

Dorothy Heathcote - a personal reflection

When Marianne asked me to represent our profession in this celebration of Dorothy's life it felt, Godfatheresque, like an offer that couldn't be refused. Whilst I was very honoured to be asked I was also daunted by the prospect of having to speak for so many others from so many places who have so many insights and memories of DH.

How does anyone begin to make such a distillation? Then, one of the essential things that Dorothy taught us all came to mind – the possibility of finding the universal in the particular. So, I hope that in speaking from my particular experience and memories of her, some of the universal truths about this remarkable woman might emerge.

I first met Dorothy Heathcote in a darkened room. It was the mid-70's and I was a twenty-something drama advisory teacher working in London on the Newham Drama Team. We had quite a reputation and I was pretty sure I was pretty good at teaching drama. Then a projector rolled and a flickering image came into focus on a screen and by the end of the film I had revised my opinion of myself.

I had been watching *Three Looms Waiting* and my life had just been changed forever.

What I had seen was quite simply astounding. Dorothy had completely restructured and, in so doing, revolutionised the relationship between teacher and learners in a way that I had never seen before. In fact, to be honest, in a way that had never really crossed my mind before even as a possibility let alone a desirable one. She had replaced the strictly hierarchical with the collegiate and had done so by entering into a process of co-creativity with the participants in the drama.

This in itself would have been astonishing, enough. The notion of giving learners the opportunity to take responsibility for helping to shape the direction of their own learning was not the way I had been trained to teach – even in the swinging 60's. No. Arrested as I was by that possibility, it was not the thing that had the greatest impact on me. It was the WAY in which she had developed the relationship of collegueness with the participants.

She was, of course, teaching in role – inside the drama with the participants - and by so doing had completely shifted time; bringing the action of the drama into the present moment so that it became a lived, embodied experience for all those involved.

I think perhaps for me, of all the gifts she gave to us, and there are many, this is the greatest and forms the bedrock on which the breadth of her practice rests. It certainly underpins mine and I thank her for it from the bottom of my heart.

Those of us – drama teachers all - in that darkened room recognised the power and intensity of the experience of the drama participants. We saw the minds, bodies and spirits of troubled boys, deprived primary children, youth theatre members and young people with learning difficulties ignited by the imagination, focus and intensity that Dorothy's methods drew from them. It was revelatory and we wanted more.

This led to her coming to work in Newham on numerous occasions and thus began my particular relationship with DH. Out of all of the members of the drama team (there were 6 of us) and our boss, the local authority drama inspector, at that time I was the only one with a spare bedroom! So, Dorothy became a regular and most wonderful guest in our house, filling it with glorious stories and gales of laughter. I will never forget the telling of her train journey through some far distant land and her ingenuity in improvising, so that modesty might be preserved, a bottom half to the curtain that reached only down to waist level and passed for the door to her sleeping compartment. I can hear her now.

But in above the stories, she spoke with such fire and perception about drama and its capacity to engage learners with their creativity and lay bare what it means to be a human being; and so tantalisingly about what she did with the teachers who studied with her that I just had to be one of them.

It took some negotiation and immense goodwill at home but in 1982 I set off for Newcastle and, in what she generously saw as a quid pro quo, Dorothy graciously inducted me into the legion of students who lived with the Heathcotes while studying with her. Yet another stranger for Raymond and Marianne to put up with – their generosity in sharing Dorothy with so many was bottomless.

That year proved a sea-change in the practice of our cohort - as all the other years must have been for all the others who studied at 42 North Road. Its structure revealed the binaries of parsimony and prodigality that provided an axis of Dorothy's practice and, I think, perhaps her life in general.

She encouraged all those who worked with her to get to the essence of the drama; to strip it back to its essentials rather than bury it under layers of what she saw as unnecessary theatrics. This was not a betrayal of her theatre roots but rather, I think, a profound understanding of them.

In planning for drama and in bringing it into being Dorothy recognised that less was more. She brought this home to her students with resounding clarity early in every year by working with children and adults with profound learning difficulties. In my year it was the very first project we undertook, and we spent a week at Earl's House school and hospital just outside Durham, working with children in the school in the mornings and with adult in-patients in the afternoons. We were thrown back on our own inner resources as we strove to respond to the very special participants in our dramas as Dorothy supported, guided and strengthened us in the process. It was an unforgettable experience for us all and one through which Dorothy had enabled us to confront and examine the sort of teachers we were and would like to be.

But parsimony was a watchword of her personal life, too, and living at Highburn House I saw it in action. For example, what do you do with perfectly good washing up gloves when the fingers are worn out? The DH answer was to cut cross-sectional strips from the wrists and, voilà, rubber bands for all occasions! And, what do you do with a perfectly good sink plug that just happens to have perished and shrunk? Simple - wrap it in the perfectly good corners of a facecloth that just happens to have worn out in the middle. A snugly fitting plug is reborn!

This of course was never to do with meanness. A more generous family would be hard to imagine and this generosity of spirit was found at the prodigality end of Dorothy's continuum. Whilst she was rigorous in the paring down of the drama process to its core she was fulsome in giving away all that she knew about how it worked and how to make it happen. She always said 'You can't teach like me and I can't teach like you. All I can do is share what I do with you so that you can take what you think is useful and shape it to your own circumstances.' Thus she gave her thoughts, ideas, insights, intuitions, experience and practice away freely to anyone and everyone who was interested.

Many were interested, and this led to an open door policy in Newcastle and every fulltime course had what seemed like an endless stream of visitors, from the UK and overseas, who joined in for a day, a week, a term. But of course, not everyone who wanted to could come to her and so Dorothy hit the road (and air) responding to copious requests to go and work with teachers and their students. Her Newcastle students often went with her to her UK gigs – in my year we found ourselves in Edinburgh, London, Cumbria and many points in between. And we also found ourselves planning with her and teaching drama with those who were not teachers in the narrow, school sense. Dorothy's invitations were diverse – from industry to the health service – as educators wherever they were, seized on her methods because they saw the power and relevance to their own particular circumstances.

Of course parsimony was never far away during these journeys and though she was giving so much of herself, the motto of her excursions surely was: have one frock and a change of underwear, will travel.

Throughout all of her teaching - in the university or out on the road, at home or abroad – Dorothy put herself on the line and taught by example. Not for her a dry, theorised and dislocated discourse about it but instead a hands on, up to your eyes in it, contextualised, shared experience to interrogate and reflect on.

For many of us who work in teacher education ourselves, now, this seems a very normal course of practice. At the time, though, she was exceptional.

Dorothy had no room for complacency in her practice. Like so many of her former students – and we are many – my cohort co-member and resulting life long friend, Brian Heap, and I have constantly touched base with Dorothy. We have rendezvoused with her in airport transit lounges, station tearooms, in her own home, at conferences – wherever and whenever schedules allow. We have corresponded with her – on paper with ink of course – Dorothy didn't 'do' computers – and have received back her considered opinion and valued advice, (and here's that parsimony again), literally delivered between the lines of what we had sent to her.

During those many encounters over the intervening 30 years, it was remarkable to see how she never stopped to rest upon her laurels but was in a perpetual state of quest – her drama work was always, as she would say, 'in the process of becoming'.

When she 'retired' from Newcastle, I went to see her with a gift and asked what she intended to do, now. The answer I received and which was the only thing she ever said to me that I wholly disbelieved in all the years I knew her was 'stay at home, dig the garden and read the Bible'. I left Highburn House thinking 'never in a million years'. I was right! Although she did indeed do those things, Dorothy also continued to teach and develop her methodologies around the world. Even in February this year, when she was already ill, she made a powerful contribution to a drama conference at Goldsmith's College by videolink.

Dorothy of course was not without her critics. She was seen in some quarters as a controversial figure with controversial methods. She was sometimes castigated for her idiosyncratic use of language.

It is true that it took a lot of concentration on the part her students to keep up with what she was saying. In the very first days of my year with her, our group was visited by a student whose PhD Dorothy was supervising. It was the wonderful and sadly missed Australian, John Carroll. He gave us a piece of advice that I think just about everyone followed. 'Buy a pocket cassette recorder, you'll never keep up, otherwise.' I certainly got one, so that I could record what she was saying leaving myself free to concentrate and try to contribute to the conversation without looking completely brainless. Trying to take notes at the same time was impossible. Every night, I sat up in bed with my trusty Sony and transcribed what I had recorded on that day and in so doing the richness and depth of what she had been saying became clear. I still have those notes and I treasure them.

She was criticised at times for having the temerity to teach teachers to teach without having been formally trained as a teacher, herself. As someone who has had a long career in teacher education, I am absolutely committed to view that teachers need to be properly qualified. However, I am also absolutely convinced that the greatest teachers are born and that is certainly true in the case of Dorothy Heathcote.

Yes, criticism and controversy did follow her at times but that, I think after all, is a feature of genius. Dorothy thought 'they just don't get it.'

But DH was a genius and countless numbers of children and young people have had their lives enriched because of her. The sadness of her passing is eased by the thought that her legacy lives on in those teachers she touched and that there are generations yet to come who will also have the opportunity to enter the 'now time' of drama and grapple with life in the crucible of co-creativity forged from the gifts Dorothy gave so willingly to us all.

Dorothy Heathcote was my teacher, my inspiration and my friend. I loved her and will be perpetually thankful for having known such a unique human being. Countless others would say the same.

Pamela Bowell

The Parish Church of St Werbergh
Spondon
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