the common and diverging characteristics of team leader feedback (Johnson & Black, 2012a; Johnson & Black, 2012b). In this article I take a closer look at some of the data from those studies to explore why team leaders choose different communication modes when giving feedback to examiners. I argue that these choices relate to the capacities of different modes to balance the needs of communication flow and to support the alignment of team leader intended meaning and examiner interpretation of feedback messages. As part of that discussion, I consider how these choices relate to communication theories, media richness, and the synchronous and asynchronous qualities of communication modes.

Why do team leaders give feedback to examiners?

The digital marking system that is used by OCR examiners supports the awarding body's marking quality assurance arrangements in a number of important ways. The ability to simultaneously distribute digitally scanned versions of common examination scripts across different examiners allows examiners' marks to be compared with each other in ways that were not practical prior to the introduction of the digital marking system. The use of common scripts supports the examiner standardisation training process by allowing common rationales to be shared with examiners on carefully chosen exemplar scripts. The system also allows team leaders (senior examiners who have the responsibility to monitor the marking performance of other examiners in their marking team) to oversee the quality of examiners' live marking in real time.

Another benefit of the digital marking system is that team leaders can engage more frequently with examiners in their marking team by giving them feedback on their recently completed marking. These benefits are reflected in an Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) report on marking which states:

As well as its logistical benefits, on-screen marking should improve marking reliability by enabling more frequent and flexible monitoring of examiners by exam boards. Senior examiners review their team's marking almost in real time, ensuring that inconsistent or inaccurate marking is detected early

(Ofqual, 2013, p.12)

Previous research has started to elicit some information about team leader feedback practices (Johnson, 2015; Johnson, 2014; Johnson &