

Stories of Displacement: Using Drama to Strengthen Intercultural Understanding in Year 11 & 12 Boys

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Further Information

This poster and further information is available at
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Introduction

The Australian education system positions “intercultural understanding”—the ability to respect and empathise with people from diverse cultures—as a core skill that students should develop across their academic disciplines. I felt that I was not providing sufficient opportunities for boys to develop their intercultural understanding and sought to address this within my school’s Social Justice Drama Immersion program through a theatre project that explores the theme of displacement.

For the project, the boys interviewed five people who have experienced displacement, including refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Burundi, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. The boys then devised, rehearsed, and performed an ensemble play based on the displaced people’s stories.

The Research Question

How can participation in a theatre project about displacement strengthen Year 11 and 12 boys’ intercultural understanding?

Research Context and Participants

My research context was Scotch College, a Presbyterian prep–12 boys’ school in Melbourne, Australia. The school was founded in 1851 and has approximately 1,890 boys, typically from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

The participants in the project were five boys enrolled in the school’s Social Justice Drama Immersion program, one of several options boys can choose as part of the school’s service-learning program. The participants included four Year 11 boys and one Year 12 boy.



“For me, it just helped make me understand [the displaced people’s] stories. ... To really kind of try and experience that yourself onstage ... you don’t understand how visceral it is.”

The Research Action

The project had five stages:

- **Induction:** The boys were introduced to the values of the Scotch College service-learning program and prepared for their interviews with their allocated displaced people.
- **Interviews:** The boys interviewed the displaced people, inviting them to share their stories.
- **Writing:** The boys created the script for the play.
- **Rehearsals and Performances:** During a one-week intensive, the boys rehearsed the play and presented two performances for the displaced people and the school community.
- **Reflection:** The boys reflected on their experiences.



“It’s difficult but exciting because you can run away from yourself for a while and learn new things, feel different emotions that you might not usually feel, and just understand life from a different perspective.”

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected qualitative data, using:

- **semi-structured interviews** with each participant at the start and end of the project;
- **a focus group** held after the performances;
- **student journals**;
- **a researcher journal**; and
- **classroom artefacts** in the form of photographs and video recordings.

After collecting my data, I transcribed the responses from the interviews and focus group. I conducted an inductive analysis of these transcripts, the student journal responses, and my teacher journal. I organised my data around key themes, looking for evidence of the boys demonstrating respect and empathy for the displaced people they interviewed and subsequently portrayed.



Key Findings and Discussion

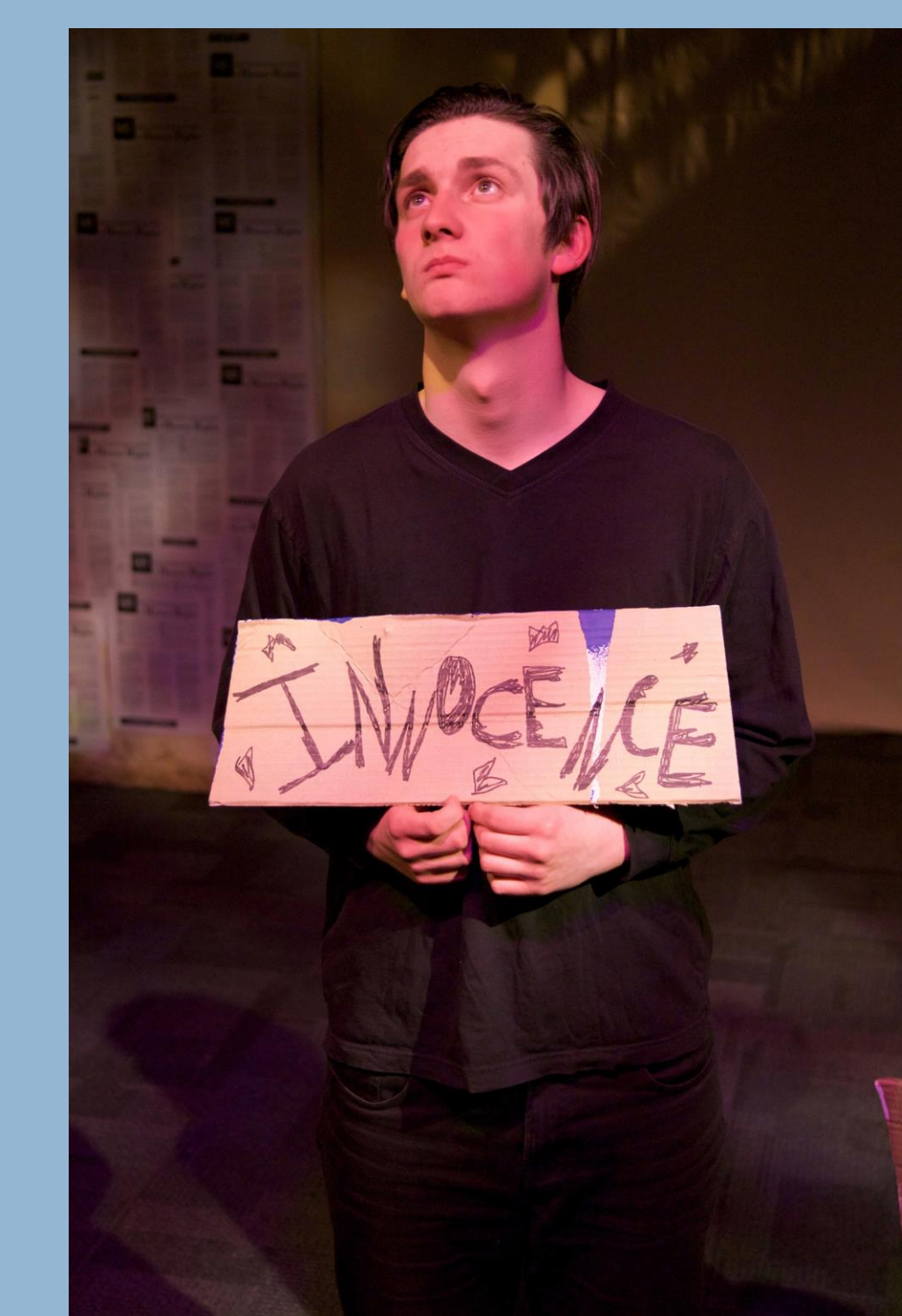
1. Participation in the intervention challenged the boys’ perceptions of displaced people by personalising the issue for them;
2. Performing the displaced people’s stories enhanced the boys’ ability to empathise with the displaced people; and
3. The boys demonstrated a high level of respect for the displaced people by thinking critically about their right to tell the displaced people’s stories and expressing a feeling of responsibility to do justice to those stories.

Conclusions

The intervention strengthened the boys’ intercultural understanding, as demonstrated through the respect and empathy they showed towards the displaced people and their stories.

The project also prompted the boys to think critically about who has the right to tell another person’s story and the responsibilities that one takes on when they tell someone else’s story.

The project reinforced for me the value of my school’s service-learning program and the importance of creating opportunities for boys to interact with people from diverse backgrounds. It also highlighted the unique strengths of storytelling in Drama as a pathway to learning that enables students to simulate real-world experiences in a safe environment.



“When you hear someone else’s story, just observing it ... it’s like a secondary source, kind of. And then when you’re acting it, it’s like a primary source.... The emotions are more hands-on, I guess. They’re more in your face. You kind of think about it more.”

Key Readings

Donelan, K. (2002). Engaging with the Other: Drama, and intercultural education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 43(2), 26–38.

Mar, R. A. & Oatley, K. (2008). The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(3), 173–192.

Rosen, H. (1999). Narrative in intercultural education. *European Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 10(3), 343–353.

