

USING DIGITAL DEVICES FOR CREATIVE REFLECTION IN DRAMA TO DEVELOP RISK-TAKING IN YEAR 8 BOYS

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Abstract

Reflection is a key skill in Drama and helps boys to consider what has gone well and what needs to change to drive a piece of performance forward. The more adaptable a boy is, the more likely he will be able to have the confidence to make changes.

I have observed that some boys find it difficult to take initiative or propose creative solutions when they get stuck. They then tend to fall back on tried and tested options - doing the same things they have done before, rather than experimenting with something different. In whole class discussions, those boys who contributed appeared to be the most willing to make changes to their work. Quieter boys would answer when directly challenged, but appeared uncomfortable to do so. I wanted to find a way to allow all boys to orally reflect on their work and to see if this would have an impact on their attitude to devising drama. Boys wrote reflections, but these were often formulaic and tended to be more a description of what they had done rather than what they had learned. I asked the boys to create audio or filmed reflections using their own digital devices to see if this would affect their approach in class.

The class were set the task to create a piece of theatre exploring the topic of masculinity, but crucially, they were required to use their digital devices to reflect on their work. The boys were informed that the project was exploring *Adaptability in a Changing World*. Each week, I set the boys tasks related to creating a performance and then posed a reflection question for them to answer. They had to create a short film or audio response to this question and email it to me. The boys worked in small groups in class, creating material that contributed to the whole piece, and performed the final work to an invited audience. The piece included collages of some of their responses and research. Some of the short films that the boys had created were used as interludes, which played to the audience while scene changes took place.

I collected data through filmed class discussions, field notes, interviews with the boys, surveys and the actual reflections, which were a rich source of information. I collated the information drawn from these sources under a series of headings representing the broad themes that emerged.

The process proved incredibly successful. Of the main themes that emerged, one of the most striking was the boys' improved attitude to change and a willingness to adapt their work. Boys reported that they felt they could take more risks in creating their performance pieces and that the process of using digital devices for reflection meant they could be more honest in their responses.

This has huge implications for future practice and as a Drama department we are looking to implement the use of digital reflection as a standard method to help boys grow their emotional confidence in devising theatre.

Introduction

The 2017/2018 topic, *Adaptability in a Changing World*, offered me the opportunity to explore the effect of using digital devices for reflection on the boys' approaches to devising theatre and to observe if this enhanced their contribution in class. Young people are often described as digital natives, having been brought up surrounded by digital technology so that using devices is second nature, but I do not always see devices used in a creative way. Through this project, I hoped to delve deeper into how digital devices could help boys to become more adaptable in their learning. My instinct was that the use of digital devices would really appeal to boys and their initial response when I posed the idea was extremely positive.

As a school we have recently introduced four qualities that we believe are essential for boys to develop in their journey through King Edward's. These are "inspiring," "curious," "generous," and "adaptable." The importance of adaptability in the 21st century cannot be underestimated. A recent article from the *Singularity Hub* (Bidshahri, 2017) pointed to agility and adaptability as one of the seven critical skills needed for the jobs of the future. As teachers of boys, we need to present our students with opportunities to specifically learn and develop their adaptability skills.

I believe that reflection is a very powerful tool and that mastering this skill is key to success not just in Drama but beyond. If I could create an environment where boys could truly reflect, would this lead to a more positive approach to making changes to work in class, and would boys develop the confidence to contribute in discussion? To this end, I chose to investigate the following question: *How might the use of digital devices for creative reflection develop risk-taking in year 8 boys?* I included the term "creative reflection" because I wanted to give boys the freedom to respond to a reflection question how they saw fit and defined "risk-taking" as boys having the courage to make changes or voice their opinions in discussion. I hoped that by introducing the use of digital devices to the creative process, I could research the impact this

had on boys' ability to take risks in the classroom as they created a piece of performance for their peers on the topic of masculinity. I was also interested – as an aside – to observe whether the use of digital devices led to more creative approaches in the process of forming a performance piece.

The methodology of action research was attractive for this project as it involves a reflective process, leading to improved practice. Its application in an educational setting hopefully allows for immediate and tangible improvements and it is an ongoing process, which appealed to me as I constantly strive to find the best approaches for my students. The findings and skills developed through my participation in this action research project have permeated throughout my personal practice and have given me the opportunity to reflect on my teaching and effect change. Ferrance (2000) makes the point that the question to be explored should be "meaningful and doable in the confines of ... daily work" (p. 10) and as a busy teacher this process has taught me the absolute value of making time for this kind of research.

Literature Review

There is much written about the 21st century skills that young people will need to survive in our ever-changing world. Adaptability is consistently mooted as a desirable attribute, but what exactly does this mean for boys in the classroom? The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21.org, 2017) defines life and career skills in part as "the ability to navigate the complex life and work environments in the globally competitive information age" (para. x). Teachers want to support boys to be able to react positively to change and to have the resilience to work through "a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities" (P21.org, para. x). To do this, we need to provide opportunities for our boys to take control in the classroom and drive their ideas. I felt that the Drama classroom was ideally suited to creating this environment and developing opportunities for boys to be in the driving seat. As Victoria Rydberg (2017) in her article for P21.org asserts:

When students are put in charge of their learning through a project, they develop life skills such as flexibility and adaptability by having to make adjustments along the way rather than waiting for the teacher to tell them what to do. (para. x)

A potential driving force behind the need for boys to develop adaptability skills is the fast-moving technological age that we find ourselves living in. Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe and Terry (2013) note that:

The internet and digital media represent a new realm of interaction of which successful navigation is essential for success in the 21st century, and once gathered and comprehended, new skills and knowledge are necessary to collaborate digitally and contribute to the collective knowledge base (p. 132).

Boys will have to be able to use their digital skills in creative and innovative ways to thrive beyond school.

Boys will also require highly developed digital skills to compete in the job market. As one of my students said, “it is an area we will need so it is useful to learn how to do it now.” The irony is that the digital world can cause a “distancing,” as we communicate through the safe distance of screens and devices and can hide our true selves. I am concerned that boys are retreating behind their digital devices and becoming less able to interact socially and less able to express their vulnerabilities. However, as Giedd (2012) puts it, “the digital genie is out of the bottle and not going back in” (p.6). We need to be looking at ways to use the digital world to make meaningful connections with our students. Giedd suggests that “the digital world is altering the arena in which teens pursue the perpetual tasks of adolescent development - to learn about the world” (p. 6) and refers to “alarmist” attitudes to social media. There are positives and negatives about the digital revolution, but Giedd also notes that “the potential upsides of the technologies are enormous and include phenomenal educational opportunities” (p. 6). To that end, I was keen for boys to use their digital devices in a positive and creative way.

I felt that introducing digital devices to drama work might appeal to my students because they are boys. Reichert and Hawley (2010) assert that:

A good deal of additional evidence and analysis are required to make a persuasive case that IT is in some way boy specific in its effects, but the prominence of technology application is a consistent feature in the teachers’ accounts of their most successful lessons (p. 4).

There is clearly something that triggers a boy’s enthusiasm and interest when using a digital device that deserves consideration. I was keen to explore whether this led to boys reflecting in a less superficial, more creative way, encouraging a depth in their responses.

Sipilä (2014) asserts that, “Digital competence is not only digital skills; it is also about the social and emotional aspects of using and understanding a digital device” (p.228). Digital devices are embedded into young people’s lives: they interact socially, make connections and can search for answers at the touch of a button. Could the use of digital devices for reflection tap into the “potential upsides” referred to by Giedd (2012) for more positive interactions? Parents and teachers can be nervous of the advance of technology, but could using this reflection method have a positive impact on boys’ emotional confidence, empowering them to make changes and, in turn, improve their performance? Tyre’s (as cited in Reichert and Hawley, 2010, foreword, para. 8) assertion that “both teacher and students must, from time to time feed their appetite for innovation and sometimes even risk” was foremost in my mind as I approached the research question.

Another aspect of my project was to create a piece of performance exploring masculinity in the 21st century. I was keen to introduce a topic that would be relevant and engaging. Boys and teachers have reported that their best lessons “often engaged boys in considering their lives as males and their masculine identities” (Reichert and Hawley, 2010, p. 141) and are lessons that “address something deep and personal in the boys’ lives; their sexuality, their character, their personal prospects in a world beyond school” (Reichert and Hawley, Introduction, para. 5). I wanted to use the medium of theatre boys to allow the boys the space to explore some of their opinions and ideas about masculinity in a “safe” environment, that is, through their reflection. Van Boeckel (2009) explores the nature of using arts education to open our eyes to nature around us, but many of the ideas resonate with one learning to explore one’s inner feelings.

He writes:

Art is also about coming to grips with ugliness, darkness, and failure. Students can learn something for life by means of artistic processes, namely that going through failure and experiencing one’s own inadequacies need not involve losing one’s feelings of self-worth (p. 157).

Key to the task was the development of reflection and for the boys to be able to voice their feelings hopefully resulting in them feeling like they could take risks in the Drama class.

Research Context

King Edward’s School is an independent day boys’ school situated close to central Birmingham, the UK’s second largest city. It ranges from Year Seven to Sixth Form and has a strong reputation for academic excellence. Boys follow the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in the Sixth Form, where there is an emphasis on challenge and enquiry.

The school has boys from a variety of backgrounds - predominantly Asian - and has a thriving Assisted Place scheme to encourage those from all economic backgrounds to apply.

My research participant group was a Drama class of 25 year eight boys. I felt that exploring the topic of *Adaptability in a Changing World* would help prepare them for the rigours of the IB Diploma and beyond. I worked with the class weekly in their 40-minute Drama lesson.

A letter outlining the nature of the action research project was sent to parents, and their consent, along with their son's, was sought. All participants and parents were given assurances that information collected would only be used for educational purposes and within the context of this research project. Anonymity was maintained by withholding the boys' names when discussing data and responses, and during video recordings.

The Action

Initially I explained the idea and set the overall activity of creating a piece of performance exploring masculinity for their peers. I also introduced the idea of digital reflection. Each week, a specific reflective question was posed for them to consider and create an audio or video response.

The research project took place over ten lessons:

1. The class was split into project groups and had an introductory class digital task, in which the boys were asked to create a digital reflection on what they found difficult about Drama.
2. Boys explored in their groups what an adaptable person looked like. They then reflected on how adaptable they thought they were.
3. Each group explored the following questions and fed back to the class:

What is a stereotypical man?

What are the pressures on men?

They then reflected on why men find it difficult to express their emotions. Boys were encouraged to be creative in the way they responded to this question.

4. The groups used their ideas to develop a scene entitled, "How to build a stereotypical man" using humour to engage the audience. Boys in the class then evaluated each other's pieces and groups were encouraged to develop and change their performance based on this feedback. For homework they were asked to interview a male role model for research to help generate ideas to create a new scene.

5. Each group then scripted their own scenes to contribute to one whole performance. They reflected on their group's progress and their individual contributions.
6. Over the next few weeks groups rehearsed and honed the piece taking on board feedback leading to a final performance in front of an invited audience.
7. The groups took part in a post-performance conversation with the audience made up of their peers and some teachers. Boys then reflected on how they had taken risks in preparing and presenting their piece of theatre.

Each week I transcribed the boys' digital reflections and gave feedback to the class about the general trends. I was careful never to identify boys directly to maintain the trust that had been created by the reflections. However, where boys had created a film in response to a question, I would show the film to the class (after seeking their permission).

Data Collection

I collected mainly qualitative data for my project. Data were mainly collected through boys' individual reflections, where I was able to look for patterns that emerged, in order to try to draw conclusions about their experience. This aligned with the notion of action research proposed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) who state:

“Action research is open minded about what counts as evidence (or data) – it involves not only *keeping records* which describe what is happening as accurately as possible...but also *collecting* and *analysing our own judgments, reactions and impressions* about what is going on” (p. 347).

I deliberately used open questions to encourage personal responses and I believe the individual nature of the exercise allowed credible responses where boys honestly explored the posed question without bias from other students.

Alongside the reflections I kept field notes during each lesson to judge whether the use of digital reflection was having an impact on the boys' practical work in lessons. Furthermore, I created an online survey about their use of digital devices in school that boys completed early in the process. Boys also completed a survey later in the process where they assessed themselves against three statements related to risk-taking.

I also videoed a class discussion near the beginning of the process, in the middle of the process, and then in the post-show discussion to analyse how contribution to class discussion changed as the project progressed.

I used multiple sources of data to give my research credibility and enrich my findings. As Stringer (1999) says, “credibility is established by... information from multiple data sources” (p. 176).

Data Analysis

When I had collected the data, I colour coded responses by highlighting similar ideas through the observations, transcribed reflections, and videos. I then collated the colour coded data and took time to think through the salient themes that emerged before trying to draw some conclusions. Ultimately, I was looking to see if the use of digital reflection had led to adaptability in the form of greater confidence (i.e., risk-taking) in drama performance, as well as in the form of greater engagement and contribution to class discussions.

Discussion of Results

Through my data analysis, the following key themes emerged:

- Overcoming fear or anxiety about contributing in drama
- Improved attitude to change in performance pieces
- A confidence in taking risks in the creative process
and
- Honesty in reflection

Overcoming fear or anxiety about contributing in drama

In their first digital reflection, I asked the boys to explore what they found difficult in Drama. Thirteen of the 22 boys cited fear of failing in front of the class as an issue for them in the lessons, with Boy K admitting, “when I’m uncertain about something I don’t go at it with determination.” Another boy, Boy E, stated, “sometimes I give up before I even start,” and several boys referred to their fear of “uncertainty” being a limiting factor in their progress in the class. Boy H summed up the general feeling: “I think that performing is a risk because you are doing something where there is no certainty.” Many referred to “anxiety” or “feeling anxious” with Boy U explaining, “I sort of panic a bit sometimes if it goes wrong.”

The introduction of the digital devices to reflect was greeted with enthusiasm. In a survey I conducted with the boys I asked them to use five words to describe the experience. Nine of the 22 referred to this process as being “fun,” with ten being “happy” or “excited.” Interestingly, several boys referred to how the use of devices made doing homework “easy.” When questioned further, Boy K expanded, “When you are writing you feel under pressure to get it right. With this you don’t feel like you’ve done it wrong when you’ve said something.” It

appeared that boys were finding the use of a digital device to convey their drama reflection to be a more liberating tool without pressure of perceived failure.

I made notes as I observed the lessons, particularly in the run up to the performance, and saw a purposeful attitude displayed in each group. Whereas in the past, I would see one person driving a group, it appeared in this project that virtually everyone was animated and contributing significant ideas. After the process of creating and performing the piece of drama had been completed, I asked the boys to reflect on their experience. Many boys appeared to display great pride in their achievements. Boy A stated, “I was very scared I was going to fail but it worked out fine so I think we should take risks when doing drama.” This too was reflected in Boy O’s comment: “sometimes I’m a bit scared to put all of myself out there but now that I have thought about it and reflected on it, I’m actually going to put my all into it and not be afraid.” Boy N summed up the feeling of the class in a post-show discussion with the audience: “our class has grown stronger as a group.”

Improved Attitude to Change in Performance Pieces

One of the key aspects of success in Drama is an ability to adapt to change. I was interested whether the process would help the boys gain a greater confidence in being able to take on last minute changes. Change was a prevalent word in their reflections. Boy W stated, “I’m not that confident with dramatic changes which could affect what I’m trying to do,” and Boy L reflected, “I’m usually quite scared of change.” Throughout the process, boys were encouraged to refine their pieces and appeared more at ease with this concept. “One thing I have learnt, the key part of being adaptable, is to try ideas and if they don’t work - change them,” explained Boy S, whilst Boy H noted, “everything will not be perfect the first time.” After the performance, Boy X reflected, “I have become more adaptable because before if something was in my way I would not get around the situation, I would just leave it how it is. Now I change things to fit it, and not say no, and always find a way around the problem.” It appears that the process has encouraged boys to feel more confident about taking risks to develop their work through making changes and developing their ideas.

A Confidence in Taking Risks in the Creative Process

Boys had the option of creating a video or audio log in response to reflection questions. However, they were encouraged to be creative in their response. Four boys chose to make short films reflecting their response to a reflection about masculinity. This led to the idea of their films being used as interludes between scenes. As Boy I said, “with making a video or audio you can be more creative,” and Boy P made an interesting point about how the digital

device had encouraged a more personal response to the task: “in a way, since we have our phones which are such an intimate part of our lives, having an intimate topic - it seems more fitting.” Reichert and Hawley (2010) observe that, “vigorous creation of products was especially effective with boys” (p. 17) and this indeed seems evident in the response the class had to the task. Boy M reported that, “I enjoyed being able to control everything ourselves,” and Boy O noted “I think we are more adaptable and can do things ourselves.” Again, after the performance the reflections helped to form a picture of the boys’ attitude to change. Boy D commented, “I have felt pressured and uncomfortable at times. I think that taking risks is really about going out of your comfort zone. That can be in performing drama and in the voice reflections.” There was a positive reaction to the outcome with Boy R noting, “I took a risk performing because I have pretty bad stage fright but I think I am getting better and adapting to the performing experience” and Boy M explaining, “One thing I enjoyed most was when it goes how you wanted to, you feel good afterwards.”

Honesty in Reflection

One other notable theme that emerged from the process was a recurring reference by the boys to “honesty.” In Drama, reflection is very personal and prior to the process, boys might have offered brief written reflections, or – in class – only a few would contribute to discussion. As Boy H put it, “it is a risk saying things openly and honestly.” Boys appeared to have different reactions to the process of individual private audio or video reflection. Boy K felt that he could “be more honest with a video than writing. I know it’s only you who listens, so I can be more upfront - for books your friends might look at them or other things like that.” Boy O recognised, “you get more out of the homework because you can say something personal” and Boy W noted, “I have found myself open and honest in my reflection as it’s kind of hard to express myself normally.” Boy V felt that the use of digital device had changed his attitude, “the new homework way helped me by making my answers more truthful.” Conversely, Boy B resolutely “did not enjoy answering the questions” and was clearly uncomfortable with the process. However, overall, there appeared to be an emerging confidence with the reflection process. As Brown (2013) writes, “our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose” (p. 2). It appears that those boys who took the risk of being honest in their reflection found a new felt confidence in expressing their thoughts. Boy P expressed this by saying, “video logs are a good way of talking about how drama lessons make you feel and I quite like that.”

Conclusions

The use of digital devices to reflect undoubtedly had a very positive impact on the boys' confidence in their classwork. Boys generally submitted thoughtful responses that allowed me a much deeper insight into their thinking. Many of them commented about how much they enjoyed the freedom to use their devices. The boys felt that they could reflect when they thought of something relevant to say, rather than when they were sat at their desk doing their homework. I suspect this formed part of why they felt the work was easier. It was in fact more convenient and allowed them to capture their thoughts in the moment.

The trust among the class grew as the project developed, with many clearly feeling more confident to take part in class discussion. In the post-show discussion, there were many boys who contributed who previously would have stayed silent. There was a palpable enthusiasm and pride in the process and their achievements. The process did not work for every boy, but the majority exhibited a distinct vigour in their approach.

The final piece demonstrated a real maturity in its content and execution. A fellow Drama teacher pointed out to the boys that it felt similar to a GCSE piece, a level that is two years above their age. The class had demonstrated the confidence to take risks by changing their ideas throughout, which resulted in a thought-provoking piece of theatre.

Interestingly, the boys did not appear to want or need individual feedback about their reflections. Simply the act of reflecting and the knowledge that they were being listened to was enough to make the difference in their attitude to performance work in class.

I attended the IBSC Spring Regional (Europe) Conference in March 2018: *Conducting and Embedding Research in Boys' Schools*, where one speaker, Dr Richard Churches – in disparaging the effect of learning styles as a teaching method – conceded that the impact this method may have had on students was that they were thinking about their thinking. In this project, boys were using reflection to think about their ideas and reflect on where to go next. I believe that it was this act that was key to their success in performance and that using the digital devices unlocked positive attitudes to reflection. It also drove home to me just how important reflection is in Drama work.

The success of this project has many implications for me personally as a practitioner. As a Department, we are planning on introducing digital reflection in Year 8 to see if this impacts positively on the boys' emotional confidence in class and are looking at ways to implement my findings across the Drama curriculum.

This project has implications for wider practice in the school, too. The cricket coach has met with me and is trialling using digital devices for reflection after his coaching sessions. Already, he is seeing positive results from the boys with this method. There is real potential for practical subjects to adapt this style of reflection to their needs, with the potential for hugely positive results. Boys in the Sixth Form complete a series of reflections for the Creativity, Activity and Service (CAS) section of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. In the past, boys have complained that they find the written reflection onerous, but it will be interesting to trial oral or video reflections to see whether this creates a more meaningful response.

The project has reminded me, and has taught the boys, the power of reflection for improving work. I believe the skills learned throughout the project will benefit them in many aspects of their future, not just the Drama class. I was excited that they saw the benefits of being adaptable and how having the courage to make changes can lead to great success. Most exciting is that I believe that the boys and I achieved this together.

Reflection

Taking part in this action research project has opened my eyes to the importance of research as a tool for developing good practice and has given me a profound respect for the process. Often in Drama, I have hit upon methods of success in my teaching, but it has been difficult to put my finger on the reasons why. By taking part in action research and providing qualitative data to support these hunches, I have found a methodology that will have a huge impact on my teaching.

It has been challenging to juggle my various roles in and out of school, and I have had to manage my time effectively, but the reward has been extremely valuable. I have been very moved by the way the boys approached the project and the complete trust they had in me with their thoughts. It has been very humbling in that respect. I was so impressed with what they achieved and it has given me real food for thought in how I design tasks with all students in the future.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the process has been the wonderful international community of which I am now part. My team have been an inspiration and we have supported each other through thick and thin. I have been pointed to so many rich sources of information and have had some outstanding discussions about education across the world. I want to thank the Chief Master of King Edward's School, Dr Mark Fenton, for encouraging me to apply and supporting my participation in the IBSC Action Research Programme. I hope that his faith in

me is rewarded. Mr Matthew Bartlett, as my Head of Department, has allowed me the freedom to experiment with my class and was invaluable in his support through the process along with Mrs Jocelyn D'Arcy as my mentor. Finally, I want to thank Bruce Collins, my team advisor and now friend. His encouragement and support has been inspirational and ensured that this has been a hugely positive experience.

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