

# Theatre in Education and Participation

## Introduction

In this paper, we begin by offering a definition of TiE which places audience participation at the centre of the process. However, we also wish to acknowledge the rich potential of learning offered through other forms of theatre engagement, not covered in this paper. We identify three concepts which we believe are central to participation which is both immersive and critically reflective, within the here and now of fiction and reality: critical spectatorship; protection; the adoption of role by audience participants.

TiE offers radical alternatives for children, artists and teachers. It is still the case that *TiE at its best has shown, in perhaps the most complete way yet, that theatre and learning need not be incompatible bedfellows* (Jackson, 1993).

## Theatre in Education

TiE is a powerful hybrid of theatre and education devised for a particular age group, in pursuit of both aesthetic and learning objectives. It is marked by the participation of children, who are asked to adopt fictional roles within a collaborative process in which the actor-teachers have expertise in presentation, facilitation and, crucially, relevant pedagogy and children's perspectives are an integral dimension of the art.

The intentions of theatre-making in TiE are to engage children in complex problems in order to raise questions both through and within aesthetic and social forms. It does not seek to arrive at pre-defined solutions or achieve specific outcomes. It explores difficult issues through concrete dramatic action which portrays human behaviour in sharply-defined social contexts.

Participation is one of the key strategies through which TiE seeks to nurture a critical spectatorship with participants. The contribution of participation needs to be carefully considered, result from a shared purpose and be clearly communicated. Any temptation to include participation for functional, ad hoc or superficial reasons, will obscure the intended learning focus. It is recognised that different forms of participation create their own unique opportunities for reflective engagement. The process of connecting participatory theatre forms with the school, community, pupil age and social context for which they have been devised is succinctly defined by the phrase '*negotiation of the aesthetic with the everyday*' (Prendergast and Saxton, 2009: 13). It is this 'negotiation' which, in many ways, defines an important aspect of the TiE practitioner's role.

It is the 'negotiation' of the theatre through participation that characterises the performer-spectator relationship and fuses the role of 'spectator and actor' (Neelands, 1990: 5). In the first book to be published about TiE, O'Toole claimed that participation, when relevantly conceived, has the potential to offer a holistic, complementary experience, in which participation and theatre feed each other, *growing together into a fusion of personal experience and projected identification... more thoroughly affecting than any presentation* (O'Toole 1976, 88). He went on to articulate that there were three categories of participation:

Extrinsic, where the element of participation is separated from the theatricality;

Peripheral, where the audience is invited to contribute in order to add to the theatricality without affecting either the structure of the play or its own basic function as audience;

Integral, where the audience perspective becomes also the perspective of characters within the drama, especially when the audience members act as well as being acted upon. The structure of the dramatic conflict, the audience's relative position to it, and therefore the total experience are altered. The element of theatre is no longer central (O'Toole 1976, 88).

### **Critical Spectatorship**

In TiE, a different kind of spectatorship is being created, one which beckons involvement, interrogates and questions. It is a critical spectatorship that is potentially possible through watching a performed scene or from giving direct advice to an actor in role. In order to interrogate this notion further, we draw upon theory from broader fields in order to clarify this relationship between fiction and reality.

TiE companies make decisions relating to the balance of reality and fiction, the physical proximity of participants to actors, role portrayal, genre, physical and eye contact. All of these factors influence the nature of the engagement, the depth of the exploration and the degree to which groups feel comfortable with participation. One of the ways in which participants feel exposed is confusion; there needs to be clarity with regard to the fiction and reality of the context. Boal's concept of 'metaxis' defines a dual consciousness, a capacity to hold fiction and reality together simultaneously; *'the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds'* (Boal, 1995: 43). Boal draws energy from this state of mind, in a dialectic rather than didactic engagement.

Vygotsky's play theories remain highly relevant for participatory theatre practice, with the emphasis on implicit rule-making, social networks and the abilities of children to endow objects with symbolic meaning. These theories centre on a state of mind in which a child can play, adopt role and create a fiction. A mindset in which she/he *'weeps in play as a patient, but revels as a player'* (1976: 549). The knowledge of play theory informs processes in which participants, and/or actors, adopt and sustain role for the purpose of examining issues relevant to their personal lives.

Taylor (2003) articulates that participants simultaneously understand the nature of their real experience whilst remaining aware of their participation in the fiction (2003: 06). Neelands and Goode endorse participants' ability to 'respond in the moment' whilst recognising the implications of their (adopted) role's actions and stance. There is much common ground shared by Brecht's mainstream articulation of 'critical attitude' (1964: 190) and Bolton's DiE perspective *'I am making it happen; it is happening to me'* (1983: 53). From the field of Drama in Education, Heathcote argues that she is searching for a state of mind which reflects 'critical spectatorship' through social, physical, emotional and intellectual engagement; reflection is explicit in the process.

*Drama teaches people by demonstrating interactive social behaviour, and encouraging critical spectatorship, because art releases the spectator/action possibility in people* (Heathcote, 1984: 192)

In TiE, practitioners value critical spectatorship for its potential in theatre-making that indicates alternatives, provokes dialogue and invites considerations for change.

### **Protection**

Audience-participants are often exploring emotional contexts which are close to their own reality. TiE often examines contentious, issues with children in their school context. It is the practitioners' ethical responsibility to ensure that children's personal security is a priority in the theatre-making. The skill is not protecting children 'from emotion' but protecting them 'into emotion' (2010:87). Bolton argues that the notion of protection enables participants to

engage safely by using structures which never over-challenge or disturb participants with regard to 'self-esteem, personal dignity, personal defences or group security' (2010: 87).

One of the ways in which children can feel exposed is when they are confronted with confusion; there thus needs to be clarity with regard to expectations, procedures and challenges of their role taking.

### **In Conclusion**

There have been many attempts to categorise specific participant roles in TiE. Readers will no doubt be familiar with examples of generic roles for children; villagers, psychiatrists, explorers, advisers or decision makers. The activities of in role participation have been identified as questioning, advising, creating new scenes, discussing alternatives and becoming specific characters. We propose a set of categories which not only define a range of roles, but also indicate the precise purpose for which such roles were devised.

The following table, *Children's Role-taking in the Participatory Process* indicates this recent research; we are both directors who have worked recently with Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah, in Leeds and The Play House, in Birmingham. The Table is far from being definitive; it is one which would benefit from further analysis. We believe that the learning potential of participation warrants deeper investigation and we would be delighted to hear responses or to engage in further conversations about this unique process.

**Deborah Pakkar-Hull, Artistic Director Theatre Company Blah Blah Blah**  
Deborah@blahs.co.uk

**Geoff Readman, Freelance Drama and Theatre Consultant**  
geoff.readman@btinternet.com

## Children's Role-taking in the Participatory Process

CHILDREN'S ROLE	DEFINITION	POTENTIAL PURPOSE	REFERENCE
<b>Themselves</b>	Where the fictional context is being prepared or negotiated; actor-teachers may indicate the expectations & procedures of the dramatic engagement.	Contracting the rules of engagement; indicating parameters and expectations ensures clarity of purpose and process.	Neelands (1984: 24-32)
<b>Twilight</b>	A role often identified with actor-teachers, but one that students also adopt in negotiating, defining and sharing the liminal space.	A stage of building the fictional context, of entering into the 'we will work together' dynamic in the relationship with actor-teachers.	Moore (2013: 14-23) Wagner (1979: 132)
<b>Critical witness</b>	As witness to events, but with an objective/critical investment.	This witnessing is informed by previous events and students are conscious of an invitation not to take things 'at face value'.	Neelands (2000: 51) Hull and Readman (2007: 215)
<b>Passive Witnesses</b>	The aesthetic dimension is stronger than the social. There is a distinction between the aesthetic space and the witnessing space.	A form of witnessing often used during early TiE sequences, equipping students with the tools for later participation. Information, context and mood are often communicated.	Neelands (2000: 51)
<b>Framed Witness</b>	Students adopt a role perspective or specific viewpoint relevant to the narrative.	It offers both 'protection' and 'distance' from the issues being explored, which may be close to a student's lived reality.	Bolton (2010: 87-96)
<b>Implicated Witness</b>	Implicated by the actions of the events and characters in the narrative. There is a strong sense of self-spectatorship*. Students are not necessarily framed, but are implicated by the signing of the actor-teachers.	Students are drawn into the narrative. The ground is prepared for later participation. They are invited to take some responsibility for the narrative.	Hull and Readman (2007: 217)
<b>Questioners out-of-role</b>	Asking questions 'out of role' facilitated by the actor-teacher.	The narrative is suspended to allow clarification, reflection and speculation. The dramatic imperative is outside the	O'Toole (1976: 130-132)

		narrative.	
<b>Questioners in-role</b>	Asking questions as part of the on-going narrative facilitated by an actor-teacher, also in role	It offers the 'lure' of discovering information, initiating inquiry and extending narrative.	Heathcote (1982: 18-28)
<b>Advisors</b>	This can be in or out of role. Often precipitated by a character requiring assurance, knowledge or guidance.	It offers the opportunity to adopt a higher status and to take responsibility for the character(s).	O'Toole (1976: 131)
<b>Dramatic Players</b>	Playing, e.g. house-building, establishing physical areas. Sometimes involves occupational mime.	It develops a sense of community, ownership and commitment to peers.	Hull and Readman (2007: 212)
<b>Context Builders</b>	Students provide knowledge for the 'creative gaps' structured by the actor-teachers that might concern relationships, thoughts, feelings and action.	Involvement in building the context increases the possibility of uniqueness and originality. Students take responsibility for the context and for the consequences of their creativity.	Jackson (2007: 180)
<b>Decision Makers: out-of-role</b>	Making decisions about the narrative. This can take the form of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'either-or' decisions</li> <li>• changing the course of the action</li> <li>• weighing up different possibilities</li> </ul>	Providing opportunities to plan, speculate, reflect, practise and perform  To enable action to be taken relating to key themes and areas of enquiry	Cooper (2013: 131-141)
<b>Decision Makers: in-role</b>	Students make decisions when immersed in moments of the narrative, speculating, anticipating and creating simultaneously.	Students feel their views are valued and are able to make their own inputs, fulfilling a task or engaging in an interpretation.	Bolton (2010: 3-17)
<b>Social Actors</b>	Moments of performance where students briefly model the attitude or mantle of character for interrogation. The 'performance' space and an 'appraisal/audience' space co-exist.	A strategy for interrogating human interaction, through witnessing, questioning and reflection. Students have often created an artistic statement for others.	Neelands (2000: 51)

## Bibliography

Boal, A. (1995) Translated by Adrian Jackson *The Rainbow of Desire*. London: Routledge.

Bolton, G. (2010) (ed. Davis, D.) *Essential Writings*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Cooper, C. (2013) The Imagination in Action: TIE and its relationship to Drama in Education today. In: *Learning Through Theatre* 41-59 Jackson, A. and Vine, C. (eds.) London: Routledge.

Heathcote, D. (1982) Signs and Portents? *SCYPT* 18-29. In: *Journal* **9**. London: Woodhead Design Services Ltd.

Hull, D. and Readman, G. (2007) Participatory Theatre-in-Education: An Evaluation of Children's Role-taking. Based upon Giant and Hero from Language Alive! In: *Planting Trees with Global Vision in Local Knowledge* Shu, J. and Chan, P. (eds.) Hong Kong: IDEA Publications.

Jackson, A. (ed.) (1993) *Learning Through Theatre: New perspectives on Theatre in Education*. London: Routledge.

Jackson, A. (2007) *Theatre, Education and The Making of Meanings*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Moore, T. (2013) Revisiting Dorothy Heathcote's 'Twilight Role' In: *Drama Australia Journal* vol. **37** no. 1 14-24. Drama Australia Publications.

Neelands, J. (2000) In the Hands of Living People. In: *Drama Research* **1** 47-59 The Research Journal of National Drama: National Drama.

Neelands, J. (1984) *Making Sense of Classroom Drama A Guide To Classroom Practice*. King's Lynn: Heinemann Educational Books.

O'Toole, J. (1976) *Theatre in Education New objectives for theatre-new techniques in education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Vygotsky, L. (1933) Play and its role in the development of the child. In: Bruner, J. S., Jolly, A. and Sylva, K. (1976) *Play-Its Role in Development and Evolution* 537-554. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.