COMPETENCY IN AUSTRALIAN DRAMA TEACHERS: MAPPING THE TERRAIN

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Abstract
This paper describes a study where the notion of competency was explored with drama teachers as a way of revealing the complex nature of their work. Six conceptions were identified that help illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of drama teaching. These experientially based conceptions have implications for pre-service teacher education and the professional development of drama teachers.

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a good drama teacher? And how would we know in a field that is shaped by ephemeral teachable moments (Stanfield, 2002) and aesthetic notions of play (Macintyre Latta, 2001)? These are simple but profound questions in times of increasing accountability, government control and performance review. This article reports on an Australian investigation of drama teachers' own experiences of competent drama teaching and uses these experiences to name and describe what this might mean.

In Australia, drama is now available in each state and territory as a tertiary entrance subject and is increasingly, though often spasmodically, taught by primary teachers who have a commitment to the arts in education. Most universities mandate compulsory primary arts education curriculum units in their initial teacher education programs and there are a number of well-established specialisations in secondary methods programs for those who choose to be specialist drama teachers. These elective offerings are often well subscribed and reflect the healthy nature of drama education in Australia, generally speaking.

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Competency is a notion that continues to attract attention both in the development of Government policy and in education in particular (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, 1996; Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1998). This reflects an interest not only in outcomes, and pedagogies that might support them, but also an attempt more broadly to understand the complex work of teachers (Brock, 2000).

There is a debate about the utility of competency as applied to teaching generally. On the one hand, competency implies a series of standards that might be used as basis for registration and professional advancement of teachers (Australian College of Educators, 2002; Wallace, Wildy and Louden, 1999); alternatively exists the potential for these ‘standards’ to be used a tool to look for and ‘assess’ measurables that define, and potentially delimit, the multi-dimensional nature of teacher’s work.

While the competency/standards approach has been seen as potentially empowering (Ingvarson, 1999) and is increasingly being adopted both in Australia (Jasman, 1999) and abroad (Music Educators National Conference, 1996), it has not been explored in relation to the teaching of drama specifically. This exploration is important as quality drama education has much to contribute in developing those attitudes and competencies in young people highlighted as important in an increasingly complex society. These attitudes and competencies include being ‘well-educated, flexible, responsive, creative, self-confident and adaptive’ (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003:7), notions long held to be developed by competent drama teachers themselves (Wagner, 1998).

Qualitative research methodology provides a framework through which such issues may be investigated. This framework draws on an individual’s experience of the world as an important paradigm in the construction of knowledge, and values and honours that experience as important building blocks in the development of understanding and theory. In short, following Cumming’s call: ‘what does it mean to be a professional educator?’ (2002:3), asking teachers about their own experience of competency provides a way of understanding the phenomenon more broadly.

**Aim**

This research project sought to establish an understanding among Australian drama teachers on the phenomenon of competency in drama teaching. This understanding can be used to inform the content and methodology of teacher education courses and further the debate on what constitutes an accomplished drama teacher.

This project used a phenomenographic approach to examine the variations and qualitative differences in Australian drama teachers’ conceptualisation of competence. Phenomenography is a research specialisation developed by Marton (1978) and others (Dall’Alba and Hasselgren, 1996; Hasselgren, 2001; Marton & Booth, 1997; Säljö, 1979), where learning and awareness are linked to reveal the qualitatively different ways in which people see, experience, understand and conceptualise various phenomena in their life-worlds — in this case, competency as it relates to drama teaching.
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Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases. In Phase One, a questionnaire was distributed at a Drama Australia conference with thirteen participants volunteering to provide data in this study. Respondents were asked to supply information about their teaching experience and the nature of school where they taught, for example, Private or Public, Primary or Secondary. The participants were asked to write an answer to the following open-ended question:

'In your experience, what does a competent drama teacher do?'

Respondents returned their statements during the conference. These narratives were then analysed using a phenomenographic approach described by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991). This seven step process consists of familiarisation and condensation of the data, selecting the most representative and significant statements, comparison across the data for variation or agreement, grouping into categories followed by a description of the essence of this similarity, labelling the range of conceptions and, finally, a contrasting across the categories in relation to similarities and differences.

In Phase Two a mail-out was used to send a copy of the questionnaire to each registered participant. In this phase the data collected from phase one was used to extend the original question, adding another two in order to better contextualise the results. These subsequent questions were:

'How do you develop competence as a drama teacher? And, based on your earlier responses, briefly write a paragraph that describes your understanding of the concept of competence in general'.

Twenty written responses to these answers were then mailed back to the researchers in a pre-paid envelope. These narratives were analysed as for phase one. In both phases of the data collection, emphasis was placed on encouraging respondents to:

- provide a fullness of description,
- document the use of specific cases or instances as evidence, i.e., an experiential approach, and
- describe the variations across this phenomenon.

Results

The analyses of data revealed a rich understanding in the experience of competence by these 33 Australian drama teachers. These respondents had a range of teaching experience — 10 in their first years of teaching (0-5 yrs), 14 experienced (6-15 yrs), and 9 who were very experienced (16 yrs +), including one teacher with 40 years experience. Of these respondents, one identified as an early childhood teacher, 6 as primary, 15 as secondary and 9 as tertiary educators. It is interesting to note that 4 teachers worked across a range of ages such as in regional schools where classes range from beginning primary to school leavers. Five of Australia's seven states and territories were represented in the data.

The iterative analysis of data revealed six varying conceptions of the experience of competence. These conceptions vary across respondents and one teacher may hold more than one of these conceptions depending on his or her understanding of their experiences. The six conceptions are:
1. Competence in drama teaching as being ‘tuned in and turned on’.
2. Competence in drama teaching as risk-taking or experimenting in a creative environment.
3. Competence in drama teaching as empowering learners and adding value.
4. Competence in drama teaching as sharing skills and networking.
5. Competence in drama teaching as being a considerate reflective practitioner.
6. Competence in drama teaching through being an ambassador for drama and the arts.

Each of these conceptions will be described in order to elaborate the richness of their contents.

1. Competence in drama teaching as being ‘tuned in and turned on’

According to respondents, the highly competent drama teacher is ‘tuned in and turned on’ in a complex manner. Such complexity is based on the views that these drama teachers are experienced, well-trained and proficient, knowledgeable about their field and craft, caring, good listeners, excellent teachers and inspirational educators, and current in their practice. They are attuned to different thinking and feeling states within themselves and amongst their students. The strength of their relationship with their students is based on their intellect, professional education and desire to work closely with groups of learners to produce excellent results.

The knowledgeable ability of these teachers is grounded in their capacity to ‘view life and its experiences as an ever-enriching process which can be crafted as learning experiences for her students. EVERYTHING counts!’ (Teacher 19) Such knowledge is itself a complex phenomenon. Not only does it include a deep understanding of the place of drama in the formal curriculum but also an understanding of the art of drama, knowing the content of drama, understanding contextual frameworks and knowing what to teach. Knowledge of the place of drama in the curriculum involves understanding how drama fits into different levels of the curriculum and being able to explain the role of drama education to different groups of interested parties. As Teacher 3 notes:

This teacher will have an understanding of the place of drama in the curriculum (whether that is at Secondary, Primary or at University), and be able to explain and justify the place to a range of people (students, administrators, parents etc.).

Understanding the art of drama was viewed as important for the competent drama teacher because it offered him/her ways by which the art of drama can be used to contribute to student’s knowledge and understanding. From this understanding, teachers can derive models for student learning. In Teacher 14’s words:

I think that competent drama teachers have a sound understanding of the art from its many aspects and draw on that understanding in their work . . . and they understand ways in which it could contribute to children’s knowledge and understanding.

For some of the teachers, knowing the content of drama teaching, i.e., the strategies and methods for best practice, is essential for them being deemed to be competent. By this content, one teacher emphasised the need for the drama teacher to have learned ‘everything’ that is associated with the study and teaching of drama — lights, costume,
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voice, improvisation, acting, directing and so on. In some ways, these ideas overlap with the idea of knowing what to teach because s/he has experienced most of the key aspects of dramatic performance and how to achieve it.

Further, the knowledge that the competent drama teacher possesses must include a thorough understanding of the contexts or artistic frameworks in which drama operates in wider society. Teacher 1, for example, identified cultural, social, political and artistic frameworks as being the key contexts in which dramatic performances succeed. This teacher sees this knowledge as being important when relating drama to other art forms in our society:

A competent teacher also understands the relationship of drama to other art forms with regard to artistic processes. These are seen as those which particularly facilitate the development of sign systems and methods of representation.

Armed with this knowledge, the competent drama teacher has developed an extensive record of experience in dramatic performance and education. For example, different participants referred to: experience in the performing arts (Teacher 12); conducting successful dramatic events (Teacher 12); being educated in drama (Teacher 11); and successfully learned dramatic skills (Teacher 9). Furthermore, they need to be proficient in all facets of teaching, including the basic skills of teaching (Teacher 23), the capacity to be a competent assessor of student performance (Teacher 2), and a role model who is a leader in shaping the school curriculum (Teacher 2).

As such, the competent drama teacher is an inspiration to all of his/her classes. As one teacher (No. 19) noted: ‘A competent drama teacher becomes an inspiration to her classes to each and every student in a personal way. There is no doubt in this person’s mind that they would not teach anything else’. Whilst being inspirational, these teachers are observed to be caring as they develop learning activities for different groups of students (Teacher 20) and actively involved in dramatic practice — largely because they were personally skilled in theatre practice (Teacher 17). They frequently demonstrated the skill of being a good listener to students. As Teacher 25 noted:

Listening to students can give insight into what they feel about what they have learned so that one can build on past lessons, clarify the intended goals or tighten the program if necessary. Also, recognising why certain things did not work and being prepared to change approach is important.

This means that the competent drama teacher uses current best practice to further drama education in his or her educational context. According to Teacher 22, this means that the teacher must be a member of the relevant professional association, read current published materials, have a good relationship with local theatre companies and be attuned to current vocational opportunities for drama students.

2. Competence in drama teaching as risk-taking or experimenting in a creative environment

A range of teachers highlighted the skill of the competent drama teacher in making risk-taking a positive force. This was expressed in different forms that ranged from experimenting with the drama learning environment, exploring the boundaries of
practice, being flexible and extending the student learners beyond the norm. Consequently, the feeling of being brave in taking these risks was valued by these practising drama teachers.

The idea of experimentation occurred for some teachers by their using of ‘hit and miss’ approaches with different groups of students. The idea was to establish, through being flexible and adaptive, the best methods that would achieve the goals of the drama curriculum. With the risk-taking comes the possibility of satisfaction for the drama teacher of doing a job very well and achieving excellent results. Teacher 27 makes this point in this way:

Competence for me as a drama teacher just did not happen over night but rather after a series of ‘hit and miss’ years of teaching. To be able to truly understand the philosophy, benefits and goals of drama teaching and to live and breathe these goals was when I felt I was competent. I certainly feel I am a better person for pursuing this path.

For some teachers, this means exploring the boundaries of their own practice as they question the assumptions underlying the dramatic performance and exhort students to do likewise. As Teacher 24 notes:

The competent drama teacher continually explores the boundaries of their own understanding of theatrical practices. They question assumptions about performance and encourage the students to do the same.

Being flexible is one way in which drama teachers can experiment in their classes to maximum effect. As Teacher 12 states, the idea of acting flexibly has a number of facets including being able to respond to a variety of signals from students in order to be able to respond most effectively to their needs. This results in the teachers being able to choose the best strategy for learning in a particular context. She notes:

Competence means building a range of strategies to meet existing teaching conditions in the ‘here and now’. This experience enables flexibility which is critical to competency. Competency demands skill in reading signals — verbal, non-verbal, external — and being able to prioritise the most immediate needs of a group of students, eg. socialisation, self-esteem, gender issues and, subsequently, structuring drama to meet the particular needs. It also requires a variety of strategies to contend with situations whereby students’ needs and administrative needs clash.

Teacher 12 has found that this involves drama teachers moving beyond familiar dramatic structures to extend their students in both form and content. The teacher will ask ‘real questions’ (i.e., questions that relate to either practice or pedagogy) to understand broader conceptual issues. She notes that the teachers:

... will be willing to take risks from familiar drama structures and extend students in both form and content. (S)he will ask ‘real questions’ and be able to build on particular situations to gain understanding of broader conceptual issues.
Consequently, the competent drama teacher is seen to act bravely by ‘trying out new ways, finding new meanings’ (Teacher 19). In fact, this person believes that this is all a part of the competent drama teacher ‘loving your work’ and to become a ‘dramatic risk-taker’ (Teacher 17) in preparing units of work that will extend one’s imagination, being flexible in the classroom and methodical in creating ‘firm teaching structures’.

3. Competence in drama teaching as empowering learners and adding value

As with many excellent teachers, competent drama teachers know their learners thoroughly so that they are able to empower them in drama education and add value to their educative experience and so that they can be more effective citizens. Empowerment is achieved by becoming attuned to the thinking and feeling states of the learners; being able to tap their imaginations and challenge them; being a mentor and a facilitator; negotiating the learning with the students; and instilling clear learning goals with the students to challenge them to improve their dramatic ability. In short, they are able to develop an excellent rapport with these students.

Teacher 17 made the point that, for the drama teacher to achieve empowerment, she must become attuned to both her own and her students’ states of thinking and feeling. The principal reasons for making this observation focus on distinctive and creative approaches to learning. As she notes:

A competent drama teacher is attuned to their own and their students’ thinking and feeling states. Their teaching revolves around the spiral dynamics of affective and cognitive learning and engages students in imaginative and creative pedagogy.

This teacher sees that this is the way to tap into the students’ imagination and to challenge them. She sees this happening by weaving together the affective and the cognitive domains to maximise the collective creativity of the people involved. As she notes:

Competency in a drama teacher means the ability to weave together affective and cognitive domains so that creativity is pooled, interpreted, shaped, tested and evaluated within the classroom and the drama staff room.

The use of the techniques of mentoring and facilitating has been demonstrated to be very important in the actions of competent drama teachers. Teacher 20 spoke of mentoring through the use of trusted or valued colleagues as ‘models of drama practice’. Teacher 19 employed the use of the concept of facilitation as a critical process for passing some of the responsibility in drama classes to the group of students to validate their experience, and to shape it.

An important component in the empowerment process is for the teacher to negotiate the learning with the students. For Teacher 20, negotiation focuses on the idea of challenging the students with innovative learning strategies so that students can feel motivated. It involves creating learning situations that would not sit well in the ‘traditional’ classroom, for example, sharing power and status. She notes:

The drama teacher needs to develop a range of competencies in implementing negotiated learning strategies in a learning environment which would threaten many traditional classroom teachers.
For Teacher 22, the negotiation would be mainly with teaching colleagues and school management to achieve the quality teaching environment that was necessary to implement exciting drama lessons. This teacher says:

The competent drama teacher will also have excellent negotiation skills and great determination to stand up and advocate Drama in the school, fighting battles with executive members wherever necessary.

To facilitate empowerment, these teachers are able to instil in their students clear learning goals so that all people involved in the learning process are clear on what Drama can do for them. This includes learning how to work better in a group and improving self-confidence in their own performance. Teacher 28 makes the following statement:

[The competent drama teacher] instils in students a clear learning goal so that they (and the teacher) are clear about what Drama can do for them — co-operative skills, self-awareness, understanding group dynamics, confidence in performance, use of empathy in making sense of global, community and interpersonal existence.

The main purpose for making explicit the learning goals to the students is to challenge them in a meaningful manner to improve themselves and their dramatic ability, to develop a sense of ownership in the outcome of the dramatic experience and become more assertive in their advocacy of drama in the school curriculum. Teacher 28 notes:

The competent drama teacher gives students an awareness of how they improve in the goals that they set themselves and the improvement may be articulated by the students themselves or given as assessment feedback. Asking students to challenge themselves within Drama gives them a sense of invested ownership in the outcome, e.g., a student may want to be more assertive in group decision-making and make this his or her personal goal. It is also a Drama goal.

A goal for teachers in such empowerment is the improvement of students’ dramatic ability. An important outcome of such an empowerment process is the development of an improved rapport between the drama teacher and his/her students. As Teacher 30 noted, this involved the understanding by students of the process of collaborative learning. Once students felt this improved rapport, they were more inclined to want to explore their thoughts and feelings about a topic and the different ways for expressing themselves (Teacher 10).

4. Competence in drama teaching as sharing skills and networking

This conception of competence draws on the notion of the collective competence of the group. By this we mean that, as the result of the empowerment process, the drama teacher finds that s/he and the class work best when they collaborate in the learning experience. They strengthen each other by: sharing key dramatic skills; attending dramatic performances as a group; discussing the outcomes of the dramatic learning experience; and functioning as a team wherever possible. In addition, the drama teacher will maintain a strong dramatic network to engage in a sharing process with other drama educators, actors and directors.

The idea of working as a team seems natural in drama classes because of the collaborative nature of the work. Teacher 30 saw this sense of teamwork as the basis that ‘builds up a working relationship with disparate students (attitudes, class values

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Being a reflective practitioner also means being able to respond to the works or performances of students in a critical and reflective manner. As Teacher 1 indicates, the process of reflection on student performance is important for it conveys to the students that their works are valued for their own 'inherent aesthetic appeal’. Such an approach draws the students and teacher closer together as collaborators. As Teacher 1 notes:

5. Competence in drama teaching as being a considerate reflective practitioner

According to respondents the competent drama teacher engages in a continuous process of action learning. S/he maintains a regular regime of reflecting on his/her own performance to engage in continuous self-improvement. Such reflection may occur as the result of students’ views and opinions or may arise from the teacher evaluation. By being critical of one’s own work methods, the teacher searches for ways to suggest and implement alternative, more relevant teaching approaches. In this process, the teacher continues to be a student of drama.

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... understand the importance of being a reflective practitioner, i.e., of responding to works of students so that they are valued for their own aesthetic appeal.

Teacher 15 added that the reflective drama teacher must recognise his or her own strengths and weaknesses by understanding the physical, emotional, intellectual, political and reflective characters of the performance experience. By understanding these aspects and by applying them to oneself, the drama teacher is able to consider with a degree of objectivity just how useful s/he has been in making the dramatic experience relevant to students' lives.

In addition, such reflection should be about the methods that the particular teacher uses to maintain a high level of interest by the students in the drama classes. As Teacher 10 indicates:

It helps to be critical of one's own work methods and to constantly evaluate relative success or failure of lessons, strategies and techniques. Keep learning and doing more, e.g., teaching, performing, studying, directing, designing, etc. Stay involved.

By engaging in these approaches the drama teacher will remain a student of drama throughout his or her professional life.

6. Competence in drama teaching through being an ambassador for drama and the arts

Drama teachers who are regarded as competent are the ones who act as powerful advocates or ambassadors for the subject. Through their advocacy roles these teachers demonstrate a passion for the subject, act as political advocates and have a heightened awareness of the theatre. Without them the profession would not have some of its most ardent support.

The concept of an ambassador may be construed simply as someone who speaks up for the subject. However, Teacher 24 seeks a more complex role. For example, he believes that the competent drama teacher is one who speaks for the subject by productions they complete and the dramatic process that they develop in the students. He states that these teachers are 'good ambassadors for the subject, not just by PR but by product and process'.

The competent drama teacher also exudes and articulates a passion for drama that enthuses others — this passion often being developed from regular attendance of live theatre. It is then transferred through personal challenges to the students to achieve quality results from their own performances. What this models is enthusiasm, advocacy and the work ethic required to be successful in theatre. Teacher 18 makes the following comments in this regard:

A competent drama teacher instils in the students a passion for attending live theatre. This enables the students to learn valuable skills and techniques about the craft of acting and production elements. A competent drama teacher is serious about the subject and demands that the students share the same attitude. Drama as a subject is not a bludge or a soft-option. The students realise when they walk in the door that there is work to be done.

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Discussion

This study revealed six experientially based conceptions of a competent Australian drama teacher. These included knowledge of the syllabus, discipline-specific knowledge, pedagogy and students, the ability to and commitment towards risk-taking, networking, negotiation, advocacy and being self-reflective as a tool towards growth, attributes of flexibility, innovation, responsiveness, creativity and adaptation and, finally, being collaborative and embodying those values and attributes that s/he teaches.

What is clear from these conceptions is that movement towards competency as a drama teacher is experientially based and develops over time. This development is the result of immersion in aesthetic environments, intellect and a high degree of professionalism, acting as a reflective practitioner, being open to a variety of forms of collaboration and remaining a student of drama.

Interestingly, these conceptions are similar to notions of competency suggested elsewhere (Chadbourne, 1999; Ingvarson, 1999; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1998), including using and developing professional knowledge and values; communicating, interacting and working with students and others; planning and managing the teaching/learning process; monitoring and assessing student progress and learning outcomes; and reflecting, evaluating and planning for continuous improvement.

What these general notions of competency address are broad areas that can be applied equally to a variety of curriculum areas. The development and use of specific notions of competency, however, are much more problematic. For example, what these respondents highlight are more of the ‘human’ and social qualities not foregrounded elsewhere — that is, the social dynamic in drama teaching is paramount. Furthermore, in the area of drama education — and reflected in the notions of competency already articulated — diversity of response and flexibility to work within a process implies a dialogic relationship not only with participants but also materials and the work itself. In addition, teaching within the arts generally has the added complexity of working with a sensate aesthetic dimension that adds another layer of intricacy to this already sophisticated field. This level of specificity, while it describes the work of competent Australian drama teachers, remains challenging in terms of assessment and certification.

Conclusion

This study has identified six conceptions of competency that can inform our developing understanding of what it means to be a competent Australian teacher of drama. These conceptions can be seen to be similar in nature to other frameworks for competency either recently, or currently under development. While drama teachers are undisputedly in one of the best positions to help reveal this developing understanding, this knowledge, if used to shape and delimit the work of teachers rather than enhance and enrich teacher’s professionalism, has the potential to be reductionist in a way that does harm to our profession, discipline and the young people we seek to serve.

Finally, we would like to extend this study and our developing understanding of this phenomenon by considering how and in what way a competent drama teacher is experienced internationally. Any interest in collaborating in such a project should be directed to Peter Wright (p.wright@murdoch.edu.au).
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