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Sharing our stories in COVID times

Lily Empson

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SHARING OUR STORIES IN COVID TIMES

LILY EMPSON

Glenview School

New Zealand

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Introduction

Sunday, October the 3rd, 2021. Term 3 had just finished and the holidays had begun. Students and teachers were relaxing and recuperating after what had been a topsy-turvy term for the Waikato; three weeks of lockdown followed by three weeks back at school. Busy packing-in my new show to The Meteor Theatre, I got word at 1 pm that parts of the Waikato were going into a snap lockdown to contain the outbreak. Just like that, the show could no longer go ahead, the lights to the theatre were switched off, the door closed.

For arts practitioners and the creative community, the response to COVID has meant cancellations or postponements and a rethinking of how we share our stories. The same too can be said for how students experience the arts in school. As an early career teacher, I had grand ideas of incorporating dance and drama into the classroom, helping with the school production, and starting lunchtime arts groups for students. Then lockdown number one happened. For two years in a row the biennial and much anticipated school production was cancelled due to COVID disruptions, not to mention assembly performances and kapa haka experiences. Yet all children have a right to arts education, one that is enriching and meaningful (O'Farrell, 2016). So how, in this topsy-turvy COVID world, can we ensure that students experience creative art encounters? How can I give students the space and support to create, play and share their stories?

The arts in The New Zealand curriculum

Four disciplines (dance, drama, music – sound arts, and visual arts) constitute the arts learning area in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, with each discipline structured around four interrelated strands (Ministry of Education, 2007). Although the four disciplines are housed within the Arts curriculum, achievement objectives for each discipline differ and acknowledge each discipline is a “distinctive body of knowledge” (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 7).

Why the arts?

Because creativity is for everyone. In *The New Zealand Curriculum*, the Ministry of Education (2007) envisions young people who are “creative, energetic, and enterprising” (p. 8), and stipulates that “learning in, through, and about the arts stimulates creative action and response by engaging and connecting thinking, imagination, senses, and feelings” (p. 20). Furthermore, O'Connor and Holland (2004) recognise the transformative power of the arts, where students learn through a “structured chaos”, which invites continual critical reflection and leads to a deeper understanding of their own lives (p. 4). Duppati (2011) considers art a learning tool that enables students to reflect, express and communicate their thoughts. The arts encourage a higher level of thinking, enabling us to understand our own and others' stories.

The school production: Rethinking how we engage with the arts curriculum

When we think of “the arts”, we tend to think of performance. Indeed, Bolton (1985) states that even the teaching profession typically equates drama with the school production. Schonmann (2016) argues that while school performances can serve as a catalyst for meaning in pupils' lives, they may have little

Corresponding author

Lily Empson: lilyempson00@gmail.com

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autonomy over the process or outcome. I have always held the opinion that the school production, whilst a meaningful part of students' creative education, is just that – a part. The arts can offer so much more than just a chance to perform to a large audience. To fully experience the arts curriculum, students need to interpret, develop ideas, and understand how the arts are purposeful to their lives and communities (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In COVID times, the chance to perform to an audience is tenuous. But this, I believe is a positive. Let's use this disruption to our advantage and make a real effort to ensure that the arts curriculum is covered fully, and students experience meaningful art encounters. How? Let's bring the arts back into the everyday classroom.

When the Waikato returned to Level 2 towards the end of Term 4, 2021, students returned to school with mixed emotions and experiences. Some were anxious and nervous, others excited. Some had endured real hardships during the lockdown. Some had been able to engage in online learning whilst others had not. Some remained connected to their friends, peers and the school community, while others did not. I was feeling excited to see and reconnect with my students but also anxious about all of the changes happening so quickly. Thankfully, my school was supportive during this time and focused upon relationship building and the wellbeing of our tamariki.

With this in mind, I utilised resources from *Te Rito Toi*, a resource designed to support teachers working with students returning from life-changing or traumatic events (O'Connor & Estellés, 2021). *Te Rito Toi* provides arts-based practical classroom activities, informed by Bolton's (1979) argument that the arts create space for people to feel safe to explore real emotions. I adapted Dunn and O'Connor's (2020) process drama *The Emperor and the Magic*, giving opportunity for students to rebuild connections, work collaboratively and explore themes of loneliness and togetherness. Throughout the process, students collaborated and problem-solved with a diverse range of classmates and related their own experiences to characters within the drama. Through the drama they discussed complex emotions in a safe and supportive way and developed ideas through a range of dance and drama conventions. Students took agency to freely explore and create. Excited by this new way of working, they laughed and, most of all, they had FUN (Schonmann, 2016).

Moving forward – Where to next for my practice?

I want the arts to be visible in my classroom but with such a packed curriculum and only so many hours in a day, I often wonder how. Multiple studies suggest that learning about and through the arts has academic, social and emotional benefits (Bautista et al., 2016; Duppatti, 2011; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Sharma et al., 2019; Stokes, 2004). Curriculum can provide a powerful context for the make-believe of drama and, in turn, the arts can provide rich and meaningful learning experiences through which to engage with other curriculum (Bowell & Heap, 2001). However, many arts practitioners remain determined that the arts maintain its position as a curriculum area in its own right (Duppatti, 2011; Russell-Bowie, 2009). With this in mind, I am interested in exploring how I can further integrate the arts whilst ensuring they maintain an equal footing with the disciplines they work alongside (Bautista et al., 2016; Russell-Bowie, 2009).

Building connections and sharing stories

As for my show, after further festival cancellations, I finally shared my story with others in February 2022. It became apparent in the feedback I received from the audience that in a time of lockdowns, isolation and disruption the arts are more important than ever. Our performance allowed people to connect with the story, connect with the performers and connect with each other. On a more personal note, throughout the process of creating and devising, I connected to my feelings and experiences, to the characters I was portraying and the creatives involved. And that is the biggest takeaway I have. The arts connect us. The arts provide a medium through which we can share stories with each other. As an arts practitioner and a teacher, I have to be flexible and adaptable so that no matter what disruptions a pandemic might bring, my students have a chance to share their stories and find connections with others.

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