

Designing a senior secondary drama programme

Designing a senior secondary drama programme in an urban Pasifika school (Tangaroa College)

Tangaroa College is a large Pasifika co-ed school (about 1050 students) in Tamaki, Auckland

Context

Drama has only been running for six years and was established because I felt we needed learning programmes to be more responsive to who our students are as culturally located young people.

Previously we had a very limited arts programme, largely focused on the visual arts. The performing arts offered a viable pathway in to our local community, linking to our local tertiary provider and a community populated with creative industries.

The performing arts and drama offer a relevant context and pathway for learning through the senior secondary curriculum. Students see their lives beyond the school reflected in activities such as cultural performance, music and community engagement. These are the features on which I have built the drama programme.

How does your programme fit into the three year progression in this subject?

Each year level essentially has the same learning structure based on four main topics, but with different contexts for learning and progressively higher demands on the skills and capabilities of the students within and across those topics.

They start from where they are at and who they are as young people (with no prior formal drama learning) and I try to build on that, drawing on what I can see is already there as the platform for the initial learning.

The three year course is student centred in terms of the content and conditions for learning. Students have opportunities to determine what and how the learning occurs, and what they bring with them as people. Their identities are used and valued as relevant content/contexts for learning. It is a space they develop as individuals through engaging collectively and connecting with community.

The four topics at level 6 are:

- Whole group performance.
 - We do a unit called mihi, so straight away the students can get the value of being part of a group and working collaboratively – not in isolation. Each student does exercises, then we put them all together and that becomes the collective mihi.
- Drama techniques, such as technical vocab and knowledge.
 - They have to act out a scene from a play. It's challenging because the language literacy

levels of our students are generally quite low and students are challenged to identify and recognise the subtleties and nuances of meaning within text. The selection of texts is very important and I rely on subject specific literacy strategies to support the learning process.

- Theatre Form - Clowning.
 - I chose clowning because our students love humour and they can be very creative. We perform at our local primary school because I want my students to experience different audiences, and especially make links with the community. There are variations on the clown theme such as Samoan clowning, Māori clowning and European clowning. Within that there's a range of genres, for example, street clowning etc. that support both the extrovert and the quiet students. I intentionally try and choose things that all students can access and succeed in.
- Solo Performance
 - The students are ready to do more creative learning on their own, and this is based on real stories from their own lives. I call it OMG, and the focus is on each student working with a shocking story. It could be from their own life or someone they know.

Progressing through year levels

Coming into Level 7, I use the same four topics (and again at level 8) so it's just building on each one. At year 12 students need to have more confidence, better vocal skills, better understanding of how to use the space etc. When it comes to creating their own work, they are able to make more independent choices on editing and selecting drama conventions, and being able to articulate reasons for the choices they make.

There are variations to the contexts in response to the different learning needs, such as in level 7, the theatre form is physical theatre. The reason I chose physical theatre as a theatre form is because it really opens the students' minds to the idea that drama isn't text bound and it extends them into more abstract problem solving forms of thinking.

How does the programme connect to the school priorities?

The school is very focused on achievement goals generated and measurable throughout the year. So the assessment structure needs to provide tangible evidence of student achievement term by term. Drama contributes a lot to those because the achievement rate is really high for the students who take drama. For example, all students achieved the Level 1 NCEA mihi that we did this year.

Our school mission statement says we "are committed to nurture in each student a belief in self, a commitment to achieve, and the spirit of aroha". In the drama programme, the idea of caring and innovation is definitely a large focus. For example, I really encourage the Year 13's to do solo work because what they gain from doing a solo piece in front of an audience, in terms of confidence, resilience, risk taking and self management, will help them as a person in life, and that becomes the most valued outcome for them.

Where does this programme lead to for students?

I research what students need to get into tertiary, because I want to make sure that I'm giving them what they need to get to the next level. I've had to research tertiary institutions and find out different ones and what they offer, their strengths, and what their weaknesses are. I try and get to know them by talking to their graduates and people in the industry who know about them. I try and maintain destination data so I can anticipate what students need to achieve success beyond school.

I have a goal that each class will have one EOTC opportunity a term whether it's to go and watch live performance or do a workshop with an artist or another professional. I connect with Auckland Theatre Company and the Performing Arts Centre so when they have auditions for plays I encourage the students to go to those, pushing them to take those opportunities. So making connecting as well with our professional communities is really important for our students so they can see and access those pathways for learning and qualifications.

Conditions for learning

How flexible are the learning opportunities?

I see a class as a community and everyone in it as a resource. Valuing each other as people, as individuals and as a community is my first principle. Finding out what it is that each one of us can bring to learning is part of that. However, it can be hard because a lot of the students come from very challenging backgrounds.

You have to have love and you have to have grace. By that I mean seeking the best for all students, even though sometimes the students are very negative. You have to have love and empathy because some of the things that our students come from are really challenging and that shapes who they are.

Knowing the students is important when it comes to drama. Building relationships and enabling them to connect with self as performers and creators, each other, and audiences is essential. Creating learning environments to facilitate those relationships and connections is very intentional. For example, it is the reason we start with individual and collective mihi at beginning of the drama course.

Creating a learning community through different forums is equally important. Facebook is one forum that is used at all year levels and is used as a place for discussion, feedback, sharing and collaborative space.

Because we work a lot collaboratively I consider the nature of the groups a lot, particularly how to make groups that fit the purpose of the task and it really depends on the class. Sometimes they are made randomly, sometimes selected by the students or I choose them, it really depends on what the class is like and the time of year. For example, if I can see that relationships are pretty tight amongst most people and there's a lot of strength throughout the whole group then they are random. The main idea is to be an active thinker and responsive to student needs at any given time.

How culturally responsive is the programme?

I try to be responsive to a broad notion of cultures including Māori and Polynesian ethnicity but also youth culture, South Auckland culture, Otago culture, modern teenager culture, Generation Y culture, as well as their parents' cultures. The contexts for learning in each unit are mostly very broad but very connected to

our students. For example, the Mihi unit in level 6 which is about introducing yourself so the content is on who the students are. It focuses on their identities from the beginning and the value of that knowledge in a learning context, and teaches them who and what they bring to the classroom is what drama is all about. It gives them that sense of ownership and belonging.

Our students really thrive in that kind of environment. They achieve best when the learning process is scaffolded, when they can work as part of a big group and develop skills in those areas, then extended into smaller groups and then solo work later.

The universal nature of the themes enables all the students to locate themselves culturally and that may include references to ethnicity, gender, whanau etc.

There are other learning contexts that are more explicit in relation to ethnicity such as the year 13's who are performing Macbeth, but set in ancient Polynesia. Level 7 across the school explore themes associated with Matariki like celebration, whanau and looking forward. This culminates in a cross curricula performance event across the arts.

What evidence do you use to monitor effectiveness of the programme?

Formative assessment is a big part of learning and the monitoring of learning. One example is what we call 'showings'. Students make something and then show the rest of the class and we give feedback, for them to go away and work on further. It provides a good way of identifying the readiness of students for assessment and the implications for my teaching.

Student voice is a big part of getting feedback on the programme and my teaching. I don't usually use written forums, like written evaluations because our students tend to just write one word or one sentence things. I tend to engage with them one on one or as a group through talking. Other times I refer to achievement results, and I will use that as the basis to talk with the students. Having good relationships with them gives you that bridge to engage.

Content

How does this content relate to your students' world?

The classroom in terms of the content and context for learning is very much derived from the students that I have in front of me so it can vary from year to year even though the structure is reasonably static. For example next year in year 13 I may change theatre form to performance poetry because the Year 12's this year have some great rappers and students that love to write poetry. Trying to fit the course to the students I have is important.

I look for plays that are meaningful and deal with social issues as well that connect to our students lives beyond the classroom. I take note and I listen to what students talk about and stay in touch with popular culture so I know what's happening amongst our youth culture which is distinctive to locality and

demographics. The learning intention is to use drama to address social situations in life that are relevant to these students in addition to learning the discipline of drama.

For one topic at level 7 I use plays called 'ensemble' plays and they're really like snapshots of a topic like 'drugs'. They are snapshots of different characters providing different experiences within that theme; there's no real main character or minor but everyone has a turn where they're the main character.

How flexible is the content selection?

Through the various forms of student voice and feedback forums I try and get a sense of how students respond to the learning. The topics or content I select are reasonably broad and student centred like OMG or clowning so students tend to have quite a lot of scope to make decisions around their learning.

How does the content connect to students' learning in other subjects?

I try and conscientiously look for opportunities to engage in cross curricula projects. This is also a school wide initiative, such as the Matariki project.

This includes looking for common assessments so students are generating evidence of learning for multiple contexts, for example, dance and music. It is an area that I want to engage in more

What student data do you use to inform planning?

In addition to the analysis of results and talking to students I get people from the industry, the arts/drama industry, to come and have a look at our work and give me feedback.

Many artists are invited into our school to work with our students and me. Professional directors or actors work with the students and that is valuable learning for me to watch them.

Student voice and other discussion forums are really important ways for me to see how students are responding to my teaching and its relationship to learning outcomes.

How is the NZC embedded in to what is valued learning?

There is an emphasis on the key competencies - Relating to others, participating, they are already there in drama. You can't really do drama without doing those things.

Particular focuses in the learning that are embedded in the key competencies are things like:

- bravery
- willingness to take risks and explore
- not being afraid to make mistakes and not being afraid to experiment
- resilience - trying stuff and not beating yourself up when it doesn't work but go back and look at it

and try something else

- self-confidence and belief in yourself, of who you are as a person and what you have to offer to the collective.

Being able to work with people who are different than you and who have different opinions and backgrounds, and different ways of seeing things is very significant for our students.