THE ELUSIVE BUTTERFLY: the challenge of developing a framework for evaluating the impact of drama work upon the social, personal and learning growth of children in a special school setting.

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Abstract: This article draws upon an enquiry based, partnership project between a special school and Shysters Theatre Company, an ensemble of actors with learning disabilities. The project, entitled The Butterfly Effect sought to explore how this model of theatre practice can influence learning and teaching. A key question has been to understand why the exploration of the physical, sensory and essentially non-verbal interactions has led to the significant development of a range of key personal and social skills and abilities within the children, including ironically an increased use of words as a means of communication.

Key Words: creative process, theatre, special education, communication, evaluation

This paper explores the landscape, evidence of transformations to date, methodologies emerging and invite delegates to share their own ideas and responses to the current challenges which the work is addressing.

The Setting

‘The Butterfly Effect’ is the name of a collaborative project undertaken by three partners: Creative Partnerships, Deedmore Special School and The Shysters Theatre Company, all based in Coventry. The project was initially designed to run for two years, starting in the autumn of 2005, and was extended for a further year to summer 2008. Plans are now underway to develop the work over another three years.

The phrase ‘The Butterfly Effect’ refers to the idea that a butterfly’s wings create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado or delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in a certain location. The three partners, Arts, Education and Government Agency, were keen that the project would have a butterfly effect. The work would start in a small and experimental way but would have much more significant and wider impact as it progressed. What brought the three partners together was the significant alignment between their respective agendas. All three were keen to explore both the development of learning through the processes of theatre and drama and the creativity of children with learning disabilities. Although this project was specifically developed for primary special schools it is not a cut down version of mainstream practice but can stand as a model for artists, educationalists and practitioners in any setting.
For Creative Partnerships Coventry, the Butterfly Effect was a welcome opportunity to explore some of its remit within a special school setting. Creative Partnerships was the former Labour Government’s flagship creativity programme for schools and young people. Its principle aims were to develop the creativity of young people and raise their aspirations and achievements (Robinson 1999). It developed teachers’ ability to work with creative practitioners, schools’ approaches to culture, creativity and partnership working and developed the skills of practitioners to likewise work with schools as significant and valued partners (see www.creative-partnerships.com).

Deedmore Primary School catered for a range of children deemed to be hard to reach, because of their cognitive and or communication, sensory or physical difficulties. A key element to the way of working was the exploration of creative practice within the classroom and the long term partnership between teacher and artist. Deedmore has now transitioned into a new broad spectrum school. This school, Castle Wood is placing creative approaches at the heart of their new curriculum and practice to generate an inclusive context for young people’s development. The challenge is to enable all children to become creative learners and create a radically rethought pedagogy to enable this to happen.

The Shysters Theatre Company is an ensemble of actors with learning disabilities who have been working together for ten years. Over this time the company have developed a methodology of theatre work that has enabled it to explore the creativity of adults with learning disabilities. The methodology draws upon a wide range of physical and non-verbal experimental theatre techniques, which in turn has enabled access to theatre-making for people for whom words (and therefore scripts) are not necessarily the most comfortable means of communication. It became clear as the work progressed that the methodology was also validating and revitalising a range of communication and interaction systems that are ‘beyond words’, and that this had a powerful effect on the kind of theatre that was made from it and on the actors themselves. Actors from the company work very closely and regularly with the pupils and adults at Castlewood School and the children and staff reciprocate, hugely enjoying Shyster performances in a variety of venues.

**The Project**

Within a year of the project’s development at Deedmore it became apparent that the butterfly effect was already happening. Children’s confidence developed as they gradually realised that they had the ability to have an effect through the work on both themselves and other people. It became increasingly more obvious in day to day curricular and social situations that the children began to believe that they have a part to play in the world and that they could ‘write their own script’ for it. One child with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder said ‘I don’t have to try to be like them any more. They should be like me.’ One parent commented that her son now smiles and another parent said that her son has found joy in dancing. The children that had been part of this project had begun to find their ‘voice’. They asked and answered questions (with and without language), they began to develop a sense of themselves and their emotions,
crucially showing empathy in many different ways, for example, noticing that someone is upset and offering support. They also found ways to express themselves through verbal and non-verbal narrative and movement. The work was beginning to question some established notions of learning disability and autism in particular.

Staff members at Deedmore who were involved with the project were amazed at the changes in the children, the school and indeed in themselves. Improvements in social cognition, curiosity, empathy, imagination, narrative skills, social interaction and creativity were noticed by staff, governors, parents, therapists, teachers and most of our many visitors. Comments from these adults ranged from: ‘I never thought that our children could do that!’ through: ‘his mental maths has improved in leaps and bounds’, ‘that child can now think!’ to: ‘she has spoken to someone today’.

As the work progressed further its impact deepened and the ‘Butterfly Effect’ concept was extended to include the notion of transformation as in the significant change of caterpillars into butterflies. The exploration of the physical, sensory and essentially non-verbal interactions of the Shysters theatre-making had led to the significant transformation within the children of a range of key personal and social skills and abilities, including ironically an increased use of words as a means of communication. Key elements seem to be the full body engagement of the children and the development of imagined contexts and individual imaginations through the emphasis on the use of only mimed objects and settings at all times.

Teachers too felt the transformation effect: those at the core of the work identified that their practice had undergone a great deal of change that was enabling them to deliver a more creative and inspirational environment and curriculum in order to teach more effectively. Working in collaborative ways with the Shysters was giving them access to a completely new set of skills that was having enormous influence. ‘Staff express more confidence in their own communication skills...they are questioning their own pedagogical practices and are more reflective – Creative Partnerships has given them the structure and credit to talk about these changes and to teach more creatively’ (Jones and Thompson 2007)

How and why were these transformations happening? Scientific analysis (O’Morgan 1999) of the tissue of the caterpillar reveals that it has embedded cells called imaginal cells, which resonate at a different frequency and so are unlike the other caterpillar cells. The caterpillar’s immune system thinks they are enemies and tries to destroy them. But the new imaginal cells continue to appear, more and more of them. Eventually the caterpillar’s immune system cannot destroy them fast enough, and they become stronger, they connect and connect, until they form a critical mass that realises their mission to bring about the amazing birth of a butterfly.

As the work continued to develop the focus changed to trying to understand how the transformations that had been observed were happening and whether the creative process is essentially one of setting the
context for the growth and eventual release of a type of ‘imaginal cell’ in those involved which eventually become an irresistible force for development and evolution in the individual. Two significant aspects of the imaginal cells analogy seem relevant here. Firstly the caterpillar is unknowingly engaged in the process of creating the cells, indeed is actively resistant to them. Secondly, in order for the process to be effective there is a dormant stage – the pupa – where nothing seems to be happening, although obviously things are going on internally.

One of the children involved in the work was becoming very anxious about his difficulties with reading and eventually refused to either read or engage with books at home and at school. His teacher, another key figure in the project, said that was fine and, with the child, took all his personal reading materials out of his drawer and moved them into a box in the teacher’s cupboard. Over the next three months the teacher continued to expose him to a wide variety of literature, games and phonics, using imaginative and factual drama and role play techniques. After three months of not overtly reading, the child asked for a reading book. The teacher discovered that his reading ability had increased significantly at the end of this ‘dormant’ period.

**Capturing the elusive butterfly**

More recently all children and staff have experienced Shyster practice generating a spread throughout Castlewood. We are planning now for further research into the phenomena underpinning the Butterfly Effect project. The aspiration is that Castle Wood School will become a centre of excellence for the development of creativity within special schools. The school will be part of a research project and may become a training hub for other practitioners who have not had experience, or would like to develop their knowledge of how to work with children with significant special needs.

None of this will be possible without the development of an effective way of evaluating the work that will support the understanding and passing on of this understanding to others. In order to grow the practice within the school and beyond there is a need to develop the intuitive judgement of all adults working with the young people so that there is a greater readiness to enable safe risk taking. Within this context teachers may move around the spectrum from ‘guide’ to ‘in loco parentis, knowingly enabling rather than protecting young people from self growth.

More reflective practice and research evidence will enable learning to be shared and grown amongst the teacher and other adult support communities. In a full partnership there is also a need to position young people as reflective, meta-learners who have ownership and awareness of their own growth and development as learners and people. It is important to continue to allow time for creativity to develop, to allow each child and teacher to discover their own path through it, in their own way, and to be able to understand and articulate the processes employed in order to give a voice to and find ways of recording these journeys.
The evaluation process needs to assess in a much more detailed way the impact the work has been having and will continue to have on pupils and the range of staff involved. Perhaps more importantly it must examine closely the practice and the processes developed within it that are enabling this impact to happen. We have realised there are huge challenges which are intrinsic in both the way the practice has developed and in the use of the metaphor of the butterfly effect to help understand it. Both argue against using established word-based and highly analytical evaluation techniques in favour of a more holistic, long-term and which value intuitive judgements. What follows is a description of some of the key elements of the practice and its processes that are essential to the work and the challenges that they throw up for the establishment of an effective methodology.

The practice is very individual-based, developing always in response to each child and his or her connection with the work. Anything that a child does or says within the working room is seen as an ‘offer’ and as such is validated as part of that child’s journey through the process. However the way in which it is validated is highly dependent on the circumstances at the time and on the child in question. The same offer by two different children may be validated in entirely different ways by the adult working in relationship with them. In the example of the child above who gave up reading the response was specific. Without labouring the point too much the judgement made to allow the child to stop reading was about a particular child at a particular moment in his development, by a particular teacher in a particular context. Any evaluation techniques that are developed must allow the individuality of the child and the teacher to be at their heart.

The practice relies heavily on communication that is primarily non-verbal and yet most evaluation methodologies are dominated by words. If non-verbal communication and interaction techniques are valid and complete in their own right, and have an essence that is in fact beyond words, then to translate what is happening into words potentially denies that validity and waters down their effectiveness. Added to this is a more fundamental belief. As human beings we can only fully discover ourselves and who we are through interacting and communicating with other people. If our communication systems are limited then so will our development and growth as individuals and by implication our effectiveness as social beings. Any evaluation tools or methodologies developed must have a synergy with the non-verbal, organic and unlimited processes of the practice rather than verbal, pre-set criteria and sense of target or ideal which might unwittingly promote a paucity of understanding, a lack of engagement and even a sense of failure within the child or adult.

The project has been developed within clear aims and with a particular vision. However the day-to-day practice does not prioritise these as the focus, so although underpinned by them, it operates instead to principles which are recognised intuitively in or after the moment of action. Crucially then the practice is enabled to be developed dialogically with the children. The structure of a session may become more
known or visible after it is over rather than planned for before the session starts – in a process that has been described as ‘backwards planning’. From experience the best time to capture an understanding of what a particular session has achieved is immediately after the session is over, and in dialogue with key adults within the process, and whilst some sense of the atmosphere of the session still remains. As the work has developed the children have also begun to play a role in this ‘instant’ evaluation.

The theatre methodology employed by the Shysters has drawn on a wide range of practice, both national and international (Barker 1977, Boal 1979, Brook 1972, Callery 2001, Eli, 2009, Grotowski, 1977, Merlin 2001, Spolin,1985, Wangh,S. 2000 ), on the principle of ‘if it works use it’. What is increasingly apparent is that a huge range of techniques can work if there is a clear understanding of the principles that underlie the practice. A simple example will illustrate this point. Much of the work is developed through the principle of copying, mirroring or repeating movement. These three words imply exactness within duplication and as such are an inaccurate representation of what it is important to develop. If a child slavishly copies, mirrors, or repeats then there is no individuality in the response (although often an inexperienced teacher will see this as a successful achievement of the task). The movement that the child is asked to copy is offered as a stimulus to the child to elicit a response of his or her own that is related in some way to the original movement. In this way copying is actually a form of (non-verbal) dialogue, as the adult and child continue to respond to each other within the framework of the copying exercise. (Rizzolatti, Sinagiglia & Anderson 2007). If a child slavishly copies a movement then we may be able to tick some of the boxes within a traditional evaluation framework or more significantly if he or she doesn’t copy exactly we run the danger of not being able to tick the boxes and imply failure. A successful evaluation process must take into account what lies behind the task in order to accurately assess what has been achieved. In the example given it must register the response but also describe the quality and effect of the interpretation made of that response and the dialogic interaction between adult and child that happens as a result.

This is similar to the necessity to be able to read between the lines of what a child is offering within the room. Challenging one’s own and others assumptions about children and their actions is crucial. Adults often cite theories about the children based on their own interpretations of a behaviour that they may have seen in other children. Again a simple example will demonstrate this: in the early stages of the work one child put his fingers to his ears whenever music was played and screamed. Sometimes he would even attempt to knock the CD player over. Intuition, confirmed by the fact that the child was actually putting his fingers next to his ears, not in them, guided the process for the child to the stage now where he actively enjoys playing CDs, including the tracks he says he dislikes. Any evaluation must include a way of assessing what might really be happening within the child at any given moment, of applying and developing means of realising a principle of ‘seeing anew’ in all possible situations.
Moments of development and reflection on development are reliant upon the establishment of a personal relationship between adult and child: this often happens in the acting out of this relationship within the work. There are possibly several stages in the work that need to be more clearly delineated – for example, establishing the relationship, working within the relationship, focussing on the development of the work once the relationship has been settled and so on. It also suggests that any evaluation must be focused on the relationship between adult and child as it develops in the room. In fact a great deal of what might be called intuitive evaluation happens on the part of the adult and indeed the child at the time of the interaction. When the adult is truly responding to the child and vice-versa then evaluation is necessarily happening. But it is potentially disruptive to attempt to articulate this at the time it is happening. At the end of the session again the adult and child may reflect on what happened after the event, and others observing as well have a considerable role to play as outside observers. There is also the possibility that the encouragement of reflection after the event helps to develop a more verbal and useful articulation of what was happening (in both adult and child). Even when that has been developed, the intuitive judgement (which may never be able to be fully articulated verbally) is more reliable as a true reflection of the moment of ‘knowing’ what is happening within an holistic mind-body learning and development environment. Intuition often suggests leaving this development and growth to a natural organic pattern rather than a deliberate and thought-out intervention. The challenge for evaluation is to find a way of validating and incorporating intuitive judgement in the centre of the process.

The work has been developed within the notion of the sum of the whole being greater than the parts. Alongside this is the belief that the context and atmosphere of the working environment is crucial to its success. Words that are used to describe this atmosphere include joyful, safe, fun, exciting, risky, wacky, caring and supportive. How do we evaluate the amount of joy there is in a room? Indeed how do we distinguish joy from pleasure? Pleasure helps but joy transforms. How do we assess whether a particular activity is safe for a child and also contains an appropriate degree of risk? This may differ for each child. For any evaluation to be effective it must include a way of sizing up the atmosphere and developing our understanding of what are the appropriate contexts for the work and how they can be developed. What are the circumstances in which the imaginal cells start to grow and when is an appropriate time for the dormant phase?

The achievements of the pupils have been developed within the context of the much broader changing school culture where the work of the Shysters has is infecting teaching practice in other areas and these in turn have brought new challenges to the practice. Without doubt the work would not have been so successful without the collaboration of key members of staff who were willing to incorporate principles of the work into their daily teaching practice. Beyond this is also the context of each child’s home life and the community that he or she lives in. In the example of the child who found joy in dancing, how different would he be now if his mother had negated his achievement in this, as opposed to sharing his joy? How can we capture and assess the essential ingredients within this cocktail of context? This is possibly the
biggest challenge of the work so far and points to the need to involve in some way all those adults who interact with the children to make connections with the work. Teachers, teaching assistants, other school staff, parents, governors, therapists – the list is potentially endless.

The final challenge that is implicit in all of these challenges is the notion of creativity itself. Can we ever pin down what this creative process is and dictate when and where it can happen?

A crucial feature of the development of the understanding of the processes has been the dialogue between partners who have approached the work from different perspectives. Ways of stimulating the dialogue further and indeed of recording it effectively are crucial to the next stage. The work needs to be positioned and referenced now within a much broader framework of existing research, knowledge and understanding within the fields of education, learning disability and theatre practice. This in turn means that more people from a wider range of backgrounds need to be involved in the dialogue. Work needs to be done to develop a more sustained reflective learning culture within all those involved and also to develop the young people themselves as reflective ‘researchers’ of their own learning. Once the process is better evaluated, understood and articulated this will enable the establishment of an effective evaluation frame work which must also be informed by the same spirit of enquiry, discovery, collaboration and creativity in which the work itself has developed.

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