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**And The Performance Speaks: (re)interpreting and  
(re)presenting student and teacher lived experiences of  
drama assessment within Further Education.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University  
of Sunderland for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

This study illuminates the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers within the English Further Education sector and reasserts the necessity of a creative education. Working with the research conversations of twenty-two students and teachers, the findings indicate a discord between the participants' experiences of teaching and learning in A Level Drama, which are tacit, collaborative, dialogic, and embodied (Polanyi, 1967; Osmond, 2007; Conroy, 2010; Franks, 2015) and the required methods of assessment. The narrative accounts of the research participants suggest that efforts to ensure the "academic rigour" of drama as a subject strengthens enduring divisions of theory and practice (Bohm, 1996; McCullough, 1998; Hyland, 2017; Fleming, 2012; Nichols, 2021), and questions the use of written examination as a viable means of expressing and measuring practical, embodied knowledge.

Synchronously, this thesis explores how lived experience can be (re)interpreted and (re)presented on the stage and the findings support Harris and Sinclair's claim that 'the writing of a play is an act of inquiry' (2014:5). Drawing on a/r/tographic practices (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005), the study argues that 'creative and artistic processes parallel the analysis that *any* qualitative researcher applies to their work' (Sallis, 2018:55) and situates drama as a method through which 'to interrogate data in different and often revealing ways' (Butler-Kisber, 2010:135). Subsequently, the study affirms playwriting as a robust research practice with the capability to 'facilitate engagement, more nuanced representation, reflexivity, and even action from the researcher, participant, and audience' (Cannon, 2012:583).

**Key words:** drama, assessment, creative methods, writing as inquiry, qualitative research.

## Acknowledgements

*'Let us, we and they, create it first in the theatre, in fiction, to be better prepared to create it outside afterwards, to extrapolate into our real life' (Boal, 2002:17).*

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## Publications and conference presentations

### Publications.

Curtis, B. (2020). 'Cutting arts from a post-Covid curriculum is a mistake'. *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-cutting-arts-post-covid-curriculum-mistake>

Curtis, B. (2020). 'Want to reward FE teachers? Fund their edu-research'. *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/want-reward-fe-teachers-fund-their-edu-research>

Curtis, B. (2020). 'Is education still a varied and expansive journey?' *Times Education Supplement (TES)*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/a-level-results-colleges-education-still-varied-and-expansive-journey>

Curtis, B. (2022). 'Chapter 5, Bridge over troubled waters: Navigating divisions of theory and practice', in Jones, S. *Great FE Teaching. Sharing good practice*. London: Sage Publications.

### Conference presentations.

Curtis, B. (2019). 'Can we talk about this? Examining the use of dialogic learning to support the integration of theory and practice in A Level Drama'. Research presentation, *ETF 2019 Annual Research Conference*, London, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2019.

Curtis, B. (2020). 'It's All Just Talk: using narrative inquiry to explore the relationship between dialogue and critical thinking in A Level Drama'. Research presentation, *ETF 2020 Annual Research Conference*, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020.

Curtis, B. (2022). 'Staging Stories: a creative (re)presentation of data through drama'. *ARPCE Annual Conference*, Oxford, 15-17 July 2022.

Curtis, B. (2023). 'Tripartite identities: journeying with myself as Teacher-Researcher-Playwright and reflecting on the use of dramatic writing as a creative and analytic practice'. *IPFREC 2023 Conference*, Sunderland, 3-6 July 2023.

Curtis, B. (2023). 'And the Performance Speaks: an exploration of writing and *wrighting* as a creative and analytic practice within qualitative research'. *International Creative Research Methods Conference*, Manchester, 11-12 September 2023.

# The Prologue

## I. Research aims.

The aim of this research is to illuminate the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers. In a financial and political climate where subjects such as drama are at risk of becoming 'the preserve of private schools' (Fazackerley, 2022), this thesis reasserts the necessity of an arts education for all. Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, warns of a situation where subjects historically viewed as being of cultural importance are quietly vanishing from the curriculum (in Fazackerley, 2022). The potential scarcity of subjects such as drama at GCSE level will subsequently have an inevitable impact on curriculum offers within the post-compulsory sector, as changes continue to be 'driven by government performance measures that favour traditional academic subjects at the expense of other subjects' (Barton in Mason, 2022). The research this thesis describes comes at a critical moment within the landscape of English education. In bringing to the fore the voices of students and teachers currently or recently engaged in the study of drama at A Level, the research will illuminate lived experience, highlight enduring dichotomies, and propose considerations for the future in a bid to ensure that drama remains an accessible, viable, and valued subject.

In response to a continued fight for the recognition of the arts within our contemporary education system and a post-pandemic context (Curtis, 2020), Barone and Eisner's claim that 'the arts in general teach us to see, to feel, and indeed to know' (Barone and Eisner, 2012:6), resonates with the methodological approach this study will take. In a desire to disrupt the normative culture of assessment which this thesis argues against, it becomes a necessity to frame the narratives that emerge from the research in a creative and dramatic form. Drama and theatre are intrinsic to both the means and the ends of the thesis and are synchronous in the subject matter discussed and

the lens through which it is interpreted. Jacobs notes how 'Drama research can access these kinds of engagements by using artistic mediums to present phenomena, experiences and findings' (Jacobs, 2016b:53). In acknowledgement of the multimodality of meaning-making in drama and theatre, and the lived experiences of the drama teachers and students which this study illuminates, creative and arts-based approaches are well positioned to support the interpretation, analysis, and (re)presentation of the data in ways that 'allows individuals to engage or be affected' (Leigh and Brown, 2021:32) by the composite narratives of the research participants.

## **II: Contribution to knowledge.**

This qualitative study will explore the narratives of students studying A Level Drama within the context of the English Further Education (FE) sector, specifically situated in a large, tertiary FE college in the Southwest of England. The stories and experiences of teachers of the A Level Drama curriculum, located both within and outside of the specificity of the research site, will be used to enhance and elucidate the student narratives. Whilst there is a significant body of literature that explores teaching, learning and assessment in drama education (e.g. Heathcote (in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984); Bolton, 1984, 1992; O'Neill and Lambert, 1988; O'Toole, 1992; Cockett, 1998; Schonmann 2007, 2011; Nicholson, 2009; Nichols, 2021), there is very little research that situates practice in the context of Further Education (Curtis in Jones, 2022). McKernan notes that: 'The conditions of teaching both in schools and in Colleges of Education at the present time make survival more urgent a concern than research or scholarship', observing a prevalent tradition upholding the notion that 'teachers teach and professors do research' (McKernan, 2008:110). As a teacher within the FE sector, my identity as an educator informs an understanding of methodologies that are situated within qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutic paradigms. I acknowledge the close-to-practice nature of my positionality and remain aware of the subjectivity of my perspective. I am also a researcher, rejecting assumptions that regard teachers as 'passive consumers of knowledge gained from research conducted by others'

(Gregson and Spedding, 2018:166), to apply ‘top-down, micro-managed approaches to the evaluation and improvement of teaching, learning and assessment’ (ibid.). In criticism of prevalent educational priorities, teacher-researchers are called to engage in research that ‘must move beyond the mere exercise of technical know-how’ (McKernan, 2008:110) and away from a place ‘in which teachers are expected to act as if experience is not real’ (Gregson and Spedding, 2018:167). The research this thesis describes is therefore in a unique position to offer insight into the lived experiences of FE students studying A Level Drama and adds to a healthily increasing presence of practitioner and teacher-led research within the sector (Hillier and Morris, 2010; Tummons and Duckworth, 2012; Gregson and Hillier *et al.*, 2015; Gregson, 2020).

This research also adds to a growing body of literature which examines how drama and dramatic practices can be used as a research approach within the context of qualitative inquiry, ‘acknowledging how performative approaches can provoke deconstructive, critical and potentially transformative involvements and responses between researchers/performers and “data”; researchers/performers and audience; and researchers/performers, audience and data’ (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:425). Where traditional ethnodramatic practices typically use drama as a means of presenting and disseminating research findings, this thesis adds to the development of scholarly work (Belliveau, 2013; Harris and Sinclair, 2014; Sallis, 2008, 2018) which demonstrates how the creative and reflexive processes of the playwright are in themselves, a thorough and robust method of analysis. In doing so, the subject of the study is reflected in and embodied through the methods used to interrogate it, complementing ‘the field of drama education, which is intricate, richly storied, sensitive and aesthetically charged’ (Jacobs, 2020a:31).

### **III. Summary of findings.**

The findings of this research study suggest that the processes of learning about and through drama as a discrete subject are found to be in conflict with the methods of assessment used to

measure student progress and achievement. Subsequently, the nature of “knowing” and “knowledge” within the context of drama education is highlighted as being tacit (Polanyi, 1967, 1969; Bohm, 1996; Eraut, 2000, 2004), embodied (Osmond, 2007; Conroy, 2010; Franks, 2015), and socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1916, 1938). In consideration of the above, the research explores the extent to which the participants’ experiences of learning and assessment in A Level Drama relate to divisions of theory and practice (Bohm, 1996; McCullough, 1998; Hyland, 2014, 2017; Fleming, 2012; Nichols, 2021) and problematises the use of written examination as a viable means of expressing and measuring practical, embodied experience.

As has been stated, this research study also responds to questions regarding the uses of drama as a methodological approach to data analysis and (re)presentation. Taking courage from creative (Eisner, 1981; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Kara *et al.*, 2021; and Phillips and Kara, 2021), embodied (Ellingson, 2017; Leigh and Brown, 2021) and post-qualitative perspectives (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Richardson, 2000; St. Pierre, 2021), this piece of work affirms the use of drama-making as a craft and a process to support a creative analysis and (re)presentation of qualitative research data. Ethnodrama (Mieniczakowski, 2000, 2019; Saldaña, 2003, 2016, 2021; Ackroyd and O’Toole, 2010; Cannon, 2012) and other ethnographic and post-foundational uses of drama as methodology (Tamas, 2012; Petersen, 2013; Vicars and McKenna, 2015; Jacobs, 2016b, 2020a; Sallis, 2008, 2018) demonstrate how drama’s characteristic ability to allow us to see the world through the eyes of others, ‘may make the research site and the subjects’ lives accessible subjectively, emotionally and existentially for the researcher and reader to identify with ‘this other’ (Ackroyd and O’Toole, 2010:4-5). In addition to its potential to conjure empathy and understanding from both actors and audience, this study highlights the playwright’s ability to exploit the metaphors, symbolism, and semiotics of the stage, through which ‘the researchers may be able to expose some of the unspoken or unrecognised sub-texts’ (*ibid.*) and bring to the fore new insights and perspectives.

## Act One

*an empty stage  
aches in anticipation*

*patiently, it waits  
to be awoken*

*by the vibrancy of bodies and voices; moving, speaking, dancing  
the presence of the spectator*

*engaged, we begin.*

### **Introduction: a 'bird in flight'.**

'Whatever is researched, we need to make sure that we acknowledge the transformative power of the arts. For too long we have concentrated on simply measuring the shadow of the bird that is art. The test of our research will rest on our ability to raise our gaze from the two dimensional, gray shadow and perceive the bird in flight, with all its miracle of song and color' (Somers in Winner and Hetland, 2001:115).

Somer's likens the future of research within drama education to a 'bird in flight'. This qualitative study recognises a need for research that is textured, thickly descriptive, embodied, and creative, as it seeks to bring to the fore the lived experiences of students and teachers engaged in curriculum-based drama qualifications. In understanding ways of knowing and being as inseparable and in a state of perpetual motion, this research uses the craft of drama to creatively analyse the relationship between learning and teaching, and practices of assessment in drama education within the context of Further Education. This introductory chapter will therefore provide

an overview of the specificity of the research aims and contexts that underpin the study, including the research setting and the research questions the study will explore. In doing so, a creative and analytic theoretical framework is introduced that assumes playwriting as a form of purposeful inquiry, as well being a method of (re)presentation and dissemination. The structure of the thesis is outlined, and an overview of each chapter is provided, as well as a glossary of terms which are deemed as significant to the reader's understanding of the research described.

### **1.1. Drama and post-compulsory education: current contexts.**

Drama as a subject is on the decline, and as Nichols states, 'remains in permanent 'self defence'' (Nichols, 2021:9). As a discrete subject, the number of students choosing to study drama at GCSE in England has 'seen a decline of 30% since 2010' (Masso, 2021) with the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), Progress 8 and financial challenges cited as drivers sustaining this trend (Johnes, 2017:7). Inevitably, changes to curriculum at Key Stage 4 correlate with the number of students taking up the subject as an option at A Level (Cairns, 2021), although drama's ability to weather the storm and adapt in the face of rapid change means it remains a popular subject of choice for many students. Fisk reports that 'Drama entries have remained consistent across both GCSE and A Level since 2020' (Fisk, 2021) but acknowledges that nevertheless, 'despite the stability predicted this year the decrease in Drama students the past decade is dramatic' (ibid.).

The impact of covid on assessment methods during the pandemic saw teacher-assessed grading replace external examination, with subsequent concerns raised in relation to grade inflation and the widening of the geographic north/south divide in terms of student outcomes and social mobility (Weale *et al.*, 2022). In the case of drama qualifications, the number of students achieving top grades reached 'over double the levels seen in normal times' (Clark and Butcher, 2021), reigniting enduring debates regarding a need for reform of GCSE and A Level Drama assessment methods

which meet the needs of the individual discipline being examined (see Pearson, 2022, and the Rethinking Assessment movement). Pearson's recent report investigating the future of assessment for 14-19 year olds in England concludes that in their current state, assessments are not testing real skills and that 'sometimes students with talent are not having their skills recognised appropriately in the subject discipline' (Pearson 2022:12). The research study this thesis describes gives weight to this agenda, drawing on first-hand accounts of teachers and students of A Level Drama to interrogate current methods of assessment and suggest future alternatives.

The Further Education sector faces similar challenges. Writing for the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), Sibieta and Tahir (2022) observe that 'Further education colleges and sixth forms saw some of the largest cuts in spending in the decade up to 2020' and despite a more recent increase in government funding, significant and new challenges emerge. An increase in student numbers, recovery from the pandemic and financial implications related to cost of living and inflation are all cited as hurdles that the sector will need to address in the coming months and years. The statistics drawn on in the IFS report corroborate Orr's prediction that 'despite great optimism as to the potential of FE to raise productivity and enhance social mobility this has not been achieved due to underfunding and the current system of governance' (Orr, 2020:507).

The research described in this thesis is concerned with the teaching, learning and assessment of A Level Drama in the situated context of the FE sector in England. In contemporary contexts, 'further education and skills remains high on the political agenda' (Spielman, 2021), with a 'focus on strengthening vocational and technical education and developing high-quality technical qualifications with a clear link to occupations for which there is a demand' (Straw *et al.*, 2019:30). As such, questions regarding competing paradigms of skills and knowledge within the current educational landscape will be explored and discussed as part of the research. Whilst Nichols notes that the creative industries in Britain are 'some of the most successful, continually growing

and ‘value-for-money’ industries in the country’ (Nichols, 2021:25), the place of A Level Drama within a sector focused on skills shortages in areas such as nursing, accountancy, software development and coding (Edge Foundation, 2022), raises questions and challenges for the future sustainability of the qualification.

## **1.2. The use of drama as a theoretical framework.**

Belliveau (2015) notes that the incorporation of the arts to inform educational research and scholarship has existed since the work of Dewey (1934) and Langer (1957). Gaining traction through the writings of Barone and Eisner (Eisner, 1981, 2002; Barone, 1995, 2013; Barone and Eisner, 2012;) arts-based research (ABR) has opened up avenues for artists, researchers and educators to explore how artistic forms and practices can be used within the context of qualitative and post-qualitative research. Challenging the historic superiority of empirical data collection, ABR brings to the fore the often-vagueness and ephemerality of research wherein art is both the subject and the lens, the method, and the outcome. Eisner and Barone respond to cynicism regarding the trustworthiness of arts-based research, stating that, ‘what we seek is not so much validity as it is credibility’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012:6). The purpose of ABR is not to claim or conclude but instead to be ‘a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspects of the world’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012:3). Eisner and Barone’s aspirations for ABR as mode of inquiry that does not seek methodological hegemony, provides support for the plurality of the research approach this thesis describes, which ‘exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live.’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012:4-5).

Beck *et al.* tell us that ‘Arts-based approaches, such as theatre, are increasingly being employed as a method and a methodology for conducting and disseminating research in scholarly settings’ (Beck *et al.*, 2011:687). Enjoying a rich history as a methodology used within the study of social

sciences, health, and education (Lea et. al, 2011), arts-based research practices afford the opportunity to draw on a range of creative disciplines and traditional qualitative approaches whilst ‘creating, translating, and exchanging knowledge’ (Lea *et al.*, 2011:2). ABR can be considered as a standalone methodology but is also commonly associated with qualitative research practices. McNiff (2008) defines ABR as making systematic use of artistic processes alongside the generation of artistic expressions as fundamental to ways in which both researchers and participants can examine and understand their subjective experience. Similarly, in her work as a scholar and a dancer, Pentassuglia describes the ‘potential of Art in order to reach a deep understanding of phenomena’ (Pentassuglia, 2017:4) to generate ‘multiple meanings’ (ibid.) and alternative forms of communication that can reach further than traditional qualitative research practices and modes of inquiry.

This research inquiry positions drama at its onto-epistemological centre: drama is both the subject of exploration and the means through which it is interpreted and understood. My personal positioning and philosophy as researcher, teacher and drama practitioner is aligned with hermeneutical, constructivist and interpretive paradigms. To that end, the stance adopted in the methodology of this study takes the view that qualitative research within the field of education is a dialogic, embodied, and active process of inquiry where meaning is a co-constructed act. It also acknowledges the subjectivity present in the positionality of the researcher as being both within and outside of the research site, and the potential for insider bias that can occur as a result. In my position as ‘Teacher-Researcher-Playwright’ (T-R-P), I am inextricably woven into the fabric of words and images presented in and through the pages of the play, which ‘renders the experiential (ontological) *and* epistemological gains of arts-based research as equivocal...and results in a fundamental conflation’ (Archibald, 2022:170). Within the context of qualitative research, the researcher recognises their subjectivity whilst also noting that our subjective experiences and understandings are ‘deeply valued’ (Jacobs, 2020a:22) within the constructs and

creative processes of drama education. Drama is one way through which we can curiously and practically explore our world, with meaning-making occurring as a product of our own interaction with our environment, self, and others.

Whilst there will be opportunities to consider the transferability of the research methodology and findings to other contexts, any suggestion of the uncovering of capital T 'truth' is rejected as an outcome of the research. Instead, this study favours 'Holding the space for moments of doubt and uncertainty and a stumbling and falling towards new horizons of understanding' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:424) and in doing so, recognises that 'the "knowledge" generated in this research will be fluid rather than static' (Jacobs, 2020a:22).

### **1.3. Wri(ght)ing a play and its role within the research study.**

This doctoral research has two foundational textual elements: the formal thesis, and a play script. The narrative of the research can be likened to the thesis itself, with the 'what happens when' account of the stages of the research journey. The story however is something different. Taking its title from a phrase used by one of the research participants, *And The Performance Speaks* is a dramatic text which theatrically stages the stories of students and teachers of A Level Drama. This thesis presents the script as integral to the work examined as part of the PhD. It is not merely an appendix or an aside. It is the part that is alive, the part that pumps, and pulses, and beats. As Archibald notes, 'Arts-based approaches are credited with enabling embodied understandings, particularly when the maker of the artwork is also the researcher' (Archibald, 2022:170). The ability for the researcher to analyse and explore the data through the practical craft of drama sheds new light on the narratives of the participants and allows for a creative and embodied (re)presentation of their lived experiences. Within this research study, the construction, development, and practical exploration of the dramatic text is used as a method of data analysis,

and to identify and illuminate the findings. In line with Sallis, this thesis will argue that as T-R-P, 'my creative and artistic processes parallel the analysis that *any* qualitative researcher applies to their work' (Sallis, 2018:55) and that the construction, development and scripting of a play interweaves both data and analysis as it simultaneously creates new data - *creata* - (Petersen, 2013) to be (re)interpreted. Fundamental to this approach is an observation of what occurs when the play is handed over to others; the T-R-P relinquishes ownership of the play as part of the journey towards new knowledge, constructed and created in the (re)interpretation and (re)embodiment of the data as a piece of drama.

Vicars and McKenna state that: 'Traditional methods of doing research and representing social science can pose problems when the sensory and the emotional stories have to be articulated and expressed' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:424). In a research study that investigates the lived experiences of students and teachers of drama, words alone are not enough and drama is used as a means of exploring itself in the situated context of post-compulsory education. Following in the tradition of Richardson, it is noted that 'When the material to be displayed is intractable, unruly, multi-sited, and emotionally laden, drama is more likely to recapture the experience than is standard writing' (Richardson 2000:934). In choosing drama as a means of analysing and (re)presenting qualitative data, the research acknowledges and welcomes the role of the body/ies within stories of self and other, explored through the simplicity of an artform that 'requires only a body, breathing, thinking, and feeling' (Heathcote in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984:90). *And The Performance Speaks* exists because no other means can tell the story in the way it needs to be told.

Whilst the thesis must provide an expected account of the research journey, the play should be considered as a living artefact within the body of the work. Eisner tells us that 'what artistic approaches seek is to exploit the power of form to inform' (Eisner, 1981:4) and that the boundaries

between form and content become blurred to the extent to which they exist in a state of mutual synchronicity. Belliveau refers to the work of Carter (2012) in explaining how the use of artistic interludes within her doctoral thesis 'became an inner story, used as an alternative and creative way to share and expand insights from the outer story (her chapters)' (Belliveau, 2015:6). Part-way through the thesis, an interlude disrupts the structure of the formal document, and the reader will be directed to the pages of the play and encouraged to read it alongside and as an integral part of the narrative of the research. These instructions should be followed to access and appreciate the full scope of the research and its findings in both creative and academic terms. In reading the play as an active component of the thesis, the drama punctuates the research and provides foregrounding, texture, and insight of perspective.

*And The Performance Speaks* is intended to be read in tangible form as a separate text and in the shape of a book as typically associated with a printed or published play script. In undertaking the physical turning of pages, the reader acknowledges the embodied life of the play as a method of data analysis and research (re)presentation, but also as a piece of performance that will continue to have a legacy in the world and the potential for further iterations and constructions of meaning. The use of dramatic writing and performance as a means of dissemination will be explored in the Epilogue as the T-R-P reflects on the research journey and considers its role within the context of qualitative and post-qualitative research.

*NB: in the event that the reader is unable to access the play text as a hard copy, it can be found in Appendix E of the thesis.*

#### **1.4. Research questions.**

The research study offers a response to the following questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between processes of learning and methods of assessment in the experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers?
- 2) Acknowledging enduring dichotomies, to what extent do the participants' experiences of learning and assessment relate to divisions of theory and practice?
- 3) How can the craft of drama support a creative analysis and (re)presentation of the lived experiences of the research participants?

The questions were developed as a result of a preparatory, small-scale research project (Cossey and Curtis, 2018) and following focus group discussions and surveys with A Level Drama students and teachers prior to the formal commencement of the study.

#### **1.5. Research setting.**

The student research sample consists of fourteen students studying A Level Drama within the context of a large Further Education college in the Southwest of England, between the academic years 2016-2021. At the time of interview, some students will be actively engaged in their studies, whilst others will draw retrospectively on their experiences. The purpose of interviewing “current” and “past” students is to ensure a broad picture of lived experience that can capture both the rawness and reality of present experience, as well as narratives that are perhaps afforded a more thoughtful introspection through the passing of time. The students have all achieved the sample college's standard entry requirements for A Level of grade 4s in English Language and Mathematics, with an additional 6 GCSEs at grade 4 or above. GCSE Drama is not a prescribed entry requirement as an increasing number of students are reporting a lack of provision or limitations in options available at GCSE, however the transition to A Level Drama is arguably smoother if this prior level of qualification has been achieved.

The teacher research sample comprises eight teachers who are currently, or have previously, delivered the A Level Drama curriculum. Not all the teachers interviewed are currently employed within Further Education colleges, but all have experience of the sector. Three teachers are current employees in the FE college that is the research site. Whereas the student sample have experience of studying one awarding body specification (WJEC Eduqas AS/A Level Drama and Theatre), the teachers reflect more broadly on the A Level curriculum and their experiences of delivering comparative qualifications designed by other equivalent exam boards (AQA; Pearson Edexcel; OCR). My own field notes, research journal and lived experiences as a teacher-researcher delivering A Level Drama within the FE college that is the research site, will also form part of the data and findings presented in this thesis. To that end, I have taught and have a relationship with all the students in the sample. The potential risks and ethical implication of my positionality as teacher-researcher will be discussed in Act Three.

It should be noted that the volume of students studying A Level Drama in the sample college is high compared with many other centres. It is common for sixth forms or private institutions in the same geographical area to have fewer than 10 candidates per year who select to study drama at A Level. In the context of the research setting, the average size of a cohort is typically up to one hundred students across years one and two of the A Level Drama course, with class sizes of between twenty to twenty-five. Reflecting on this disparity in numbers between centres, it will be necessary to recognise the inevitable bearing this has on teaching and learning strategies, resources, and student results. To suggest that the experiences of either teacher or student within each of these very different environments will be the same is a falsehood. As Stenhouse reminds us:

‘The field situation [setting] in which the action takes place is unique. No attempt to replicate it can succeed. And the uniqueness of the situation is not nominal, but significant.’ (Stenhouse, 1975:136)

The results of the questions posed by this project are therefore most relevant within the specific context of the research setting, and the wider FE environment. It is likely however, that other practitioners within different settings can make use of the findings from this research if they are involved in the field of education and in particular, the teaching of drama at A Level. The enduring dichotomies of theory and practice, knowledge, and skills, academic and vocational that are deeply entrenched within the research this thesis describes, are also present across a number of disciplines and as such, may be of interest to practitioners in different fields.

### **1.6. Structure of the thesis.**

The structure of this thesis departs from normative conventions and instead develops a form that allows the research journey to be effectively and clearly expressed. The documentation of the research study is separated into acts, scenes, and sub-scenes, and denotes a time before and after the play, *And The Performance Speaks*, is constructed. An interlude is situated part-way through the body of the work, momentarily directing the reader away from the formal thesis and towards the play-text which is the embodiment of the *data/creata* construction. This interruption is a deliberate provocation: an opportunity to let the play speak for itself and a contextualisation of the Acts which follow this intended interval.

The thesis also contains text which represents the active voice of the T-R-P, my voice. This text is indicated in italics and may precede, conclude, or interject within the more formal writing of the thesis. Often, my voice provides a way of introducing the Act or specific stage in the journey, acknowledging my embodied and human thoughts and feelings and experiences in relation to the research study. Collaborative and dialogic practice is central to the approach adopted by the research and therefore the voices of others are also present at points in the work. This text is similarly italicised and attributed to its author. The play, *And The Performance Speaks* is referenced within the body of work, with specific quotes and the relevant page numbers identified

for cross-referencing purposes. The structure of the thesis is explained in more detail in the paragraphs that follow:

#### **1.6.1. Act One (Contextual overview of the study).**

Act One introduces the focus of the research and the rationale for a creative approach to data analysis and (re)presentation of findings. The contribution to knowledge is stated in relation to the research of drama in the context of post-compulsory contexts, as well as in the use of writing and *wrighting* as a practice of inquiry. Within this chapter, the research setting, and participant sample is outlined.

#### **1.6.2. Act Two (Literature review).**

Act Two will discuss existing literature relevant to the field of study. It is noted that little is written specifically about teaching and learning in drama within the context of Further Education, subsequently enhancing the original contribution to knowledge this research study makes. The act begins by exploring current contexts and priorities in English post-compulsory education, before discussing types and ways of learning and creating knowledge within drama education more specifically. As part of this discussion, key concepts are brought to the fore. These include: the body and embodiment; parallels between education and theatre as socially constructed acts; the place of drama both on and off the curriculum, and related debates regarding drama as subject or pedagogy. Central to this will be an exploration of divisions of theory and practice and how such dichotomies impinge on and continue to influence the methods of assessment used to measure student progress and achievement in drama. The review of literature concludes by highlighting the potential uses of writing, and specifically playwriting, as a research practice and form of inquiry. This section brings to the fore the work of scholars whose creative, writerly, and dramatic approaches influence the methodology and methods adopted in this study. Questions

and concepts will be raised for further consideration in Act Three as the tripartite identity of the T-R-P is journeyed through and arrived at.

### **1.6.3. Act Three (Methodological approaches and methods).**

Act Three sets out a justification for the methodological approach of the research. It outlines the positionality of the research and the researcher within qualitative, interpretative, and hermeneutical paradigms and constructs the tripartite (Sallis, 2018) and a/r/tographic (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005) identity of the Teacher-Researcher-Playwright (T-R-P). Writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Harris and Sinclair, 2014), research-based theatre (Beck *et al.*, 2011), and Petersen's (2013) concept of 'creata' are identified as the overarching methodologies underpinning the practices adopted in the research. An examination of Richardson's (2000) CAP Ethnography as a process of creative and analytic inquiry, and the use of crystallisation (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2009, 2017) as a reflexive framework to ensure the credibility of the research approach/findings is also discussed.

Act Three goes on to explain the methods of data/*creata* collection and begins to tell the story of how the data is worked with through the creative lens of the playwright. In explaining how the craft of drama responds to what the 'data wants' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016), the act illuminates how analysis of the interview data is achieved through the rigorous and reflexive processes of making a play. The act also explores the methods used to transcribe and code the data from twenty-two research conversations with A Level Drama students and teachers. As part of this process, the creation of the play's structure, plotline and characters is discussed in relation to stages 1 and 2 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic practice. Borrowing from the traditions of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006; Braun, Clark and Hayfield, 2022), initial themes are identified and given names. As the data is translated into *creata*, the narrative of the play comes into being and the structure of the drama and the characters are developed.

#### **1.6.4. An Interlude (*And The Performance Speaks*).**

Following Act Three is an interlude, a placeholder for a shift in time and perspective. The Interlude serves as an interval in the staging of the story: here, *the performance speaks* for itself. It is at this point that the reader will be directed to the pages of the play as a means of contextualising and punctuating the Acts of the thesis which follow. The reader will be encouraged to move their focus away from formal academic structures and engage in an embodied reading of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*. Here, the composite voices of the research participants are illuminated through the dramatic form, which has been constructed as a result of the creative, analytic, and writerly practices of the T-R-P.

#### **1.6.5. Act Four (Summary of findings).**

Act Four offers a summary of the findings – or “illuminations” – in response to the original research questions. The primary findings from the creative analysis of the data/*creata* will be outlined in order to frame the discussion which is documented in Act Five. Implications for the future practice of assessment within the context of A Level Drama will be acknowledged, and subsequently expanded upon as part of the recommendations found within the Epilogue.

#### **1.6.6. Act Five (Findings are interpreted and discussed through the practical processes of the playwright).**

Act Five describes Stages 3 and 4 of the T-R-P’s process, within which the focus is on explaining how knowledge and understanding continue to be created in the (re)interpretation of the play through the bodies and voices of others. In considering how the play is read, rehearsed, and performed, the research findings are drawn into focus and discussed through the refinement of visual, physical, and textual metaphors in the drama. The T-R-P examines how the vantage point of the spectator allows for further readings of the data findings to be explored and expressed.

Relevant literature is returned to and reviewed, and the research questions are responded to, in some cases generating new questions and pathways of inquiry.

#### **1.6.7. The Epilogue (Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations).**

The Epilogue observes how the play might exist in the world, a legacy which allows for nuances of the research findings to be continually uncovered. In this coda to the story of the research journey, the potentiality of the play as a method of dissemination is discussed and some recommendations based on the research illuminations are offered. These relate to the place of drama as a discrete subject within the context of FE, as well as in relation to how teaching, learning and assessment in A Level Drama could be reimagined in the future. As part of this chapter, recommendations will be made that allow for a practical reimagining of assessment practices within the context of A Level Drama. The applicability of the research findings in relation to other educational qualifications will be explored, within contexts where divisions of theory and practice remain a prevalent and contentious issue. The limitations of the study are also noted with suggestions given for further work.

#### **1.7. Key terms and definitions.**

This thesis draws heavily on several key terms and requires an understanding of some nuance of the sector in which it is situated, and the methodological concepts which frame the research approach. The final section of this Act details some brief descriptions and explanations of these key terms to provide clarity of understanding in relation to their usage within the context of the thesis. Stating the purpose and definition of key concepts and terms also ensures that no assumptions are made in terms of the reader's prior knowledge and understanding of the situatedness of the research, and the theoretical perspectives that underpin it.

### **1.7.1. The Further Education (FE) sector.**

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF, 2019) provide an overview of FE provision as including:

- General FE colleges (GFEs)
- specialist colleges (for example land based or residential special educational needs)
- Independent Training Providers (ITPs) some of whom are part of the charitable or “Third” sector
- Work Based Learning (WBL)
- Adult and Community Learning (ACL)
- education and training in the justice sector [prisons and Young Offender Institutes] for offenders and young offenders.

### **1.7.2. Drama and theatre.**

As terms, “drama” and “theatre” are often used interchangeably. However, this thesis assumes a difference between the two terms regarding purpose and intention. In examining the etymology of the words, “drama” indicates something done, whereas “theatre” infers something observed (Baker, 1973). In the context of this research study, “drama” is used to describe a physical and practical activity within which the participants actively engage in the creative processes of using and/or making drama. “Theatre” is used to describe the outcome of processes of drama and suggests the presence of an audience who observe the theatrical event. Within this thesis, “drama” will be capitalised when referring to *A Level Drama* as a qualification title and adopts its uncapitalised use in all other contexts.

### **1.7.3. Lived experience.**

This research takes a phenomenological reading (Husserl, 1960; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 2002) of the term “lived experience”. Referring to Burch’s definition, lived experience describes the ‘way in which human beings exist in the world as selves, and it implies that the essence of this experience lies precisely in its “lived” character’ (Burch, 1990:133). As a piece of qualitative research within the context of drama education, this thesis also ascribes to Leigh and Brown’s assertion that lived experience is an example of Embodied Inquiry and ‘therefore may focus on the body as a communicative and expressive tool constructing new knowledge’ (Leigh and Brown, 2021:24). As a consequence of Embodied Inquiry, it is also acknowledged that ‘being in the field, engaging with others, being immersed in particular contexts and environments requires the researcher to be prepared to experience and live what is new, unexplored and not understood at this point’ (Leigh and Brown, 2021:23).

### **1.7.4. (re)present and (re)interpret.**

It is a deliberate choice to use parentheses around “re” when describing the way in which the research “data” that is the bodily narratives of the characters in the story, is being (re)told and (re)presented on the stage. To refer to Way and Tracy (2012) in Ellingson (2017), the bracketing of (re) suggests a practice of care and compassion in the way in which the data is handled, which is both sensitive and respectful, but also pro-active and embodied. ‘Performance comes from the body’ (Ellingson, 2017:185) and in repositioning the body as central within the methodologies and methods this qualitative study employs, we can bring to the fore the corporeality of the stories and the bodies this research illuminates.

### **1.7.5. Teacher-Researcher-Playwright (T-R-P).**

This term is a phrase coined by and arising from the experiences of the researcher within the context of this qualitative study. The term ‘Teacher-Researcher-Playwright’ describes the

symbiosis of the composite identities and positionalities of the teacher, the researcher, and the playwright in the context of the study, and through which the craft of the playwriting is used as a means of analysing and interpreting qualitative data. A full explanation of this phrase can be found in Act Three, section 3.1.

### **Act One: chapter summary.**

The opening Act in this thesis has sought to provide the contextual grounding necessary for the reader to meaningfully engage in what is to follow. In bringing to the fore the concepts, themes and tensions which underpin the research study, the necessity of drama as central to the ways in which the inquiry is approached and experienced by the researcher has been outlined. The practice of writing has been introduced as an embodied and creative process through which the T-R-P explores data and creates new data (*creata*), highlighting the hermeneutics of an onto-epistemological positioning which acknowledges meaning as co-constructed, fluid, and dialogic.

## Act Two

*Drawing on what has come before, I begin to map the geography of the landscape*

*I build a picture of the world of the play; the spaces the characters will inhabit.*

*Our stories interweave and overlap as I see myself in the experiences of others  
Watching, listening, feeling...*

*What does the past have to say to the future?*

### **Introduction: setting the scene and researching the “world of the play”.**

Theatre director Katie Mitchell (2009) describes the importance of understanding the setting and environment within which the action of a play occurs: ‘Building a complete picture of the place or places in which the action of the play occurs helps the actor enter...the world in which their character exists’ (Mitchell, 2009:20). As a researcher, it is similarly necessary to construct a map of the landscape we intend to study. In the case of this piece of research, the Further Education (FE) sector is the “world” within which this study is situated. It is, therefore, first necessary to provide an overview of current discourses regarding FE, before turning to address the literature relating specifically to drama education.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the relevant literature which informs this research. This will include a critical exploration of the historical challenges faced by the Further Education sector in England in relation to its definition, purpose, and funding, as well as highlighting current contexts, priorities, and points of tension. Such contentions include the enduring dichotomisation of theory and practice, academic and vocational teaching and learning, and skills and knowledge, which bear specific relevance to the research questions being

investigated. Following this, section 2.2 will outline three concepts which underpin the research and contextualise the nature of knowledge construction and learning within theatre and drama education. These are concerned with:

- 1) theatre and education as socially-constructed, collaborative processes;
- 2) the interdependence of theory and practice;
- 3) and the significance of the body as a site of meaning making.

Section 2.3 interrogates the literature regarding learning and teaching within the specific context of drama education and outlines the difference between the uses of drama within education and the inclusion of drama as a discrete subject on a formal curriculum. In this section, prevalent and persistent tensions are considered, such as the arguments surrounding drama as subject or pedagogy, and process or product. Within this section, it is acknowledged that there is a scarcity in the literature in relation to the teaching and learning of drama within Further Education contexts, highlighting the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes. Following this in section 2.4 will be a review of existing literature to contextualise an understanding of practices of assessment within formalised drama education, with points raised in relation to the superiority of writing as an assessment method and the current role of written examination. Concluding the chapter is a consideration of the use of playwriting as a practice of inquiry within the context of research into drama education, with existing scholarship introduced as foregrounding for the methodologies and methods used in the study, which are explained in more detail in Act Three.

## **2.1. Defining the Further Education sector: contexts and challenges.**

The wider FAVE (Further, Adult, and Vocational Education) sector itself can be described as 'broad and far-reaching' (Gregson and Hillier *et al.*, 2015:16), encompassing formal and informal learning opportunities for 16–18-year-olds, and adults. At present, there are 228 colleges in

England (AoC, 2022a), 161 of which can be described as Further Education colleges (AoC, 2022b). However, the nature of Further Education specifically, has been debated and ‘not always fully understood’ (Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi in Tummons, 2020:3). Referring to the work of Panchamia (2012), Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi describe what has oft-been referred to as the ‘everything else sector’ (ibid.), highlighting a lack of understanding of the unique nature of Further Education colleges within the wider educational landscape. This has resulted in the impression that FE lacks purpose, and a generalisation that Further Education colleges ‘are perceived as not fully realising their potential’ (Foster, 2005:vii). Husband and Mycroft (in Tummons, 2020) challenge the view that FE lacks a relevant and purposeful definition, suggesting that teachers working within Further Education colleges do indeed have a strong sense of their own identity but need ‘an audible and coherent voice’ (Husband and Mycroft in Tummons, 2020:343). Instead of succumbing to debates that claim attempts to define FE are enduringly problematic, Husband and Mycroft instead offer a definition that ‘inextricably’ (Husband and Mycroft in Tummons, 2020:344) links purpose and identity: ‘*further education should promote and support transitions of individuals through learning*’ (ibid.). This, they say, is ‘all that is required in order to understand the ethos of the sector’ (ibid.), and this is the definition of FE that this thesis chooses to adopt.

Since its birth from The Education Act 1944, Further Education has been a sector in a state of consistent tumult and precarity (Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi in Tummons, 2020), and one that has become more prevalently researched and discussed (Smithers and Robinson, 2005; Hillier, 2006; Simmons and Thompson, 2008; Avis, 2009; Husband and Mycroft in Tummons, 2020; Orr, 2018, 2020). In understanding the history and positioning of a sector which has been subject to ‘almost constant political tinkering’ (Watson, Husband and Young, 2020:129), it is important to recognise that FE has endured systemic underfunding (Wolf, 2015; Orr, 2020) and ‘been subject to at best a benign neglect by policy makers’ (Avis, 2009:633). High-profile independent reviews such as the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011), the Lingfield Report (BIS, 2012), the Sainsbury Review (The

Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016), and the Augar Review (Augar, 2019), have all drawn to the fore questions surrounding professionalism, vocational education, apprenticeships, technical education and skills, and funding, which have had wide-reaching implications for the FE sector. Whilst colleges have demonstrated their resilience and ability to respond rapidly to new directives, Orr notes that this is not without issues and that the ‘remarkable capacity of FE colleges to adapt is the flipside of their incapacity to determine or challenge the changes imposed upon them’ (Orr, 2018, in Orr, 2020:512).

In the decades since the 1990s, Further Education has been driven largely by the marketisation of the sector (Hodgson and Spours, 2017; Watson, Husband and Young, 2020), and whilst playing an unequivocally important role in providing opportunities for 16–18-year-olds and adult learners across the UK, ‘the FE sector appears to be in a period of retrenchment’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2017:3). This, as Hodgson and Spours explain, can be broadly attributed to the ‘impact of government policy since 2010’ (ibid.) which has instigated funding cuts, an emphasis on skills and work-based learning, and encouraged an increase in school-based sixth forms, all of which challenge the security of the FE sector and threaten its growth, innovation, and stability. Saunders (in Tummons, 2020) agrees, stating that funding for 16-18 education has fallen by 15 per cent and funding for adult learning by 45 per cent, equating to an overall drop of 30 per cent funding for the post-compulsory education and training sector. These figures highlight the inequalities in funding for FE in comparison with other sectors and signifies ‘implications for whether institutions can do a good job of educating and training people today’ (Wolf, 2015:3). This is a point upheld by Ofsted’s Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, who states that: ‘FE is being underfunded in comparison to other sectors, and that that underfunding is having a direct negative effect on FE provision’ (Starkey, 2018).

Today, Further Education colleges cater for some 1.6 million students (AoC, 2022b) studying across a diverse range of academic, vocational, and technical qualifications, including work-based learning and apprenticeships. Orr (2020) highlights the importance of Further Education but states that despite its size and position, the sector has been persistently subjected to countless policies and reforms that have each failed to deliver a more stable and financially secure future for FE colleges in England. This is at least in part, owing to governmental ideologies and agendas that view FE as ‘the place where the perceived economic and societal ills might be solved’ (Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi in Tummons, 2020:3) but where changes to policy ‘seem either cyclical...or just a rebranding exercise’ (ibid.), failing to affect real progress and/or change. However, as Coffield notes, the ‘instrumentalist attitude of politicians fails to capture the uniqueness of FE’ (Coffield in Coffield *et al.* 2014:1) and instead applies a tightening pressure on institutions to consistently ‘improve standards, by which I mean test scores’ (ibid.), at the detriment of teaching and learning. Gregson and Hillier *et al.* (2015) point out that the work of FE teachers has become increasingly legislated over the past 50 years, a development which they claim can be viewed both positively and negatively. With a growing emphasis on issues of quality within further education, Gregson and Hillier *et al.* (ibid.) note that this signals a regard for the importance of teacher professionalism and quality learning experiences for students, whilst also conversely growing a culture of performativity and accountability. Referring to the work of Ball (2003), they describe the potential for a ‘culture or system of accountability which uses public comparisons of performance as measures for productivity and output’ (Gregson and Hillier *et al.* 2015:85). Consequently, the impact of such instrumentalist emphasis serves to distract teachers from the business of teaching and learning and limit risk-taking and creativity in approaches to pedagogy.

A further issue to be drawn on in this brief overview of the FE sector relates to debates regarding academic versus vocational education, and skills versus knowledge. Hyland remarks that ‘preferences and prejudices favouring intellectual over practical or manual pursuits are deeply

embedded in Western culture and arguably, have their origins in Ancient Greek philosophy.’ (Hyland, 2017:5), an opinion prevalent in much literature regarding vocational education (see Winch, 2000; Hyland, 2006, 2017, 2018; Hyland and Winch, 2007; Bathmaker, 2013; Wheelahan, 2015). Throughout this research study, dualist attitudes towards both drama and education are frequently apparent and will be addressed and challenged throughout the remainder of the literature review and the chosen methodological approach. These dualisms include mind/body; theory/practice; academic/vocational; knowledge/skills. Young highlights what he describes as a ‘fear of knowledge’ (Young, 2013:107) amongst schoolteachers in relation to curriculum theory, an issue that can also be located within contemporary FE contexts. Arguably, Further Education teachers have also become increasingly concerned with ‘teaching to the test’ and as Young points out, there is ‘a neglect of the knowledge question itself and what a curriculum would be like if an ‘entitlement to knowledge’ was its goal’ (ibid.). In a similar vein, Coffield asks us to consider what if ‘teaching and learning became the first priority?’, warning that ‘policy has narrowed to the mantra of ‘economically viable skills’, as proposed by the Leitch review of skills (2006:1)’ (Coffield, 2008:5). Sennett also notes in his book, *The Craftsman*, how ‘the “skills society” is bulldozing the career path...people are meant to deploy a portfolio of skills rather than nurture a single ability in the course of their working histories’ (Sennett, 2009:265).

There has been an enduring discourse amongst politicians and theorists alike which seeks to lessen the gap between the academic and the vocational, with an emphasis on ‘the role of ‘skills’ in maintaining prosperity, raising productivity, and generating growth’ (Wolf, 2015:66). The introduction of T Levels (DfE, 2022) in 2020 were designed to offer the reform to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) required to fill gaps in the workforce and bridge the divide between academic and vocational qualifications in England. Marrying training with significant work experience in industry, the goal of T Levels is to ‘link the learning directly with the labour market and underpin the knowledge gain with direct collaboration with employers’

(Misselke-Evans, 2021:56). Drawing on the conclusions arrived at in the Sainsbury Review (2016), in her doctoral thesis, Misselke-Evans clarifies the distinction in types and forms of knowledge revised in the design of the T-Level qualification. Despite claims that a 'classical definition of knowledge is insufficient to encapsulate all of the knowledge types taught in vocational education' (Jones and Lloyd in Tummons, 2020:197), Misselke-Evans states that 'there has been a re-emergence in the use of the term technical to depict a form of education which enables and includes the development of a robust body of knowledge linked to a profession' (Misselke-Evans, 2021:55). It is noted that this definition makes 'clear distinction from knowledge which is referenced to or linked or related with an occupation to the specific set of knowledge or theory which underpins the practice of the professional working in this field' (ibid.). In their discussion of vocational knowledge, Jones and Lloyd (in Tummons, 2020) describe the influence of Eraut's work in defining the tacit nature of knowledge that 'brings together knowing how to do something and knowing about a subject' (Jones and Lloyd, in Tummons, 2020:197). It is relevant to highlight however, that both drama and vocational education suffer from the misconception that practical knowledge does not also contain significant amounts of subject/disciplinary and theoretical knowledge as well. What may be described as problematic, is the fact that tacit knowledge is 'loosely defined as things we know but can't explain to others' (Jones and Lloyd, in Tummons, 2020:198) and like the types of learning experienced in drama, is not easily articulated verbally or in writing. This can be attributed to academic/vocational divides that seemingly place greater worth on writing as a means of valuing and measuring knowledge and brings to the fore questions of assessment that will be explored and challenged within this thesis. These are relevant points to consider in relation to the definitions and forms of knowledge within the context of drama education, raising questions regarding the extent to which drama is seen as an academic, or a vocational subject. Alongside broader debates regarding the nature and purpose of education, these pertinent and politically charged issues will be examined further throughout

the remainder of this literature review and revisited within the discussion of findings in Act Five, as well as being dramatically depicted in the play, *And The Performance Speaks*.

The dichotomisation of academic and vocational qualifications is an enduring issue (see Avis, 2004; Hyland and Winch, 2007; Keep and Mayhew 2010; Hyland, 2014) shoring up what Coughlan describes as a prevailing “negative perception” that vocational courses are for those who could not succeed in academic subjects’ (Coughlan, 2015). He argues that there is a need for high quality vocational provision that addresses the ‘mismatch between what people are studying and the needs of employers’ (Coughlan, 2015). This is an argument also highlighted in the renewed Education Inspection Framework (EIF) which emphasises that:

‘All providers should be contributing effectively to meeting the skills needs of employers and the local, regional and national economy...When evaluating the quality of education in further education and skills providers, inspectors evaluate (among other things) whether the curriculum offers learners the knowledge and skills that reflect the needs of the local, regional and national context’ (Ofsted, 2022).

One of the ways in which Further Education colleges are encouraged to meet the needs of employers is through the development of personal skills, behaviours, and attitudes of their students (Ofsted, 2022). Bereiter and Scardamalia describe a ‘rising emphasis on personal attributes – such as skills, attitudes and values’ whilst ‘at the same time there is a declining emphasis on knowledge’ (Bereiter and Scardamalia in Kerslake and Wegerif, 2018:73). This is not to say that the value of knowledge itself has been abandoned, more that it has been replaced or perhaps diluted, by a focus on getting young people “work ready” and developing what has commonly become known as “soft skills”. As Wheelahan concurs: ‘The paradox is that while

education is supposed to prepare students for the knowledge society, the modern curriculum places less emphasis on knowledge, particularly theoretical, disciplinary knowledge' (Wheelahan, 2010:3). Interestingly, Wheelahan goes on to highlight how this disparity in the prominence given to knowledge within contemporary curricula can be most prevalently observed in FE: 'This applies to all sectors of education and training, but particularly to post-compulsory education and training which includes the senior years of school, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education' (ibid.). In reviewing the literature noted above, similarities between technical and vocational education and learning within the drama classroom can be observed. In drama, learning happens through a malleable interaction of individual and collaborative creative exploration and both process and product should be valued and appreciated as valid outcomes of learning. Given the plurality and plausibility of approaches to teaching and learning in the subject of drama, we can anticipate the difficulties this will pose in relation to assessment. Detailed discussion of both teaching and learning and assessment in drama education will follow in what remains of the chapter, preceded by debates regarding theory/practice, and body/mind that underlie prevailing divisions within the subject.

The opening to this literature review has sought to set the scene for the action that follows. In providing an overview of key concepts and issues within the further education landscape, seeds are sown for more detailed discussions of teaching, learning, and assessment within the context of A Level Drama. The remainder of the chapter will examine the nature and concept of theatre, and draw parallels with education, concluding both to be socially constructed events. The body will be brought to the fore and recognised as integral to the ways in which we teach and learn about drama, examining existing literature that provides examples and challenges assumptions regarding issues of pedagogy and assessment in drama education.

## **2.2. Ways of seeing, ways of knowing: three underpinning concepts.**

Theatre director and theorist, Peter Brook opens his text, 'The Empty Space', with the following statement:

'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.' (Brook, [1968] 1990:11)

For Brook, theatre then is concerned with intention; the intention of the actor entering the space to call this action "theatre", and the intention of the observer to classify themselves as "audience". The roles of actor and spectator, and teacher and student are not dissimilar. There are assumed behaviours associated with each and it is arguably the interaction of the two in a common space and time which results in the occurrence of an "event", whether that be a moment of performance or a moment of learning. It is interesting to consider Brook's assessment of the agency of the spectator within the context of the theatre: 'In a sense there is nothing a spectator can actually do. And yet there is a contradiction here that cannot be ignored, for everything depends on him' (Brook, [1968] 1990:25). The necessity of the relationship is highlighted and underscored by a suggestion that the physical proximity of the bodies of both parties is required in the construction of meaning. Conroy's perspective is helpful here in acknowledging the physical body 'as the vantage point of my analysis' (Conroy, 2010:6). Embodiment and the role of the body as a site of meaning-making and learning will be discussed later in this chapter, and indeed will arise as a theme throughout the thesis. At this point however, we focus on Conroy's observation that as spectators, our analysis of a theatrical event is 'always subject to the restrictions or possibilities that my own body imposes or opens up' (ibid.) and therefore, 'the 'ideal' spectator only exists as an abstract idea' (ibid.).

In his consideration of the role, Brook also describes the 'deadly spectator' (Brook, [1968] 1990:12) who 'in his heart...sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves' (Brook, [1968] 1990:12-13). This is reminiscent of what we might call the 'deadly classroom' and builds on Freire's articulation of the "banking" concept of education, 'in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits' (Freire, [1970] 2017:45). It can be inferred therefore, that both education and theatre depend on those involved and present in the act to be active and engaged. Freire claims the 'raison d'être of libertarian education' (Freire, [1970] 2017:45) should be a commitment to breaking down the prosaic definition of "student" and "teacher", 'by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students' (ibid.). This is reminiscent of Boal's (2002) insistence that all human beings are both simultaneously, actors and spectators. In blurring the boundaries between "stage" and "auditorium" a space is created where both actor and audience/student and teacher can willingly participate in a shared responsibility for the construction of learning and meaning-making. The hermeneutics of this process will be considered throughout the doctoral study, exploring the relationship between different forms of knowledge and knowing within the context of drama education, and also, within the constructs of qualitative research.

### **2.2.1. Theatre and education as socially-constructed and collaborative processes.**

When we think about theatre, we consider an art form that utilises verbal, but also non-verbal means to tell a story through the placement and movement of bodies and objects in a defined time and place. In the instigation of an act of performance, the intention is that together with the collected presence of the audience, meaning will be constructed and situated within the specificity of the culture and context/s it inhabits. As renowned physical theatre practitioner and teacher, Jacques Lecoq states, 'Rather than handing on a set body of knowledge, it is a question of reaching a common understanding' (Lecoq, 2002:20). Despite the fact that what we see and read

within the theatrical frame has been precisely created and controlled by the director and/or company, it is never possible to claim complete authority over how the semiotics of the stage are read by the audience: 'levels of interpretation vary between individual spectators...whose world view, cultural understanding or placement, class and gender condition and shape her/his response' (Aston and Savona, 1991:120).

Supporting a social-constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) perspective, theatre, and education both subscribe to the view that as individuals, we 'construct meaning not only from the interplay of what [we] newly encounter and what [we] already know, but also from interaction with others' (Alexander, 2017:11). Within the context of education, and more specifically drama education, these social interactions are crucial to both the academic and the personal development of learners. McCullough suggests that 'theatre practice is an interactive social group activity...[which] assumes that performers and spectators gather together, whatever the precise nature of the particular event' (McCullough in McCullough (ed.), 1998:4-5). The same can be said for education: it is not the transmission of knowledge that creates meaning for students, it is the relationship between teacher-student-environment-context-subject which enables learning to be a meaningful experience.

Primarily concerned with how we see and read visual art, John Berger's (1972) seminal text 'Ways of Seeing', challenges the reader/viewer to think deeply about the complexities of the relationship between what we see and what we know, and the process of meaning-making as an interaction between self and other/s. Berger asserts that before we can talk, we see: 'Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.' (Berger, [1972] 2008:7). The semiotics of the stage are read in much the same way as Berger describes how we view art, and more broadly speaking, the world around us: 'We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves' (Berger, [1972] 2008:9). The way in which

we read and make sense of the world is inherently informed by the immediate circumstances that we inhabit. Brook supports this in his assertion that ‘meaning never belongs to the past. It can be checked in each man’s own present experience.’ (Brook, [1968] 1990:15). How we articulate and express our understanding of the world in relation to our experiences is a question this thesis will explore through the creative and analytic lens of the teacher, the researcher, and the playwright. In choosing to journey with a methodology that is creative and embodied, as well as robust and analytic, a modality of forms is used to express and illuminate knowledge and knowing, in and through its state of becoming. In the discussion of divisions of theory and practice that will follow in this chapter, attention is drawn to a generalised assumption that theoretical knowledge is predominantly associated with written and verbal language, with words. Berger, however, states that ‘it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world’ (Berger, [1972] 2008:7).

Within the context of the drama classroom, the process of meaning-making occurs in embodied and artistic ways. Thoughts and ideas are verbalised but are also expressed and represented physically and visually through the body, scenic devices and stage machinery, and the aesthetics of the performance: ‘the theatrical language is the most essential human language’ (Boal, 2002:15). Lipman summarises the early philosophies of Wittengstein (1889-1951) stating that: ‘In philosophy, there is a running argument as to whether words alone have meanings or whether life and nature can have meaning too’ (Lipman 1988:136). In making a distinction between what can be *said* and what can only be *shown*, we call into question the tensions associated with the use of written and verbal language to describe what is performed, felt, and witnessed on the stage. Lecoq similarly notes that:

‘We begin with silence, for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew’ (Lecoq, 2002:29).

Conroy articulates that 'to understand the meaning of certain concepts, we need to do more than look up the word in a dictionary' (Conroy, 2010:15). Theatre is meant to be seen, to be experienced. It could be argued therefore, that there is an inadequacy in the use of verbal and written forms of communication to truly express our understanding of, and encounters with performance. Renowned pioneer of drama education Dorothy Heathcote notes that 'All drama, regardless of the material, brings to the teacher an opportunity to draw on past and relevant experience and put it into use; language, both verbal and nonverbal, is then needed for communication' (Heathcote in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984:91). The necessity of access to both verbal and non-verbal language to communicate dramatic experience is relevant when considering the nature of teaching and learning in drama education. The importance of allowing students to first engage in tangible experiences of theatre and performance *before* they are required to talk or write about them can therefore be highlighted as a prerequisite. This has implications for the methods of assessment used within drama education and raises questions about the legitimacy of traditional written examination to measure a student's understanding of what is inherently, a physical and practical event.

### **2.2.2. The interdependence of theory and practice.**

Drama teacher Matthew Nichols states that when considering the nature of drama education, 'It is not a contradiction that our subject is both practical and academic' (Nichols, 2021:115). However, as McCullough points out, dichotomies of theory and practice pervade drama education, highlighting enduring tensions which lie in 'the perception that theory is a contemplative activity and that the time needed for practice is potentially disruptive to serious thought' (McCullough in McCullough (ed), 1998:3). This hierarchical view is one that intersects both the vocational/academic divide and the theory/practice divide, not to mention the divisions prevalent in the validity given to the study of the arts over the study of the sciences. The notion of theory and practice as being discrete is one that also pervades the methodological approach of this

thesis, and one that will be discussed further in Act Three. Educator and scholar Stephen Kemmis, asserts that those involved in educational research have historically been burdened by the dogma that practice and practitioners are inferior to theory and theorists. He defines the 'rationalistic theory of action' as being pejorative in its assumption that 'theory is a guide for practice' (Kemmis in Carr, 1995:9). Writing from the position and perspective of theatre and drama education, McCullough concurs in explaining that performance, by its nature, 'is perceived as a transitory form and lacking the rigour of objective (critical) thought by reason of the ephemeral nature of its 'text'' (McCullough in McCullough, (ed.), 1998:2). This compounds the notion that theory maintains its superiority in the relationship, and whilst it views practice as useful in the tangible manifestation of an idea, it cannot ever be the source of the idea itself.

Grady suggests that the problematic nature of the theory/practice divide within the teaching and study of drama is primarily to do with a misinterpretation of the word 'theory' itself. Explaining, she states that 'some see contemporary theory with a capital 'T', think it only refers to new critical theories each with its own specialist discourse, and see such theories with their own dauntingly dense ideas as useless to their practice' (Grady in Taylor, 1996:59). This opinion is also found in the work of Fleming (2012) who observes that teachers of the arts have a special responsibility to grapple with theory in order to understand what they are doing and why. In pointing out the need to encourage both artists and teachers of the arts to engage with the theory that underpins their practical discipline, Fleming believes that 'thinking can be expanded, prejudices challenges and fulfilment enriched' (Fleming, 2012:4). McCullough also discusses the complexities involved in the dismantling of the theory/practice divide in dramatic pedagogy, noting that 'all theory is ultimately concerned with linguistic philosophy' and therefore 'the tension between theory and practice in our discipline [theatre] may be perceived as a further advance on the past subservience of practice/performance to the cultural yardstick of the literary, or logocentric, form' (McCullough in McCullough (ed.) 1998:4).

Within the context of drama as a discrete educational subject, “theory” is generally unanimously associated with written work. In his assessment of the 2014 reforms to GCSE Drama examinations, Nichols observes that ‘there seemed to be an in-built understanding that written examination...somehow had more *rigour* than an assessment of practical skills as demonstrated in performance’ (Nichols, 2021:48). It is certainly the case that my experiences as a drama teacher of over a decade, corroborates this assertion: in the eyes of many college leaders, managers, parents and even students themselves, it is the written examination that is perceived as the theoretical content and subsequently, the marker of credibility in terms of an overall assessment of knowledge within the subject. As Nichols concurs: ‘it has crept into lots of educational thinking that a written assessment is somehow more useful, or more accurate, or *better*, than its practical counterpoint’ (Nichols, 2021:49). And yet, Nichols goes on to conclude that:

‘When students have to write about how they might demonstrate their practical skills as part of a written exam it is always the case that they will find the response easiest and be able to write in detail and clarity if they have experienced this work for themselves. Any theories about performance are best tested, explored and demonstrated through performance’ (Nichols, 2021:99).

The writing demanded of A Level Drama students in their theoretical examination requires them to respond as artists, as illustrators, as painters of a fictitious dramatic landscape. In this act of explaining to the reader their vision for the interpretation of a text on the stage, a physical and visual media, they find their language limited to the form of words in the communication of their ideas. Therefore, it could be claimed that students need to learn to *paint* with language, as in the absence of images or a physical depiction of meaning they are left reliant on words to embody what they see. As McCullough notes, ‘theatre cannot be constrained within purely logocentric structures. It is also physical, visual and visceral’ (McCullough in McCullough (ed.) 1998:4). The

argument against the prominence of writing in the education and assessment of drama can be supported by Berger who reminds us that images are ‘more precise and richer than literature’ (Berger, [1972] 2008:10). We could then question not only the relevance, but also the authenticity of testing the “knowledge”, and more pertinently, the *creativity* of students studying a subject that is grounded in seeing, and doing, and being, through the written form. These dilemmas will be discussed in more depth in section 2.4 of this chapter, where research into how students studying drama are assessed and measured is critically analysed.

### **2.2.3. The body as a site of meaning-making.**

Despite drama’s place in history as being ‘studied simply as a branch of literature’ (Leach, 2008:18), within the context of contemporary drama education it is now accepted that dramatic knowledge is understood as being both embodied and situated (Osmond, 2007, Conroy, 2010, Franks, 2015). Whilst there is knowledge as defined in the traditional sense, (the knowledge of theatre history, dramatic styles, and acting techniques, for example), there is also a type of knowledge that can only occur in and through a state of bodily engagement and experience with the dramatic form. Osmond refers to the work of Franks (1996) who notes that before issues of meaning-making, materiality and representation can be discussed in relation to the body and embodiment in drama education, ‘it first must be understood as a site of knowledge itself, a site that is never generalized but is always specific to the lived experience of each individual’ (Osmond in Bresler, 2007:1110). Conroy explains this well when she says that ‘Although the notion of ‘the body’ or ‘bodies’ is a profound simplification of a complex set of cultural and philosophical beliefs, theatre exists as a place where we might animate and experiment with these simplified schema’ (Conroy, 2010:74).

The drama teacher’s role therefore is to foreground the active process of experimentation as central to their pedagogical approach and encourage in students an awareness of how our

theatrical bodies become a site for both meaning-making and expression. Movement is central to this process and is more than simply 'covering the distance between points A and B' (Lecoq, 2022:21). When working with students in the context of drama education, we facilitate spaces which emphasise that 'the important thing is *how* the distance is covered' (ibid.). If as drama teachers, we also open up opportunities for learners to watch theatre and ask questions about bodies in relation to theatre, then we also foster collective, critical thinking and dialogue as we invite students to 'analyse the connections between theatrical matter and the real lived cultural matter of their lives' (Conroy, 2010:75).

Franks (2015) states that 'Learning in drama draws on learners' practical knowledge of situated human relations and their abilities to select, shape and enact aspects of the social world' (Franks, 2015:313). To create a space where this type of learning can take place, the teacher's own practical and theoretical knowledge of both the subject and the learners is significant within the drama classroom. This can be associated with what is described by Shulman (1987) as Pedagogic Content Knowledge whereby teachers possess not only a level of expertise within their specialist subject, but also an in-depth understanding of the particular pedagogies that enable content knowledge to be transposed into learning experiences for others. This is not to return to the previously discussed and dismissed concept of "banking education" where the teacher is the possessor and author of knowledge. Instead, Franks' position acknowledges the role of the teacher in the drama classroom as active and engaged in a process that brings the body and bodies of those present to the fore, as a means of learning about and through the subject. As such, drama teachers must approach the question of knowledge within the teaching and learning of the subject as something that is to be discovered by the student, a discovery that can be skilfully facilitated by the teacher, but one which ultimately should be journeyed by the students as social and storied beings. In doing so, it is necessary to ensure students in the drama classroom have the freedom to explore and question without any fear of "getting the answer wrong". As Franks

concludes, knowledge within drama education is a holistic experience which holds at its heart a commitment to 'emphasise both the materiality and plasticity of the meaning-making body, its mutability in action and perception and its profound implication in learning' (Franks, 2015:313).

Thinking on Franks' assertion that drama education should be a holistic experience, we might further consider attempts to separate mind from body as fundamental misunderstanding of both the subject of drama, and how it is best taught and learnt. Referring to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), it can be argued that far too much emphasis has historically been placed, for teacher and student alike, on the development of the skills listed in the cognitive domain and the misconception that the theoretical and the physical act of learning are separate entities. Hyland recalls how Dewey 'observed that "mastery of the body is an intellectual problem" in early learning and went on to describe the implications of this notion of holistic, somatic development for all aspects of education both general and vocational' (Hyland, 2018:7). The hierarchical nature of the levels within each of the three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor), is often, Hyland (2017) observes, incorrectly interpreted, giving greater weight to the development of higher order thinking skills before recognising the necessity of the acquisition of foundational knowledge. It also feels archaic to view the three domains as separate, linear, or hierarchical processes (Dettmer, 2005). It could certainly be argued that optimum learning is achieved when the teaching or activity acknowledges the mutuality between cognition, emotion, and action for the learner. Osmond notes that 'Drama education offers an opportunity for the body to "do" what it "knows" by making meaning the ground for action' (Osmond in Bresler, 2007:1113). In consideration of the body as a site of meaning-making, drama education acknowledges the significance of our lived experience and recognises that our interactions as teachers and students are shaped through our embodied engagement with, and situatedness in the world. In continuation of this argument as a means of defining the term "praxis", Osmond explains that: 'Our body-knowing is circumscribed by our social and cultural circumstances...Within the options circumscribed by our current situatedness

we choose our actions and interactions (ibid.). Freire holds a similar position when he states that ‘only human beings are praxis’ (Freire, 2017:73). Continuing, he explains that ‘Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings’ (Freire, 2017:74). In following the thinking of both Osmond and Freire, we can oppose dualist interpretations of knowledge and provide ‘an embodied perspective on the notion of Drama Education and the Body “praxis” as the enactment of knowledge’ (Osmond, 2007:1113-4). Praxis is a term used widely within the study and practice of theatre and it lends itself naturally to the creative synthesis of words, thoughts and actions in a practical approach to the teaching of drama:

‘In my experience as a drama teacher, it is here in this process of making theatre that you see the most learning take place. You see students applying their understanding of theoretical concepts in a practical context, feeling empowered and working together to embody experience in the form of dramatic narrative. This, we might call ‘praxis’, if by praxis we understand it to mean ‘theory in action’, or the coming together of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in a practical act of learning’ (Curtis in Jones, 2022:54).

In consideration to references made earlier in this chapter regarding the relationship between language and thought, being and doing, Osmond’s reversal of Descartes’ famous adage is interesting as he notes that, ‘drama education represents an opportunity to involve the body *a priori* in the process of knowing - to be, we might say, in order to think’ (ibid.). In drama, we regularly use the term “muscle memory” to describe the efforts an actor must go to in order to train their body to learn the physical actions or movements within a performance, to the extent that it becomes fully inhabited and embedded within the body. Bohm defines proprioception as when ‘thought is aware of itself in action’ (Bohm, [1996] 2014:91) and suggests that ‘proprioception is built into the physical movements of the body’ (ibid.). Although, as Bohm notes,

proprioception can be improved – ‘athletes and dancers learn to make it better’ (ibid.) – it cannot ever be perfect in any one individual ‘because for many of your movements you are not aware of what you are doing. But still it is there’ (ibid.). This statement illuminates the complexities of praxis as a way of thinking about teaching and learning and foregrounds the problematic question of assessment in relation to the A Level Drama curriculum. If, as Bohm notes, we are not always able to be aware, or to articulate the very nature or origins of our thoughts (the theory) in relation to the movement of the body (our practice as performers), perhaps then extended consideration of the means of measuring such embodied experiences of learning must be further considered.

### **2.3. Teaching and learning in drama education.**

Whilst much has been written about teaching and learning within drama education, there is little to be found about the specifics of this within the post-compulsory sector. Drama teaching within the Further Education sector is mentioned in passing in some examples of the literature, but the focus remains primarily on drama education within compulsory, or HE contexts. This highlights the contribution to knowledge that this thesis brings in offering specific insight to the experiences of drama teachers and students in England within the context of post-compulsory education. Having provided an overview of the general FE landscape at the start of this chapter, I therefore turn to the body of literature regarding teaching and learning in drama education in other contexts to evaluate significant and persisting discourses concerned with drama in education and dramatic pedagogy.

#### **2.3.1. Drama in education: subject or pedagogy?**

O’Toole and O’Mara note that: ‘Drama and formal curriculum have always had a relationship of mutual suspicion in Western society’ (O’Toole and O’Mara in Bresler ed., 2007:203). The impermanent and ephemeral nature of drama has often been out of kilter with the formal curriculum, which is ‘conceptualized with status and permanence’ (ibid.). Teachers, scholars, and

policy makers alike have wrestled to define the purpose of drama in education, with differing priorities coming in and out of focus since the turn of the twentieth century. It should be noted that despite oscillating between periods of flourishing and periods of austerity, drama has proved itself tenacious and has withstood attempts to remove it from the curriculum entirely. Although numbers opting for drama have dropped in the last decade (Nichols, 2021), it remains a subject choice at both GCSE and A Level, as well as continuing to be utilised in extra-curricular contexts (school plays, drama clubs, theatre visits etc.). More recently, and specifically post-covid, there has been a growing re-assertion of the importance of access to the arts as being fundamental to a young person's experience of education and one that should not simply be the preserve of those educated in private schools (Starmer, July 6, 2023). Despite continued challenges, drama in education holds on.

Historically, the uses and place of drama and theatre within education can be broadly described as falling within 'two parallel and inter-related education movements' (Nicholson, 2009:13), commonly labelled as "Drama in Education" (DIE) and "Theatre in Education" (TIE). This thesis is concerned with what is commonly described as "curriculum drama" or drama in education, that being drama as taught in schools (or in the case of this research study, colleges). Just as the term "curriculum" is continually contested and reinvented within educational literature, it is important to point out that there are also nuances and complexities in types and forms of DIE. It is a broad definition and considers both the use of drama as a pedagogic learning tool (a method) and the teaching of drama as a discrete, accredited curriculum area (a subject). Since the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988, drama has been subsumed within the study of English in primary education, only becoming an option for discrete study in Key Stages 4 and 5. It is also relevant to note that there is also a place for drama education outside the confines of the school or classroom, with DIE occurring 'increasingly in community spaces and in professional theatres, with populations of all ages' (McAvoy and O'Connor, 2022:1). Whilst this literature review will not

explore the many and varied social and educational uses of drama within community contexts (see TIE, Applied theatre, Prison Theatre, Children and Young People's Theatre etc.), it is acknowledged that the teaching of drama on a formal curriculum is just one facet of a subject and an artform that is adaptable to myriad situations and environments. It is not surprising therefore, that the place of drama within education is a topic which has long been the focus of political and scholarly debate. The study of drama's place within education is a topic too vast and complex to be tackled in any depth within the literature review this thesis provides. What follows therefore, is a very brief overview of the development of drama and theatre in education, drawing on prevailing discourses which have shaped, and continue to shape, its place both on and off the curriculum.

Gavin Bolton (1979, 1984, 1992) has written prolifically about drama in education, contributing significantly to our understanding of how we teach and learn within the context of the drama classroom. In his summary of the theory and practice of pioneering drama educators (Finlay-Johnson 1912; Caldwell Cook, 1917; Way 1967; Heathcote in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984; O'Neill and Lambert 1988) Bolton notes the commonality of their individual approaches as being 'the assumption that when pupils are involved in drama some kind of learning occurs' (Bolton, 1985:155). Whilst we might assume that there is a tradition of theatre studies as having a presence within schooling which pre-dates the turn of the twentieth century, the value of drama within the education system can be noted as growing in appreciation in the post-second world war era (Wooster, 2007). Its burgeoning popularity can be seen as in alignment with progressive models of teaching and learning which favoured the centrality of the child and recognised the importance of play, creativity, and imagination on an individual's development. This movement towards using drama as a way of learning – a pedagogical approach – signalled the start of a polarisation between definitions of theatre and drama within the context of education and is one that remains a subject of debate and disagreement within drama, theatre, and education communities. As Geoff Readman, chair of National Drama writes, 'The unhelpful distinction

between 'drama in education' and 'learning about theatre' began with the highly influential publication of *Development through Drama* (1967) in which Brian Way claimed, 'there are two activities which should not be confused – one is theatre, the other is drama' (1967:02)' (Readman, 17/04/2023).

O'Hara (1984) attributes the formalisation of drama in education to the work of Peter Slade (1954) who advocated for drama's place on the curriculum and recognized its distinct use as a tool for personal development, separate from the agendas of theatrical production. This description fits with what O'Toole and O'Mara define as the prevalence of three, distinct 'paradigms of purpose' (in Bresler ed., 2007:204) regarding drama in education, which focus on drama's ability to develop a child's cognitive, expressive, and social skills and largely view drama as a *vehicle* for learning and personal growth, or as a branch of literature. This conceptualisation of drama's use in education was advanced during the 1950s and 1960s through the work of teachers and drama practitioners such as Peter Slade, Brian Way, and Dorothy Heathcote, who furthered the use of pedagogical techniques such as "teacher-in-role" and the "Mantle of the Expert" which were quickly adopted and made popular. Within the context of a progressive, post-war Britain and without a standardised curriculum, schools had the autonomy and the flexibility to explore these alternative methods of teaching and learning in the hope that they 'that would redress the traditionalism of pre-war education' (Burt, 15/04/20), and it was this view of drama that dominated and had become the norm by the late 1960s.

The propensity to view drama as a powerful pedagogy was also furthered by a growing mistrust of commercial theatre throughout the 1950s (Nicholson, 2009:19), which subsequently led to the establishment of DIE's cousin, TIE, which was designed to 'encourage young people to participate in theatre as a learning medium and as a vehicle for social change' (ibid.). The political nature of TIE however, meant despite thriving during the 1960s and 1970s, it remained vulnerable to the

mistrust of policy makers and government ministers (Crossley, 2021:139) and funding cuts made under the Thatcher administration and the increasingly prescriptive nature of the curriculum in primary schools, led many TIE companies to depart from 'experimental, open-ended programmes' and move towards 'more instrumental, objective-led projects' (ibid.).

Nicholson observes that drama's place on the formal curriculum followed a similar pattern to TIE and flourished during the 1970s. She notes that: 'in secondary schools, drama was gaining popularity as an optional examination subject in the fourteen to eighteen range...and there were increasing numbers of graduates with degrees in drama entering the teaching profession who welcomed the opportunity to teach at examination level (Nicholson, 2009:39). Indeed, Burt (2020) points out that in 1962 there were only six courses in the UK offering specific drama teacher training, compared to over one hundred by 1971. Despite this, the 1980s and 1990s brought about changes to the education system, namely the introduction of the National Curriculum in England in 1989, which meant drama's place on the curriculum became once again, 'hotly contested' (Nicholson, 2009:39), with some scholars arguing that an over-reliance on drama as a method prevented students from learning about drama as an art form (see Hornbrook, 1991).

These enduring tensions are problematised more recently by Nichols who asks: 'is drama the coat or is it the coat hanger?' (Nichols, 2021:186). It is now widely recognised that attempts to separate the notions of learning through and learning about drama serve to exacerbate false dichotomies. For Bolton, 'the richness of classroom drama lies in its potential to achieve change of understanding (a pedagogic objective) along with improvement in drama skills and knowledge of theatre (an artistic objective)' (Bolton in Jackson, 1993:39), and labels attempts by educational trends to decouple such objectives as 'reductionist and functional' (ibid.). In his comparison of TIE and DIE Bolton notes that there has historically been an assumption that 'school drama has nothing to do with pedagogy and that drama teaching is solely about promoting the study of

dramatic art' (Bolton in Jackson, 1993:39). Continuing, he asserts that in fact 'drama has a great deal to do with pedagogy *because* it is an art' (ibid.).

Tackling this perennial issue, Patrice Baldwin writes a passionate response to a letter from the Department for Education to the Birmingham Repertory theatre, which 'suggests drama is not a subject in the minds of ministers' (Baldwin, 2013). In relation to a review of the primary curriculum, the letter in question claims that drama is considered as a series of pedagogies and not a discrete subject worthy of consideration or inclusion in the core curriculum (DfE, 20th November 2012). Baldwin questions what she perceives as 'preconceived ideas and archaic notions of what constitutes curriculum' (Baldwin, 2013), throwing out the DfE's position on drama's place within the primary curriculum as being 'politically expedient and complete nonsense' (ibid.). Citing drama as both a subject *and* a powerful pedagogy, Baldwin observes the necessity to have skilled teachers who hold both specialist drama subject knowledge and can provide the opportunity for children to learn about drama, as well as understanding of how drama can be used as a medium and vehicle for learning. Baldwin's assertion is visible in what O'Toole and O'Mara describe as being a 'fourth paradigm of purpose' (in Bresler ed., 2007:204), which draws on the functional aspects of drama and concentrates on 'learning what people do in drama' (ibid.). This shift in perspective is significant in that it 'offers drama a place in parity with the other arts in the twenty-first century curriculum' (ibid.) and allows for the unification of purpose through a focus on a student's ability to make, to present, and to respond to drama. These overarching principles are largely retained in the structure and content of GCSE and A Level Drama syllabi that we are familiar with today and arguably, 'drama education does now – and perhaps more so than ever – balance its mix of skills acquisition and a theatre/performance focus' (Nichols, 2021:26).

### 2.3.2. Drama in education: process or product?

The question of drama as subject or drama as pedagogy is also reflected in divided opinions about the purpose of drama within education as being one of process, or product. This dilemma was observed some decades ago by Dorothy Heathcote (1973) who astutely notes that the dichotomisation of drama as process or product is as a result of the teachers' own experiences of drama which 'lead them to consider the finished product as paramount, and the energies of the participants and contribution to the growth of the child are pushed to the background' (Heathcote in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984:81). Whilst advocating for the transformative nature of drama in education however, Neelands warns against textbooks that claim to 'mythologize the potential efficacy of drama education' (Neelands, 2004:48). In his assessment of the "power" of drama, he states that 'Drama cannot, of course, of itself teach in any kind of way, nor can it, of itself, be powerful' (ibid.), and yet concludes that within the drama classroom, "miracles", used here 'to describe accounts of events which claim some profound and new change in a student...can and do happen' (Neelands, 2004:47). Summarising, Neelands notes that such miracles are bound within our understanding and expectations of the overall purpose of education, adding to a collective opinion that in drama education, students enter into a *process* of learning where the development of self is at the heart of the educational experience.

Drawing on the work of Howell and Heap (2001), Anderson describes the process of learning within drama education as involving students through 'embodiment and enactment, focusing, imagining, creating, investigating, reflecting, problem-solving, collaborating and communicating' (Anderson, 2012:68). In discussing the significance of collaboration and collaborative learning as central to drama pedagogies, Anderson draws on Vygotskian tenets to describe 'a dynamic threshold of what the student is capable of learning through interaction with others, rather than the capability of what they can already achieve alone' (Anderson, 2012:67). Dewey's (1916) emphasis on the *search* for truth within collaborative, communicative processes of learning,

wherein the journey is of greater significance than the outcome is also relevant for a curriculum designed to explore the *process* of making drama. The drama itself is concerned not with the presentation of a certain truth, but with a set of possibilities which are shaped entirely subjectively through the co-ordinated and collaborative experience of the participants. As Big Brum Theatre in Education company state in their Artistic Policy, 'artistic production is a process of becoming, born out of the need that human beings have to know and re-know themselves, individually and socially' (Big Brum, 2011:1). It can therefore be assumed that the pedagogies of learning in drama are cooperative, exploratory, and underpinned by an understanding of the agency of the learner/young person as imperative. This is in 'direct opposition to transmission teaching' (Big Brum, 2011:2) and acknowledges the role of the drama teacher as facilitator and co-participant in the creation of knowledge through engagement in the dramatic situation.

Fleming believes however, that debates surrounding the purpose and function of drama in education have seen a 'gradual shift from a theoretical focus on the subjective, personal growth of the individual through creative processes of self-expression to a recognition of the social nature of drama and the importance of the development of understanding in objective, cultural contexts' (Fleming, 2019:3). This is countered by O'Toole who chooses to offer a more holistic view of drama's purpose in education. Recognising the importance of process *and* product, subject knowledge *and* pedagogy, O'Toole states that the drama teacher should be able to draw on all of the above in an approach that is responsive to the differing needs of their learners and dependent on their age and context. As well as dramatic subject knowledge, O'Toole cites dramatic pedagogy as central to the role of the primary teacher using drama across the curriculum, whereas he claims teachers in secondary settings need 'all the above, plus knowledge and skill in making formal performance and theatre in multiple styles, teaching acting and production skills, teaching dramatic history, genre and background, and managing formal curricula and syllabuses' (O'Toole in Schonmann (ed.), 2011:14). For teachers in the post-compulsory sector, O'Toole

continues to highlight the necessity for teachers of drama to 'teach their speciality, but also how to cultivate their students' broader understanding of their context, and articulacy and advocacy skills' (ibid.). This, he notes, is central to supplying students with the skills and experience necessary for a career within the industry, which is certainly an agenda prominent in current agendas in relation to the purpose and efficacy of teaching and learning within further and vocational education and training (Ofsted, 2022).

In conclusion to the question over drama's place as subject or pedagogy, process or product, Nichols decides that 'The 'logical' and well-considered response is that it isn't one thing or the other and that it is a fascinating and complex mixture of both' (Nichols, 2021:186-7). In fact, Gallagher (2003) goes as far as to say that there is no one, correct pedagogical model for the teaching of drama and that as Bolton (in Bresler, 2007) summarises, a teacher's approach is likely dependent on the contextual background of the drama classroom within which they practice. This brief overview of the history of drama in education highlights that divisions and dualities prevail and perceptions of drama as subject or method continue to shift in response to an ever-evolving education system. As Hodgson pointed out in 1972 however, 'the questioning and re-examination of aims and purposes can only lead to stronger and more virile approach in the long run' (Hodgson, 1972:11) and drama in education has indeed made clear its ability to be resilient in the face of challenge and change. The following section of the literature review will therefore continue to explore these enduring debates in more detail, extending its scope to consider the unhelpful dichotomisation of process and product, and the subsequent impact on methods of assessment within the A Level Drama curriculum.

## **2.4. Assessment in drama education.**

‘...due to its multi-faceted nature, creativity does not seem to be an easy skill to teach, let alone assess. Unlike the ability to add or subtract numbers, creativity cannot be taught explicitly, and is also difficult to measure systematically’ (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:23).

Assessment within the context of arts education, and specifically drama education, is a topic subject to enduring debate and consternation (Eisner, 1993; McKone, 1997; Cockett, 1998; Schonmann, 2007; Jacobs, 2016a, 2016b). Nichols (2021) suggests that despite being at the very heart of the subject of drama, creativity itself cannot be measured. This is problematic for a subject in a constant state of precarity, and particularly in a post-pandemic world where the theatre industry is still very much in a state of recovery (Walmsley, 2022). If, as Nichols states, ‘there is no formal or recognized measurement or scale on which to measure creativity’ (Nichols, 2021:86), then this presents a significant challenge in the most appropriate way to assess students on their learning within drama whilst remaining viable as a subject at A Level.

To interrogate this question further, it is first necessary to explore some definitions for the term ‘creativity’ within the context of drama education. Carroll and Dodds (2016) provide a helpful summary of opinions, citing Barron’s definition of creativity as ‘the ability to bring something new into existence’ (Barron, 1969 in Carroll and Dodds, 2016:23), whilst Bruner suggests that creativity ‘confirms something that we already knew subconsciously’ (Bruner, 1979 in Carroll and Dodds, 2016:23). Bailin (in Schonmann, 2011) decides that there is a consensus amongst theorists that for something to be creative, it must have an element of originality and/or novelty. Nichols agrees, explaining that creativity can be identified in ‘that moment where a spark happened, someone applied some logic, thought laterally, used some emotional intelligence’ (Nichols, 2021:5) but

ultimately concludes that the very term “creativity” is hard to pin down (Nichols, 2021:4). In their assessment of the work of Gallagher (2007), Carroll and Dodds arrive at a similar opinion to Nichols regarding the difficulties associated with defining the term, stating that ‘after reviewing the literature in detail [she] still comes up short when trying to find an applicable definition, or in finding suitable studies that attempt to define creativity in Drama’ (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:23). This is a common theme in the literature and foregrounds the enduring and thorny debates regarding the nature and purpose of assessment within drama education.

It could be suggested that creativity, like drama and theatre as an artform, cannot be fully expressed in logocentric terms, being very often a “feeling” or something you sense intuitively within your own personal experience, or through witnessing the experiences of others. In fact, as Lecoq observes, ‘a person expressing himself (sic) is not necessarily being creative’, (Lecoq, 2002:17), discrediting perspectives that suggest that creativity is an essential characteristic of drama education. The ambiguity of the term stretches as far as claims that drama is an inherently creative pursuit and therefore by definition, a person who chooses to study the subject is subsequently engaging in creativity. However, as Bailin observes, our understanding of the word must run deeper than such simplistic definitions: ‘We usually mean more by creativity than simply engaging in creative activities, since we distinguish among the products of these activities in terms of their creativity. Not all creations are equally creative’ (Bailin in Schonmann (ed.), 2011:209). The obscurity of what is meant when something or someone is labelled as being “creative”, or displaying “creativity”, or working “creatively” highlights its problematic relationship with assessment. As a drama teacher, I can recognise creativity in the work and processes of my students, but it does not always look the same: it can manifest itself in different ways according to the context within which it is occurring. Bailin (in Schonmann (ed.), 2011) raises the point however, that creativity cannot solely be found in the process of creating drama; there is also a subconscious expectation that there is some kind of tangible outcome or achievement.

In their research study, Carroll and Dodds (2016) note that given current debates regarding 'internal assessment being prone to bias' (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:26) it is therefore necessary to assess the product/s of creativity, as well as the process/es in order to satisfy calls for more robust assessment procedures in drama education. The outputs we speak of in the context of drama are most commonly of a performative nature, but again this can prove problematic when we consider the nature and ephemerality of live performance work. The fact that the majority of A Level Drama specifications require students to work in groups to make and perform theatre is also noteworthy when considering how we measure and assess progress and achievement. Creativity is transient and contextualised within the traditions, cultures, and situations within which it occurs and is shared. It does not exist indefinitely and is often as a result of artistic collaboration, making its measurement problematic within a system designed to assess students as individuals. O'Neill and Lambert concur, adding that: 'Among the problems which may arise in attempting to assess the quality of the drama experience will be the group nature of the work and the fact that one has to be guided by externals in judging what may be largely an inner experience' (O'Neill & Lambert, 1988:145).

In her aptly titled article, 'Wrestling with assessment in drama education' (in Bresler, 2007), Schonmann asks critical questions about "who" and "what" are involved in decision-making processes regarding assessment in drama education:

'Assessing individual achievements is based on a collection of chosen criteria to be used in deciding whether the performance of a student is proper or not. Moreover, the questions to be asked are many and profound such as: How can we decide whether the results are valuable? How do we decide what are the needs to be met through the assessment? Who decides what information can be gathered to

demonstrate the level of performance? What are the major sources of relevant information?' (Schonmann in Bresler, 2007:411).

In their recent report (2022), awarding body Pearson summarise the findings of research that seeks to critically examine the qualifications system in England and make recommendations regarding the future of assessment. Responding to the fragility of the current system as exposed by the pandemic, the report recognises 'the near impossibility of addressing assessment outside of wider system reform' (Pearson, 2022:4). This provides an interesting prism through which to examine the extent to which current systems and criteria for the assessment of A Level Drama students in England remains relevant and fit for purpose within a post-pandemic world. Historically, opinion has swung back and forth between the benefits and pitfalls of practical, performance, and coursework approaches to the assessment of learning in formal drama education, and methods which rely on more traditional, summative systems to measure progress such as written examination. Schonmann articulates the problematic nature of assessment in drama, explaining that 'Drama teachers recognize the limitations of assessment models that overestimate the outcome over the process; however, they also recognize the limitation of assessment models that overestimate the creative process and that do not do justice to the students' artistic achievements' (Schonmann, 2007:410).

Reflecting on current times, Nichols highlights assessment as one of the 'eternal political footballs...within English educational policymaking' (Nichols, 2021:48) and notes the impact of the 2014 reforms to GCSE qualifications that sought to add "Govian rigour" to subjects that were previously perceived as lacking in such. In the case of drama, this meant a greater weighting on assessment through traditional, external examination which as Nichols explains, equated to the introduction of a written exam weighted at forty percent of the overall qualification (ibid.). Within A Level Drama, the move from the AS to Linear A Level specification in 2016 revised the

assessment methods to now consist of a summative written examination accounting for no less than forty percent, and Non-Examination Assessment (NEA) components making up the remaining sixty percent of the qualification. However, a significant proportion of the NEA units also specify the need for written accounts and reflections on the creative process of making performance work, which therefore brings the overall assessment weighting to be more akin to fifty/fifty in terms of assessment through practice and assessment through writing.

#### **2.4.1. The use and function of writing and written examination in A Level Drama.**

Carroll and Dodds (2016) describe a small-scale research study that examined assessment in A Level Drama from the perspective of course leaders in four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). By exploring assessment practices through the eyes of drama teachers in HE contexts, they were able to explore the extent to which the A Level Drama curriculum provides the relevant skills and knowledge required at undergraduate level. The findings from the study have much to contribute to the literature underpinning the research questions this thesis investigates and confirm many of the aforementioned consternations regarding assessment in A Level Drama. Much as Eisner (in Bresler, 2007) notes that risk-taking is central to experiences of teaching and learning in drama, Carroll and Dodds find this sentiment echoed in their study, alongside concerns that the 2016 reform to A Level Drama placed an emphasis on rote learning and a belief in the minds of students in the notion of a 'right' and a 'wrong' answer. The HE teachers interviewed in the study conclude that this 'sense of correctness or incorrectness often removed students' abilities to take risks and generate individual thought' (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:52), contradicting what we understand about the importance of play, imagination, risk-taking, and freedom of expression within the drama classroom.

In consideration of the role of the written examination within the current A Level Drama qualification, all four of the interviewees in Carroll and Dodds' study observed the potential for

traditional, external written examination to 'deaden' (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:27) the relationship between students and the 'expressive and artistic nature' of the subject (ibid.). Drama as a subject is often chosen by students who feel frustrated or daunted by an emphasis on assessment through writing and formal examination conditions, preferring to work practically and collaboratively (Cossey and Curtis, 2018). This is a point laboured by Nichols who states that 'as part of GCSE or A Level, practical work is where most students excel...because this is the part of the qualification which (most) students love and why they've picked it' (Nichols, 2021:67). This is further emphasised by Nichols when he examines the situation from the perspective of drama teachers, who, he claims, were 'dismayed by the percentage of the qualification which could be achieved through practical work' (Nichols, 2021:57) following the reforms to the subject in 2016. Regarding the writing required of A Level Drama students, the teachers interviewed within Carroll and Dodds' study are critical of any requirement for students to produce reflective writing under formal exam conditions, stating that 'that time and pressure of such a setting is not conducive to reflection' (ibid.), separating reflective writing from its power and potential as means through which students can develop themselves as creative practitioners. The most striking finding from Carroll and Dodds' research, however, is the unanimity of the interviewees' conclusion 'that a traditional examination setting was not 'fit for purpose' for the study of Drama' (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:27), which is a statement that provides a poignant foreground for the research this thesis describes. Despite being of much insight, Carroll and Dodds work focuses on the experiences and opinions of assessment in A Level Drama from the perspective of course leaders in HEIs. This opens up space and highlights the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis can provide in shining a light on the lived experiences of students and teachers of A Level Drama, within the context of English post-compulsory education.

Jacobs (2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2020a, 2020b) has researched extensively into issues of performance assessment within drama education in the Australian school system. Although the

context of the research differs from that which this thesis documents, there is much similarity between the focus and methodological approach of the work. Jacobs' contribution to the use of drama scripts as a way of analysing and sharing stories of experience (Jacobs, 2020a) will be referred to in more detail in Act Three. For now, it is apt to draw on her research regarding assessment within the context of drama in years eleven and twelve (equivalent to GCE Level in England) in Australia. In noting the controversies and challenges involved in assessing creative and artistic work, Jacobs draws on the work of Hanley (2003) and Tomlinson (2001) to clarify that 'system-wide assessment in the arts is both achievable and necessary to establish the credibility of Drama and to provide systems for identifying student achievement within the formal school curricula' (Jacobs, 2020b:187-200). This is a point corroborated by Nichols who writes that 'without having any assessments in place, it's not possible to reliably and accurately measure what a student can or can't do, and how much progress they have or haven't made' (Nichols, 2021:47). If we agree with the findings from Pearson's study that 'external certification of achievement is a valuable commodity' (Pearson, 2022:5), particularly in terms of learners' progression to employment and higher education and training, then it is right that we also interrogate current assessment systems to ensure that they are fit for purpose and equip our students effectively for the future. As Pearson note in their research findings however, 'the current system is too restrictive, with too many rules specifying how qualifications and assessment need to be structured' (Pearson, 2022:5). This thesis will add to the literature regarding lived experiences of teaching, learning and assessment within A Level Drama and can hope to illuminate more ambitious possibilities in terms of how we measure progress and achievement in drama education.

#### **2.4.2. The place of formative and summative assessment within drama education.**

A further question that is worthy of consideration within the broader discourse about assessment in drama is the extent to which *formative* and *summative* assessment methods feature in the

current means of measuring student progress and achievement. Jacobs states that 'ongoing and regular assessments are critical components of the Drama classroom' (Jacobs, 2016a:3). In the context of A Level Drama in England, students are assessed through a variety of formative and summative means and are required to think from the perspectives of actors, directors, designers, playwrights, and theatre makers. There are core components in each of the available specifications, as well as pathways where students may choose to specialise in a specific discipline (i.e., directing, or lighting design etc.). The range of assessment methods include live performances (devised and scripted), the practical process of making and/or rehearsing a play, reflective logbooks, journals and portfolios, textual analysis of playscripts, theatre reviews, response to unseen texts, technical drawings (i.e., theatre ground plans or costume designs), as well as traditional written examination.

Nichols (2021) explains that as part of the reforms to the subject, two distinct forms of assessment were determined: Non-Examination Assessment (NEA) and Examination Assessment. Within the context of A Level Drama, Examination Assessment refers to the written work students produce in traditional exam conditions, whereas NEA comprises everything else, including live performance. The extent to which the teacher is involved in the assessment of student work varies. In four of the main awarding bodies for A Level Drama in England (AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas, OCR), whilst non-examination assessment (NEA) equates to sixty percent of the overall qualification, within that percentage there are variations in the proportion of assessment conducted internally by teachers and externally moderated by the exam board, and externally marked by a visiting examiner. In the Edexcel and OCR specifications, forty percent of the NEA components are internally marked by teachers and externally moderated, compared to thirty percent in AQA, and just twenty percent in Eduqas. Such disparities are mirrored in the timings of the summative written examination at the end of the A Level, which despite all equating to forty percent of the qualification, range from between two hours and thirty minutes, to four hours (split

into two, shorter examinations). From this, we can conclude that a student may be advantaged or disadvantaged depending on the weighting of teacher-assessed NEA components and duration of written examinations, and how this aligns with their own confidence, knowledge, and skills across the various assessment contexts.

Despite the necessity of numerical and letter grades within the context of our prevailing education systems, Cockett (1998) notes how this type of summative assessment is less valuable to the continued and longer-term development of students of drama. According to Cockett, formative assessment is of the greatest importance to a student's progression in drama. Carroll and Dodds' corroborate this in the findings from their study, labelling formative assessment as being 'integral to assessing creative subjects' (Carroll and Dodds, 2016:24), and noting that feedback and dialogue within the creative process itself is central to student learning and development. This type of assessment is of particular efficacy when it takes the form of a dialogue between student and teacher within which the student is provided with 'critical evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses in the drama' (Cockett, 1998:248). Heathcote notes that without reflection, there can be no real learning within the context of drama education as it is only reflection that 'permits the storing of knowledge, the recalling of power of feeling, and memory of past feelings' (Heathcote in Johnson and O'Neill, 1984:97). This point is noteworthy in that it draws to the fore the relationship between body, mind and emotions as part of the learning process and questions how we can accurately assess a student's progress if these elements are left side-lined and unconsidered. Dialogue and reflection provide a means through which to access and explore our knowledge and experiences as students and artists, allowing us to engage in the continual renewal and reconstruction of our understanding in relation to drama and dramatic knowledge. Given that it has been highlighted that learning in drama is often as a result of social interaction and practical experience, it raises the question as to why dialogue, perhaps in the form of a viva exam, is not a method of assessment used more widely within drama education at A Level.

Arguably, constraints of time as well as issues of subjectivity versus objectivity on the part of the assessor could be cited as reasons why it is avoided, but it remains a question worth considering within the divisions of theory and practice that this thesis investigates.

Schonmann agrees with Cockett and promotes forms of formative assessment that place a focus on 'assessing the drama experience' (Schonmann in Bresler, 2007:413). This type of assessment, Schonmann explains, is useful within drama education as it openly 'examines what the teacher contributes to the situation' (ibid.) as well as making a judgement about the students' knowledge, understanding, commitment to and interest in the work being assessed. The potential tension here is concerned with bias and subjectivity in formative and non-examination assessment methods when the drama teacher is 'both the facilitator of the learning experiences and the assessor of creative work (Jacobs, 2016a:8). As Eisner states: 'those who pursue the arts are typically seeking to work at the edge of incompetence and try to push, as they say, the envelope. As a result, assessors need to make judgments. Such judgments are, of course, fallible as are all judgments' (Eisner in Bresler, 2007:424-5). T

This enduring issue is discussed at length by Jacobs who refers to Tomlinson (2001) in arguing for 'a healthy balance between subjective and objective judgements' (Jacobs, 2016a:5) in relation to the assessment of performance work in drama. If we return to the start of this chapter and Conroy's (2010) notion of the spectator as being always embodied and subject to viewing the world from their own physical vantage point, we can draw parallels between the points made by Eisner and Jacobs if we acknowledge the nature of subjectivity within the context of the relationship between audience and performer/that which is being performed. However, as Jacobs (2016a) astutely notes, we must credit the professional and artistic integrity of the drama teacher who is able to view the performance from the perspective of both spectator and assessor:

‘While an audience member is permitted to make purely subjective judgments, the assessor aims to make informed judgments, which may result in marks or grades being recorded. Teachers in the arts develop expertise in assessing the outcome of the aesthetic process or the manifestation of the individual aesthetic experience’ (Jacobs, 2016a:5).

As Jacobs continues to explain, students of drama do not engage in the creation and/or performance of dramatic work simply for the purpose of being assessed (Jacobs, 2016a). Indeed, the students I have worked with during my career have for the most part, actively sought out constructive feedback to help them develop their craft, and often the grade is secondary to feelings and experiences of achievement as a performer. The pressures felt by both teachers and students of drama however, as already highlighted in the work of Carroll and Dodds (2016) and Beghatto (2005), indicate the potential for creativity, risk-taking and artistic expression to be hindered by burdensome assessment objectives and pressurised examination conditions. This is where the work of Eisner (in Bresler, 2007) becomes particularly apt in his call for a richer tapestry of assessment methods within the context of arts-based subject areas.

As Eisner recognises and has been previously noted in this chapter, there is a place for different types of assessment within drama education, including the traditional letter grading associated with the summative outcome of A Level qualifications. Indeed, Jacobs furthers this point by pointing out that ‘As with all learning areas, it is vital that Drama assessment follows the guiding principles of ‘good’ assessment’ (Jacobs, 2016a:10). However, as Eisner explains, each assessment method will have its own strengths and weaknesses and to provide a full picture of a student’s progress, we must also use narrative accounts to support and describe our judgments. Learning is, Eisner concludes, too complex a process to be accurately assessed through numerical or letter grades alone, and that ‘Narratives may tell a fuller story and certainly

complemented with quantitative information can broaden our understanding of the consequences of our practices' (Eisner in Bresler, 2007:424-5). The literature concerning assessment within drama education foregrounds what is a central aim of the research study; to illuminate student and teacher lived experience of learning and assessment within the specific context of A Level Drama. The data from the research conversations will add to existing scholarship regarding the relationship between ways of learning and methods of assessment in drama education, amplifying the voices of the students and teachers and creating space to reflect and reimagine.

## **2.5. Characters in each other's stories: the potential of playwriting as a research practice.**

Theatre is in itself, a form of knowledge (Boal, 2002). Clandinin and Connelly refer to teachers, learners and researchers as 'storytellers and characters in their own and each other's stories' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:2) and it seems fitting therefore, to conclude this Act by returning to the power and significance of narrative and story. As Somers notes, as human beings, 'We story the world to make meaning of it and our place in it' (Somers in Winner and Hetland (eds.), 2001:112). This is true of teachers and students of drama and is inherent in the very nature of the subject and our motivation to create and share performance work. Similarly, this gives weight to Eisner's insistence that story should form part of the way in which we measure learning and progress within the context of the arts, and more specifically drama education. Jacobs agrees, stating that 'stories and aesthetic artefacts of performance are critical to the drama assessment environment' (Jacobs, 2020a:20), paving the way for the description of a methodology that explores how the craft of drama can support a creative analysis and (re)presentation of the experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers. Much as stories are deeply rooted in the experiences of teaching, learning and assessment of drama teachers and students, they are also intrinsic to my own narrative as a teacher and a researcher. It therefore becomes imperative that

a storied approach to the research this thesis describes is adopted; where creativity and drama are fundamental to the way in which the work is (re)presented, experienced, valued and assessed.

Thinking *with* story as an organic, living, moving process is similar to how we consider the making and performing of theatre. The playwright, actors and director do not control the narrative, they allow the narrative to drive the process and influence the physical playing out of the story for an audience. Similarly, as a researcher, I am guided by the story that needs and desires to be told. Drama and theatre act as a compass in the navigation of my journey; they form part of my epistemological and ontological stance in providing a lens through which to interpret and make sense of the world and understand our place within it. As Vicars and McKenna corroborate, 'Drama as a way of knowing has at its core the capacity to extend influence on how we think, behave and conduct ourselves' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:417) and has as a methodology, the possibilities to provide us as researchers, 'with plateaus from which to begin to co-construct understandings of meanings of the quotidian world and how these have become assimilated into the daily fabric of our lives' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:425).

Summarising the work of Saldaña, Ellingson reminds us that the dramatisation of research 'should be done when the medium fits with the story needing to be told' (Ellingson, 2017:185). The theory-practice divide pervades all aspects of the research study and I feel a need to be able to 'create' and 'make' something tangible and tacit (Dewey, 1916, 1933; Polanyi, 1967, 1969; Bohm, 1996; Eraut, 2000, 2004) from the data which will be gathered. The shape of this performative outcome will not only present the narratives of the research subjects (the characters in the play) but will (re)present their voices in a form aligned with creative and dramatic processes and practice. Our stories must be *shown*, not just told.

Jacobs (2016b) draws on the work of Baker (2016) to note that whilst the use of stories and scripts within the context of qualitative research is not new, it is an area of research activity deserving of attention. Jacobs summarises Baker's argument that seeks to make a distinction between the practices of theatrical scriptwriting and academic scriptwriting, noting that the latter is 'self-reflexive and informed more by discipline-specific knowledge than by demands of audiences and theatrical curators' (Jacobs, 2016b:55). In a paper detailing her own work using scripts and stories to illuminate drama assessment practices within secondary schools in Australia, Jacobs explains the potential of scriptwriting to 'give life to a topic that many might consider mundane, highly technical or lacking in theatrical engagement' (Jacobs, 2016b:55). The focus of Jacobs' body of work is of significance and similar in nature to the research this thesis describes. Whilst the context and specifics of the research site differ, there is much to be gained from the insights Jacobs brings to light in relation to the research questions this thesis responds to. In that respect, the research described in this thesis adds to a growing body of work that acknowledges and explores the depth and breadth of potential in using scriptwriting and dramatic processes as a framework for rigorous, reflexive, and accessible approaches to qualitative research methods.

The literature review has exposed tensions between the embodied nature of teaching and learning in drama education and the systems of assessment and methods used to validate practice in the context of the A Level Drama curriculum. In response to the above, it becomes impossible to rely on conventional qualitative methods in the analysis, interpretation and (re)presentation of the data. I instead prefer to reimagine and reposition my responsibility to the data using Koro-Ljungberg's heuristic of 'dual duty in the context of methodology' which 'does not imply that researchers ought to ignore legacy, tradition, existing knowledge, or previously established methods', but rather seeks to 'shift legacy and resituate or re-create tradition from within their discourse and disciplines' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:31). In offering an 'unapologetically

eclectic' (Ellingson, 2017:3) approach to research methods and methodologies, Ellingson describes how she is 'engaged in acts of synthesis, translation, connection and creativity' in her work and scholarship. Similarly, Eisner states that 'Methodological pluralism rather than methodological monism is the ideal to which artistic approaches to research subscribe' (Eisner, 1981:7). In the context of the research that this thesis describes, Ellingson's invitation to 'use all there is to use' (Burke in Ellingson, 2017:3) to make 'bodies a meaningful presence' (Ellingson, 2017:1) underpins an approach that draws on traditions of interpretivism, phenomenology and ethnography alongside arts-based and writerly practices of inquiry to explore the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers.

Whilst this thesis does not attempt to offer an in-depth reading of post-qualitative and post-structuralist perspectives, it acknowledges the influence of thinkers such as St. Pierre (2015, 2021), Richardson (2000), and Koro-Ljungberg (2016) as pivotal to the journey of the research study. As has been introduced in the Prologue to this thesis, the work of practitioners and scholars involved in arts-based, ethnographic, and embodied research practices has a strong bearing on the decision to move away from traditional methods of qualitative data analysis, and towards an approach that grants the researcher and the data to work together in playful, reflexive, and creative discovery. Ways of conducting research such as Embodied Inquiry, look to non-Western paradigms that 'privilege different forms of knowledge, and foreground reflexivity and self-awareness akin to Indigenous perspectives' (Leigh and Brown, 2021:82). Such approaches examine what it means to move beyond validity and reliability and consider the need to 'accurately reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and participants' (ibid.).

In viewing qualitative research through an embodied lens, the data can be interpreted and analysed in a way that is 'true to the voices of all the participants and reflects and understanding of the topic that is shared by researcher and participants alike' (Wilson, 2008 in Leigh and Brown, 2021:82). This gives weight to Eisner's observation that 'the artistically oriented researcher

recognizes that knowing is not simply a unidimensional phenomena, but takes a variety of forms' (Eisner, 1981:6), and notes that the researcher approaching research through and with an artistic methodology, 'knows also that the forms one uses to represent what one knows affects what can be said' (Eisner, 1981:7). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the researcher to select the most appropriate form through which to represent the phenomena that is being researched, in a way that allows others to experience and understand.

### **2.5.1. Listening and responding to what the “data wants”.**

When considering what the 'data wants' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:52) in relation to the research this thesis discusses, a strong pull towards the use of creative and embodied approaches to analysis and (re)presentation is gradually but unequivocally revealed. Koro-Ljungberg highlights the potential pitfalls of 'information overload' in relation to data gathering and analysis, noting how it is possible for researchers in qualitative studies to be 'overwhelmed with the quantity of data and the volume of data materials' which can lead to 'results in data interactions and findings that resemble lists of materials and examples of collected quotes' (ibid.). Referring to the work of St. Pierre (1997), Koro-Ljungberg invites qualitative researchers to resist fencing data within rigid boundaries and immovable definitions, and instead encourages us to 'get inspired to experiment with data' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:54), opening up the concept and expanding possibilities. She also questions the typical 'one-directionality of knowledge' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:49) within qualitative research, where the researcher assumes a dominant position over the data and their analysis of it, suggesting that we reverse normative positionalities and relationships and recognise 'how data (object) can make a discovery of the researcher (subject) during “data analysis”' (ibid.).

The conclusion to this literature review offers an overview of key concepts that will go on to be examined in more depth in Acts Three, and in relation to the methodological positionality and practices of the T-R-P. Kara *et al.* reminds us that 'when using creative techniques...in analytic

work, the needs of the research should always take precedence over aesthetic and entertainment values' (Kara *et al.*, 2021:83). This thesis argues that the *needs* of the research and the *want* of the data in relation to the subject of drama and the literature reviewed as part of this study, requires analysis and reporting of findings that is dialogic and acknowledges 'that human understanding is embodied, language is complex and communication is multimodal' (Leigh and Brown, 2021:42).

'Many examples of arts-based research (ABR) exist in which the arts are used for either data collection or data representation. Less developed is the use of arts during the data analysis phase in qualitative research. The use of the arts during the data analysis phase is a critical gap in the methodology literature that needs attention' (Snyder and Turesky, 2022:2).

This thesis will therefore respond to Snyder and Turesky's call to speak into a 'critical gap in the methodology literature' (*ibid.*) in offering an insight into the use of the arts, specifically drama and the construction of a playscript, as a viable method to analyse and (re)present qualitative data. As has been outlined in the Prologue, the process of creating dramatic text is not an additional method in a plethora of more normative qualitative approaches. It is a reflexive and analytical method in itself, and a process requiring the assimilation, synthesis and translation of meaning through the dramatic language of the stage. Petersen explains that:

'In its data+analysis simultaneity the ethnographic drama insists on being "creata," and on offering significant insight into various cultural practices, yet by explicitly and unapologetically drawing on a literary genre, it also never lets the reader/audience forget their part and responsibility as reader/audience' (Petersen, 2013:293).

Petersen's (2013, 2014) work is helpful in explaining and justifying a methodological approach to the research, particularly in support of a need to work with the data in a way that emphasises and embodies the creative and practical subject at the heart of the study. In describing the intertwining of data and analysis as a connected and woven process, she states that: 'the ethnographic drama is an interesting form of postfoundational scholarship in that it is both (or neither) data and analysis; it troubles the desires for transparency and real-reality that come with the usual manner of presenting the data and analysis as separate and separable' (Petersen, 2013:293). The play that will be produced as an outcome of this piece of research will be both a method of analysis and (re)presentation, as well as becoming in its making, (re)interpretation and embodiment, a data artefact in and of itself. As a dramatic script, it has a potential and a life outside of the boundaries of the academic thesis and will continue to exist in the world as a piece of art. The co-construction of knowledge and new meaning between researcher, playwright, reader, actor, and audience becomes a cyclical event that is continually (re)visited, (re)interpreted and (re)made.

The creation of a playscript as a means of knowing and unknowing qualitative data will be examined for its potentiality as a robust research method within the context of this study. Following an evaluation of the literature as described in the preceding sections of this thesis, the use of drama to tell the story of the research is determined as a necessity and brings with it a 'responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience of an audience, once that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative' (Saldaña, 2003:202). It also highlights the very essence and form of drama as being crucial in allowing the data to enter into dialogue with itself (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:67) so that it can be read in different times and spaces, by different people, each of whom will bring their own perspectives and experiences to the interpretation of the text(s). As Ellingson states: 'representation is an embodied act; researchers write or type (or draw or paint or photograph or dance) and discover new meanings even as we move across the page, stage, canvas or screen (Ellingson, 2017:1).

## **Act Two: chapter summary.**

This Act has brought to the fore key literature and research regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of drama, with a focus on the context of post-compulsory education which is the primary site of inquiry. Through the review of existing literature, it has been noted that there are many dualisms which remain prevalent and have an enduring impact on the stability of drama education as a discrete subject. These include theory/practice, mind/body, skills/knowledge, and academic/vocational. Embodiment, dialogue, and collaboration have been identified as central to the ways in which drama is learnt about and experienced, recognising drama as possessing its own forms of distinct pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge. It has been noted that these ways and means of knowing are at times, at odds with existing methods of assessment, preparing the ground for the questions this thesis will explore. In doing so, the method of playwriting as a purposeful form of inquiry and an artistic research practice has been presented as the appropriate methodology for a study which seeks to shed light on the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers. The potentiality and challenges of arts-based methods will therefore be explored and evaluated as a consequence of the research.

## Act Three

*As I try to find a way forward, I am pulled back by the promise and comfort of the stage.*

*It is here, I realise - that meaning can be made and found:*

*in the light and shadow,*

*in the movement of bodies and voices,*

*intersecting and interacting in space and time.*

### **Introduction: beyond words.**

This research study adopts Richardson's assertion that writing is 'a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis' (Richardson, 2000:293) and Harris and Sinclair's claim that 'the writing of a play is an act of inquiry' (Harris and Sinclair, 2014:5). In drawing on the traditions of arts-based researchers and performance ethnographers, Harris and Sinclair (2014) identify the construction of a play as a method through which to create and develop new and textured understanding and knowledge and note the embodied nature of a practice that brings together thinking, being and doing research. This is a perspective similarly adopted by Lea *et al.* (2011:3) who draw on the work of Norris (2009) and Mitchell, Jonas-Simpson and Ivonoffksi (2006) to articulate an understanding of how theatre can be used as an integral and interwoven thread within research designed to illuminate lived experience.

Act Three will explore the integration of systematic research processes with a creative and theatrical practice, and an explanation of Richardson's (2000) 'CAP ethnography' is offered as a framework to underpin the creative and analytic exploration of data stories. As part of this, the rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection is

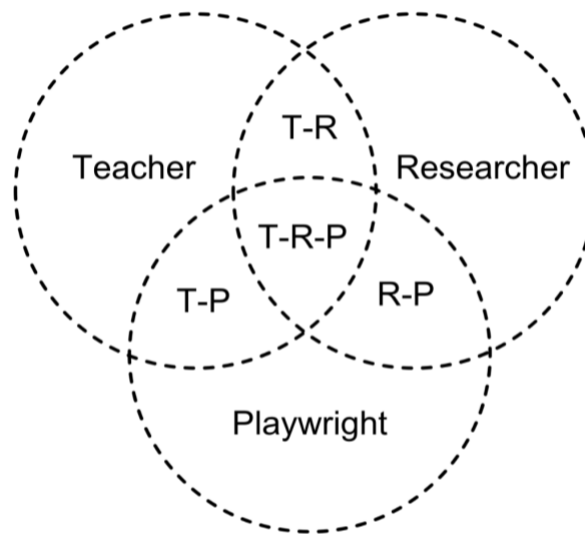
explained, alongside the construction of *creata* (Petersen, 2013) in the form of a dramatic playscript. Woven throughout, is an examination of the ethical considerations associated with the research practices that inform this study.

This chapter will also outline and justify the positionality and identities of the researcher. The use of the term ‘Teacher-Researcher-Playwright’ (T-R-P) is explained in relation to the study that this thesis documents and prepare the ground for Act Five, which is intended to be read as a synchronous explanation of the interconnected and entangled process of analysis, (re)interpretation and discussion of findings. The purpose of this is to make the practices and thinking of the T-R-P transparent, illuminating how themes and findings from the data are made knowable, sifted, and crystallised (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2009). As a result, the traditional structure of the doctoral thesis is disrupted in the form of a dramatic “interlude” and the reader will be directed to the pages of the playtext in an acknowledgment of the script as both a (re)interpretation of the data, and simultaneously a data source itself (*creata*). In doing so, the collaborative nature of theatre-making as integral to this process will be highlighted and theoretical perspectives discussed in earlier chapters of the thesis will be revisited and re-examined.

### **3.1. An explanation of the identity and positionality of the T-R-P.**

To explain the journey towards an understanding and articulation of the methodological approach that this research study constructs, it is first necessary to explain the overlapping identities and positionality of the researcher. This Act discusses the development of an onto-epistemological perspective which acknowledges the relationship between three versions of self: the teacher, the researcher, the playwright, interwoven in an embodied and artistic experiencing of the world. Drawing on a definition of a/r/tography as an arts-based form of living inquiry that can be used to explore aspects of the artists/researcher/teacher’s lives (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005), the identity of the Teacher-Researcher-Playwright (T-R-P) is revealed as central to the conceptual

and philosophical stance of the work this thesis describes. Following in the footsteps of Sallis (2018), my identity can be explained as *tripartite* in manner and acknowledges that the boundaries between each of the three identities are subject to blurring and even messiness. Reflexivity is therefore essential to ensure the research and positionality of the researcher is thoughtfully and ethically considered, more of which will be discussed later in this chapter. In the diagram below, the choice of dotted lines is significant and takes Conquergood's assertion that 'a boundary is more like a membrane than a wall' (2002:145). The permeability of the boundary lines suggests an identity that is fluid and malleable and subject to changing shifts and pulls of direction:



*Figure 1. The intersection of the teacher, researcher, playwrights' identities.*

Leblanc and Irwin (2019) describe a/r/tography as a dynamic and emergent interdisciplinary practice, and one that blends artistic forms and creative modes of inquiry with qualitative methodologies such as ethnography or educational action research. The forms explored within a/r/tography can be described as being grounded in the broader methodology of arts-based research (ABR), and seeks to move 'beyond the use of existing criteria that exists for qualitative research and toward an understanding of interdisciplinarity not as a patchwork of different

disciplines and methodologies but as a loss, a shift, or a rupture where in absence, new courses of action unfold' (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005:898). The process of the a/r/tographer is one where both text and art interweave to arrive at new understandings of the world. It is, therefore, a fitting methodology for this research study which draws on the language of theatre, in its broadest sense, to explore and (re)present the lived experiences of drama students and teachers. Springgay, Irwin and Kind (2005) speak of the dialogic nature of text and image within a/r/tographic research practice, explaining a relationship of interconnectedness and intersection. Within the creative space where knowledge is constructed as a result of conversations between the artist/researcher/teachers' identities, the role of the audience is also recognised. As in theatre, where meaning is always a co-constructed act, a/r/tography joins 'the viewer/reader figures into the process of meaning making, adding layers of inter/textual dwelling. Each informs and shapes the other in an active moment of lived inquiry' (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005:899-900).

From the context of the drama teacher, Belliveau's (2015) work is integral to explaining a methodology that allows for the use and practices of theatre as a means through which a/r/tographers can critically engage in educational research whilst challenging and questioning their own understandings. Falling under the broader umbrella of both a/r/tography and ABR, 'research-based theatre' (RBT) is a term used by Belliveau to define 'a methodology that theatricalizes research data' (Belliveau, 2015:8). RBT will be explored within this Act as a guiding concept which shapes the work of the T-R-P, alongside writing and *wrighting* as embodied forms of inquiry. Whilst acknowledging other arts-based approaches that combine the use of drama and theatre with qualitative research, RBT offers its support to the use of playwriting as a means of collecting and disseminating data, but also - and, crucially within the context of this thesis - as a reflexive and effective process of analysis.

Although this thesis chooses to use the term 'playwright' instead of artist, the emphasis on an artistic, creative, embodied practice as woven into the fabric of the a/r/tographic research is maintained. In arriving at a fluid and malleable space where arts-based methodological concepts are drawn together to frame an onto-epistemological understanding of the research this thesis describes, the journey towards this destination also needs to be made apparent. In moving perspectives between qualitative and post-qualitative lenses, a/r/tography resists formulaic systems and methods (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, 2005) and instead becomes an approach that embraces 'the simultaneity, multiplicity and complexity' (Belliveau, 2015:7) of the 'lived experiences and evolving identities' (ibid.) of the T-R-P and the research participants.

### **3.2. Mapping the performance space: the construction of creative, analytic methodologies.**

In theatre, a ground plan is used to show the shape of the stage and elements of set and scenery, entrances and exits, and position of the audience in relation to the actors. Taking Koro-Ljungberg's (2016) assertion that maps can be used as an alternative to linear or fixed processes in the documentation of methodological movement, a methodological ground plan is drawn to represent a travelling backwards and forwards through methodologies that is representative of my experience as a qualitative researcher working in a creative subject area, against the backdrop of a global pandemic. Koro-Ljungberg articulates what she describes as 'the notion of methodologies without methodology' that 'represents methodologies without strict boundaries or normative structures' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:1). Drawing on the work of Lather and St. Pierre (2013), Koro-Ljungberg questions the fixity of traditional research methodologies and challenges 'what can be gained through the presence or absence of labels' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:2). Whilst this research study did not begin its life within the context of post-qualitative onto-epistemologies, it is necessary to acknowledge the bearing of this approach on the development of my own

research philosophies and in particular, the subsequent ways in which I intend to analyse and (re)present the data gathered through the study:

‘Life, contexts, interactions and data are likely to prompt scholars to deviate from the planned methodological path and visit other methodological places and theoretical spaces’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:4).

The methodological ground plan maps a journey and therefore, what is known in dramatic terms as “promenade” has been chosen as the spatial configuration. In a promenade performance the audience travels with the performers, physically moving through the world of the play and watching the action unfold from different perspectives and angles. This choice acknowledges the play’s reliance on the audience’s willingness to journey through the action alongside the actors and recognises therefore, that every participant’s subjective experience and interpretation of the event will be different. There are commonalities however, and the sharing in time and space is necessary to the co-construction of meaning within the playing out of the event itself, as is the embodied experience of being and moving alongside others. In this way, the fluidity of the methodological practices adopted in this piece of research speak back to the review of literature and acknowledge the importance of learning as a social act. It also disrupts divisions of theory and practice which has been identified as a thorny dichotomy within the context of teaching and learning about drama. Lea *et al.* (2011) draws on the work of Irwin (2004) to note the relationality between knowing, doing, and making within a/t/ographic and research-based theatre. In doing so, the necessity for a methodology that is pliable and creative is supported and emphasises ‘the process (praxis) through which practitioners draw upon their Artist, Researcher, and Teacher identities to artistically engage (poesis) in research and (re)questioning their understandings (theoria)’ (Lea *et al.*, 2011:3).

The ground plan used to map the methodologies of this piece of research is located, for the purpose of this metaphor, within the physical boundaries of a studio theatre space. Following through with Conquergood's (2002) notion that walls are permeable not fixed, in the case of the methodological ground occupied by this thesis, the space beyond is fluid and could be described as 'other'. The post-qualitative lens opens the door from the theatre and lets the action continue to be played out outside of the boundaries of the theatre walls. Within this 'other' space, there is a blurring of roles as actors and spectators mingle freely and explore their environment in ways that nurture a more creative approach to inquiry and 'value the *experience* of both researcher and researched' in a 'working toward an embodied understanding' (Bacon in Ackroyd, 2006: 135) as specific to the research context.

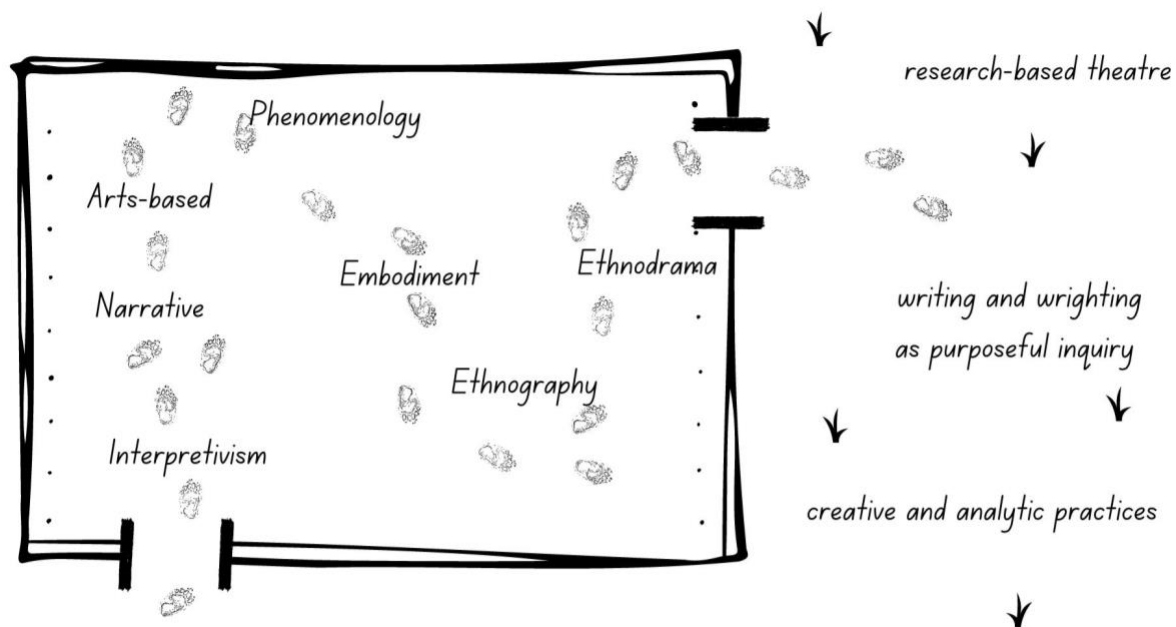


Figure 2. A methodological ground plan.

### 3.2.1. Writing and *Wrighting*.

*As the wheelwright makes a wheel,  
the playwright makes a play*

*The researcher has a new language to write, and wright with*

Within this piece of research, the term *playwrighting* and the practical craft of *making* a play is wholeheartedly adopted. The doctoral thesis demands words to document the process, to write about the journey of the research. I answer back by drawing on the skills and craft of the playwright to *wright* the data into a tangible, dramatic form. The use of the term T-R-P celebrates the physical act of constructing a play and critically, creatively, and *practically* examines the archaic notion that theory is superior in skill to practice, a key theme in the research. The multimodal perspective of the T-R-P also provides an interesting prism through which to view the wider context and theoretical discourses examined in Act Two of the thesis. Where divisions of theory and practice, vocational and academic, technical, and practical have been highlighted, by adopting and utilising my skills and experiences as a drama practitioner, I am able to synthesise these enduring dichotomies in the praxis of my approach. Not only does this allow me to walk alongside the data in a way that feels empathic and appropriate to the creative discipline of drama and the experiences of the research participants, but it also provides the opportunity to (re)tell and (re)present the stories in a visual and physical form. This draws into question and challenges one of the key themes arising from the literature; that writing is a more worthwhile and valid form of expression (and assessment) than the impermanent act of being and performing.

Nowell states that 'To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner' (Nowell *et al.*

2017:1). Drawing on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who describe four, distinct criteria that can be used to value the worth and trustworthiness of a qualitative research study, Nowell *et al.* (2017) argue that 'these trustworthiness criteria are pragmatic choices for researchers concerned about the acceptability and usefulness of their research for a variety of stakeholders' (Nowell *et al.* 2017:3) and offer examples of how the criteria are used to shape thematic analysis of qualitative data. However, just as qualitative research has long-since been critiqued by those in favour of quantitative studies as the "gold standard" of research, so now are the normative values and preferred methodological frameworks associated with qualitative research also interrogated. Vicars and McKenna point out that 'The reiteration of highly conventional stories told of and about what qualitative research is, should be and how it is to be done habitually reinforces the doxa of foundational research practices' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:416). Challenging the 'rituals of practice' (ibid.) encouraged by the academy, Vicars and McKenna recognise a need to understand and acknowledge qualitative research as a practice that is socially and politically informed and highlight drama as a methodological process with the power to 'disturb' (ibid.) commonly accepted discourses.

In opposition to criticism that creative practices and approaches to methodology and methods are somehow less rigorous or credible than normative qualitative methodologies, Saldaña (2003) points towards the depth of reflexivity which is made possible when the skills present in the creative armoury of the drama practitioner are utilised within the analysis of data. The ability to view the data from myriad perspectives and forms – textual/auditory/physical/visual – arguably provides a deeper and more thorough synthesis and scrutiny of the data than traditional methods, such as triangulation. Playwriting as a practice of inquiry asks us to consider creatively, narratively, and humanly what the data is telling us, but also what that data looks like, sounds like, how it interacts with itself/others, and the space in which it inhabits. As Saldaña summarises, 'the successful reenactment of nonfictional events exposes both the fieldwork experiences and the

fieldworker himself or herself to empathetic spectator involvement and value-laden public scrutiny' which in turn allows 'both the researcher and audience [to] gain understandings not possible through conventional qualitative data analysis' (Saldaña, 2003:230). By subjecting ourselves and the research to the open and vulnerable platform of the stage, we are inviting the data to be read, examined, and interpreted critically and rigorously, and encourage the generative effects of human connection and understanding.

Whilst this thesis takes influence from the traditions of ethnography, including ethnodrama (Mieniczakowski, 2000; Saldaña, 2003; Ackroyd and O'Toole, 2010), and the verbatim theatre style as central to the ways in which the research data is analysed, interpreted and (re)presented, Beck *et al.*'s (2011) use of the term 'research-based theatre' (RBT) as a phrase that encompasses a spectrum of related traditions is useful in acknowledging the breadth of possibility of practice associated with such approaches. Lea *et al.* explain that although RBT evolves from methods of dissemination, it has grown into an 'emerging methodology that has the potential to integrate theatre into the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data' (Lea *et al.*, 2011:2).

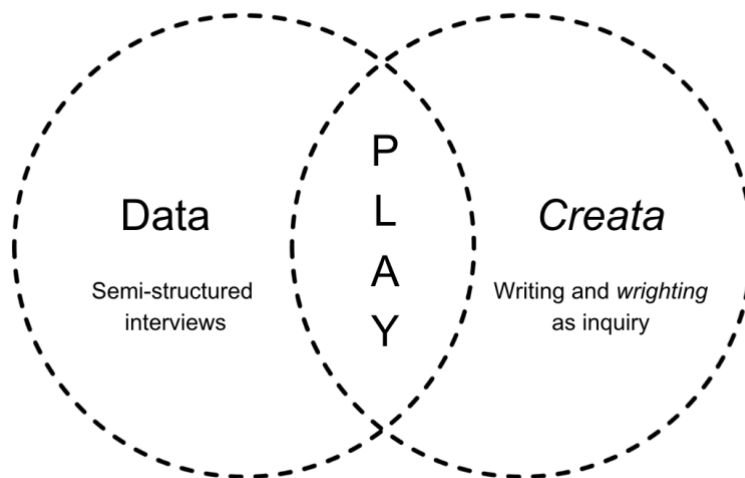
The study this thesis describes will add to a growing body of work sitting under the broad umbrella of research-based theatre. Like the work of others (Beck *et al.*, 2011; Lea *et al.*, 2011; Sallis, 2008, 2018; Belliveau, 2015) this study draws on other research and theatre traditions (arts-based research, ethnodrama, verbatim theatre) to 'create a text that gives voice to the participants in the research setting using the conventions of dramatic form to retell their lived experiences' (Sallis, 2018:52). The original contribution to knowledge is found in the unique situatedness of the research site, which illuminates the narratives of A Level Drama students and teachers within the specific context of the English Further Education sector. The practical (re)interpretation of the script in its development stage will form one of the ways the data is analysed, and findings crystallised, as students and teachers from the FE sector are invited to explore the emerging text

in practical and performative contexts. In line with Sallis who states that, 'research-based theatre can require audiences to both interpret and interact with the work; the performance is a dialogic event' (Sallis, 2018:51), the critical perspective of the spectator is of interest in the context of this research study. Whilst a public performance of the text is beyond the achievable scope of the work this thesis presents, in aligning itself with the traditions of research-based theatre, the future life of the play which emerges as a result of the study remains one of possibilities and potential.

### **3.2.2. Data and *Creat*.**

This thesis is in alignment with Butler-Kisber's assertion that 'script preparation is in itself a form of inquiry and can be used by researchers to interrogate data in different and often revealing ways' (Butler-Kisber, 2010:135). The creative practices of the playwright allow the data stories to be examined from myriad perspectives. As Jacobs (2020a) observes when explaining her own move to a dramatic and storied methodology as part of a research study into performance assessment in senior secondary education in Australia: 'Drama education is full of stories. These stories are portrayed on stage, often scripted or devised and indeed, lived through teachers' and learners' experiences' (Jacobs, 2020a:20). Despite what Jacobs recounts in relation to quantitative research as being a paradigm more 'easily understood by governments and decision makers in both curriculum and educational policy' (Jacobs, 2020a:20), a positivist approach to research would not provide the scope and language(s) necessary to provide a textured and nuanced account of the phenomena investigated. Playwriting, as Petersen notes, draws on the traditions of literature that 'has other ambitions than to provide absolute truth or any other form of certainty' (Petersen, 2014:1). In shifting the focus from the discovery of an immutable truth to a process where meaning is a co-constructed and creative act, the T-R-P 'embraces an epistemology that rejects the positivistic view which holds that only formal propositions can, in principle, provide knowledge' (Eisner, 1981:7).

Taking text from semi-structured interview transcripts, alongside fieldnotes and creative journaling of the researcher, a dramatic script will be curated and constructed. The purpose of the script is to creatively embody the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers in the current educational landscape, as well as becoming in its creation, a further site and source of data (Harris and Sinclair, 2014). The construction of the play through the craft of the T-R-P therefore becomes what Petersen describes as, 'creata' (Petersen, 2013:293). The blurring of boundaries between traditional data collection methods and *creata* as a method of collection/analysis/(re)presentation generated through the artistic work of the playwright, will be explored in detail in Act Five. The image below, however, introduces the relationship between data and *creata* as constructed by the T-R-P in the case of this specific research study:



*Figure 3. Data/Creata as a method of collection-analysis-(re)presentation.*

Petersen observes that 'Presenting research 'findings' through a play is a strategy that...underscores the performative work of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing, and the role of both the author and the reader or audience' (Petersen, 2014:1). In the case of the research this thesis describes, the purpose of the play becomes both a means to present research findings, but also a practical and embodied process of analysis in itself. When the research data is given

the freedom to play and be played on the stage or workshop floor, its potential is opened up through a process of practical and theatrical exploration and experimentation (Conquergood 2002; Norris, 2009; Belliveau, 2013, 2015; Harris and Sinclair, 2014). Instead of beginning interpretation and analysis from a dominant position of power where data is something to be *worked on*, the T-R-P *works with* the data (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016) through a responsive approach that invites the contributions of others and acknowledges that in theatre, meaning is always a co-constructed act.

Creative analytic practices (CAP) is a phrase coined by Richardson (2000:929) to encapsulate what is described as being the changing state of ethnographies to include the writerly activities and textual forms of playscripts, poetry, screenplays, readers theatre etc. In acknowledgment of drama as a collaborative discipline, CAP opens up space and invites others in through an approach to the analysis of qualitative research that 'encourages involvement, inspires curiosity, creates inclusivity, and constructs depictions that remain in the thoughts of readers in ways that traditional representations sometimes do not' (Berbary, 2011:195). Richardson is clear in asserting that:

'The practices that produce CAP ethnography are both creative and analytic. Those holding the dinosaurian belief that "creative" and "analytic" are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor' (Richardson, 2000:930).

The approach to the analysis adopted by this thesis is in alignment with Richardson's suggestion that the dichotomisation of creativity and analyses is not possible. Attempts to downplay or disregard CAP as robust or valid fail to understand the intertwined and interconnected nature of process and product. This speaks back to arguments highlighted as part of the literature review in relation to teaching, learning and assessment in A Level Drama and the division of theory and

practice. Act Five of this thesis will document the construction of the dramatic play, *And The Performance Speaks*, through adopting Petersen's (2013:293) simultaneity of data+analysis becoming *creata*. The creative and analytic practices of the T-R-P will also follow Berbary's example in explaining how the drama is 'composed of quotes and passages taken directly from transcripts and fieldnotes and rearranged into a script that conveys insight into each research question' (Berbary, 2011:187).

### **3.2.3. Crystallisation.**

Richardson (2000) offers qualitative researchers the crystal 'as an alternative metaphor to the positivist image of methodological triangulation as the basis for methodological rigor and validity (Ellingson, 2017:179). Crystallisation provides the researcher with 'varied and in-depth perceptions of the experiences' (Sallis, 2008:10) of those within the culture and phenomena under study. It can be used as a framework to ensure the reliability and credibility of the research, whilst also acknowledging that there is no set recipe or prescribed steps to take to engage in the crystallisation of research data (Ellingson, 2009). In eschewing the commonly accepted image of the triangle as means of validating qualitative research, 'we recognize that there are far more than "three sides" from which to approach the world' (Richardson, 2000:934). In looking at data through the prism of the crystal, we can acknowledge that there is no one truth, and instead see a series of reflections and refractions, each 'creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions' (ibid.). As Richardson (2000) notes, the crystal is still structured and in its deconstruction of normative understandings of "validity", accepts that knowledge is situated, complex and unending.

Ellingson (2009) explains that crystallisation requires an understanding of methodology that resists the dichotomisation of art and science and instead sees all research as existing along a continuum that combines objective and subjective interpretation with mixed genres and methods.

Central to her mapping of crystallisation as a set of practices, Ellingson is clear in stating that researchers must ‘make sense of your data through more than one way of knowing’ (Ellingson, 2009:11) and provides several key principles as a guide. These include the use of multiple genres and methods of analysis and textual forms/types of writing, and a commitment to reflexivity and embodiment as central to the practice. Alongside this is the consistent maintenance of respect for the research participants whilst balancing ‘claims of truth with recognition of the intersubjective nature of all knowledge claims’ (Ellingson, 2009:14).

In the context of this piece of research, the data is explored in four primary ways: 1) through the creative and dramaturgical coding of semi-structured interview texts; 2) through the organic and evolving observations of the T-R-P in the field journal; 3) in the creative and analytical processes of the playwright as they construct a dramatic text; 4) through the practical embodiment and (re)interpretation of the script (*creata*) by others (students, teachers, playwrights). To that end, this research study aligns with Ellingson’s description of an ‘integrated crystallization’ (Ellingson, 2009:14) within which the principles of the practice are reflected in a single representation (in this case, the dramatic script) through a process of weaving and layering of verbatim text and the T-R-P’s own creative writing and theatrical vision.

Whilst not undermining the responsibilities of the T-R-P as outlined above, it is important to note that the creative process of playwriting is not always linear or able to be neatly articulated. Ellingson notes similar challenges regarding the use of crystallisation, acknowledging the need for researchers to possess ‘the cognitive and emotional capacity to both suspend disbelief in the rules of a given practice and implement a range of practices simultaneously’ (Ellingson, 2009:18). As Act Two has established, creativity is not easily measured, and the same can be said regarding the creative process of writing and *wrighting* the data. Act Five will offer a commentary to the script itself, explaining its construction and to make the stages of the T-R-P’s creative and analytic

process visible. Much like an origami bird is unfolded to reveal the complex folds that comprise its tangible form, so will I endeavour to unfurl the often-messy creative processes that enable a play to be written, and a collective meaning to be constructed.

### 3.3. An overview of the research sample, including data collection methods and *creata* practices.

This research study uses Beck *et al.*'s (2011) description of a 'research continuum' within the broad context of research-based theatre, to explain two key phases of data/*creata* collection:

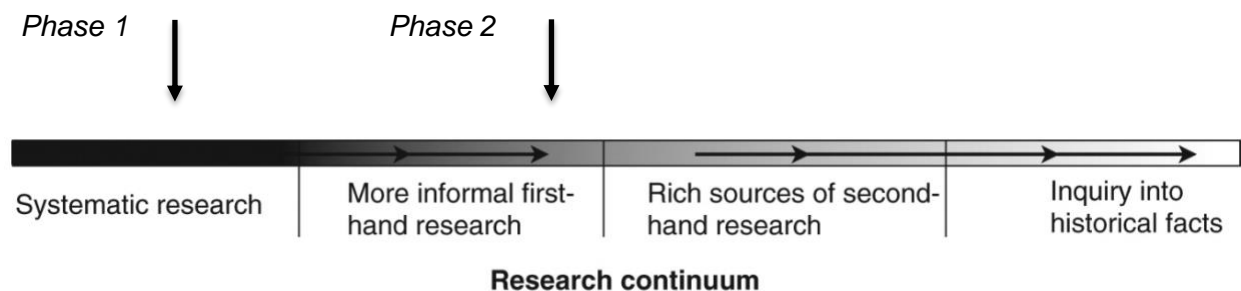


Figure 4. Phase 1 and 2 of data/*creata* collection as plotted on the 'Research Continuum' (Beck *et al.* 2011:691).

As has been outlined, despite a move towards embodied, creative, and dramatic methods of analysis and (re)presentation, the formal data collection methods used in Phase 1 are those typically associated with qualitative research. Beck *et al.* describe this systematic phase as 'A formalized research process conducted by any individual or group, may be within a university setting' (Beck *et al.*, 2011:690). An example of this can be seen in the work of Jacobs (2016a), who uses traditional qualitative inquiry methods to collect her data, before exploring how drama, stories and scripts can be used to disseminate the research findings. To that end, semi-structured

interviews, or “research conversations” with fourteen A Level Drama students studying on the course within the specific research site (a large Further Education college situated in the South-West of England) at points between 2016-2021, will be the formal data collection method for this piece of research. These will be complemented by interviews with eight A Level Drama teachers, situated both within and outside of the research site. The sample size is appropriate to the methodological paradigms that shape the research and the embodied intentions of the data/*creata* analysis and (re)presentation. The sample size provides a good breadth of data to provide robust and textured responses to the research questions, which require the weaving of a narrative tapestry of human experience.

Phase 2 of data collection falls into Beck *et al.*'s (2011) description of ‘informal first-hand research’, where the first-hand experiences of the T-R-P are revisited in light of the hermeneutical and dramatic (re)interpretation of the formal data. It is at this stage that the craft of the playwright becomes the focus, as the original data becomes *creata* in its translation to playtext and in its refinement as a piece of drama as it is read, responded to, and (re)interpreted by others. The research journal provides a creative space through which the T-R-P can explore the blurring boundaries of their tripartite identity as they begin to find embodied ways of knowing and responding to the data. The sample here recognises the experiences and narratives of the T-R-P as another source of data in relation to the research questions which frame the study. Whilst the involvement of other individuals (student-actors, delegate-actors, peer-reviewers) is integral to the creative and analytic processes of the T-R-P as the dramatic script is developed and refined, these “others” are not considered to be part of the study’s research sample. Instead, the T-R-P’s collaboration with others serves as a means of knowing and unknowing the data/*creata* and supports the application of the arts as a ‘dialogic-reflexive process’ (Snyder and Turesky, 2022:2) within the context of qualitative, arts-based research.

*Table 1* outlines Phase 1 of the research sample and data collection methods as associated with Beck *et al.*'s (2011) definition of formalised, systematic research, whereas *Table 2* illustrates the informal practices of *creata* which are adopted within Phase 2 of the process:

Phase 1 Research Sample	Phase 1 Data Collection Method	Number in Sample
Current A Level drama students	Research conversation	8
Past A Level drama students	Research conversation	6
Internal A Level drama teachers	Research conversation	3
External A Level drama teachers	Research conversation	5

*Table 1. Data collection and research sample Phase 1.*

Phase 2 Research Sample	Phase 2 <i>Creata</i> Practices
Teacher-Researcher-Playwright (T-R-P)	<p>Research Journal</p> <p>Creative and analytical writing</p> <p>Construction and refinement of dramatic playtext (including: creation of character and narrative; scenic structure; imagery; stage directions; peer review and practical exploration of the the developing script)</p>

*Table 2. Data collection and research sample Phase 2.*

### 3.3.1. Sampling methods.

The research study uses a range of non-probability sampling methods to gain access to the formal data sample. Non-probability sampling can be considered as being as effective as probability

sampling when used within particular contexts and with specific intention (Tongco, 2007). In my position as teacher-researcher in a large Further Education college, the “current” student and “internal” teacher sample are easily accessible and so there is an element of convenience sampling (Kara, 2012:48) involved in the sampling frame. An open call was utilised, inviting “current” students and ‘internal’ teachers to participate in the research study, and the research conversations were scheduled with each participant as they came forward. The interviews were preceded by an initial informal conversation and issuing of the participant information sheet and consent form for consideration (see Appendices A and B). This process is in line with the approval of the research study as granted by the university’s ethics committee and BERA (2018) guidelines.

To support the validity of the research study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling are used in addition to convenience sampling to ensure robustness, widen the field, and enrich the data. Purposive sampling is described by Tongco as being a non-random technique within which the researcher deliberately selects an informant based on the characteristics they possess and in the knowledge that they ‘can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience’ (Tongco, 2007:147). Within this specific research study, purposive sampling is utilised to invite the participation of some “current” students and all “past” students, requiring the researcher to use my ‘own judgement about which participants will have most to contribute to the research’ (Kara, 2012:49). My insider-knowledge as a drama teacher of both “past” and “current” students as individuals is important and guided the invitation of participants who I anticipated would have differing experiences of studying the A Level Drama curriculum; for example, a student with dyslexia who found the written element of the course very challenging, and a “high achiever” who excelled in both the practical and written components.

Purposive sampling was also used as a method to invite all “internal” teachers and some of the “external” teachers to participate in the study. Tongco states that ‘one must know about the culture before one samples the population in order to find knowledgeable and reliable informants most efficiently’ (Tongco, 2007:151). Given my tripartite identity as T-R-P and the close-to-practice nature of the research, I already possessed significant experience and understanding of the culture and community being researched, which aided the selection of suitable participants. Conversely, it is also important to note the potential limitations of such sampling methods, including the reliability of the data provided by informants and the potential that they may wish to “please” the researcher (Tongco, 2007), which is of particular consideration given my dual relationship to the student sample as both teacher and researcher. These issues will be discussed further in later in the chapter when the “research conversation” is explored as the primary method of data collection.

Snowball sampling is cited by Parker *et al.* as being one of the most popular methods within the field of qualitative research (Parker *et al.* 2019), and one often combined with purposive sampling. As with purposive sampling, snowball sampling is subject to criticisms, including, ‘its selection bias as well as a lack of external validity, generalisability, and representativeness’ (Parker *et al.*, 2019:4). Starting with a small number of initial contacts, the researcher typically makes use of social networks to establish other potential participants who possess the necessary characteristics, knowledge and experience required by the research study (Parker *et al.*, 2019). Snowball sampling is used within the context of this study to widen the sample of ‘external’ teachers. The research conversations held with initial “external” teachers early in the data collection process provided leads to other potential participants who were recommended and in turn, contacted and invited to take part. Many of these participants were initially contacted using social media platforms and found through already existing professional networks, such as *Open Drama UK*. Potential limitations of snowball sampling include that the sample may be influenced

or restricted by the size and scope of the researcher's networks and contacts, and the extent to which potential contributors are deemed to be willing and cooperative by those who recommend them. This will be considered as a potential limitation to the work as the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the study are reflected upon in the Epilogue to the thesis. As with all research participants in the study and in line with the ethical approval granted by the university and BERA (2018) guidelines: all participants reached as a result of snowball sampling were given the option to decline the invitation to participate and leads were not followed up if the initial contact resulted in no response. An effort was also made for the sample to represent a balance in the gender of participants (as seen in Tables 3 and 4, found in section 3.3.4), although gender is not considered to be a specific factor within the data analysis in this particular study.

### **3.3.2. Teacher participants.**

The teachers in the research sample all have experience of delivering the A Level Drama curriculum to 16–18-year-old learners. Of the eight teachers, three of these are currently working within the institution that is the research site and are either currently or have previously taught the A Level Drama curriculum between the period 2016-2021. They have been labelled as “internal” teachers. The five “external” teachers are situated in institutions outside of the research site and either currently teach or have recently taught the A Level Drama curriculum. These institutions are not exclusively FE colleges, with some external teachers working in grammar schools and sixth form colleges. There is a difference in the specifications delivered by the teachers; whilst they are all A Level Drama, the specifications are written and accredited by a range of awarding bodies, including Eduqas, Edexcel, AQA and OCR. Of the teachers interviewed, one “external” teacher is also involved in the delivery of a Secondary Drama PGCE course. Several of the teachers in the internal and external interview sample are either currently or have in the past, worked as A Level Drama examiners for a range of awarding bodies. Two of the external staff

interviewed have also sat on advisory boards for various awarding bodies and have been involved in consultations concerning reforms to the A Level Drama specification and qualification.

The three teachers internal to the research site were approached directly and invited to take part in the research (convenience/purposive sampling). Feeling compelled to participate is a potential limitation of insider-research and purposive sampling methods which needs to be considered within the evaluation of this study. However, as has been noted, all participants were provided with participant information sheets (see Appendix A) prior to agreeing to participate and completed consent forms (see Appendix B). As part of this process, all participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they reserved the right to withdraw their consent at any time. The tensions around informed consent within the context of qualitative will be considered in detail in section 3.4. One colleague within the research site declined to participate. This is helpful in illustrating that no attempt was made to persuade or use my collegiate relationships to influence or compel any member of the internal teaching staff to take part in the research study.

It was considered that the data would be enriched by perspectives and experiences of teachers delivering the A Level Drama curriculum in other institutions, external to the context of the research site. These teachers were approached via an open call to participate using social media platforms: Twitter and closed Facebook groups for A Level Drama teachers were useful in attracting the attention of relevant teaching staff. Alampi (2012) states that 'Social Media platforms can inform every step of the research journey' (Alampi in Bell, 2014:143) and the ability to contact other teachers through digital, social networking provides access to richer sources of data. The *Open Drama UK* network allowed me to advertise for research participants in their monthly newsletter, with teachers making contact via email to express a wish to participate in the research (purposive and snowball sampling). As Bell (2014) explains, the purpose of social media within

research is not intended to replace traditional methods of data collection but can provide helpful ways of initiating and building relationships.

The ability to network with people who might add valuable insight to the data, but who might be otherwise inaccessible (owing to time, geographical location etc.) is a considerable benefit of the use of digital platforms within sampling and data collection. It should also be mentioned that the coronavirus pandemic opened up new opportunities to interact with other potential participants, owing to an increase in professional and social communication between educational groups and communities on platforms such as Twitter. This meant that other A Level Drama teachers were not only more easily contactable but were also more accustomed to the idea of taking part in a video interview following the national move to remote teaching in the first and second lockdowns. Again, all teacher participation was voluntary with consent granted in the case of each individual and an overview of the research aims, and intent outlined in a teacher participant information sheet (see Appendix A). Video calls were then scheduled with each teacher participant, the benefits and limitations of which will be considered in greater detail later in this Act.

### **3.3.3. Student participants.**

The students in the sample have all studied the Eduqas A Level Drama specification in a single institution referred to as the “research site”: the research site being a large FE college in the South-West of England. The student sample is composed of 16–18-year-old “current” students (those actively enrolled on the A Level Drama course between the academic years 2019-2021) and “past” students (those who completed their A Level Drama studies between the academic years 2016-2018). Although the majority of students were interviewed individually, two students who were twins and in the same teaching group, chose to talk to me together. It was initially intended to hold the research conversations with students in person, but the Covid-19 national lockdown meant that this was not viable and data gathering had to shift to online or “remote” interviews. The implications of this will be discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2.

The research utilised an open call to the “current” student sample within the research site (convenience/purposive sampling). Students studying A Level Drama within the institution that is the research site during the academic years 2019-21, were provided with an overview of the research study and invited to take part. As with the internal teaching staff, it was important to draw a distinction between my role and relationship with the students as their teacher, and as researcher. A student participation information sheet (see Appendix A) was provided for the students to share with their parents/guardians and as with the teaching staff in the sample, all students completed voluntary consent and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important, ethically, to provide this information prior to any research conversation taking place in order that ‘respondents have an opportunity to query the meaning and implications of any statements’ (Bell, 2014:179) and prevent anyone from feeling coerced into participation in the study.

In terms of the “past” students, the approach to data collection was different in that these students were contacted directly and invited to take part in the study (purposive sampling). These were students with whom I had maintained contact in a professional capacity, either through providing references, advice or communications relating to their ongoing study of drama. The “past” students were contacted via email and provided with the relevant participant information sheet and consent form prior to setting up and conducting the research conversations. Extending the student sample beyond the research site was considered, but on reflection felt to be not appropriate or practical in terms of GDPR (2018) and safeguarding.

The combined factors of age, professionalism, and subject area were commonalities that provided a mutual basis for the conversations with other drama teachers, where shared experiences could be discussed in a collegiate manner. With reference to the case study of teacher-researcher, Stephen Waters, Bell concludes that it was found that ‘colleagues welcomed the opportunity to air problems and to have their situation analysed by someone who understood the practical day-

to-day realities of their task' (Bell 2014:57). This was similarly the case with the “internal” student sample; my role as insider-researcher was beneficial in not only allowing me access to a wide-range of learners, but more importantly in ensuring that there was already a bond of trust established through our relationship as teacher and student. This would have been difficult to achieve in the same way with external students because there was not sufficient common ground or time to build the trust needed to allow for an open and honest dialogue.

### **3.3.4. Character Labels and ethical anonymity of identity.**

*We are characters in each other's stories*

*Together, we weave our narrative experiences to form a tapestry*

*It is my story, it is your story, it is our story*

In order to anonymise the participants in the formal sample, each research participant has been assigned the letter S (to indicate “student”) or T (to indicate “teacher”) and a number (i.e., S1 or T4) by which they are referred to within the initial analysis and creative coding of the formal data. The letter and number assigned bears no relation to any personal data of the research participant and is used as a way of identifying and distinguishing between the different student and teacher voices. This is also in keeping with the consent given by the research participants which promises to anonymise personal data within the agreed sharing of the research in publications, with other researchers, or for teaching purposes (see Appendix B).

The use of neutral character labels is also in keeping with the conventions of some postmodern play texts, whereby the characters are undefined and anonymous. Within the context of the dramatic script, *And The Performance Speaks*, which has been created as a product and process of research data/*creata* analysis and (re)interpretation, the convention of neutral character labels is maintained. This is both a stylistic choice, and an ethical one. It is acknowledged that in line

with the artistic practices and axiology of the T-R-P, the characters in the play represent composite and not individual identities and are not intended to replicate or represent the specific and individual characteristics or features of any of the research participants. An example of this approach can be seen in the work of Berbary who explains that ‘Although the characters are fictional in the sense that they do not represent a single individual with whom I conducted research, their personalities, appearances, interests, and experiences are grounded in my data and are representative of my... participants’ (Berbary, 2011:190). Whilst the convention of neutral character labels is replicated in the playtext, *And The Performance Speaks*, there is no direct correlation with the labels/numbering used to distinguish between the teacher and student participants in the data sample. Whilst not necessarily having a bearing on the ways in which the data was analysed or worked with (i.e., the gender of the participants is not considered as a factor within the scope of this research study). *Table 3* describes and labels the teacher sample. *Table 4* provides more information regarding the demographic and labelling of the student sample:

Character label	Gender	Internal or External	Place of work (type of education provider)	Sampling method	Other Notes
T1	M	Internal	FE college	Convenience/ Purposive	
T2	F	Internal	FE college	Convenience/ Purposive	
T3	F	Internal	FE college	Convenience/ Purposive	
T4	F	External	Sixth Form college	Purposive	
T5	M	External	Sixth Form in a school - boys	Purposive	Part of exam board advisory group
T6	M	External	Grammar school - mixed	Purposive	Part of exam board advisory group
T7	M	External	Sixth Form in a school - mixed	Snowball	
T8	F	External	HE institution and Secondary school	Snowball	Teaches PGCE drama trainees and drama in a secondary school

*Table 3. The teacher research sample.*

Character label	Gender	Current or Past student	Year 1 or Year 2 of course (Current students only)	Sampling method	Other Notes
S1	M	Current	Year 2	Convenience/ Purposive	
S2	F	Current	Year 2	Convenience/ Purposive	
S3	F	Current	Year 1	Convenience/ Purposive	Interviewed with S4
S4	F	Current	Year 1	Convenience/ Purposive	Interviewed with S3
S5	F	Current	Year 1	Convenience/ Purposive	
S6	F	Current	Year 2	Convenience/ Purposive	
S7	M	Current	Year 1	Convenience/ Purposive	
S8	F	Current	Year 2	Convenience/ Purposive	
S9	M	Past		Purposive	At drama school
S10	M	Past		Purposive	In employment
S11	F	Past		Purposive	At art college
S12	M	Past		Purposive	Gap year
S13	M	Past		Purposive	At drama school
S14	F	Past		Purposive	Studying drama at a university

*Table 4. The student research sample.*

### **3.4. Data collection methods: ethical considerations and potential limitations.**

The research was accepted by the university's ethics committee and has been designed to be accurately and reliably in adherence with both BERA (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018) guidelines. In line with the university ethics committee guidelines, research participants were asked to read an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and sign a consent form to agree their participation in the study prior to the commencement of formal data collection (see Appendices A and B). The participant information sheet and consent form make it transparent to research participants that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they retain the right

to withdraw their consent at any time, and with no explanation. Regarding the “current” student sample (i.e., those students currently studying in the research site, and aged 16-18) the students were advised to share the participant information sheet with their parent or guardian, although specific parental consent was not deemed necessary by the researcher/ethics committee.

In addition, to comply with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the safeguarding policies of the college that is the research site, all “current” student interviews will be held using Microsoft Team, the college’s chosen platform. The teachers and “past” (ex, not current) students in the sample will be able to select to use Microsoft Teams or Zoom as their preferred platform. Each research conversation will be set up using a private meeting link, generating an invitation to join the online meeting that will only be shared with the participant. This protects the privacy of the meeting and ensures it is accessible only by those directly involved/invited. Within the consent form, participants will be able to choose whether they consent to the conversation being recorded and notification of when the recording commences, and ends will be given by the researcher at the start/end of each interview. Participants will be made aware that they can request to view the recorded footage of their research conversation at any time. The recorded data will be downloaded from the local device used to conduct the interview (i.e., the laptop) and securely stored using password-protected hardware, after which it will be deleted from the local device. All data will be securely stored in line with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the BERA (2018) ethical guidelines and will not be shared with anyone for any purposes outside of this specific research project. Participants can withdraw their consent or request that their data is destroyed at any point, in line with the participant consent form and ethical approval granted as part of the research.

At the point in the research where the use of research-based theatre and writing as inquiry was revealed as being the most effective methodological approach for the study, an amendment to the ethics proposal was submitted to the university’s ethics review committee. This addendum

was granted and specified the intention to use the traditions of ethnodrama as a means of analysis and data (re)presentation. As requested by the committee, the anonymity of the participants was ensured by using “character labels” and the removal of any identifiable character traits in the writing up of the data in the form of a dramatic play (as has been outlined in section 3.3.4). Similarly, as the live performance for a public audience of the dramatic script is not intended as an initial outcome of the research study, it is acknowledged that further consent would need to be sought from the participants should the play be developed, rehearsed, and shared outside of the contexts outlined in the ethical proposal and participant consent form.

#### **3.4.1. The use and potential limitations of the “research conversation” as method.**

Research conversations are the primary method of data collection for this study. Clandinin states that ‘most narrative inquiries begin with telling stories, that is, with a researcher engaged in conversation with participants who tell stories of their experiences’ (Clandinin, 2013:34). This study therefore uses the term “research conversations” to describe the method of data collection employed. Borrowing from the traditions of “semi-structured” interview conventions, a series of conversations with A Level Drama teachers and students were facilitated online using Zoom or Teams virtual platforms. Winwood explains that the semi-structured interview provides support for the researcher and maintains focus on the research topic. Preparation for the research conversations involved the process of carefully creating “question prompts” that were used to guide the dialogue if and when needed. As part of this process, the question prompts for the student participant interviews were trialled with a group of students from the research site outside of the identified participant sample, to explore which question topics and phrasing led to the most fruitful and interesting responses. The question prompts were then able to be ‘fine-tuned’ (McGrath *et al.*, 2019:1004) considering the responses received and to check that questions had been understood and interpreted as intended. When it came to the design of the teacher participant questions, an initial survey was drawn up and distributed via *Open Drama UK’s*

newsletter and closed Facebook groups for A Level Drama teachers. Whilst the results and responses from this survey are not considered within the data set of the research study, the process was used to refine the design of the questions which were subsequently used to guide the teacher research conversations. The question prompts for both the student and teacher research conversations can be found in Appendix C.

Within the context of semi-structured interviews, the use of question prompts allows the researcher to dig deeper into the themes presented in the study's research questions and act as an *aide-memoir*, meaning that essential topics are not overlooked' (Winwood in Lambert, 2019:14). The questions designed for use within this research study provided a basic structure and a 'jumping off point' for the research conversations, but each interaction was also allowed to progress organically, with questions not always posed in the same order and offered in response to the pace and thematic direction of the dialogue. Whilst Winwood observes the potential of an 'open and purposeful' conversation within which participants 'have the freedom to introduce, examine and discuss issues which they felt were relevant' (Winwood in Lambert, 2019:15), Kara also notes the risks associated with entirely unstructured interviews that may result in important issues being missed and the conversation 'degenerating into a general chat' (Kara, 2012:122). My field journal was integral in supporting this process, allowing specific questions, thoughts, and ideas during the conversations to be recorded, as well as noting my own embodied responses as T-R-P and reflecting on my positionality and subjectivity.

The flexibility and fluidity of the research conversation is of benefit when collecting data that examines human experience, thought and opinion on a specific topic. However, adopting a semi-structured approach to interviews is not without limitation or critique. Qualitative research interviews undoubtedly take considerable time to arrange, conduct, document and analyse, although this can be aided by technology such as the ability to record remote, online

conversations. This can be countered by ensuring that a study only involves as many participants in a study as are needed to robustly respond to the research questions (McGrath *et al.*, 2019), and those who can offer the insight and experience of the research topic required. There is also the recurring criticism regarding the subjective nature of data collected through naturalistic methods, calling into question once again the validity and reliability of human experience and interpretation. As Denscombe explains, 'research interviews focus...on *self-reports* – what people say they do, what they say they believe, what opinions they say they have' (Denscombe, 2014:254). This thesis chooses to view personal narrative as an opportunity, not an obstacle, and is positioned in alignment with an interpretivist paradigm. This research relies on the interpretation of people's lived experience and acknowledges the fallibility and subjectivity of human existence and expression. Tummons and Duckworth reflect on this when they compare the reliability of a research interview to the act of telling a story:

'One way to proceed is for the interviewer to treat the interview data as a form of storytelling, during which the respondent might still be making sense of the events that they have been talking about, irrespective of how recently they occurred' (Tummons and Duckworth, 2012:69).

The wider ethical implications of the research conversation also need to be considered. As Winwood points out (in Lambert, 2019), researchers have a duty to provide a supportive space for the dialogue to take place and appreciate the time given to the research study through the voluntary involvement of the participant. This means providing the necessary preparatory information and gaining the free and informed consent of the participant, in advance of any research conversation taking place. It is important that the participant recognises that they have the right to withdraw any or all of their data from the study at any point during or after the event. The study takes BERA's (2018) definition of informed consent as being that all participants are aware of what their involvement in the study will entail. This includes being provided adequate

and accurate information regarding what the study is about; why their participation is sought; what will happen to them in the course of the research; how their data will be collected and stored; and with whom it will be shared. Informed consent also recognises the participant's rights to be respected, to be free from duress and to be aware that they can withdraw from the study at any point.

However, as Husband (2020) observes, the precise outcomes and implications of involvement in a piece of research cannot ever be fully realised or predicted, and therefore suggests informed consent is viewed as ongoing and as part of an active and continuing relationship between researcher and informant. Despite ethical guidance being carefully designed, sought, and adhered to, as Husband notes (*ibid.*), the setting of the semi-structured interview is intentionally created and constructed and there are balances of power to be considered. It therefore requires more than a signature on a consent form to ensure the safety and respect of research participants. This, as both Husband (2020) and McGrath *et al.* (2019) agree, demands a high degree of sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and responsiveness of the researcher/interviewer to act responsibly and ethically within a setting that is often unpredictable.

In drawing on the work of O'Neill (2003), Husband adds that 'informed consent is an assurance that participants are neither deceived nor coerced' (Husband, 2020:3), a definition also adopted by this piece of research. Husband also notes however, that the nature of informed consent is not without problems and raises questions regarding the potential implications for researchers regarding the ongoing impact and tangible influence of participant involvement in qualitative studies. This is specifically to be problematised when there are 'conditions within and created by research interactions that lead to post-interview reactions based on the experiences of respondents' (Husband, 2020:3) which may have a bearing on the research participants outside of the expected or planned-for design of the study. The writing of a script was not initially anticipated as a means of analysing and sharing data within the original ethics proposal for the

research. Therefore, if the play's potential as a piece of public performance is to be explored in the future, the concept of consent as a dialogue between researcher and participant would be usefully adopted out of respectful and sensitive consideration to the authorship and origins of the data.

As this Act has outlined, an aspect of my identity is that of teacher-researcher and therefore the research study does not claim objectivity in relation to the data collected, analysed and (re)presented within this thesis. Referring to the work of Gray (2002), Bell explains how qualitative researchers can use 'constant questioning of practice' and adopt 'a critical attitude towards the interpretation of data' (Bell, 2014:187) to safeguard against the dangers of bias. The need to remain reflexive in relation to the data is essential to ensure the research findings are not skewed to align purely with my own beliefs and experiences, but that they honour and do justice to the experiences of the participants as well. As part of the process of analysis, I will note what my assumptions are as I work with each of the research conversations. Examples of such assumptions might be, *drama students don't enjoy writing*, or *the arts are under-valued in educational institutions* or *drama teachers are more concerned with creative expression than grades or outcomes*. Writing these down is a deliberate act to remain mindful of my own experiences, values and beliefs and safeguard against any inadvertent foregrounding of specific agendas or perspectives. The process of transcribing each research conversation will also be directly followed by a researcher's commentary, within which assumptions and conclusions will be further questioned and considered. This will be explored in more detail within Stage 1 of the creative and analytic approach to the data, as explained in section 3.5.1.

### **3.4.2. Holding research conversations online.**

Before concluding the justification for research conversation as the primary method of data collection, it is necessary to revisit the implications of Covid-19 on the study. It became necessary

to move the anticipated face-to-face interviews to remote, online spaces for the completion of the data collection to remain viable amid a pandemic. Given a new familiarity with working and interacting via digital spaces as a result of lockdown, I found no objection or reluctance from the participants to taking part in the research conversations online as opposed to in person. As has been mentioned, in many ways the flexibility afforded by online interviews allows the study to reach a wider range of participants and is a cost and time efficient means of collecting the research data. As Lo lacono *et al.* report, the use of video interview via platforms such as Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams provides researchers 'with the ability to interview research participants using voice and video across the internet via a synchronous (real-time) connection', concluding that 'they [video interviews] work well as a viable alternative or complementary data collection tool for qualitative researchers' (Lo lacono *et al.*, 2016:1).

The use of online video interviews also allows the researcher to meet the needs of the participants more easily, scheduling interviews in the evenings and weekends to suit work and home-life schedules. No-one is required to travel to take part, and an online interview is less-intrusive on the participant's time – as well as the researchers. As Kara notes, 'recording data enables exact reproduction of someone's words and pauses' (Kara, 2012:122) and is far less time consuming than transcribing interviews, and well as being arguably more useful as you can re-play the footage multiple times as part of the data analysis process. Removing the need to take notes during the conversation is another benefit of recording interviews or conducting them online. It allows the researcher to be more "present" within the interview, which is of particular concern to this study and the intention that the research conversations will be centred on mutual, dialogic exchange. According to Blaxter, Tight and Hughes:

'Using an audio or video recorder means that you need only concentrate on the process of the interview. You can focus your attention on the interviewee, giving

appropriate eye contact and non-verbal communication. You will have a verbatim record of the whole interview' (Blaxter, Tight and Hughes, 2010:196).

As well as the benefits, there are also limitations to be considered when using online or 'remote' platforms to video and audio record the research conversations. It is possible that whilst a participant might consent to taking part in a research interview or conversation, it does not necessarily follow that they will also consent to that dialogue being video recorded. Within this research study, this potential obstacle has been largely overcome owing to the context of the pandemic within which the data collection took place. The call to participate in the research study referred to engaging in a conversation with the researcher online and therefore assumed that the participant is comfortable with this in their consenting to take part. The consent form formalises this process, although it is made clear to participants that they have the right to withdraw their consent regarding any aspect of the research study and data collection at any point.

For Denscombe (2014), the use of online interviews also raises questions about the researcher's ability to validate the identity of the person they are interviewing. Whilst this is not an issue with regard to the student sample or 'internal' teacher sample, it is a consideration in relation to the 'external' teacher sample. In their research into the use of Skype for qualitative interviews, Lo lacono *et al.* (2016), refer to the work of King and Horrocks (2010) and 'suggest using some other form of media to verify the participants' ID when using telephone and online messenger style interviews' (Lo lacono *et. al.* 2016:16). As the "external" teacher sample only comprised five individuals, it was therefore a relatively quick and easy process to verify the participant identities by cross-referencing professional Twitter and LinkedIn profiles with the details of places of employment.

Another consideration or critique of online interviews is that they create a greater sense of “remoteness” than would normally be the case in a traditional face-to-face interview. Denscombe states that because there is ‘no *direct visual contact* involved’ in an online interview, there is the potential for the respondent to be ‘more ‘remote’ and distant not just in a physical sense but in a psychological sense as well’ (Denscombe, 2014:272). This can be compounded when technical difficulties such as loss of sound or image, even if temporary, can affect or inhibit a sense of intimacy and interrupt the flow of the dialogue. Whilst it is not possible to prevent technical issues from happening entirely, ensuring that there is a good internet connection and that researcher and the respondent are in quiet, uninterrupted surroundings *before* the conversation commences, will alleviate this issue a little. Lo Iacono *et al.* comment that in the context of their own research, even when technical problems did occur during an online video interview, the quality of the data was not unduly affected:

‘Even on those rare occasions when the call was interrupted by the loss of connection, there was no problem resuming the conversation. Rapport was good possibly because we knew most of our participants (either in person or through previous repeated contacts via online social media)’ (Lo Iacono *et. al.* 2016:10).

A recurrent theme within the context of this thesis is the importance of embodiment in the teaching, learning and assessment of the A Level Drama curriculum. It is interesting to consider the impact and implications of this theme within the analysis of the data, specifically since the pandemic prevented the research conversations from being carried out in person, and at a time when teachers and students were saturated with screen time as a result of the move to online teaching and learning. It can be argued however, that there are some participants who may feel more comfortable taking part in an online interview, with the distance that Denscombe refers to as a limitation providing some welcome separation. A small-scale research study undertaken with a colleague pre-pandemic (Cossey and Curtis, 2018) brought to the fore the voice of the “quiet

learner”, who whilst seemingly silent in physical classroom spaces would come alive in online environments. This marries with my observations as a teacher delivering lessons online within the Covid-19 pandemic, and corroborates that for some individuals, the physical barrier of the screen can be a comfort, creating time and space for deeper thought, reflection, and dialogue.

### **3.4.3. Research journal.**

‘Although when I write up my research it is my sincere hope that a reader might be moved in such a way, I mostly write for myself. I was initially moved in such ways by the stories my participants told me; I see it as my responsibility to relay their stories in the same way that they hit my ears. Traditional write-ups do not allow for that’ (Teman and Saldaña, 2019:472).

Slotnick and Janesick explain that ‘Since the researcher is the research instrument in qualitative research projects, the researcher reflective journal serves the researcher well’ (Slotnick and Janesick, 2011:1354). Creative journaling is a tool readily used by theatre actors, directors, designers, as well as students of drama, making it an apt choice of method to use within the context of this research study. The data collected from the research conversations will be textured by my own fieldnotes as T-R-P working within the research site. My fieldnotes take the form of a research journal which is subjective, creative, and organic in its organisation and structure. Mind-maps, doodles, sketches, lists, stream of consciousness writing, stage directions, speech bubbles are all used to record my observations, thoughts, ideas, and realisations, drawing together the strands of the narrative to bring to the fore key themes and questions as they arise. The journal is handwritten, which is important as it reflects the significance of the practical, and the embodied in my approach to working with and simultaneously generating, data/*creata*. The physical use of my body as a response to the development of my T-R-P identities, and in relation to the data and

*creata* constructed, is evidence of the ‘maturation of this scholar’s desire to “know” in both writing and in image’ (Slotnick and Janesick, 2011:1358).

Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick” narratives is relevant within the context of the research journal as the site for my own ethnographic notes and observations. Jacobs references Denzin (1988) and offers a definition for “thick” description as being ‘a deep, dense and detailed account of problematic experiences’ (Jacobs, 2020a:24). Thick descriptions are typically aided by the researchers own fieldnotes and research journals and help to contextualise the research and challenge the researcher to check their own interpretations and understanding alongside their personal values and attributes (Bhatti, in Coe *et al.*, 2021). In being transparent about my positionality and belief that the arts are fundamental to both education and human development, as a researcher influenced by ethnographic approaches, I acknowledge the bearing of my own experience and values on the research being conducted.

The transcripts from semi-structured interviews with research participants and my own fieldnotes, thoughts and experiences as both drama teacher, playwright, and researcher, will be used within this research study to create a dramatic text that allows ‘for movement through settings, thick descriptive storytelling, the use of quotes, and the integration of my own voice’ (Berbary, 2011:187 in Phillips and Kara, 2021:137). By using the research journal as a space within which to capture the personal narratives and experiences of the researcher, greater depth and texture can be added to the broader tapestry of experiences documented, (re)presented and explored. Alongside this, the use of a creative journal allows for the crystallisation of the data (Richardson, 2000; Janesick, 2001; Sallis, 2008; Ellingson, 2009) and provides a hermeneutic space for me to dialogue with myself (Slotnick and Janesick, 2011) as part of the process of analysis and (re)interpretation.

### 3.5. A four-stage approach to the creative and analytic practice of the T-R-P.

*'Data':*

*bombarded by,  
immersed in  
Information*

*What does it have to say to me?*

In the same way that this thesis argues against the dichotomisation of theory and practice and process and product, the structure of the remaining chapters resists expectations to present data analysis and discussion of findings as distinct or separable. This research study does not reject structure, but chooses to create its own system to explain four stages in the creative process of the T-R-P. These are as follows, and will be explored as a chronological explanation of the writing and *wrighting* practices undertaken by the T-R-P:

Stage 1: iterations in the transcription and creative coding of voices and bodies.

Stage 2: identifying themes and the creation of story, structure, and character.

Stage 3: the synthesis of data and *creata* enables initial themes to be reviewed.

Stage 4: reflections on seeing and hearing the play as an embodied artefact.

McNiff notes that 'As with artistic expression, structure often liberates and informs the art-based researcher' (McNiff, 2008:34) and the method of playwriting in its simultaneity as both analysis, discussion and (re)interpretation of findings is utilised here in a clear and systematic way. Stages 1 and 2 will be explored in what follows of Act Three as the initial transcription and creative coding of the research conversations is discussed. In doing so, the characters and narrative arc of the play are established. Stages 3 and 4 are documented in Act Five and offer a discussion of the

illuminations which occur as a result of the T-R-P's creative and analytic practice of working to develop the drama.

### **3.5.1. Stage 1: iterations in the transcription and creative coding of voices and bodies.**

*I can't see the wood for the trees. Words litter the pages, indecipherable shapes.*

*I am aware of my body. I put out my hands and begin to fumble, feeling my way forward.*

The influence of the arts, embodiment and writing as inquiry have been identified as central to the methodological positioning of the research study that this thesis describes. The intricate and interwoven identity of the T-R-P favours an approach which allows the data to be explored creatively, and one that will provide embodied and richly textured responses to the research questions framing the study. The use of a single, traditional method for data coding and analysis is therefore rejected in favour of an organic, reflexive, and multimodal set of practices wherein the researcher is led by and responds to the needs and wants of the data (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016). As has been foregrounded in the preceding Acts, a significant aspect of this research study involves an exploration of how the craft of drama can be used within the analysis, discussion and (re)presentation of lived experience, requiring research applications that allow for an open, experimental, and creative approach. The tenets of thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006; 2012; 2013) are therefore broadly adopted as a guide within the context of this study, being a flexible, inductive and 'organic approach to coding and theme development' (Clark and Braun, 2017:297) which emphasises the 'active role of the researcher in these processes' (ibid.).

Braun, Clark, and Hayfield (2022) explain thematic analysis as providing a starting point for the journey of data analysis and interpretation, and not a map with predetermined routes. Coding occurs because of analysis, not as imagined, assumed or pre-existing frameworks. In journeying towards an understanding of what the data required of the T-R-P, the project trialled the use of

software to produce a digital transcript of the twenty-two research participant conversations (see Appendix D for example). With an initial transcription of over eleven and a half hours of recorded footage, there was value in efficiency, but I held doubts that working in this way was authentic to the lived experiences of the research participants and the methodological frameworks underpinning the study.

It became clear that there were multiple layers of “text” missing from the digital transcription; noticeably not just what was said, but *how* it was spoken - the pace, rhythm, tone, pause, silences that provide the context for dialogic interpretation. Nor did the use of digitised transcription allow attention to be paid to the body or the emotions of the speakers, which were illuminated through the footage of the conversations. Kiger and Varpio (2020) outline the first stage of thematic coding as being the researcher’s familiarisation with the data to generate initial codes. Engaging with the data from the research conversations as digitally produced transcripts resulted in what felt like fumbling in the dark. It led to disconnection and distance rather than familiarity and understanding. In imposing a hierarchical perspective that encouraged data to be viewed as ‘object’ and not as the rich tapestry of stories and human experiences that it is, the opportunity to know and unknow the data in a relational and dialogic way was compromised. If, as has already been argued, ethnodramatic research practices require ‘the ability to analyze texts, nonverbal actions and gestures, and ‘read’ beneath the surface’ (Saldaña, 1999:68 in Butler-Kisber, 2010:139), it was clear that further iterations and modes of transcription would be needed to reach a place where authentic and creative analysis of the data could begin.

Being guided by Gadamer’s philosophy of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1976, 1977), ‘repetitive iterative readings’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:59) of the data were encouraged through practices that ‘included movement between whole and parts of the text’ (ibid.). In the case of this research study, initial attempts to engage with the data through singularly theoretical and cognitive methods

exposed a necessity to also explore moving with the data in physical and bodily ways. In becoming open to the possibilities of other modes of working with the research data, an alternative framework for the creative and analytic practice of playwriting as a form of inquiry began to develop. Part of the process towards understanding more relational approaches to data analysis requires an acceptance that findings are not simply revealed but occur through ‘a gradual *convergence* of insights coming from the research and the text’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:65).

Central therefore, to the method developed in this research study is a commitment to what Snyder and Turesky describe as movement ‘beyond cognitive skills to embodied and dialogic knowledge creation’ (2022:2), and which crucially, feels more representative of what the literature has revealed regarding the tacit nature of learning in drama education. This is also in line with the ‘experiential orientation’ (Terry *et al.*, 2017:19) of the T-R-P in relation to the analysis and interpretation of the data, which seeks to illuminate the thoughts and feelings of the participants in response to the research questions. However, the approach of the T-R-P does not accept that spoken and written language is always reflective of reality, taking instead a ‘critical’ (ibid.) view that language is created, as in the case of the *creata* which is constructed in the context of this specific research study through the act of making a play. What follows in this Act is an account of that process and an explanation of how each stage in the journey led to a more embodied understanding of the data as it was explored through the lens and craft of the T-R-P.

### **3.5.2. A starting point: character notebooks.**

*From my position as T-R-P I am attuned to the data and listening openly to what it is telling me.*

*I begin to draw pathways between narrative accounts and make connections between the lived experiences of the participants.*

*I pay attention to differing views and opposing perspectives, including my own.*

*I ask questions of myself and the data to test its validity and challenge assumptions.*

*Recurrent themes and ideas are sketched and made visible in words and pictures.*

*Using the verbatim words and images born of the contributors, I begin to creatively code the data:*

*Moving across and within it, I listen - the data speaks to me.*

*In doing so, I make myself aware of my own agenda, and the agendas of others in the wrighting of the data into a dramatic script.*

In response to the call for an embodied approach to data analysis, the second iteration of transcription was conducted physically, by hand. Each of the twenty-two research conversations were documented and explored in a simple A5 notebook for each participant. The character notebooks provide the freedom to be imaginative in the ways in which the research conversations are transcribed and analysed, and the physical nature of working by hand is a deliberate choice in order to 'take into account the way we live in our bodies while we analyse data, in ways that help us to move beyond standard explanatory systems' (Thanem and Knights, 2019:113 in Kara *et al.*, 2021:84). Within the notebooks, a mixture of words and images (rough, hand-drawn sketches) were used to translate the dominant ideas, emotions, and experiences of each research participant, generating a set of initial codes. Significant extracts of the dialogues were transcribed verbatim and indicated in the notebooks using speech marks, in an approach that is in line with Braun and Clark's insistence that 'the transcript retains the information you need, from the verbal account, and in a way which is 'true' to its original nature' (Braun and Clark, 2006:88). This second

round of transcription of the research conversations is noteworthy in that it acknowledges the notion that analysis and interpretation are not separate phases of the qualitative research cycle, but that:

‘Analysis is going on from the outset – based on what the researcher brings with her to the inquiry, what she pays attention to and selects out of what she is hearing, seeing, and recording, and how the field texts are constructed’ (Butler-Kisber, 2010:30).

The adoption of a more creative and holistic approach to transcribing the *whole* of the person/s communicating, allowed for the initial interpretation of the raw data in the synthesis of speech/action/reaction/expression/emotion as a hermeneutical process. I also began to think more like a playwright, starting to consider who the characters might be and what the story is that the play is telling. Leavy reminds us that ‘How the story unfolds will depend on the analytic process the data have undergone and the range of meanings the researcher intends to convey’ (Leavy, 2015:187). As part of the journey towards discovering the central themes of both the research and the drama, I followed the approach of Saldaña (2021) and Sallis (2018) in the broad use of a system similar to that of in-vivo coding.

Sallis (2018) cites Alston and Bowles (1998) who describe in-vivo coding as coming ‘directly from the language of the people being studied and are usually vivid in imagery as well as being analytically useful’ (Alston and Bowles, 1998:200 in Sallis, 2018:55). As the transcriptions were recorded and analysed in the character notebooks, the participants' words were used to construct codes which offered an initial interpretation of patterned topics, themes and concepts arising from the research conversations, and in relation to the research questions the study poses. In line with the creative and embodied approach adopted by the T-R-P, some of the codes take the form of

written words and phrases, whilst others are depicted as visual images. Examples of some of the initial codes constructed as part of Stage 1 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic process can be seen below:

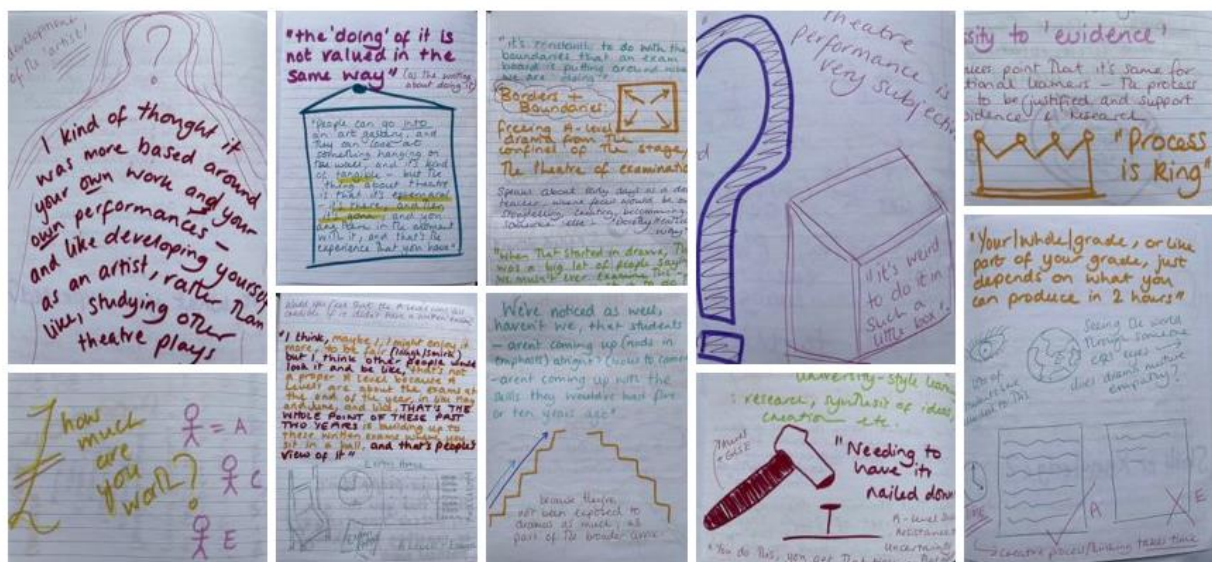


Image 1. Examples of hand-transcription and creative coding in the character notebooks.

The significance of giving attention to *how* words and stories are communicated places emphasis on the concept of the 'participants in action' (Saldaña, 2003:228). In acknowledgment to the significance of embodiment within the narrative of the research, stage directions are used as a dramatic feature to document the non-spoken texts of each research conversation. In the process of transcription, this included the notation of gestural actions such as breaking eye contact, the turning of a head, or the use of the hands to aid expression and communication of a thought, opinion or feeling. Non-verbal sounds were also transcribed in the form of in-text stage directions, such as laughter and sighing. This physical text serves as a second reading or means by which to reflect on the often-subtle nuances of the data. This is common practice in the work of the

verbatim playwright who must not only accurately record the words spoken but must 'also find a way of transcribing what's *not* said' (Belfield, 2018:38). Examples might be:

**S14:** 'I feel like, I...like... (*looking off to side, takes hands and clasps together*)... a lot of Art is very...(*purses lips and makes inward sigh*) like (*looks back to camera*) a lot of Art collectors, and kind of like – everyone wants a piece of art in their home, yet not everyone goes to the theatre.

*and*

**S9:** It's more about what's in here (*points to head*) and what's in here (*points to heart*).

Although an artistic and ethical decision was made not to include many of the stage directions transcribed in the final edit of the script itself, the notation of the physical/emotional text as part of the process of transcription was integral to the initial stages of analysis. Saldaña (2021) claims that coding is a cyclical process. The stage directions therefore provide a second set of codes through which the formal data can begin to be categorised. By paying careful attention to the information that is translated through the movements and responses of the body within each dialogic exchange, the T-R-P is able to listen more holistically to what is being said. In the creation of multiple texts as part of the transcription process, further opportunities for the crystallisation of different forms and modes of data are opened up for interpretation. For example, in reference to the quote from S14 above, the verbal code "Art" is now read alongside the physical/emotional codes of "sighing" and "clasped hands", which signifies the concept of art within the context of the research study as one which can be interpreted as contentious and problematic. When we look again at S9's comment, we notice that experience is described as embodied, and one which encompasses both thoughts and emotions. This speaks back to verbal in-vivo codes generated through the transcription of voices which include terms such as "waiting for blackout", "beautiful,

wonderful things”, and “you shouldn’t really be able to answer it”, where students articulate what it feels like to be creative, to make drama with others, and to perform. This process is in line with Saldaña’s (2021) distinction between a code and a theme, whereby a theme is described as an outcome of initial coding. In reading the coding of bodies/emotions alongside the coding of voices, the physical text allows themes to begin to be identified, i.e., if *Art* is the code, then *drama is not viewed as an artform* becomes a potential theme in the analysis of the data.

The character notebooks also contain other forms of text which are more informal and summarise concepts, and ask questions:

“Text’ not only signifies to the written transcript, but also to recordings, comments made by the researcher about the interview situation and observations. Fieldnotes describing the context and emotions not captured by the recordings were written next to the interview text’ (Alsaigh and Coyne, 2021:5).

The simple device of a purple pen was used to document my own voice, thoughts, physical and emotional reactions, both as a participant in and as an observer of the research conversations. The physical act of noting and transcribing by hand helps to connect the mind with the body and with the emotions, challenging and questioning the meaning that is being extracted from the data and checking this is not disproportionality coloured by any assumptions I hold. Returning to the recorded footage of the research conversations and the accompanying transcripts, also allows the T-R-P to check that they have understood what is being said (and not said) and ensure they are ‘reflexive about their portrayal of participants, because while writing, they must ask questions like, “Who gets the best lines?” “Who gets the final word?” “Who gets to speak and who doesn’t?”...“How does my character’s silence speak on stage in a way it cannot in a traditional ethnographic text? (Goldstein, 2008:4 in Cannon, 2012:583). Writing myself into the narrative of

the research conversations is important in being transparent about my own experiences as a teacher of A Level Drama, but also being clear about my role as a researcher outside of that space. As Thornley reminds the Verbatim playwright to 'leave your ego at the door' and to 'get out of your own way as much as possible' (Thornley, P. in Belfield, R. 2018:160), Saldaña also suggests that often, the best position for the playwright/researcher to be is in the wings (Saldaña, 2003:223).

### **3.5.3. Forms of notation adopted in the transcription of the research conversations.**

In the construction of a text which acknowledges its intended destination is to be *performed* and not just read, the specific conventions adopted in the transcription of participant voices are important. Sallis notes the potential of in-vivo coding to document 'culturally-constructed vernacular of the participants' (Sallis, 2018:55) and highlight words and phrases that may be used as dramatic dialogue in the play. The stylistic and structural choices made by the playwright regarding how the text is organised and laid out on the page create inference for the actors to interpret. Therefore, when the text is comprised of verbatim speech, consideration needs to be given to the extent to which the playwright intends for the actor to mirror the speech patterns and vocal attributes of its originator. As Belfield cautions:

'...you'll soon realise that real speech is much more difficult to write down than made-up speech...As you proceed you'll need to settle on a simple system that you can keep consistent across all your interviews' (Belfield, 2018:38).

As has been explained, the digitised transcription of the research conversations failed to document the idiosyncrasies of natural speech. The second iteration of transcription therefore involved the creation of a set of simple literary and dramatic devices to ensure consistency in the hand-transcribing of each research conversation. This system was used within the character

notebooks to notate the dialogue in an embodied and three-dimensional way, acknowledging how each pause, stutter, interruption, and emphasis provides further layers of text to be analysed and interpreted:

**Ellipses** (...) indicates a pause, which might be accompanied by a stage direction, such as (*looks away and rubs back of hand against chin*). This can be helpful in ascertaining when the speaker is lost in thought, or perhaps searching for the words to articulate their experience. Ellipses are also used to indicate that the speaker trails off mid or end of thought/sentence. In the curation and creation of the performance script, the use of **Beat** is also used as a device to indicate a brief moment or pause in the text. *Beat* has become common usage in contemporary play texts, being used to infer a moments rest that is less than the traditional *pause* -it is a 'beat', like a heartbeat, a momentary interruption or silence.

**Commas** (,) are used frequently and help to show the often-disjointed flow of the speech or in fluency, and regularly feature the repeated use of '**filler words**' such as 'um', 'er', 'hmm' that are common and habitual to the rhythm and nature of verbal dialog. If a comma has been omitted, it can suggest that speech is delivered quickly and without pause for breath.

To indicate **stress** of a word or phrase, in the notebooks this is indicated by underlining or if a more definite **emphasis** is required, the use of **capital letters**. In the writing up of the transcripts to script form however, the underlining is replaced using **italics** which is the common convention in play texts.

An **em dash** (-) is used to show interruption of speech (perhaps by the other person in the dialogue, i.e., the researcher) or the person speaking themselves. It can also

help to indicate the separation of a sentence fragment from a subsequent complete sentence, or a change in tangent or train of thought. An em dash may also be used to indicate a shorter, mid-sentence pause by the speaker.

**Conjunctions that start a sentence** are retained (i.e., And then I just left.) as are **full stops** and **capital letters** to indicate clear beginning and ends of complete sentences.

**Repetition, stutters, and false sentence starts** are all retained and indicated typically through the use of an em dash or commas. Examples would be ‘I – I thought that I would like the theory...’ or ‘I th-th-think’ or ‘I think, I think I expected something different to what it was’.

**Mispronunciations** or **mistakes** are written as delivered, phonetically and should therefore be delivered as such and not corrected by the writer or actor.

**Stage directions** are used to indicate the physical and gestural movements of the speaker, as well as non-verbal sounds.

For the purpose of this research and to preserve anonymity as agreed in the consent forms, accents or local dialects will not be indicated or written into the transcribed text.

#### **3.5.4. Stage 2: identifying themes and the creation of story, structure, and character.**

‘the ‘narrative’ for me is linked to the structure and can be defined or expressed as a series of events – what happens when. The ‘story’ is something more profound – it is a way of expressing what lies at the heart of the verbatim play’ (Belfield, 2018:57).

If Stage 1 is described as my familiarisation with the data, or the 'coarse-grained phase...when the researcher really gets to know her field texts' (Butler-Kisber, 2010:30), then Stage 2 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic process describes the 'fine-grained analysis' (ibid.) Butler-Kisber defines this as being 'when the researcher looks even more closely. 'Chunks' of field texts are reassembled into more refined categories, and are broken down into others, and these are assigned, and reassigned names or codes' (Butler-Kisber, 2010:31). In the T-R-P's construction of the play, the coding and categorisation of the data is a holistic and intersecting process. The research conversations transcribed and coded in the character notebooks are creatively and collectively examined to 'identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst' (Braun and Clark, 2006:88). The following sections explain how 'conceptual themes that emerged from the data were to become the play's initial broad scene and plotline elements' (Sallis, 2008:10) and support the development of the characters of the drama.

Following in the footsteps of Sallis (2008), I responded to a need to inductively analyse and reduce the data from the initial character transcripts and sets of textual, visual/physical and emotional codes to find both the themes and the dramatic subtext contained within the various layers of text. Borrowing again from the traditions of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), the character notebooks were re-read for recurrent and patterned topics, words, images, and ideas as discussed by multiple A Level Drama teachers and students. As well as looking for patterns in the data, I also searched for concepts that had "performative" qualities. Sandford explains that as a playwright, you are always consciously 'making choices' (Sandford in Belfield, 2018:52) about what you include in the knowledge that you are making a piece of theatre. In the case of this research study, it is recognised that there is a need to produce credible research outcomes as well as an engaging piece of drama. The T-R-P needs to carefully negotiate how the data is selected and used within the play's construction and be conscious that the aesthetic and entertainment value of the performance does not overshadow the validity and authenticity of the

research. This does not however, mean that the data is not subject to processes of selection and editing as the T-R-P searches for the most direct way to tell the story that needs to be told. As Saldaña states:

‘And because a play is life—with all the boring parts taken out—and one of the playwright’s functions is to use an economy of words to tell a story, the verbatim transcript is reduced to the “juicy stuff” for “dramatic impact.” Lengthy sentences or extraneous passages within an extended narrative, whose absence will not affect the quality of the data or their intent, could be edited’ (Saldaña, 2003:224).

Referring to the work of Braun and Clark, Kiger and Varpio state that ‘a theme is a ‘patterned response or meaning’ (Braun and Clarke 2006:82) derived from the data that informs the research question’ (Kiger and Varpio, 2020:3). As I mined the text, I revisited the initial codes generated in the character notebooks and lifted repeated, striking, and poignant words, phrases, and stage directions (physical actions and gestures) that encapsulated key ideas, and which I felt might serve as suitable titles for scenes within the play. Braun and Clark (2006) are clear that within the analysis of qualitative data, themes do not simply *emerge* and are not lying in wait to be *discovered*. The T-R-P acknowledges the active role they play in the construction of themes and notes that the aim of a thematic approach to analysis is to ‘identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data’ (Clark and Braun, 2017:297). Kiger and Varpio helpfully highlight that ‘researchers can identify themes irrespective of the number of times a particular idea or item related to that theme appears in a data set’ (Kiger and Varpio, 2020:3) and that ‘the importance or centrality of a theme is not necessarily reflective of the frequency of its appearance within the data’ (ibid.). Whilst some themes occurred frequently in the repetition of words and phrases such as “physical” and “the examiner”, others were less common but equally as striking and important, like “the performance speaks”, for example, which would become the title for the play.

### **3.5.5. Developing dramatic episodes: a thematic approach to narrative construction.**

Having established a list of possible scenic titles and initial thematic categories, a further round of creative analysis was applied. This is referred to by Belfield as getting ‘under the skin of your transcript’ (Belfield, 2018:84), a process which he claims is vital if you are to reveal the heart of the story you are trying to tell. A new document *Script, Draft 1*, was created and a framework of scenes laid out. During this process, I remained mindful of my ethical and axiological commitment to respect the lived experiences of the participants, and an ‘obligation to portray events in a way that does not misrepresent the data or the culture from which it is derived for the purpose of dramatic engagement’ (Sallis, 2008:13).

Belfield tells the verbatim playwright that when working to write a thematic piece as opposed to a more conventional, chronological narrative, presenting the themes ‘in sections like a play is divided into scenes’ (Belfield, 2018:94) is one way to construct the script. Similarly, Saldaña cites Rubin and Rubin to explain how ‘themeing’ the data can lead to the refinement of a play’s developing narrative structure: ‘Themes should be stated as simple examples of something during the first cycle of analysis, then woven together during later cycles to detect processes, tensions, explanations, causes, consequences, and/or conclusions’ (Rubin and Rubin, 2012:206 in Saldaña, 2021:177). The iteration of the script’s structure below is close to what has become the latest (I purposefully resist “final”) version and provides a narrative overview of the developing thematic categories determined through the transcription and initial stages of data analysis. As part of this process, each cluster of themes were colour-coded to support the development of analysis and the selection and organisation of dialogue. The thematic categories forming the narrative arc of the play were as follows:

- *Episode 1 - What other people think: defining 'academic'.*
- *Episode 2 - Divisions are discussed: debates about theory and practice.*
- *Episode 3 - How do we measure creativity?: the omnipresent examiner.*
- *Episode 4 - Moments of connection: doing and being.*
- *Episode 5 - Reimagining: process over product and lessons from Covid-19.*

To allow the voices of the characters to tell the story, the transcribed text from the research conversations was colour-coded in relation to the thematic categories/scenic structure. Anything that didn't fit under these thematic categories was left as black text, and any verbatim text belonging to my voice as the researcher, remained purple, as in keeping with the transcription and notation practices adopted in Stage 1 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic process. Through colour-coding the participant voices, I was able to notice which thematic categories were particularly prominent or recurrent across the experiences of multiple individuals. Associating the text with colours also allowed for distinction between different sections of the emerging play, acknowledging changes in pace, tone and atmosphere, as well as recognising shifts in message and story. In line with what Braun and Clark describe as working at a 'latent level' (Braun and Clark, 2006:84), the construction of *creata* through the crafting of a play allows the T-R-P to go 'beyond the semantic content of the data' and begin to 'identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (ibid.). As a researcher, these insights were promising in terms of how the data was speaking back to the original research questions. As a playwright, it gave me courage to trust in the creative process as a meaningful and effective lens of analysis. The text below is taken from S14's verbatim transcript and provides an example of thematic colour-coding:

- *Drama is just like so – upper-class – and just to be able to go to the theatre, is a lot...(pause) the industry is so exclusive, and very...um...yeah, exclusive of class (ticks off numbers on fingers), and wealth, and also like, diversity.*

- Or...like afterwards when...I would feel that *good feeling (gestures hand towards chest centre)* after the performance.
- Hmm...(looking up, fist pressed to chin) I think...yes...it was – but also theory kind of shocked me a bit! (laughs). I was like, 'ahh!' (moves back, eyes wide, mouth open in an expression of faux fear)
- In Fashion A-Level, we didn't have an exam, we just had to write an essay. If we had that kind of approach in Drama, it would be a lot better.
- Whenever I think of examiners, I just think of like, cold, grey, lifeless (laughs) humans...So you're kind of just like talking to a droid, rather than your teacher, who knows you.

Beginning with the arrangement of the student participant text under the new episodic structure, the play started to take on a tangible shape. As T-R-P, an understanding of the importance of dramatic conflict in the making of performance helped to ensure that there was balance of opinion and that popular ideas were challenged and provided with the opportunity to respond and offer counter-argument. Aston and Savona notes that: 'For the dramatist, whilst it may be true that an idea for a play is sensed in advance of its composition, how that idea is given a dramatic shape depends on the type of theatre the writer has in view' (Aston and Savona, 1991:16). We might borrow from Stanislavski's (1936) reference to the 'super-objective' here which Stanislavskian scholar, Bella Merlin explains as being:

'The super-objective is the ruling idea of the script. It forges a link between writer, director, actor and eventually audience. If you can identify the super-objective, you can clarify the motivating force behind what the writer wrote the script in the first place...Identifying the writer's super-objective prevents you from concentrating exclusively on your own role: instead, you start to see the bigger picture, as well as

the context in which your character exists, so that you have a concept of every character's function and journey' (Merlin, 2007:220).

The articulation of the play's super-objective was a significant moment in the development of the primary themes being constructed. There is similarity with Braun and Clark's description of the process of reviewing themes as part of thematic analysis, and the point at which 'you consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also whether your candidate thematic map 'accurately' reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole' (Braun and Clark, 2006:91). I defined the super-objective of the play in my fieldnotes as being:

*Teachers and students share their experiences of the A Level Drama curriculum in an effort to challenge hegemonic assessment practices. They seek to reframe and redefine what the term 'academic' means within the context of drama education and critique a system that favours product over process. They acknowledge the significance and presence of the body and creatively reimagine ways that drama education could be reinvigorated and assessed. They are resolute in their insistence that everyone should have access to an arts education and support the championing of drama as an artform with its own set of distinct skills and pedagogies.*

Interestingly, Merlin states that she has 'ambivalent feelings' (Merlin, 2007:220) about the notion of Stanislavski's super-objective, noting that 'a play's super-objective doesn't really emerge until you put it in front of an audience' (Merlin, 2007:221). This perspective aligns with the latter stages of the T-R-P's process of analysis and illumination of findings, whereby the role of "others" in the continued shaping of the play is highlighted and discussed.

### **3.5.6. Developing characters: ethical and stylistic decisions are made.**

As part of the process of arranging the verbatim text to create and develop the play's narrative, the fourteen student research participants were amalgamated into seven Student characters:

'Characters in the script can be constructed as composites so that the themes that emerged during data collection— which - in interviews, for example, may have come forth in multiple interviews— can - be used to create character "types."' (Leavy, 2015:185).

In the development of composite characters, the voices of all fourteen student participants remain represented within the script, illustrating simultaneously their individual and collective experiences. Taking inspiration from the conventions of postmodern playwriting, I imagined the voices of the student ensemble delivered outward, to the audience, being more abstract in style than would be the case in a naturalistic drama. This also supported my commitment to the participants to anonymise their identities in the sharing of the research, as well as aligning with the methodological positioning of the T-R-P who does not seek to mirror reality, but to offer an interpretation of it. Choosing to think about the student characters in the play as an ensemble also gave them a power on the stage that they might not be afforded as single identities or in the style of naturalistic characters. The use of the ensemble represents both the way in which 'students' can be viewed and talked about homogeneously by those in positions of authority (teachers, examiners, policy makers, the media), but also allows them to grow in strength and influence when they and move, and act as a collective group. In experimenting with the scripting of the student voices in the form of both singular and choral speech, it is possible for the characters to remain separate and distinct whilst also maintaining a sense of their shared experiences as A Level Drama students. This helped to ensure that particular perspectives weren't being side-lined or written out of the research findings.

As a dramatist and as a researcher, I recognise the importance of drawing distinction between the lived experiences of A Level Drama students in comparison to teachers, despite an intersection of themes identified as a result of Stages 1 and 2 of the creative and analytic process. Referring to Saldaña's extensive body of work in the creation of ethnodramas, Leavy illustrates how the ethnodramatist can 'Exhibit collective story creation through the multiplicity of perspectives' (Saldaña 1999:64 in Leavy, 2015:185) as one way to ensure the credibility of what is being illuminated. Subsequently, two composite Teacher characters were developed from the verbatim text of the eight original teacher participants, through which significant and problematic questions in relation to the themes constructed could be discussed and debated in the form of a dramatic dialogue. Creating the characters of *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 2* provided a platform to explore the nature of drama education in a style that offered contrast to the more stylised and physical nature of the student ensemble.

The curation of the dialogue between *Teacher 1* and *Teacher 2* infers that the characters are colleague relationship feels reminiscent of many a staffroom conversation where teachers meet informally to talk about the problem and context of their subject and share anecdotes and experiences. These dialogues were initially created as independent vignettes constructed to explore the thematic categories identified in Stage 1 of the analysis, and then later integrated with the student text as part of the play's scenic structure. In *And The Performance Speaks*, the two teachers share certain core values such as the importance and value of an arts education for young people, but also have the opportunity to engage in dialectical sparring as they explore the "big" questions of the research. These include whether A Level Drama should be assessed using written examination, and the extent to which the subject is viewed as valuable in the eyes of others/wider society. Their dialogue speaks into and alongside the voices of the students, with views and opinions sometimes singing together in harmony, and at other times disconnected and in counterpoint.

### **Act Three: chapter summary.**

Act Three has mapped out a journeying with methodology as experienced by the researcher and has identified the tripartite identity of Teacher-Research-Playwright as central to the ways in which the data will be creatively analysed and (re)presented through the use of playwriting as a purposeful practice of inquiry. It is understood however, that the point arrived at by the T-R-P is a resting place, not a finite destination and acknowledges a composite methodology which is better described as being created, than adopted. As part of this process, some of the potential challenges, criticisms and limitations of the methods and methodologies proposed for use within this study have been considered and responded to through a commitment to reflexive, dialogic and crystallised research practice. The sampling frames, research participants and phases of data/*creata* collection and associated methods have also been outlined.

A four-stage process has been described to explain the T-R-P's creative and analytical practices as the raw data is coded, themed and a framework for the dramatic text is constructed. Act Five will concern itself with the role of *creata* and other forms of writing as a way of deepening analysis, developing understanding, and co-constructing meaning in relation to the research questions. As part of Stage 3 of the T-R-P's process, the significance of visual imagery and physical action will be explored as an additional way of interrogating and examining qualitative data. This will be considered alongside the creative process of the playwright as they transform text on a page to something that is performative and can be realised on the stage. Stage 4 will explore this concept further as the rough script is handed over to performers who enable the T-R-P to undertake a further iteration of analysis and look for fresh illuminations and missed perspectives as the data is (re)interpreted and read through the bodies of performers in space.

## An Interlude

*Interlude:*

*an interval; an interruption;*

*a break -*

*a pause...*

*a breathing space*

### **I. The purpose of the Interlude within the body of the thesis.**

The approach adopted in this study embraces a belief that artists are researchers, and each artistic expression is in itself, an inquiry into human experience. Act Three has explained the multiplicity of the Teacher-Researcher-Playwright's identity and justified the use of playwriting as a method of inquiry, selected purposefully in response to the particular situation of the research this thesis describes. In choosing to engage in the artistic practices and processes of the playwright, I express an understanding of the data in a way that acknowledges my intimate connection to the research whilst also remaining cognisant of my separation from it (McNiff, 2008).

As a research method, the construction of a play text is an artistic experiment. The complex, creative and at times messy processes involved, allow the data to be richly explored from different vantage points and opens up the possibility for the unexpected and unintended to occur. As the playwright works with others in the translation, playing with, and refining of the developing drama, the researcher is held to account by those they collaborate with, and through the reflective and critically constructive dialogues that occur. As a result, what follows in the remaining Acts of this thesis will respond not only to the questions posed regarding relationships between ways of

learning and modes of assessment in A Level Drama, but also contemplates the use of playwriting as a method of inquiry within the context of qualitative and educational research.

To that end, this brief interlude acts as a breathing space within the context of the thesis as a document, and as a piece of work. It signifies a shift in time; a time before, and after the existence of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*. The Interlude is also a place to pause and take stock: to consider the journey so far and situate the writing and *wrighting* of a dramatic text within the research study. In doing so, the Interlude maps out what is to come and provides an overview of the creative and analytic process of the playwright in four key stages. Integral to the Interlude is the instruction to the reader to depart from the pages of the formal thesis and turn their attention to the play in its dramatic form. As specified in Act One, it is the intention that the reader reads the play in tangible form, turning the pages of the text and immersing themselves in the world of the play. Reading the play as a single, uninterrupted act is a manifestation of the embodied processes of thinking/being/doing that have been identified in the literature reviews as fundamental to the ways in which we learn about and through drama.

The play, *And The Performance Speaks* is intended to be read as a physical and embodied experience which acknowledges that to splice and scatter the drama throughout the pages of the thesis would be to dilute its purpose and ability to communicate to the reader/audience. This study takes the view that the T-R-P's process and a discussion of the findings can be more clearly understood when they exist in the knowledge of the play as a dramatic work. At the end of this Interlude, you will therefore be invited to read the play in its entirety as a means of foregrounding the Acts which are to follow.

## II. “The play’s the thing”.

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the eponymous Prince of Denmark uses playwriting and the performance of a play to ‘catch the conscience of the King’ (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2). Theatre often has a purpose other than its aesthetic or entertainment value. In the case of the study this thesis describes, playwriting is used not only to present the research findings in an engaging and accessible way, but more significantly as a means of analysing and discussing what has been illuminated through the conventions and devices of drama. The play, therefore, is *the thing*. It is an analysis of data and a discussion of what has been found and should be viewed and read with this intention in mind. The T-R-P’s careful crafting of the text is as a result of a dialogic process through which the researcher enters into conversation with the data and opens up possibilities for (re)interpretation and a hermeneutic construction of meaning.

The findings presented in Act Four are explored in Act Five in their complexity through a narrative discussion of the construction of the drama: the structure, style, characters, dialogue, movement, and stagecraft of the play are chosen for their potential to shed light on the lived experience of the research participants. The T-R-P’s process is an embodied one and the use of first-person narrative is a deliberate acknowledgement of my own body as part of and in relation to the inquiry, and to the bodies of others. It is apt therefore, to offer a reminder that the ‘characters’ in the play are not fictional: *they are* the research participants. Act Five will consequently include reference to both character voices, and participant voices as the data is analysed and interpreted.

When the play is brought to life, it is the voices of the participants that are heard and seen as embodied thought/experience in action. My own lived experiences as drama teacher and researcher are also present in the curation of the text, and through the visual and physical imagery created as I explore and discuss the illuminations in performative terms. Scholars working in the field of ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2003; Mienczakowski, 2001; Sallis, 2018) note the importance of

maintaining as much of the verbatim narrative as possible to create ethnographic performance texts that speak *with* and not *for* the participants (Mienczakowski in Atkinson *et al.*, 2001:469). In alignment with the position of Sallis, the T-R-P's process adopted here seeks to 'engage in a process of highly selective dramaturgy – drawing exclusively from the raw material that I have from my research notes, interview transcripts and so on' (Sallis, 2018:53). To that end, the reader/spectator is asked to keep in mind the human bodies without who, the research and the play would not exist.

The job of the play is to speak out into the world and elicit a response from its audience - to stimulate thought, encourage communication and raise questions. The shape and form of the play is designed to provide a concise account of the entirety of the research study. It begins by exploring A Level Drama students' and teachers' thoughts about how the subject is perceived, grappling with the dichotomisation of mind and body in processes of learning and assessment, before arriving at a place where the characters offer their hopes and thoughts about the future life and potential of the qualification in a post-pandemic world. At the heart of the play is a driving insistence that the arts and creativity matter, and that young people deserve access to a high-quality arts provision as part of their education. Similarly, this thesis chooses to place the creative and analytic practice of writing a play at its core and centres itself around a belief that theatre can speak what is often unspeakable. In utilising the potentiality of the play's form to stage stories about experiences of drama education, the arts are championed as a means of expressing complex ideas in a way that is nuanced, multi-modal, accessible, and inclusive.

*NB: in the event that the play is not available in its physical form, it can be located in Appendix E of this document. If possible, and to access the research as intended, it is suggested that the reader may wish to print the play and read it as a hard copy.*

### **III. And The Performance Speaks.**

*An invitation: put down the thesis document; leave the glare of the screen.*

*Pick up your copy of the play and listen:*

*And The Performance Speaks.*

*You are encouraged to move your body; find a restful position and space to read the play uninterrupted, in one sitting. Allow yourself to read the play as a piece of drama (including the notes and stage directions) visualising how it may look and feel in its tangible form on the stage:*

*And The Performance Speaks.*

*As with verbatim theatre, you are reminded that the words spoken by the characters are taken directly from interview transcripts; they are not elaborated or fabricated. These are the stories that need to be told:*

*And The Performance Speaks.*

*The collation, arrangement and ordering of the text depicts the hand of the playwright, as do the visual and physical moments which underscore the dialogue. The movement, imagery and physical action remind us that sometimes what needs to be said is unspeakable and requires other modes and means of expression:*

*And The Performance Speaks.*

## **Act Four**

### **Introduction: 'illuminations'.**

As a play exists in an organic and spiralling state of evolution, the “findings” documented can only ever be captured momentarily, in the same way that dramatic performance is impermanent, subjective and resists being tethered to any singular interpretation or conclusion. The stage lights illuminate the performance space and make the drama visible, textured, and multi-dimensional. However, they are unable to shed light on every corner of the stage and there will remain pockets of darkness which continue to exist undiscovered and in shadow. Similarly, the illuminations constructed as a result of this research study are made in an understanding of ‘how important it is to withhold conclusions of any kind when investigating human behaviour’ (McNiff, 2008:34).

It is acknowledged that the voices and images which arise from the page are one retelling of a story that has other characters, circumstances, and experiences outside of the scope of what is presented here. These will be considered within the limitations of study, within chapter six, The Epilogue, alongside reflections on the research journey and considerations regarding dissemination. The Epilogue will, however, explore the potential transferability of the study’s findings to other contexts and consider how they may inform researchers investigating comparative issues and/or the application of creative methods and methodologies in qualitative research. The Epilogue will also consider the implications of the findings in practice. Whilst a reimagining of a new A Level Drama curriculum is outside of the scope of this thesis, suggestions for the future practice of assessment methods in formal drama education will be made considering the aims and findings of this research study.

#### **4.1. A summary of the findings in response to the original research questions.**

This chapter will restate the original research questions and present the main findings as constructed from the creative analysis of the data/*creata* in relation to each aim. As is explained in Act Three, the formal data is taken from eleven and a half hours of research conversations held with students studying/who have studied, and teachers with experience of delivering, the A Level Drama curriculum within the situated context of Further Education. To protect anonymity and in line with ethical consent, a system of labelling has been used to distinguish between participants, as explained in 3.3.4. The informal data follows Petersen's (2013) concept of dramatic writing as *creata*, whereby through my practice as T-R-P, I have synthesised an analysis of the formal data and the notes from my research journal, with the practices of playwriting to develop a play script that interweaves simultaneously a discussion, and (re)presentation of the findings.

As has been outlined in section 3.5, the influence of arts-based and post-qualitative scholarship in relation to the blurring of boundaries between methodologies and methods led to the construction of a four-stage process of creative analysis, which was developed as a product of the T-R-P's use of playwriting as a practice of inquiry. Stages 1 and 2 of this process have been documented in Act Three, where practices of transcription, coding, and thematic analysis are explained alongside the initial construction of the play's narrative structure and creation of characters. Stages 3 and 4 of the T-R-P's process of creative analysis will be presented after this chapter, in Act Five, and offer a more detailed interpretation and discussion of the themes, referring to the research questions and related literature. This chapter will therefore draw on the findings constructed through an interplay and hermeneutical dialoguing of both the data and *creata* and will highlight themes and patterns crystallised as an outcome of this the T-R-P's process, and in relation to the three research questions which underpin the study. Sub points will elaborate on each of the main findings, citing the research participants to illustrate how themes were constructed.

## 4.2. Research Question 1.

*1. What is the relationship between processes of learning and methods of assessment in the experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers?*

The over-arching aim of the research study was to investigate the relationship between the ways in which students learn within drama education, and the methods used to assess them. This was an emotive topic within the research conversations with both student and teacher participants and brought to the surface a strength of feeling regarding what can be described as a deep disconnect between ways of learning and methods of assessment in the A Level Drama specification. The findings in relation to research question one are sub-divided into three sections, which are concerned with: the embodied nature of learning in drama education; the prevailing question of “rigour” and the use of the term “academic” in relation to drama’s place within the curriculum; and the uses and efficacy of written examination as an assessment method within the context of the A Level Drama qualification.

### 4.2.1. Finding 1a: discord between ways of learning and methods of assessment.

*There is discord between the ways in which students enjoy and engage in learning in A Level Drama (which are tacit, collaborative, dialogic, and embodied) and the methods of assessment employed by the current exam specifications (which emphasise retrospective or hypothetical written descriptions of live performance and/or creative skills and processes, and performance work that is made and presented within prescriptive parameters). The study found strong feeling amongst the participants, particularly the student participants, that some current methods of assessment, namely the written exam, inhibit a sense of creativity and creative autonomy, which is fundamental to an engagement in, and enjoyment of, learning within drama education.*

The findings support and corroborate much of the literature reviewed in section 2.4 of Act Two and highlight enduring tensions regarding **a disconnect between how students learn about drama, and how they are assessed** in the context of the A Level Drama curriculum. Student participant S11 states this clearly in describing their experience of studying the A Level Drama specification as being “just separated into two halves”, a feeling echoed by student participant S5 who expressed about that course, “that it’s quite disjointed”. Despite teachers being clear about their intention and desire to teach the subject holistically, a common theme within the research data was **a separation in thinking about the processes of learning about drama, and the product of examination** as demanded by current specifications. One of the teacher participants offers a similar sentiment in their assertion that “The stuff we do in class is very different to the way we have to then twist it (*motions with hand*) to reproduce it in this stupid exam” (Teacher participant T3). The study found that ways of learning and methods of assessment are deeply intertwined with the false dichotomisation of theory and practice, which will be discussed in more detail in Finding 2a. This engrained division permeates teaching and learning within the A Level Drama curriculum and although **teachers and students have some choice within current specifications** (i.e., choice of text, or theatrical style of performance work) there is also much which is heavily prescriptive and the **distinct separation of “written exams” and “performance exams”** does not allow for a harmonious unification of theory and practice.

Within drama education, the findings make clear **the significance of the body** and our bodies in collective and dialogic interaction as integral to the ways in which we learn. In drama, the body is not only implicit in the visible expression and communication of human experience but is also fundamental in the act of interpreting and understanding each other, ourselves, and the world we inhabit. Student participants speak about learning as happening within and through the body and enjoy the creative and collaborative nature of working physically and practically within drama. Student participant S3 notes the importance of physical, bodily engagement in drama as more

valuable to learning than from studying the work of others: “The experience you get from doing it, rather than watching people who have previously done it, is – would be – greater”. Student participant S7 places similar weight on the necessity of *doing* in drama education, noting that learning in drama “*is* the performing and not necessarily the look at how you *might* do it, without performing it”. The **embodied and vigorous nature of drama and performance** is also drawn on by many of the teacher participants **as being integral to processes of learning**, such as Teacher participant T2’s comment that “Within our art form, it’s live, isn’t it? - you have to smell, and breathe it, and taste it, and hear it” which emphasises the tangible and physical nature of the subject. The physical and practical application and exploration of theoretical concepts is considered by all teacher participants as fundamental to learning in drama education: “We introduce the theory through ‘this is what the practitioner *does*’, not simply the philosophy... You can read everything that Brecht ever wrote, but you’ll never really understand what the play looked like” (Teacher participant T5). Drama education, therefore, **must retain a significant weighting on learning through practice**. This will be considered further in Finding 2c.

As has been highlighted, **the complexities of “creativity” remain an enduring issue** within drama education and was a common topic within the research conversations. Whilst some learners were happy with the creative experience afforded by the A Level Drama curriculum, many of the student participants felt that there were limits placed on their creativity and originality, particularly within the written examination, which was frequently described as a “tick box” exercise or a “memory test”:

“it didn’t feel very... creative, you, know? It felt very, like I was almost doing a maths sum, or something (*laughs*)” (Student participant S11).

“the exam – it’s more of a memory test, and I could never really get my head around it... you’re just regurgitating stuff you’ve just memorised, it’s not...the creativity has all happened before” (Student participant S12).

The nature of creativity and the impact of making it assessable was also a common theme within the conversations with the teacher participants, with Teacher participant T1 stating that, “I think we cramp a lot of creativity in what we’re doing” and Teacher participant T4 noting that the problem lies in the fact that, “There is no measure for creativity. There’s no unit of measurement”.

**There is a tension between a desire to provide a creative education and the need to create valid and robust frameworks of assessment.** The uses and place of written examination as an assessment method within the context of A Level Drama will be explored in more detail in section 4.2.3 and is found to be at the core of most of the criticism about the current qualification. The study found that the student and teacher participants believe **practical performance work provides more opportunities for creative exploration and freedom**, albeit within the constraints of prescribed theatrical styles and/or application of practitioners to the theatre made and performed. This emphasises the disconnect between the physical practice of learning and the logocentric nature of written assessment in drama education:

“often I’ve found in my personal experience, is like all my creative people are, like, versed more in physicality and like, performance, and so trying to turn that creativity – that is expressed through acting, and drama, and physical theatre – into like, written words, like writing, and answering exam questions, sometimes can be a bit crushing... ...to condense it all down into writing, or like an exam piece of paper, is just a bit, it can be a bit painful” (Student participant S3).

This research data found strong consensus amongst the participants that there is **a conflict in the relationship between what is known and understood about learning in drama education, and the methods of assessment used within current A Level specifications** to make that learning measurable. In doing so, the body is often side-lined, and creativity impinged which has a bearing on student and teacher engagement with and enjoyment of the subject. These issues will be considered in greater complexity in the findings presented in the following sections, where nuances in opinion are explored in relation to the research questions.

#### 4.2.2. Finding 1b: the terms “rigour” and “academic” as enduring agitators.

*The question of “rigour” is an enduring agitator in the relationship between learning and assessment in A Level Drama. Students and teachers agree that the practical craft of drama is in itself, a rigorous and academic pursuit. However, some feel that the inclusion of a formal written examination is necessary to legitimise the subject of drama in the eyes of others (parents, senior management, HE providers, employers, government etc.).*

Within the context of the teaching and learning in drama education, **drama is found to have its own distinct forms of disciplinary knowledge and is considered by the participants as an art form.** A strong theme however, particularly within the data from the research conversations with the teacher participants indicates **a feeling that drama is either not considered as an art form by others, or is placed lower in the hierarchy of arts subjects** than other artforms, particularly Fine Art. There are numerous examples in the research data from both student and teacher participants which supports this, some of which are provided below to illustrate this point:

“We are not being taught as an art form. I would very much like Drama to be treated more like Art, as a subject. I would very much like Drama to be taught as an art form, not as an extension of English and History academia” (Teacher participant T6).

“There’s a real hierarchy in the arts...I feel like – it’s a bit like – within the arts...we are bottom of the pile...” (Teacher participant T2).

“The government is so like, doesn’t care about the arts...I think it’s been very like, *(takes an in breath and rubs forehead)* engrained in our society that like, the arts are less important” (Student participant S5).

“I just feel like the way that our society, especially in England, and like the conservative government they *(makes slamming gesture with hands to emphasis the next three words)* do – not – give – a flying *(gestures with hands and nods)* ‘thing’ about the arts” (Student participant S14).

The findings from the research conversations give weight to a perception of the current education system as purporting **certain subjects as being more valuable than others**. This was found to be the case particularly within the context of Further Education where cuts to funding, pressure on teachers for students to achieve high grades, and the prioritisation of subjects that fill skills shortages meant that **drama often has to fight harder than other subjects to remain viable**. Teacher participant T1 spoke clearly about the pressure felt by teachers for students to achieve high grades, and the impact this has on teaching and learning within the drama classroom:

“And the more we’re in this situation where we’re being (*throws hands up*) judged all the time on grades, you know, then the less, the more anxious you feel about that, the more you don’t operate creatively yourself” (Teacher participant, T1).

Whilst the study finds further evidence to support what has long been understood about the transformative power of drama and the transferable skills gained through engagement in drama education, **the term “soft skills” is often not helpful** in building an argument for the academic rigour of drama as a subject, shifting focus from its forms of distinct disciplinary knowledge to its ability to support personal, social, and emotional development. As Teacher participant T7 notes:

“The issue with ‘soft skills’ is that it doesn’t translate to a grade, does it, and it’s, it’s really hard to measure because it’s incremental – that’s the difficulty, isn’t it? The other problem is that it’s all linked to jobs” (Teacher participant T7).

The research corroborates understandings of **drama as being both practical and academic** and negates opinions that suggest mutual exclusivity. However, there is still a **tendency for drama to be viewed as “not academic”** and the findings observed that this phrase was commonly used amongst the student participants, often describing themselves as being “not very academic” or enjoying more “practical, hands-on ways of learning”. Student and teacher participants also recounted situations where they had felt **a need to explain and justify the academic rigour of drama as a subject**, worthy of study at A Level:

"I think it's very wrong not to call it an academic subject... It's practical – and it's academic." (Teacher participant T3).

"I certainly don't define 'academic' as being good at writing...The claims that it's academic because there's a lot of written work in it, for me is just, a complete fallacy" (Teacher participant T6).

"I always looked at A Level Drama, because of the way it was structured, it always was my most academic subject, in a way" (Student participant S12).

"My parents said, yeah, absolutely, go for it! – but if you're going to do a creative subject, try and do something that's academic as well" (Student participant S13).

The findings observe **a need for drama to conform to curriculum procedures and policies**, which include those related to assessment and certification and celebrates the **tenacity and resilience of drama's ability to adapt** in the face of educational and political change. The research data finds however, that whilst students and teachers want fair and robust assessment practices, there is disagreement about the extent to which drama should be asked to conform to the models of other subjects and the potential impact on creative freedom that this can bring: "It's got to please Ofqual – who are going to accredit it – and that's really, really difficult...Everything becomes a compromise" (Teacher participant T4). Student participant S13 offers a pragmatic view about the need to balance a creative curriculum that is also measurable:

"I feel like....(*looking up*) quite, there was quite a lot of creative freedom (*stroking beard and chin with an open palm*) ...considering the fact that we needed to be...*marked* under a certain kind of...under the syllabus and everything, we had to – there had to be some kind of standardisation, so that it could be marked" (Student participant S13).

Some of the teacher participants expressed similar concerns regarding **a need for drama as a subject to be seen in line with other subjects within the curriculum** and "justifiable to everybody" (Teacher participant T1), fearing that otherwise "it will inevitably, become marginalised...and unimportant" (ibid.). This is countered by opinions that the current use of high-

stakes testing models of assessment within A Level qualifications and specifically A Level Drama, are “killing the creativity” (Teacher participant T2) and that there is a prevailing “attitude that, you know, creativity is not as valuable as academic knowledge” (Teacher participant T8) within our current society and education system. As one student participant poignantly states: “The whole system is rigged by being extrinsically motivated...I’m only validated if I get a certain score” (Student participant S4). However, the **written examination is viewed by many of the student and teacher participants as necessary in legitimising Drama as an “academic” subject** in comparison to others, particularly in the eyes of others – friends, other teachers, parents, universities, employers etc:

“I wouldn’t want to see written work taken out of the GCSE and A Level completely, because I think we’ve got an issue, haven’t we, of drama being seen as a non-academic subject” (Teacher participant T7).

“I think that a lot of the time, courses that are viewed...as...like a final exam at the end of it, no coursework – none of that, are viewed as like *harder* and more...like *better* A Levels...In my head, the only way it’s possible – to succeed – is to do well in the [written] exam – which isn’t right, but it’s what universities look for, it’s what employers look for, so, yeah...(laughs)” (Student participant S2).

This view was also found in discussions about the currency of A Level versus vocational drama qualifications, with some student participants stating that they chose A Level Drama over a vocational alternative owing to **the “status” of the A Level qualification** and a sense that “A Level’s are more respected” (Student participant 5):

“A Level gets less questions...it sounds...err...kind of...err..*(makes inverted commas gesture)* ‘smarter’” (Student participant S9).

“Um, my teachers at GCSE, like my secondary school teachers *(looks off to the side)* some of those just said, ‘but like, why? You’ve got such good grades, why would you just go off and do a vocational course?’” (Student participant S8).

As with divisions of theory/practice and knowledge/skills, **divisions between how academic and vocational programmes are perceived remain deeply engrained in our education system.**

Despite many of the student participants expressing a preference for ways of learning that are commonly associated with vocational qualifications (i.e., more practical, process-driven, and coursework-based), there were a certain number who stated clearly that they were actively discouraged from choosing courses such as BTECs in drama or performing arts, and/or felt that an A Level was deemed as a more reputable and robust qualification.

#### **4.2.3. Finding 1c: disagreement about the uses and place of written examination.**

*Teachers and students are divided about whether a written exam is necessary as part of the A Level Drama qualification but agree that the scope and content of the current written exam paper is flawed. Concerns include a lack of cultural diversity and relevance to industry practice within the specification, alongside criticisms of exam questions that devalue process learning, practical experience and the embodied ways in which students learn about drama and theatre.*

The **presence of a written examination** as forming part of a framework of assessment within the context of A Level Drama was found to be one of the most significant and contentious findings from the research. As Teacher participant T7 replies when asked whether they would keep a written exam, “Oohh! The million-dollar question!” and the use and place of writing, and specifically summative written examination proved a topic of much debate within the research conversations with both student and teacher participants.

Within the teacher participant sample, there was **a notable divide between “older” and “younger” teachers about the necessity of a written examination** within the A Level Drama specification. Teachers who had more experience of teaching the specification pre-A Level reform were more likely to express a preference to discontinue the use of written examination as an

assessment method, claiming it to be fundamentally disconnected from the nature of drama. Instead, they preferred a process-driven model of continuous assessment with a greater weighting on teacher-assessment of student performance work – both in progress, and as an outcome of learning:

“It’s not testing the skills, the application of skill, and it’s not testing the knowledge particularly – and, and, that actually invalidates those two exams as far as I’m concerned” (Teacher participant T3).

“How do you assess drama? All those big questions, they follow all those creative subject, you know?... When that started in drama, there was a lot of people saying we mustn’t ever examine this – because once we start to do that, we will destroy it. And I think that’s what’s happened actually. Now we’ve over-examined everything...I wouldn’t have any written in it at all...It’s a completely artificial way of dealing with the skills-base of the professional element of that subject. It’s a misunderstanding of what theatre’s about” (Teacher participant T1).

Younger teachers within the participant sample were more inclined to advocate for the use of written examination as an assessment method within A Level Drama, citing fears that its removal would see the subject lose credibility and status in the eyes of others. They disagreed however, with current weightings in the specification and concurred with their older colleagues in calling for more opportunities for assessed and non-assessed practical performance work within the qualification.

“I think that there’s evidence to say that there’s a level of fairness in an exam” (Teacher participant T5).

“I’m not saying I agree with the ratio, but that there should be some written work there. At some point, pen has to go to paper” (Teacher participant T4).

“I’m not sitting here and saying there should be no written work...I don’t want to go back to that, cos I don’t think we’d have respect as a subject if we did. I want to be able to offer an A Level that’s respected” (Teacher participant T6).

All teachers in the sample, regardless of their feelings about the use of written examination, agreed **that the current content, scope and focus of the exam questions is not fit for purpose** and does not provide an accurate illustration of what a student knows and understands about both the theory and practice of drama as an artform. Teacher participant T2 also makes a point of noting that there is not only a division between ways of learning and methods of assessment in drama education, but also cites “a disconnect between the assessment (*demonstrates ‘disconnect’ by gesturing with hands and arm movement*) and what’s actually happening in industry”. A **lack of cultural diversity and representation of people colour** is also noted as in need of reform within current the current specification: “The set texts are not diverse. They’re not representative” (Teacher participant T7). As Teacher participant T5 adds, if you’re not actively inclusive within the selection texts and practitioners to be studied, “You could be teaching a very old-dead-white-guys sort of curriculum. It isn’t the canon anymore”.

The student participants also expressed strong feelings and opinions about the use and scope of the written examination within their experiences of the A Level Drama qualification. The findings show that **for many students, the summative written examination is seen as stressful, uncreative, and at odds with embodied and dialogic processes of learning.**

“I just felt it was...and it was just how much we needed to write – it was hard for me to write enough to be able to be marked” (Student participant S10).

“I was really daunted by the exam. There is so much pressure in exam halls. The knowledge that you don’t know what the question’s going to be – petrifies me. The language that was used to, like, to write the questions was just, so, (*looks off to side*) vague and vast, that it kind of sends panic into someone” (Student participant S14).

“-it was like a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ thing – you couldn’t, really... cos I remember, in one of my questions I tried to do something creative and I went - ‘NO’ - because I don’t think I’ll get any marks for this because I’m not answering it correctly – even though I thought it was

a good idea – when – if I was saying it out loud, then, I don't know, I think, it was assessed wrong, in the exam" (Student participant S11).

And at worst, the findings suggest that for some students, the impact of the written examination can be claimed to **detrimental to their overall sense of self as a creative being**, and enjoyment of drama as both a subject and an art form:

"it, it, puts – it wants to put (*pushes hands towards each other*) you in boxes, and...when you put Drama into boxes (*repeats gesture with hands – pushing them together closing down the space*) it, it inhibits you and, your, your creativity is just squashed a little bit, each time, in each exam...you have so much more to give – yeah, you're just crushed a little bit...(looks away and take a drink from mug)" (Student participant S1).

"I know I didn't read a play for quite a long while after the exam" (Student Participant S9).

The study found that even students who spoke of feeling at ease with and enjoying the experience of formal examination felt that there was **a level of unfairness about the current structure and scope of the exam questions**, particularly when considering peers who they understood to experience struggle or anxiety with writing and written examination conditions:

"It's hard for me, because I do well in exams, to like see it like that – but I definitely think that it's not the fairest...way - it's the easiest probably, in terms of like how many people you have to assess but...yeah, I dunno...(rubs side of head with thumb) maybe I wouldn't have an exam...yeah, maybe more coursework-based" (Student participant S5).

"Um, (*looks away*) so, I think it works quite well for *me*, at the moment, because...I can write and because...like, that's such an important part of it, but, I think it would be more fair...if...the written exam was made, I dunno, more accessible....just so that people who, um, are better with, like, they have the creative ideas and they can do the practical, to just make it easier for them to express that, instead of having to do it in that structured, tick-box way that the examiners want to see" (Student participant S8).

Both student and teacher participants provided suggestions regarding alternatives to the current use and scope of writing within the A Level Drama qualification, which consider the use of reflective and formative writing, teacher-assessors, and the place and potential of dialogue within frameworks of assessment. These findings will be explored in greater depth in section 4.3 and in relation to research question two, as the discord between learning and assessment in A Level Drama is related to enduring divisions of theory and practice.

#### 4.3. Research Question 2.

*2. Acknowledging enduring dichotomies, to what extent do the participants' experiences of learning and assessment relate to divisions of theory and practice?*

As an experienced teacher of drama, I began this study with a desire to investigate the extent to which ways of learning and methods of assessment in the A Level Drama specification bore a relationship to a sense of the division of theory and practice within the subject. The study find that the participants experience of **a disconnect between processes of learning and methods of assessment within the qualification exacerbate false dualisms of theory and practice**, specifically regarding upholding engrained perceptions that theory equates to writing and written examination and is devoid from the practice of theatre making and performance. This is contrary to what the teacher and student participants know and understand about drama education, wherein an acceptance of the symbiotic relationship between theory and practice is widely spoken of within the research conversations. However, the current structure of the A Level Drama specifications and specifically, the assessment methods used to measure student knowledge and understanding are unhelpful in supporting a holistic view of drama as praxis. The findings in relation to research question two have been broken down into three areas which are: the current specifications exacerbation of theory/practice and knowledge/skills divides; the potential uses of

dialogue within reimagined methods of assessment in A Level Drama; and the value of practical theatre making and performance work as praxis. Within each of these sub-sections, other common themes arising from the research conversations will be presented, including the role of the teacher-assessor, student experiences of written coursework in comparison to written examination, and participant experiences of achievement within the context of A Level Drama.

#### **4.3.1. Finding 2a: links between participant experiences of learning and assessment and the false dichotomisation of theory and practice.**

*There is a disconnect for students between their practical experience and the singular pursuit of writing about theatre making and performance required in the written examination, which exacerbates false dichotomies of theory and practice within the teaching and learning, and assessment of A Level Drama. The study also found a division in terms of how the student and teacher participants view 'knowledge' and 'skills', with knowledge being attributed to summative, written examination and skills being developed through process-driven learning and formative assessment. Written coursework and formative assessment were found to be more valuable to most of the student participants than written summative examination.*

There is a distinct clarity of understanding and appreciation amongst both the teacher participants and the student participants regarding the inter-relationship and inter-dependency of theatre and practice within drama education. However, the findings corroborate an opinion that despite the efforts of teachers to structure and deliver the qualification content in a way that harmonises the relationship, **theory/practice divisions remain hard to dismantle:**

"I do see a divide between those two things [theory and practice] – but I'm always trying to break that divide" (Teacher participant T8).

In many cases, the research found that theory/practice divides, whilst accepted as a false dualism, are compounded by an A Level Drama qualification that separates out textual knowledge from

practical knowledge in the methods of assessment. This is underpinned by a prevailing discourse which **presents theory as superior and associated with knowledge and compartmentalises practical performance work with the acquisition and demonstration of skills:**

“The knowledge is essentially to pass the exam, so it feels a little trivial” (Student participant S4).

“A Level Drama is designed to support knowledge. I’m not actually sure how many skills we give them practically” (Teacher participant T1).

**The dichotomisation of theory and practice and knowledge and skills is exacerbated in the component structure of the A Level Drama qualification** which separates out knowledge of texts, theatrical styles, and theatre history from practical exploration, theatre making and performance through the methods used to examine them. Some of the respondents were clear in articulating this division with one student participant describing the written exam as being “a lot of writing about stuff that I definitely don’t have any skills in...I could not do any of the stuff (*laughs*) that I wrote down ‘I would do it like this’, in the exam” (Student participant S9). Links were also inferred with the separation of process and product within drama education, with the formative processes of learning being found in many cases to be of more value than the summative outcome or product.

“Process is King...The process far outweighs – and it’s the process where the *learning* happens (*pulling on ear lobe*)...and that’s the stuff – particularly in drama – that doesn’t (*shaking head*) get highlighted enough – it’s all based upon outcome and a memory test at the end” (Teacher participant T2).

“with the skills, you have that in your body, you have that for life” (Student participant S3).

Students described **forms of writing that encourage reflection on their own lived experience of making and performing drama as being more valuable** than examination questions that ask them to describe how they would hypothetically perform/direct/design a moment of dramatic text.

It is therefore concluded that practical experience is a prerequisite for meaningful writing about drama and performance:

“The PER [reflective log/coursework] was one of the most helpful bits of drama writing I’d done because I was actually *really* working out and trying to pick apart what I’d devised” (Student participant S9).

“If you’ve already done it, and you’ve performed it, and you know how it went and, you know the process you went through in order to...mmm...help it materialise, then it’s so much easier to write about it” (Student participant S13).

“With the coursework, we relate to ourselves, to the performances that we’ve *done* – it’s just so much more meaningful” (Student participant S10).

As has been discussed in section 4.2.3, the teacher participants were divided over the use of summative written examination as a viable assessment method within the A Level Drama qualification. However, in alignment with the student comments about what constitutes meaningful written work, there was agreement that writing which requires learners to reflect on their own practical experience as creative practitioners and performers, is of more value to learning and assessment than exam questions based on theoretical situations. Teacher Participant T7 explains that they would “like to see more intelligent thinking around the role of written work in assessment”, stating that they “would like to see more of a move towards a portfolio at GCSE and A Level”. It was also felt that that forms of writing which encouraged reflection on practice encouraged a greater sense of learner agency, which was beneficial in preparation for the study of drama at both HE level, and within industry. Teacher participant T5 muses on the problematic “notion that we [students] ‘imagine’ a production” within the context of the written exam, which they state, “doesn’t exist in academia, it doesn’t exist in theatre criticism, it doesn’t exist in professional theatre, it doesn’t exist in anything – it only exists in their weird little island of drama qualifications”. Findings from the research data suggest that tensions regarding how best to measure a student’s

learning in drama remain a source of friction but that **there is agreement that there is a need for assessment reform**. The complexities of this issue will be further interrogated and problematised in Act Five and alternatives considered in light of the findings.

#### **4.3.2. Finding 2b: the importance and potential of dialogue within learning and assessment in drama.**

*Dialogue forms an important part of the embodied learning processes present in drama and talking helps students to articulate and reflect on the relationships between practical skills and theoretical concepts. Collaborative dialogue allows for interpretation and acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed, contextual, and fluid. Dialogue can act as a bridge between the act of making theatre and the processes involved in writing about it.*

The findings from the study give weight to an understanding that **critical dialogue and reflection provide a means through which to access and explore our knowledge and experiences**, allowing students to engage in the continual renewal and reconstruction of our understanding in relation to drama and dramatic knowledge. Without reflection, there is arguably no learning within the context of drama education and critical, collaborative dialogue is found to be intrinsic to the development of the creative practice of students:

“The dialogue...that was, it was like, very stimulating – it forced you to think about it”  
(Student participant S1).

“A discussion would be better because then you are learning from other people” (Student participant S9).

Many of the student participants in the study spoke about finding it easier to talk about their creative ideas in terms of textual interpretation, theatre making and performance, as opposed to be required to write about them. In recognising the embodied and interactive nature of dialogue

in the drama classroom, we bring to the fore the relationship between body, mind, and emotions as part of the learning process and question the extent to which we can accurately assess a student's progress if these elements are left side-lined and unconsidered.

The use of **a viva-style format of examination was found to be a popular alternative to written assessment in the view of many student respondents**, supporting an understanding of drama as embodied, interactive, and dialogic in nature:

“it would be easier to communicate how you feel about it all...it would be much easier to explain it” (Student participant S7).

“I'd rather be talking about what I've *done* as a performer and *show* my reasons for that” (Student participant S10).

“If an invigilator were to sit down and watch me explain on video, why I'd done things a certain way, I feel like it would make it so much *clearer*...They can't see who we are as people when they're reading our writing” (Student participant S13).

Whilst the student participants were receptive to the idea of a viva-style assessment, **the teacher participants were divided about the use of viva as a viable assessment method**, with some stating it is seen as unreliable and others supportive of its potential:

“Ofqual felt that the viva approach was not reliable...The viva approach fell off the cliff at that reform – because it wasn't seen as reliable” (Teacher participant T4).

“I think there's a reason why universities use it, because it is you know, a pretty thorough process” (Teacher participant T5).

“It's [the written exam] basically a two-year memory test, isn't it? It kind of kills that joy about the creative process....That would almost be better through viva exam” (Teacher participant T7).

The logistical issues of time and cost were also a consideration in relation to viva examination, particularly within the context of Further Education where teachers were more likely to have larger

class/cohort sizes, less time, and fewer resources than teacher participants working in other post-16 contexts, such as sixth forms and grammar schools.

Arguably, the findings of the study suggest that critical, reflective dialogue should therefore feature not only within pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in drama, but also deserves recognition of its role and potential within frameworks of assessment. This topic will be interrogated further within Act Five as the findings are interpreted and discussed through the lens and processes of the T-R-P, as well as in section 6.3 where implications of the study on future practices of assessment are considered.

#### **4.3.3. Finding 2c: the value of practical theatre making and performance work.**

*Theory can be assessed as being understood by students when it is applied and actualised in practice. Teachers feel able to “measure” learning and understanding in drama in this way – the theory is demonstrated in the practical exploration of theatre making and performance. The participants feel that more time and weight should be given to the practical act of theatre making both within the A Level Drama curriculum, and as a method of assessment. The study also found that for many of the student participants, there is a distinction between how they understand and experience achievement and attainment.*

**Both teacher and student participants welcomed an assessment model that gave greater weighting to practical assessment**, which could take the form of both ongoing formative assessment of developing practice, as well as summative assessment of final performance outcomes. As Teacher participant T1 exclaims: “What you are fundamentally wanting them to do at the end is to *make the play!* – and to make the performance – AND THE PERFORMANCE SPEAKS – that’s the whole point! The performance speaks”. In the context of drama education, it is accepted that is necessary to assess not just what is known, but what a student can do in

practical, physical applications of their craft. This often occurs in collaborative group situations which the study notes, can cause further complications when it comes to assessment of individual attainment. There was strength of feeling from the participants about **the ability for a student to show and make visible learning through performance work and practical theatre making processes**. Student participant S1 comments that: “I don’t think there’s anything I’ve taken from the written exam that I couldn’t have been taught practically...I think everything I’ve learnt how to do, it could’ve been done without an exam, proving that I could”. In this sense, learning is seen as tacit and often unspoken/indescribable. The findings from the data support a belief that within drama education, **what we can “say” is only a small part of the tacit and embodied practice of knowledge/knowledge production:**

“For me, in anything, it’s hard for me to write down what I’m thinking. To show what I’m thinking – it’s so much easier for me to show it with my body, with my voice, and just present it that way...I don’t see why that’s not done as a sort of exam itself for drama” (Student participant S10).

In line with points raised in section 2.5 of the literature review, **tensions were revealed regarding the role of teachers as assessors** in the context of drama qualifications. Most of the student participants felt confident in their teacher’s ability to assess them fairly and robustly, seeing the professional relationship as a strength and noting the importance of assessment as an ongoing, collaborative, and formative process:

“I really do respect what my teachers have to say about my grade – and I respect that a lot more than some random person from Edexcel, who I’ve never met, and who has never met me” (Student participant S1).

“Whenever I think of examiners, I just think of like, cold, grey, lifeless (laughs) humans...So you’re kind of just like talking to a droid, rather than you teacher, who knows you” (Student participant S14).

Teacher participants were however, divided once again about the potential for criticism to arise over the rigour of teacher assessment, within on participant stating that “Many drama teachers aren’t very well trained. I don’t trust half the drama teachers out there to be good measures of what quality is. I think there needs to be an intermediary” (Teacher participant T5). In contrast, Teacher participant T7 cited a lack of teacher agency in the design and delivery of curriculum and assessment as an issue: “What say do you get?...(*shaking head*)...None. You don’t”.

Interestingly, there was **a distinction made in the research conversations between attainment and achievement**. When asked to describe a moment of achievement while studying A Level Drama, most student participants shared an experience of performance, often to an audience, as the manifestation of feelings of personal achievement. However, it can be suggested that attainment is more closely aligned with summative assessment and the letter grades awarded at the completion of the qualification, which were broadly of less consequence to the student participants than the development of their practical skills, confidence, and the enjoyment they felt when engaging in drama/performance.

“If I get a laugh from an audience when it’s meant to be funny, then, great – that means more to me than the grade, I guess” (Student participant S9).

“The Drama A Level gave me a confidence for a lot of things, and it’s given me so many ideas” (Student participant S10).

“Um... just with the practicals – I just felt really happy – and like, I loved working with different people. It felt like being in your own little theatre company... we created something that we were really proud of” (Student participant S11).

“All three of us were kind of huddled behind one of the flats, waiting for blackout, there was just such a sense of achievement between the three of us” (Student participant 13).

A sense of achievement and feeling of job-satisfaction for the teacher participants was also commonly linked to the practical act of performance work. Individual teacher participants spoke

of being able to recall “scores and scores of practice performances” but being “not sure I could tell you what last year’s exam paper section was” (Teacher participants T4). Despite many teachers feeling a pressure to produce high grades from their cohorts of learners, the study found that what drives drama teachers to continue their work is more concerned with drama’s ability to provide creative, expressive environments where young people can think critically, problem-solve and develop practical skills of theatre making:

“Being able to create a place – a, a, um, an environment where young people can, can *surprise* themselves –that’s, that’s really what makes an extraordinary teacher, and also makes you feel that you’ve achieved something...special. It confirms your belief that that creative experience is actually fundamentally healing, and positive, and necessary for human beings...as a means of expression” (Teacher participant T1).

“On the coalface – and the thing that actually keeps you there – is, is, our interaction with young people – and *we know* what the importance of the arts are – yeah? - in our own lives, as well as in making sense of the world around us” (Teacher participant, T2).

“I want to give students ways into them having their own voice – when you see students being able to express things *in their own way*, that’s when you feel achievement” (Teacher participant T8).

**The purpose of drama and its place on the formal curriculum is a question which continues to be problematic and subjective.** The findings from this research study support the necessity for equal access to high-quality arts education for all young people, taught by teacher who are subject specialists. The findings have highlighted a desire in both the teacher and student participants to preserve drama’s place on the curriculum but are clear in noting that to do so, reform and reimagining is needed. Whilst the construction of a new A Level Drama qualification is beyond the scope and aim of this thesis, suggestions regarding the future uses and dissemination of the research in chapter six will consider implications for practice and refer to wider calls for assessment reform across the education system.

#### 4.4. Research Question 3.

*3. How can the craft of drama support a creative analysis and (re)presentation of the lived experiences of the research participants?*

This question was formed later in the research journey when, as has been explained earlier in the thesis, a need to respond to the data narratives in arts-based, embodied, and dramatic ways was revealed as an imperative. The findings stated here are briefer than those presented in relation to research questions one and two. There is also an absence of direct quotations from the research conversations documented here. This is because the evidence for the findings stated in sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 are made visible throughout Act Five, as the craft of drama is used to construct, develop, and refine an understanding of the data through the practices of the T-R-P. Act Five will therefore draw on both direct citations from the formal data and excerpts of *creata* as taken from the play, *And The Performance Speaks*. Quotations from peer reviewers, student actors, and delegate-actors will also be used to illustrate and affirm the findings noted here.

##### 4.4.1. Finding 3a: the practice of playwriting is a creative and a robust form of inquiry.

*Playwriting is both a creative and robust form of inquiry. The creative and analytical processes of the playwright are concurrently both theoretical and practical. The use and craft of drama, and specifically playwriting, should be considered as a reflexive, and analytic research methodology and method, capable of (re)presenting human experience in sensitive, embodied, and accessible ways.*

This study corroborates the work of scholars including Belliveau (2013, 2015), Harris and Sinclair (2014), and Sallis (2018) in providing a further example of the uses and potential of drama, specifically playwriting, in the creative analysis of qualitative research data. The creative and analytic processes embodied in the identity of the Teacher-Researcher-Playwright support

existing scholarship which argues that writing and the use of drama as a research practice is robust, reflexive, and rigorous and should be considered as credible alongside other, more traditional forms of qualitative inquiry. The findings of this study provide evidence that the (re)presentation of data through the medium of a playscript can offer an accessible, dialogic, and tangible vehicle for those both inside and outside of the situated context of the study to engage with and respond to the research:

“The play has good structure, it makes its main message concisely with strong arguments to back it. It also gives both sides of the "debate" a decent amount of time to provide the audience with a balanced view... It captures the feelings of both students' and teachers' opinions surrounding the flaws in the educational system” (Student participant/reviewer).

“I read a lot of policies and articles but having your themes/thoughts and discussion points put across in your play made them somehow more real and for me. I felt like they need dealt with more immediately than if I had read a paper about them. Essentially the reading of your play really brought a sense of urgency to some of the biggest issues that drama and many performing arts face today” (Delegate-actor 2).

Post-qualitative and embodied perspectives, in particular the work of Richardson (2000), Ellingson (2009, 2017), and Koro-Ljungberg (2016) have been found to provide useful frameworks to support the construction of methodologies that allow for the body of the researcher to be welcomed and work alongside the bodies of the participants. The research recognises that knowledge is not static and is always in a state of becoming, and that both data and *creata* (Petersen, 2013) can be used to make meaning and provide new insights when explored through the many languages of theatre. The potential for drama and playwriting to be used across methodologies, methods, analysis, discussion, and dissemination is illustrated in the centrality of the play script, *And The Performance Speaks* within the body of this work, and challenges existing expectations about the traditionally prescribed structure and form of the academic thesis.

#### **4.4.2. Finding 3b: the use of playwriting as a research practice is enhanced through collaboration with others.**

*The processes and practices involved in playwriting are enhanced when the researcher collaborates with others. In embracing a hermeneutical approach to the exploration and co-construction of meaning, unexpected and unintended discoveries become possible.*

This study finds that the construction of meaning is deeply embedded within processes and practices of creativity which enable the T-R-P to crystalise the coding and theming of data with the conceptualisation of findings in physical, visual, and aesthetic forms. These processes are found to be enhanced and deepened through collaboration with others as part of both the creative practice of the playwright, and the analysis of the researcher, providing new perspectives and opportunities for critical, reflective dialogue.

“As an audience to the data, but participant in the play I was able to embody the data myself, which provided a deeper understanding and was a meaningful experience”  
(Delegate-Actor 1).

The sharing of the play in its development stages with others is found to be integral to deepening, iterative spirals of (re)interpretation and analysis. The potential for the play to have a life outside of the boundaries of the academic thesis opens further opportunities for (re)interpretation and analysis and accept that “findings” are always in a state of flux and contextualised through the lens of the viewer.

#### **Act Four: chapter summary.**

This chapter has summarised the primary findings resulting from the research study in relation to each of the research questions framing the inquiry. In summary, the research study has found a deep disconnect between ways and means of teaching and learning in A Level Drama, and the

methods of assessment demanded by the awarding bodies. This serves to perpetuate false dualisms of theory and practice which endure within the subject and exacerbates perspectives which view written examination as the “gold standard” of assessment method. Subsequently, physical practice and performance are seen as less credible and reliable indicators of student attainment which results in an over-reliance on formal writing to validate practical experience. There is a fundamental neglect of the affective and embodied nature of learning in drama which understands knowledge as being an ongoing relationship and intertwining of being, knowing, and doing through processes of reflection, collaboration, and dialogue.

Many of the findings in relation to teaching, learning and assessment in drama education are replicated when we consider the use of drama to construct a creative and analytic approach to methodologies. This study concludes that playwriting can be used as a rigorous and robust practice of inquiry but that the impermanent and interpretative nature of practical performance also leaves research open to criticisms of bias and subjectivity. However, the opportunities presented through the utilisation of drama as an approach to methodologies and method only serves to generate new and more textured insights into the research data and provides a means through which others can access the findings in accessible and meaningful ways.

The findings have been presented in relation to the original research questions posed, with the significance of each outlined in preparation for further discussion in Act Five. The labelling of each finding (i.e., 1a) will be used within Act Five to cross-reference and make visible the relationship between the construction of meaning through the development of the dramatic text and that which is illuminated. The findings are also considered further in chapter 6, the Epilogue, where conclusions are drawn, and recommendations are made for the future practice of assessment methods within the context of accredited drama qualifications as part of the post-compulsory curriculum.

## Act Five

*it tugs and pulls*

*my creative self  
propels me onwards*

*I listen and respond to what the data wants*

*and in response, I create*

*I tentatively start to construct images and movement and moments of interaction  
which come into their brilliant being on the stage  
inviting interpretation*

*I embrace theatre as a way of knowing, unknowing, and (re)knowing the world*

### **Introduction: the construction of a dramatic play as a creative and analytic practice.**

As has been outlined in the Interlude, an active decision has been made to resist the requirements of academic tradition which presupposes the processes of analysis and discussion of data are presented as separate within the thesis document. In line with the onto-epistemological positioning of the T-R-P and an understanding of methodologies as constructed, not adopted, Richardson's (2000) notion of creative and analytic practices (CAP) is embraced as a framework for working in embodied and relational ways with the data. Concurrently, the use of Petersen's (2013) concept of 'creata' as being the simultaneity of data and analysis which occurs within/as part of the construction of the ethnodramatic text, underpins a practice which assumes a perpetual spiralling of analysis, interpretation, and discussion in a dialogue between data, *creata*, the T-R-P, and others in bodily and dramatic forms. Central to this practice is an ongoing reflexivity that seeks to treat the participant narratives and experiences with due care, respect and sensitivity,

and acknowledges the interdependence of theory and practice as integral to the ways in which we learn and co-construct meaning within the context of drama education.

This chapter is therefore unapologetic regarding its complexity and length. Stages 3 and 4 of the T-R-Ps creative and analytic practice are actively and transparently nuanced, intertwined and textured by the involvement of others in the development of the dramatic text as inseparable from the construction and synthesis of data themes and the subsequent findings. In embracing the synchronicity of my playwright and researcher identities, this chapter seeks to make visible the creative decisions made which result in the coming into being of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*, and reflects on how meaning is constructed as part of a hermeneutical dialoguing with itself, the data/*creata* and others. In doing so, the craft of drama and the use of playwriting as a purposeful method of inquiry is highlighted as supporting an approach to research which is in alignment with the complexity, creativity, and affective nature of the study of lived experience.

This chapter follows on from Stage 1 and 2 of the T-R-P's process, as described towards the end of Act Three. Stages 3 and 4 focus on the construction of patterns and themes as a result of working with the data/*creata* in the development and refinement of the dramatic text. As part of this process, the play is given over to other students and teachers who in turn add to the layers of analysis through further iterations of (re)interpretation. Within this chapter, you can expect to see direct reference to the raw data of the research conversations used as the primary method of data collection, as well as quotations from the play, which will be cross-referenced with the findings summarised in Act Four. Subsequently, it is hoped that the findings of the research are crystallised through the synthesis of data/*creata* within the T-R-P's description of their creative and analytic practice, and that illuminations are brought to the fore in response to the research questions which underpin the study.

### 5.1. Stage 3: the synthesis of data and *creata* enables initial themes to be reviewed.

*"I think there are threads of narratives in the text as it stands but it is not yet a play... if it is to be a performance text, I think you have to bite the bullet and create fictional scenarios."*

*Peer Reviewer 1*

Following Stages 1 and 2 of the creative and analytic process, it was apparent that whilst the verbatim text was rich in themes and images, the script lacked performability. Although the coding, categorisation, and arrangement of the text within the play's scenic structure was a necessary and useful process, the script read more like a radio play and the physical and visual embodiment of the data was missing. Seeking the involvement of others, I worked with two "peer reviewers" on the development of the first draft of the script. Reviewer 1 was a teacher, colleague and one of the research participants, whilst Reviewer 2 was a creative practitioner and playwright able to offer a more objective opinion on the developing drama (Finding 3b). Koro-Ljungberg encourages qualitative scholars to see peer reviews 'as an opening and an opportunity to make your text "stronger" and more accessible' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:154). The feedback from Reviewer 1 that "*it is not yet a play*", stung because it was correct: I didn't have a play, I had a script. Considering the persistence of theory/practice and mind/body dualities within drama education and throughout the research journey, a need to re-centre my approach to be one of *praxis* was recognised: personally understood as the living out of theoretical concepts through the body, and in interaction and collaboration with others.

*"I think it's worth exploring applying a "creative" process to this information.*

*This would make it personal. It is kind of trusting the art form to do its job."*

*Peer Reviewer 1*

It was revealing that Reviewer 1 interpreted the initial script as predominantly "information". In its current form, the script was constructed entirely from verbatim text taken from the interview transcripts, reflecting my trepidation in adding to, or editing the data too heavily. Reflecting on the feedback from Reviewer 1 highlighted that to fully embrace my identity as T-R-P, a bolder and more playful practice through which to explore and shape the text was needed. "*Trusting in the art form to do its job*" was a salient reminder that it is often only by taking creative risks, that the real heart of the drama can be found. In navigating tensions between the roles of researcher and playwright in the creation of ethnodramatic work, it is possible to allow the text to be theatrical and dramatic whilst preserving its integrity and validity as qualitative research data. My ethical and axiological stance requires a commitment to and respect of the narratives and lived experiences of the research participants. There is scope however, to 'be bold with your decisions and creative with your staging' (Belfield, 2018:161), which is the natural progression of the T-R-P's creative practice. Guided by the process, concepts raised in the literature review regarding learning in/through drama are explored and expressed through the T-R-P's engagement in praxis as an embodied craft.

The themes identified in Stages 1 and 2 of the data analysis support the notion that learning in drama education happens in and through the body. The bodily expression of theory enacted in practice combines both skill and knowledge as a physical process, not just a cognitive one. For teachers of drama, the data affirms a belief that "learning how to make a play" remains the most effective and explicit application and understanding of dramatic knowledge and is the clearest method of assessment. There is emphasis however, that the *process* of making theatre is as

important, if not more so, than the outcome that is produced. The T-R-P's learning about how to craft a play as part of a creative and analytic examination of qualitative data, models the ways and modes of learning highlighted as significant by the teacher and student research participants. In this space, the visual and the physical are viewed as equal in validity to logocentric forms of communication and expression.

#### **5.1.1. Theatre as sign-system.**

'It goes almost without saying that, from the earliest theatres, dramatists have been concerned to counterpoint verbal with visual impact' (Aston and Savona, 1991:142).

Given that it is not ethical or reliable to 'develop and expand the theatrical imagery at the expense of the truth' (Sandford in Belfield, 2018:159), the textual data was re-examined and re-conceptualised in physical and visual terms to find the performative. In theatre, semiotics plays a significant role in the analysis of performance work as we consider how theatrical signs are produced, communicated, received, and interpreted. Aston and Savona state that 'everything which is presented to the spectator within the theatrical frame is a sign' (Aston and Savona, 1991:99). This serves as a useful reminder of the need to remain critically aware of how the data will be (re)analysed and (re)interpreted on the stage, and in the presence of the audience. Drawing on structuralist traditions, Aston and Savona explain how semiotics shift focus from the *what* to the *how*, exploring the ways in which the various "parts" of a work that make up a "whole", allow us to see '*how* meaning is generated through the elements involved in the scripting of drama, and *how* meaning is created within a performance context (Aston and Savona, 1991:3). If we return to Berger's (1972) analysis in 'Way of Seeing' in Act Two of the thesis, we can liken Aston and Savona's explanation of theatre semiotics to Berger's comparison of painting and film, particularly in terms of how an argument or idea is presented to the audience:

‘A film which reproduces images of a painting leads the spectator, through the painting, to the film-maker’s own conclusions...This is because a film unfolds in time and a painting does not. In a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible’ (Berger, [1972] 2008:26).

In theatre, the construction and interplay of images that comprise the dramatic action, shifts and alters before the audiences’ eyes. As Aston and Savona observe: ‘the stage picture is subject to continual change’ (Aston and Savona, 1991:158). The depiction of action written into the text by the playwright, and the realisation of those actions through the bodies of the director(s) and actor(s) in performance, points towards a particular narrative and point of view. This presents an interesting question within the context of research-based theatre regarding who has authority over the meaning that is created: is it the spectator (the reader) or is it the playwright (the researcher)? Berger suggests that with a painting, because ‘all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously...the painting maintains its own authority’ (Berger, [1972] 2008:26). Aston and Savona, however, draw parallels with Boal’s (1979) “spect-actor” and point towards the role of the spectator as an ‘active and engaged receiver’ (Aston and Savona, 1991:122), whose ‘world view, cultural understanding or placement, class and gender, condition and shape her/his response’ (Aston and Savona, 1991:120).

It is right to consider the challenges this poses for the construction of meaning through the dramatisation of qualitative data. Arguably, there is no way of ensuring that the signs which are encoded within the text will be interpreted in the way in which the T-R-P might intend. Indeed, as MacDonald observes:

‘Every member of an audience will bring a different meaning to an event, will extract a different meaning from it, and each is deemed ‘valid’...An individual is at liberty to understand for her/himself. No single meaning is omnipresent to police that understanding: it is based entirely on personality and on personal understanding’ (MacDonald in McCullough, 1998:128-9).

Theatre semiotics can be utilised as a way of exploring how a text is *decoded*, and in doing so, ‘move away from the notion of a text as a closed system’ (Aston and Savona, 1991:15) and towards its ‘unfixing in the plurality of signifying processes generated through the activity of reading/spectating’ (ibid.) The following sections of the thesis will discuss how themes and illuminations identified in the research data are further examined through the creation of visual and physical metaphors. In doing so, the T-R-P is transparent about the presence of their hand in the construction of the play’s dramatic argument and acknowledges the role of the spectator in the decoding of the performance text and generation of meaning. We make theatre to say something about the world. These are our stories that we choose to share: but we cannot claim complete authority over how they are received, processed, and understood.

#### **5.1.2. Other forms of writing as a method of crystallisation.**

Engaging in other forms of writing as a purposeful practice of inquiry allows a chance to pause and reflect on what is being learnt (and in some cases *unlearnt*) in relation to the research questions (Finding 3a). Experimenting with the writing of fictional vignettes was used as a method to dramatically and semiotically explore the themes and illuminations identified through the initial stages of creative analysis, as well as searching for ways to develop the performability of the script. Using the original character notebooks and first draft of the script as stimuli, images and metaphors were constructed in response to my current understanding of the data, using dramatic and poetic devices to explore the latent subtext. Some of the data illuminations identified as a

result of the T-R-P's creative and analytic practice are expressed in the following paragraphs. These are situated within the context of their performative realisation, and cross-referenced to key concepts derived from the literature review, in Act Two:

### **TIGHTROPE**

*Somebody balances on a tightrope that divides the stage.*

Divisions of theory and practice (Finding 2a) are articulated in *TIGHTROPE*, as a student crosses the space of the stage, moving cautiously as they try to find balance between what the A Level Drama written examination demands of them, and their creative self. One student participant described the assessment of the qualification as feeling like 'it was just separated into two halves' (Student participant S11), with unequal weight placed on theoretical content and exam technique, and less emphasis on the practical components of the course. Whilst the teacher participants were unanimous in their opinion that theory and practice should be taught synchronously (with theoretical concepts best learnt through practical experience), the data findings suggest that theory-practice divisions remain hard to dismantle. This speaks back to Dewey's (1938) assertion that theory and practice are inseparable, and that knowledge and action occur concurrently as we, as human beings, engage in the act of making meaning. However, the data suggests that teachers and students often struggle to maintain the synchronicity of the relationship between theory and practice within the hegemonic structures and rigid systems of assessment within the A Level Drama curriculum.

### **BIRD**

*A bird flies over and across the stage.*

*For a moment, everyone stops to look at it.*

*The bird is caught and put in a golden cage.*

In continuation of this argument, *BIRD* represents feelings of frustration expressed in the stories and experiences of students and teachers who speak of feeling creatively inhibited by a system that does not understand the distinct nature of drama as an art form (Finding 1a). One of the most contested questions amongst the teacher research conversations relates to whether, or not, the A Level Drama qualification should have a written exam as a method of assessment (Finding 1c). Whilst some teachers felt it was necessary in order for the drama to be viewed as credible alongside other subjects more traditionally accepted as 'academic' (STEM, English, history etc.), others were firm in their opinion that the A Level Drama course should not have a summative written examination: 'It's a completely artificial way of dealing with the skills-base of the professional element of that subject...It's a misunderstanding of what theatre's about' (Teacher participant T1). The written assessment requirements in A Level Drama were frequently referred to as an extension of English Literature and did not encourage creative thinking or autonomy. Forms of writing that encouraged reflection on students' practical experience were widely recognised as being more accessible, worthwhile, and meaningful, particularly from the student participants.

### **PAUSE/REWIND/FAST FORWARD**

*The company pauses.*

*The company rewinds and replays. Possibly in slow motion.*

*The company moves at double speed.*

*These actions can happen more than once, isolated or in any combination, and at any point.*

*PAUSE/REWIND/FAST FORWARD* is an exploration of time (or lack of it) - a theme that came up repeatedly in the research conversations. Teachers were united in their views that time for drama within the curriculum has been gradually and consistently squeezed, resulting in many

students pre-GCSE now only experiencing drama as a taught subject within the context of English or occasionally, in the annual school play. With reforms to GCSE and A Levels, the introduction of the EBacc and STEM recognised as a governmental priority (Curtis in Jones, 2022), teachers state that there is not enough time to allow all young people access to a quality arts education (Finding 1b). As Nichols affirms: 'drama is on the decline...it's becoming the preserve of well-funded and selective independent and grammar schools. It means that the subject is being pushed out of options choices at GCSE, and lower down the school, at Key Stage 3, it's falling off the agenda' (Nichols, 2021:6). The student participants also explain the pressures of time: in the form of timed examinations; time restraints on practical performance work; and the difficulty in prioritising a subject like drama alongside other A Levels, which are given more weight and value. If the value of a subject is measured in time, the enduring perception that drama is "not academic" correlates with its disregard within the curriculum and lack of investment afforded to the teaching of drama as a discrete subject. The question of drama's place within the wider hierarchy of the arts will be discussed in section 5.2.3., in relation to the difference in frameworks and methods of assessment.

## **OTHER PEOPLE**

My parents say I shouldn't.

I worry about what other people will think -

They say it won't be challenging enough.

they look at you, like, like they've already decided who you are

My teachers say I can do better

that it will be a waste of time

And will it?

Student and teacher experiences in relation to how they feel drama is perceived are explored through the brief dialogue, *OTHER PEOPLE*. As has been noted, there is a prevailing feeling that drama is viewed as less academic than other subjects, reflecting wider misunderstandings about the nature and rigour of the study of drama (Finding 1b). “Rigour” is understood in terms of writing and summative examination, a notion upheld even by some of the student and teacher participants. The “A Level” qualification title carries weight, and many student participants speak of choosing A Level Drama over a vocational equivalent. This was explained as being the result of influence from parents, secondary school teachers, and careers guidance tutors, as well some students’ own perceptions that the A Level qualification is better regarded by universities and employers. This was less common in students who wanted to progress to drama school, with those participants citing the importance of the development of their acting skills above the A Level grade as an outcome of their studies.

## **BLACKOUT**

*Blackout. The sound of anticipation.*

Summative grading is counterpointed in *BLACKOUT* which simply and directly evokes the transformative power of drama and notes that achievement is, more often than not, experienced by students and teachers in the practical and physical outworking of the curriculum - in *embodied* and *performative* terms (Finding 2c). When asked to describe what achievement looks and feels like within the context of A Level Drama, students were unanimous in speaking first about a moment of performance they had participated in: in how it felt to be in that moment; how they had collaborated with others; and how the audience responded - ‘S5: all three of us were kind of huddled behind one of the flats, waiting for blackout, there was just such a sense of achievement between the three of us’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Play(ing)’ p.32). Whilst the grade they achieved at the end of the course remains understandably important for many student participants

in the sample, all acknowledge the benefits of studying drama in relation to their wider personal and professional development and progression. There is a tension here however, when considering the notion of transferability of skills, as noted in the literature review (Finding 1a). Teachers in the research sample agreed that so-called “soft skills” are an outcome of any educational encounter with drama, as well as championing what is described as the “therapeutic nature of drama” Whilst these benefits obtained as a result of the study of drama are widely affirmed, the notion of “transferable skills” can also lead to the devaluing of the subject as an art form and with its own specific body of practical and theoretical knowledge and skills.

The playwright’s ability to create meaning in visual and physical form provides another language through which to analyse and crystallise the initial data themes (Finding 3a). In the construction of moments of dramatic action and visual motifs, the a/r/tography of the T-R-P’s role comes into its own. When we allow ourselves to look at data from different perspectives, we make space for findings to become illuminations. As these illuminations are given the opportunity to dance and interact across the empty expanse of the stage, we create the conditions for the data to dialogue with itself and begin to speak back to the research questions. This was a pivotal point within the process of analysis, shifting an understanding and interpretation of the data as ‘information’ to something that is tangible, visceral, and alive. The synthesis of the data with the drama of the stage opens up new and exciting possibilities; meaning begins to form and themes crystallise. Whilst not all these visual representations and (re)interpretations of the data are used within the final draft of the play, the discoveries made through the process are central to both the development of the script and the clarity of what it illuminates in relation to the research questions. Upon sharing the outcomes of the exercise for peer review, I was pleased to receive feedback that confirmed the value in this process:

*"The images you sent through last time are vivid and begin to offer metaphors for the ideas you are expressing. I think it is through those choices of metaphor that this will become a performance text/play."*

*Peer Reviewer 1*

### **5.1.3. Themes are explored: intersecting spaces and the entrance of the Examiner.**

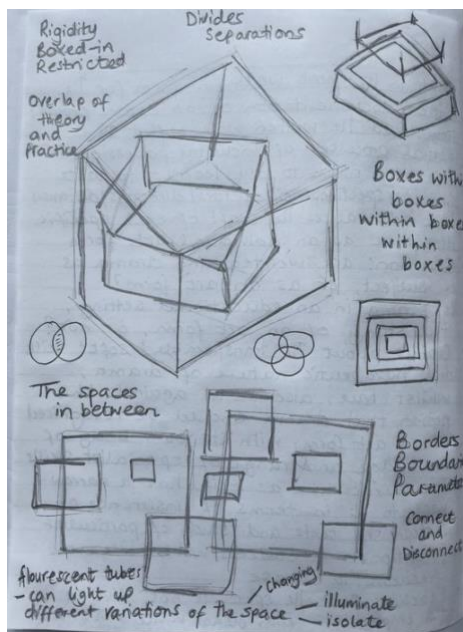
One of the metaphors explored through the construction of the play is that of boundaries and dichotomies as depicted through the physical and visual division of the performance space, and the audience's positioning within it in relation to the actors:

*The stage is set in the round. The exact dimensions and shape of the performance space can be decided by company, but the audience should encircle the stage, each viewing from their individual perspective (T-R-Ps journal).*

The decision to set the piece in-the-round was made early, there being a natural affinity between this staging configuration and a hermeneutical methodology that influences the research study. As Aston and Savona note, 'not only do spatial codes set out to define, shape and construct the meaning of the spectating and playing spaces, they also govern relations between performers on the stage and performer-spectator interactions' (Aston and Savona, 1991:115). When the audience encircles the stage, they each view the action from their own unique vantage point and therefore, the meaning which is co-constructed is continually in a state of flux. The proximity and intimacy of this type of performance space blurs the boundaries between actors and audience, inviting and enabling communication between the bodies of those present in any one moment. It allows the actor to speak more directly to the spectator, reminiscent of Boal and his concept of the "spect-actor", which positions the performers and the audience as equals, and acknowledges the active (not passive) nature of the observer in the making of the drama.

*The stage is minimalist. Three distinct spaces need to be determined. These could be achieved using rope, elastic, lighting... it is important that the three spaces can move and change, expanding, constricting, overlapping, intersecting, disappearing (T-R-Ps journal).*

In playing with the boundaries of the stage space, it is possible to further examine the persistent division of theory and practice, which presents itself at all junctures of the research journey. In commitment to a robust research practice, the Character Notebooks from Stage 1 of the analysis process were returned to and examined again. Looking at both text and image, I noticed a frequency in words and pictures related to divisions of curriculum, self, experience, and repeated drawings depicting boxes, borders, and boundaries. These were largely associated with student and teacher feeling towards what is perceived as the prescriptive nature of the qualification, particularly in relation to creative freedom and assessment (Finding 1c). A student participant's comment about current systems of education in England that want to 'put you in boxes' (Student participant S1) resulted in an initial series of stage design sketches which featured cubic spaces that overlapped, connected, bordered, and disconnected from each other.



*Image 2. Stage design sketches which explore the visual representation of data themes as performance spaces and theatre. T-R-P's creative journal.*

The *space in between* the divided stage floor was of interest as I considered what and where this was - (was it “praxis”?) - the place where theory and practice meet and harmonise. Reflecting on the student and teacher research conversations suggested that this space where theory and practice meet is also the place where achievement is felt and experienced: ‘there’s just something about being in that space, with all the other students and the teacher - creating, and devising, and performing’ (Student participant S3). As Jacobs (2016a) notes, students don’t make theatre purely for the purpose of being assessed. The student participants in this study support a view of drama education as providing opportunities for engagement in the practical experience of performance exploration and construction, which is pleasurable, cognitively challenging, collaborative, and creatively liberating (Finding 2c).

This analysis of the study’s research conversations also advocates for an appreciation of the wider, holistic benefits of drama education, whilst also acknowledging that for many students and teachers, the summative grade does remain important in terms of progression and in feelings of worth and self-fulfilment (Finding 2c). The research data suggests a distinction between *attainment* and *achievement* with many students considering the former in relation to the outcomes of formal examination and the latter as residing in the feelings associated with performing theatre for a live audience. This thesis therefore suggests that there are engrained relationships in the minds of students between theory and formal examination, and practice and the experience of participating in performance. Whilst these are certainly interlocking concepts, there remains clear points of disconnect that positions assessment as a means to an end and learning as something altogether more dynamic. This raises questions regarding *what* is being assessed within the context of drama education. If it is arguably not the *processes* of learning over a time, then examination can be accused of focussing too heavily on the sum total of knowledge acquired, which generate measurements of attainment but do not consider the aesthetic or emotional aspects of the students’ learning experience.

It felt necessary for the boundaries of the spaces marked out on the stage to be able to shift in response to the action of the play. I thought about the stage as a Venn diagram, with three spaces occupied by the Students, the Teachers, and an “Other”. At points in the play, the three spaces would be distinct, separate, isolated, and at others, connected and intersecting. As can be seen in the final scene of the play, *Become(ing)*, the demarcation of the spaces is removed entirely, and the stage is as one as the Student and Teacher characters discuss the potentials of a future, reimagined A Level Drama curriculum. The “Other” space referred to signifies the presence of the Examiner, a looming figure prevalent in the research conversations with both the student and teacher participants. The influence and perceived power of the Examiner was a strong theme identified in Stages 1 and 2 of the creative and analytic process. One student participant said: ‘whenever I think of examiners, I just think of like, cold, grey, lifeless (*laughs*) humans...so you’re kind of just like talking to a droid, rather than your teacher, who knows you’ (Student participant S14). The image of the Examiner as “Other” became an important character within the play, taking influence from Orwellian notions of a “Big Brother” figure who remains present throughout, even if not always visible or in human form:

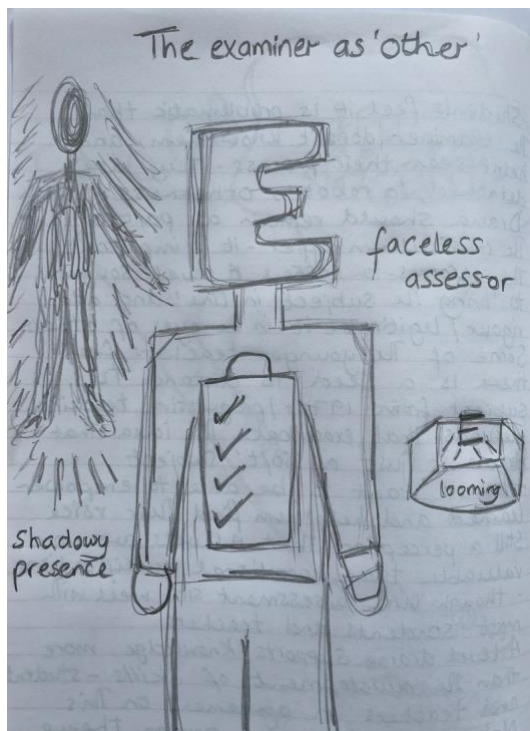


Image 3. Visual explorations of the theme of the ‘Examiner’. T-R-P’s creative journal.

As part of the verbatim theatre practitioner's editing process, Belfield asks us to consider not just the spectrum of voices represented in the play, but also who or what is absent: 'Is there a group or angle that is missing or unrepresented? If so, ask yourself what is the reason for this?' (Belfield, 2018:82). The active decision not to include representatives from A Level Drama awarding bodies, policy makers, or those individuals who have experience in the role as external/visiting examiners as part of current assessment methods will be noted and justified as part of the potential limitations of the study (see 6.4). For now, however, the analysis of the data/*creata* concentrates on the significance of the 'Examiner' as an abstract concept verbalised by the research participants, and as a dramatic device within the context of the developing play. As Peer Reviewer 1 notes:

*"As for the examiner - there couldn't be a more symbolic figure. I'm not sure whether they should have a voice or not, but they need to be present in some form"*

*Peer Reviewer 1*

Given the prevalence of the 'Examiner' as a thematic feature of the formal data, it felt necessary to explore how the dramatisation of this figure could serve as an antagonist within the context of the play, held in tension with the student and teacher experiences of assessment:

S4: ...cos I remember, in one of my questions I tried to do something creative and I went –

Student Ensemble: 'NO'

S4: - because I don't think I'll get any marks for this because I'm not answering it correctly – even though I thought it was a good idea /

*(And The Performance Speaks, 'Boundaries' p.17)*

As one Teacher participant comments, when working within a culture of education that is increasingly market and performance driven, ‘the more we’re in this situation where we’re being (*throws hands up*) judged all the time on grades, you know, then the less - the more anxious you feel about that, the more you don’t operate creatively yourself’ (Teacher participant T2). This statement chimes with student feeling regarding a disconnect between the presence of creativity in methods of learning and those of assessment within drama education raised in Act Two:

S6: I think that a lot of the time we’re just sort of taught how to answer the questions, how to do the exam in the *exact* way-

S3: the whole system is rigged by being extrinsically motivated - I’m only validated if I get a certain score

*(And The Performance Speaks, ‘Boxes’ p.21)*

The recent research report by Pearson referred to in the literature review, ‘indicates that we need to dramatically improve how we are assessing skills’ (Pearson, 2022:12) noting a reliance on ‘assessments that require learners to demonstrate recalling knowledge at the expense of their skills’ (ibid.). This, Pearson concludes, ‘leaves little room, teachers argue, for trying out novel approaches, stifling innovation’ (ibid.) and ‘that students become disengaged or are turned off education and move away from the subject they were once interested in’ (ibid.). This perspective is corroborated by findings from the Times Education Commission’s interim report (Meyers, 2022) which suggest that students from across a range of settings feel that creativity is lacking from their education and describe an emphasis on a drive towards final examinations from a very young age. The data illuminations identified in this thesis support this argument, highlighting student experience of assessment through written examination as being regarded as a “memory test” - ‘you’re just regurgitating stuff you’ve just memorised, it’s not...the creativity has all happened before’ (*And The Performance Speaks, ‘Boxes’ p.21*) - and raises the question: ‘why are we so

feeble in our ambition for what assessment can be?’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Art’ p.22). These arguments will be explored in more depth later in this chapter, and in the Epilogue. Similarly, in the construction of the T-R-P’s tripartite identity and adoption of an arts-based approach, this study challenges the use of rigid methodologies and methods within the context of qualitative research, and similarly questions what makes something ‘measurable’ and academically rigorous. As Koro-Ljungberg notes: ‘Creative and continuously changing methodologies cannot be mastered (through a traditional sense of mastering, examination, and external evaluation)’ (Koro-Ljungberg 2016:139).

#### **5.1.4. Walking the tightrope: exploring divisions of theory and practice through theatrical image and action.**

*“The tightrope is really effective as is the performance element throughout that I feel really works and transforms the dialogue and creates an unwritten theatrical language that highlights the actual work created. I would just encourage you to be bigger and bolder with it!”*

*Peer Reviewer 2*

Act Two examines the work of Peter Brook in discussions regarding the relationship between actor, audience, and space. Brook states that ‘if you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it’ (Brook, [1968] 1990:43). There is obvious irony here given the title of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*, but Brook’s point is worth consideration in relation to the T-R-P’s role in the construction of a script which serves as a platform for data illuminations to play, and be played, on the stage. As Reviewer 2 highlights, the synthesis of data and *creata* in the making of the play provides evidence in relation to the research questions and supports the potential of dramatic forms of inquiry. However, as Brook notes, sometimes the play needs a helping hand to coax out what it

is truly wanting to speak of itself. As Koro-Ljungberg reminds us, the act of writing itself should be viewed as inquiry; ‘something that will always stay unfinished and moving’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:154). In response, I explored how to go “*bigger and bolder*” with the (re)presentation of the data through the theatrical language of the stage.

Having created the image of the tightrope as a metaphor for divisions for theory and practice (Finding 2a), its use as a visual motif to allow the complexities of the discourse to be further debated was examined. As has been discussed, the theory-practice divide remains an enduring educational issue within the literature reviewed in this study, and through the analysis of the student and teacher research conversations. It is subsequently presented as an integral theme within the play, deserving of the audiences’ focus and consideration. As Teacher 1 comments at the opening to *Tightrope 2*, ‘it’s a constant rumbling debate about our subject... it’s not an ‘either/or’ situation’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Tightrope 2’ p.5). The interrelationship between theory and practice remains a thorn in the side of many drama teachers and students: they recognise the importance of both within the A Level Drama curriculum but highlight that the current assessment methods only serve to drive a wedge between the two concepts. The Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) was set up to evaluate current assessment systems used in English education and through comparisons with international case studies, draw conclusions and suggest alternatives for future assessment reform. The IAC’s ‘New Era’ report finds that divisions of theory and practice are prevalent within current assessment methods in general terms, not just in the context of drama or creative subject areas, stating that ‘A focus on paper and pencil tests values theory over practice, memory and recall over thinking, individual effort over collaboration and is not an authentic way of measuring everything that matters’ (IAC, 2022:39).

The work of Joseph Dunne is helpful here as we begin to articulate what happens when a practice which is situated within the performative, is made measurable through technical, rational means:

‘To technicise a practice is to make it over in such a way that control over its key operations is maximally assured by a method whose successful implementation can be monitored systematically and unambiguously’ (Dunne, 2005:374-5).

Dunne explains how the technisation of practice seeks to separate the knowledge of the practice in question (in this case, drama and performance), from the context of the practitioner who embodies it. In doing so, attempts are made to reduce the practice to a set of skills that can be ‘abstracted for encapsulation in explicit, generalisable formulae, procedures, or rules – which can in turn be applied to the various situations and circumstances that arise in the practice, so as to meet the problems that they present’ (Dunne, 2005:375). In reference to the work of Husserl (1974, 1976), Arnold describes the consequences of “technisation” within the ethics and epistemology of phenomenological studies as being ‘reasons for doing something are forgotten, the meaning of the activity is lost and cannot be reactivated, which equals a loss of autonomous self-responsibility’ (Arnold, 2022:215). This presents problems when we consider the ambiguous nature of “creativity” as raised in Act Two, and a review of existing literature which has noted enduring complexities in the measurement of learning within the context of drama education:

T2: but what *are* we examining? we’re obviously not examining creativity /

T1: / it’s because there is no measure for creativity. There’s no unit of measurement.

T2: I mean, what is ‘creativity’? we’d have to define that, anyway – it’s going to mean different things to different people

T1: I just don't think we can test creativity – we can only look to see if the concepts have been understood in some way, and within the demonstration of the work, if some of that has been applied

(*And The Performance Speaks*, 'Create(ing)' p.34-5).

In the case of A Level Drama, the data illuminations suggest a need to make drama 'assessable' through the reduction of a process within which students develop a complex and holistic practice, to a series of criteria and assessment objectives (Findings 1a, 2a). This notion is not new and as Jacobs notes, presents an enduring discourse in relation to drama assessment. Criterion-referenced assessment systems are 'predicated on the known' (Jacobs, 2016a:9) with critics arguing that this is fundamentally incompatible with the very concept of creativity and being creative. As a result, teachers, and particularly students, arguably experience a disconnect between learning and assessment in the subject, and their creative selves and engagement in/with the art form of drama. This is explored in *Tightrope 1*, *Tightrope 2*, and *Tightrope 3* as the student attempts to stay balanced as they try to satisfy the checklist of competencies that seek to make measurable something that is embodied and experienced. The act of walking the tightrope becomes a means to an end and the autonomous creativity and expression found in the making of drama begins to diminish.

The analysis of the research conversations suggest that the drama students interviewed have a clear understanding of the necessary relationship between theory and practice in the development of their craft and study of the subject (Finding 2a). This challenges innate assumptions held in my identity as teacher-researcher that students aren't interested in and feel disengaged from the theoretical aspects of the course. Through the construction and exploration of the data in dramatic form, it can instead be argued that the issue lies in a failure to examine drama as a subject through methods that allow for the unification of theory and practice as part of embodied experience, as

*praxis*. As S4 comments in the play, 'the only thing that got me through that exam was memorising the structure of how to answer it – that's the only thing that got me through it - and I think that's really wrong because it didn't feel very... creative, you, know? it felt very, like I was almost doing a maths sum, or something' (*And The Performance Speaks*, 'Boundaries' p.16). Kemmis notes that this can be explained as an attempt to make a process of learning that develops over a long period of time, into something that is fixed, stationary and two-dimensional:

'Looked at from the perspective of the individual practitioner, 'craft knowledge' is different from the propositional knowledge that 'flattens' time into words. Craft knowledge involves understandings of doing; it is dynamic' (Kemmis, 2005:403).

In response, Teacher 2 remarks that 'the problem is this 'needing to have it nailed down'' (*And The Performance Speaks*, 'Examiner' p.18): when we insist on words to make dramatic knowledge fixed, and therefore measurable, we neglect the very nature of the subject that is being assessed. As Nicholas states: 'creativity doesn't fit neatly into boxes and is impossible to measure. It's only through practice and experience, though, that students can learn how to be creative and how to harness and apply their own creative skills' (Nichols, 2021:50). In returning to notions of craft and craftwork introduced in Act Two, Kemmis offers helpful insight in explaining that 'In short, 'craft knowledge' is dramaturgical in character (it concerns things that unfold in time), it is embodied (requiring the 'hands-on' skills of the practitioner), and it is practical in the ancient Aristotelian sense' (Kemmis, 2005:403). The data tells stories of students and teachers who understand and appreciate that the craft of their subject is learnt and understood first and foremost, in and through the body - and often in relation and connection to others/the physical environment. There is a striking resemblance between Kemmis' suggestion that craft knowledge is 'knowledge not only 'in the head', but also in the hands, and in the heart' (Kemmis, 2005:404),

and S3's comment that 'it's more about what's in here (*the ensemble, in unison, points to head*) and what's in here (*as above, points to heart*)' (*And The Performance Speaks*, 'Gallery' p.3).

In further consideration of the work of Bohm and the concept of tacit knowledge, it is possible to examine the complexities which surround the nature of writing about creative process and experience. A key illumination identified in this research study supports a suggestion that in the assessment of the A Level Drama qualification, writing is used to quantify and qualify practical experience (Finding 1c). The analysis of the data highlights that A Level Drama students and teachers do not necessarily oppose or dislike the act of writing itself, but that the form and type of writing required by the awarding bodies in the assessment of the qualification is problematic. Despite acknowledging that some students perform well in high-stakes examinations (IAC, 2022), most student research participants describe the types of questions asked in the context of the A Level Drama written exam as meaningless and futile. In being asked to write about the practical experience of staging theatre and performance, a separation between mind and body is created, emphasising a disregard of drama as an embodied form of knowledge and communication. It is relevant to note however, that the student participants in the study all share experience of a single drama specification/awarding body (WJEC) and therefore points made about the type and form of questions posed in the written exam cannot speak definitively about those formulated in the papers of other examination boards.

Bohm describes "tacit" as 'that which is unspoken, which cannot be described' (Bohm, [1996] 2014:16) and proposes that in the same way in which the movement of the body is a tacit process, so is thought:

'The concrete process of thinking is very tacit. The meaning is basically tacit. And what we can say explicitly is only a very small part of it' (ibid.).

The data documents the frustrations felt by A level Drama teachers and students when they are asked to explain how an actor would deliver a line of dramatic text, or how a director would work with performers in a moment of interaction. The irony is that in asking for a description of a physical act, the body itself is side-lined and rendered unimportant, it being left to writing and words to articulate a knowledge that is intuitive and *tacit*. As Bohm tells us, tacit knowledge is also fluid and changing (Bohm, [1996] 2014), as is the case with drama and performance – learning happens, and meaning is made when there is movement, when we are aware of the movement in our thought processes. The connection between thought and action, mind and body are intrinsic to the way meaning is constructed in the theatre, and to expect students to be able to express this in written form is at best unfair, and at worst exposes a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the subject that is being assessed. The fact that dramatic knowledge is embodied provides insight to the lived experience of many A Level Drama students who express their struggles within the context of the written examination of the subject. As Nichol's notes: 'whereas the practical skills tend to be demonstrated from instinct and through mimetic observation and experience, writing about those same skills can baffle students' (Nichols, 2021:54). The majority of the A Level Drama students who participated in the research conversations spoke of a persistent difficulty and frustration when asked to articulate the act of making and doing performance in words/written form: 'trying to turn that creativity – that is expressed through acting, and drama, and physical theatre – into like, written words, like writing, and answering exam questions, sometimes can be a bit crushing' (*And The Performance Speaks*, 'Bodies' p.11).

A key illumination of the research gives weight to the power and potential of dialogue in bridging the gap between physical experience and written assessment methods (Finding 2b). Alexander encourages us to fully consider the power and potential of talk in 'more rigorous forms in which reciprocity, exploration, speculation, argumentation and carefully structured discussion replace mere recall of predetermined responses' (Alexander, 2020:20). An assessment method which

seems more suitable to a subject that is in its essence, designed to be spoken, not read, is the use of discussion or viva interviews. Critical dialogue in the form of an assessed conversation provides an opportunity for students to explain the process of making a piece of performance, or their creative ideas regarding the staging of a scene from an existing play. The use of vivas forms part of what the Rethinking Assessment movement describes as 'Performance-based assessment' wherein 'a learner speaks to a piece of work they have created, to practical assessments in sports, drama, art or music' (Rethinking Assessment, 2023:11).

This form of assessment was looked on favourably by many students I spoke to (see *And The Performance Speaks*, 'Art' p.27), and supported by Rethinking Assessment's 'Blueprint for Change' (2023) which lists oral viva as a useful tool to probe thinking and develop oracy skills. There was disagreement amongst the teacher participants however, some of whom shared concerns regarding the 'unreliability' of the viva as a method of examination (see *And The Performance Speaks*, 'Art' p.24-5). This returns to the familiar debate regarding the survival of drama as a subject and a need for it to be viewed as equal in rigour to other A Level subjects, with the written exam acting as some form of "rubber stamp" of intellectualism and academic merit. However, as Gordon Wells notes, it is in the 'interpenetration of talk, text, and action in relation to particular activities, that...students are best able to undertake...the semiotic apprenticeship into the various ways of knowing' (Wells, 1999:146-7 in Alexander, 2020:91-2). This aligns with the research findings within which drama students express a desire to be assessed through methods that feel dialogic in nature, and if writing is required of them, that they are allowed to write about something that they have first experienced in practice.

This continued, thorny debate regarding how best to assess dramatic skills and knowledge is brought to climax in the *Tightrope 3*. As the teachers discuss the lack of understanding of society

and educational policy makers in relation to the very nature of theatre and drama as a distinct art, the tightrope walker is left in a state of precarity:

*The tightrope grows suddenly brighter, and the tightrope walker is lifted higher from the ground.*

*Sounds of electricity, or white noise.*

*The stage is illuminated and noisy.*

*The tightrope walker's face is in peril.*

*The student ensemble look on.*

*Suddenly, there is silence.*

*(And The Performance Speaks, 'Tightrope 3' p.9)*

In response to Reviewer 2's advice to "*play with the lengths of the scenes so that they vary and when they are explosive or energetic, they feel like a real puncturing statement and drama*", *Tightrope 3* seeks to lay bare the reductively simplistic attempts of exam boards and education policy makers to reduce the complex relationship between theory and practice into a set of competencies. In choosing to make *Tightrope 3* a short, staccato moment, it acts as a dramatic slap in the face, providing a narrative full stop to section one of the play and underlining a key theme in the research. The suggestion at the end of this scene is that the problem lies not only in a general misunderstanding of the subject of drama, but fundamentally in an overarching mistrust of it:

T1: I got a letter from Michael Gove – this was ages ago – saying that drama wasn't a subject, it's just a series of pedagogies

T2: that's unbelievable...

*Beat*

There must be something, fundamentally, not trusted about drama.

*The tightrope flickers and disappears.*

*The walker is left suspended in the darkness.'*

*(And The Performance Speaks, 'Tightrope 3' p.10).*

#### **5.1.5. Continued pressure: the survival of the arts in the context of Further Education.**

The analysis of the research conversations held as part of this study conclude that current assessment methods used within the context of A Level Drama are flawed and unsustainable (Finding 1a). The creative and analytic practices of the T-R-P have identified commonalities in the feelings and lived experiences of both A Level Drama students and teachers which suggest that at best, systems of assessment are frustrating and unintuitive, and at worst, restrict autonomy, stifle creativity and place unnecessary emphasis on summative, written examination which further exacerbates the division of theory and practice. Within the context of Further Education, the primary site for this research project, extra pressures have been noted within the teacher narratives in relation to performance-driven cultures of high grades, large class sizes and a lack of resources. Those teachers currently teaching A Level Drama in FE colleges were more likely to have group sizes of over twenty students, with some cohorts being as large as up to one hundred students across years one and two of the specification. This is in comparison to teacher participants working in settings such as grammar schools where class sizes may have as few as four or five students, with a maximum of twenty in total across an entire cohort.

Access to facilities and resources was also cited as having a bearing on the learning experience of students dependent on the type of setting within which they were studying. The research data identifies that of the participants in the sample, teachers in sixth forms and grammar schools typically had access to more time in drama studios and were able to utilise dedicated spaces for theory and practical lessons. In contrast, students studying in colleges described a greater demand on practical spaces and experienced less access to live theatre trips and enhancements such as working with visiting theatre companies as part of their course. The ratio of student-teacher time is also a factor to be considered when considering the equity of experience of students studying A Level Drama in FE colleges as opposed to other settings. Teacher participants working in colleges describe pressures to meet demands for high grades amidst increasing class sizes and with students who, particularly post-pandemic, struggle to achieve the ease and competency of writing style and exam technique required by the summative examination. When class sizes are increased, teachers understandably have less capacity to support students in the development of their writing skills to the same degree as can be achieved when working with smaller groups. This pressure has been exacerbated by the 2015 qualification reforms which de-coupled the AS and A Level qualifications, which, as the IAC's 'New Era' (2022) report concludes, leaves students and teachers in England with less flexibility and increased pressure on performance in final examinations. When compared to Wales and Northern Ireland, where students are still able to take exams modularly or linearly, learners studying qualifications in England are at a disadvantage having 'just one be-all-and-end-all opportunity to show what they know and can do' (IAC, 2022:41).

The problematic nature of funding within the context of Further Education has been highlighted within the literature review and as The Labour Party's Council of Skills Advisors' Report (2022) notes, is inextricably linked to qualification availability and delivery. The analysis of the participant research conversations supports a view that arts-based subjects are in a state of precarity as

colleges focus on governmental agendas that reward recruitment and progression in areas that support the economy (Department for Education, 2022b). Despite acknowledgement that the creative industries play an important role in England's financial prosperity, 'as well as a key cog in the levelling up machinery' (Salmon, 2023), the pedalling of rhetoric which supports the notion of arts-based courses being of "low value" in comparison to other disciplines and subject areas prevails. In his assessment of the current state of the creative industries, Salmon calls for 'more careers advice for schoolchildren to promote creative sector professions' (Salmon, 2023) and a recognition that visible economic growth in the sector requires time and investment. Labour's Council of Skills Advisors Report emphasises the importance of creativity and an arts-based education, stating that 'we must not lose sight of the value of learning for learning's sake and protect the arts' (2022:8). However, given that many of the student participants in the research study recalled a lack of encouragement from teachers, friends and family when choosing drama as a subject at A Level suggests that negative perceptions of the creative industries endure.

A continued decline in recruitment of drama at A Level as noted in Act Two, will undoubtedly increase pressures on an already under-funded subject area and amplify pervasive narratives which suggest the arts are a poor academic and economic choice for learners. This has been driven at least in part, by a reduction in uptake of non EBacc subjects and the influence of the Progress 8 agenda in schools as highlighted in Ofqual's 2019 report which indicates 'that schools/colleges are continuing to focus more on EBacc subjects than those subjects which do not count towards the EBacc' (Ofqual, 2019:4 in IAC, 2022:16). This thesis supports a call for the recognition of arts subjects within both education and society (Campaign for the Arts, date accessed 19.02.23) and persists in endeavours 'to provide high-quality cultural education for our young people, to help them succeed and enter adulthood as well-rounded individuals with more than just a good set of exam results' (Marshall, date accessed 19.02.23).

In March 2023, the Drama and Theatre Education Alliance (DTEA) held a campaign entitled *Seize the Day*, responding to the state of drama and theatre for young audiences which they claim, ‘has been dismissed, underfunded and undervalued for decades’ (DTEA, date accessed 02.03.23). Calling for the recognition of drama as a distinct subject at key stages 1 and 2, alongside yearly access to live theatre performances and workshops for all children and young people, DTEA advocates for ‘networking between drama teachers, theatre practitioners and the wider creative industry sector to recognise drama as a source for cultural capital, identity and heritage’ (ibid.), inspiring people ‘to take risks, think critically and build social cohesion through collaboration’ (ibid.). In a post-pandemic context, this thesis takes the stance that these skills are more vital than ever. These points will be considered further in 5.2.3. as the value of drama within education is discussed, alongside conclusions and recommendations drawn from the study and noted in the Epilogue.

## **5.2. Stage 4: reflections on seeing and hearing the play as an embodied artefact.**

*The final lens of dramatic analysis occurs when the play is handed over; when it ceases to be words on the page and pictures in the playwright’s mind and is interpreted and (re)interpreted through the bodies of others. The space I now occupy as T-R-P is as observer, as listener: I am afforded the privilege of immersion in the data from the perspective of the audience. In theatre, most playwrights do not direct their own work and for similar reasons, I find my position is outside the demarcation of the performance space. I see the data in its (re)embodied form, as bodies and voices interconnecting, seeking out and making meaning in situ as the text is taken from ‘page to stage’.*

‘You can have the body of text and of course you need to make some selections of what to include, but there’s no substitute for working with the actors and deciding

what to keep and what to edit out. It's like a sculpture; you keep hacking bits off until you end up with the shape you want' (Cutting in Belfield, 2018:63).

MacDonald observes a shift from 'author-led, text-based theatre to the present notion of theatre as a predominantly interactive medium' (MacDonald in McCullough, 1998:129) and notes that in working with a group on the development of a text, 's/he will know already that his/her contribution is an adaptation, that the text that emerges is merely a formal record of the event' (ibid.). I remain aware of the hermeneutical spiral and the deepening of my understanding of the data and how it speaks into the space it inhabits. As Conroy asks: 'Is spectatorship a form of experience, or is it a process of investigation?' (Conroy, 2010:42). The creative process of textual research and development challenges the T-R-P to explore the data/*creata* in physical form and be reflexive in the re-examination of key themes and debates. Synchronously, the T-R-P is invited to learn, unlearn and (re)learn what has been discovered from the data/*creata* as it is (re)presented in dramatic form, providing further opportunity to highlight issues of potential insider bias and assumption (Finding 3b).

#### **5.2.1. Critical, collaborative dialogues elucidate the aims of the research and the dramatic purpose of the play.**

*"It would be great if you were able to work with some students on playing with how it could be staged and how the text works within the physical and theatrical element and direction. I feel putting it on its feet you'll find a real rhythm to it and maybe break away from the tidy nature of the play on paper - I think there's room to mess it up a bit that only comes with actors in a room experimenting."*

*Peer Reviewer 2*

Being back in the studio with a group of young performers represents a coming full-circle in terms of the research journey, and a fitting place to situate Stage 4 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic process. The drama students contributing to this final stage are not part of the participant sample and so have no preconceptions regarding the scope and intent of the research. This was important in terms of the interpretive nature of the research as it was intended that the students would approach the text as actors working with a playwright, not as participants working with a researcher. The teacher/director facilitating the practical exploration of the work was one of the teacher participants from the research site, who also contributed to the research conversations as part of the study. As was the case with Reviewer 1, this supported a process of reflexive crystallisation whereby the T-R-P's interpretation of the data is shared with the participants as a means of ensuring the credibility of the research (Mienczakowski, 1993; Sallis, 2008).

Two groups of twelve students explored four extracts from the working draft of the script. The episodes chosen were *Gallery*, *Tightrope2*, *Boxes* and *Play(ing)*. These scenes were selected as they represented a series of moments from across the narrative arc of the play, but also because they posed questions and challenges regarding the realisation of data themes in physical and dramatic terms. Whilst it would be valuable to explore the play in its entirety, this is not feasible within the boundaries of the thesis. Nonetheless, the opportunity to observe even short extracts of the play in a state of physical and embodied (re)interpretation is significant and supports the potentiality of playwriting as a form of dramatic inquiry (Finding 3b).

Sallis notes that 'a key consideration when writing a research-based theatre piece is who does the ethnodramatist envisage will view it' (Sallis, 2018:52). Given that the intended audience/s for the play being constructed as part of this research study include drama students, teachers, it made sense to involve this demographic in the development stages of the writing process. Before any practical work with the text began, the student-actors read the accompanying textual notes

(see *And The Performance Speaks*, p. i-iii) and the chosen scenes aloud as a group. This also presented an opportunity to 'explain the origins of the play' (ibid.) to make the purpose and context of the work explicit and transparent and outline how their contributions would inform the work. Ethically, this was important in providing clarity regarding how my role, positionality and intentions underpin the axiological stance of the study.

The student-actors were encouraged to ask questions of me in my role as "playwright" and from their perspective of "actor", as would be the case in a period of research and development (R&D). R&D is a common practice in the theatre industry within which a playwright workshops a text with a company of actors before returning to the script to edit, amend and refine. The questions the student-actors asked allowed for further crystallisation of the themes identified and presented through the dramatic device of the play. They also provided a helpful opportunity to challenge assumptions of truth in relation to the story being told. Some of the questions and my subsequent responses and reflections as taken from my journal are outlined below:

Student-Actor: *Who is the audience?*

Beth: *Initially, I had thought...anybody - or particularly, other teachers and students of the A Level Drama curriculum - but now I actually think that the people who really need to hear/see this are exam boards, government policy makers, senior leadership teams and also some parents and wider society as a whole. However, I feel it is really important for other teachers and students to see and hear these stories dramatically told on the stage. We need to feel and understand that we aren't alone - there are shared experiences and a determination for things to change. We need to pull together and speak up.*

Student-Actor: *What do you want the audience to think and feel at the end of the play?*

Beth: *I want the audience to think that there is value in an arts education - specifically drama - and that the continuation of drama as a taught subject is worth*

*fighting for. I want them to consider that drama deserves to be seen and appreciated equally alongside other art forms, and that this should be reflected in the ways in which the subject is assessed. I want them to think about what the word 'academic' means and appreciate that it doesn't just equal exams and writing - 'academic' can also be embodied experience, practice and craft...Ultimately, I want them to consider whether we can, and should, measure creativity. I want the audience to feel our collective struggle, and to feel the weight and importance of the matter. I want them to feel empathy and to feel a sense of drama teachers and students as a collective, as an ensemble. I want the audience to feel that the arts matter, that being able to study drama as part of your education, matters. Ultimately, at the end of the play I want the audience to feel hopeful for a better and brighter future and empowered to fight for the survival of A Level drama and the creative arts more broadly.*

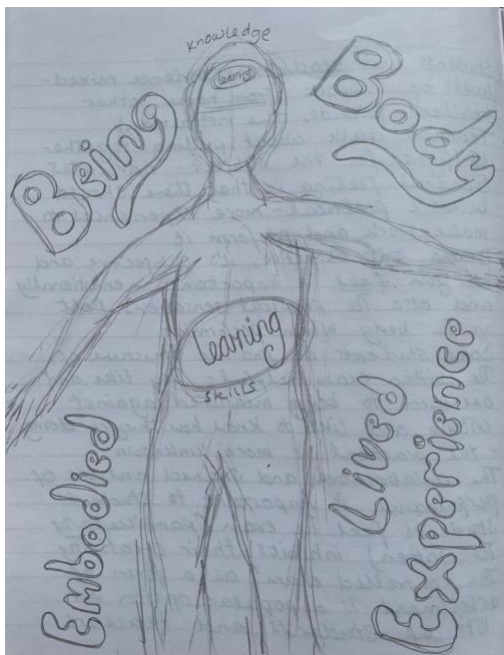
Student-Actor: *Why does this play need to be written?*

*Beth: This play needs to be written because the voices of teachers and students aren't typically present in the spaces where decisions about curriculum and assessment are made. They need to be shared and heard. The play also needs to be written because the arts are in crisis - and they need to survive. As creatives, we should feel compelled to challenge assumptions that practice isn't academic, and that practice must be validated through writing. Ultimately, we need to speak up and be heard - the current system of assessment within A Level Drama isn't working.*

Engaging in the dialogues with the student-actors stimulated a reconsideration of the research questions considering the data/creata illuminations. Being asked to articulate who the play was for, and why it had been written was important in clarifying the original purpose of the study this thesis describes and brought into focus the original problem and context as introduced in Act One. This was a helpful and significant re-focussing of my intentions as T-R-P and brought to light questions regarding dissemination which will be explored further in the Epilogue. A play is written to be performed, and so I begin to consider what the life of this piece of work may be, outside the boundaries of the doctoral thesis.

### 5.2.2. The body as a site of inquiry: practical exploration of the script leads to refinement and clarity of thematic expression.

This section describes how observation of the student-actors' practical exploration led to refinement of the developing script and brought clarity of expression in the dramatisation of data themes. In seeing the data (re)interpreted through the bodies of the performers, the researcher enters a further spiral of knowing and unknowing, whilst the playwright looks for the communication of meaning in the text and images presented through the dramatic action on the stage. This thesis argues that in the same way that dramatic knowledge is best acquired through learning where theory is applied in practice, the embodiment of the data in the form of the developing play helps the T-R-P to construct meaning in relation to the research illuminations. Three practical research and development examples (Experience (a), (b), and (c)) are discussed here. Each example explains how the T-R-P's experiencing of the embodied data/*creata* in a dramatic and performative context provides opportunities for further discussion of the research illuminations in relation to the study's questions. In doing so, key concepts identified in the literature review are revisited and reconsidered in relation to the narrative accounts of the research participants.



*Image 4. The body as learning/knowledge/meaning-making/site of inquiry. T-R-P's creative journal.*

***Experience (a): the problem of “soft skills”.***

The division of dialogue amongst the Student ensemble within the script was a creative point reconsidered in light of the student-actors' initial workshopping of the text. In *Tightrope 2* there were only three students available in the R&D workshop, and so the group re-assigned the lines and re-considered the dramatisation of the action. Taking a roll of tape, they marked out the tightrope diagonally across the stage floor and one student mimed stepping with trepidation onto the wire. Flanked by the other two student-actors, the performer made their way along the line, dissecting the space in a visual depiction of theory and practice. By reducing the number of bodies and voices in the scene, the message is communicated with greater clarity as the audiences' attention is focused with more precision. In the case of *Tightrope 1/2/3*, the use of two actors either side of the tightrope walker emphasised the dualism of concepts including theory and practice, vocational and academic, body and mind, and knowledge and skills (Finding 2a, 3a).

Fleming notes that the question of “skills” within the context of drama teaching is a topic that has been given a wide berth by theorists seeking to avoid ‘a focus on narrowly defined skills devoid of recognition of the importance of content and context’ (Fleming, 2019:3). Bolton agrees, stating that ‘the current instrumental perspective of education as instruction has upheld a view of drama education as having a purpose either to do with practising life-skill or to do with acquiring prescribed theatre knowledge and skills’ (Bolton in Jackson, 1993:39). Despite this observation being made some thirty-years previous, we are arguably still operating within an instrumentalist ideology which can be observed, ‘in its most conspicuous form in the “21st century skills” movement and its emphasis on soft skills’ (Bereiter and Scardamalia in Kerslake and Wegerif, 2018:73).

Within drama, “soft skills” is a term often used by those wishing to justify the existence of the subject within the curriculum. The development of skills such as public speaking, confidence,

teamwork, and problem-solving are noted in the outcomes of this project as being benefits in the study of, or engagement with drama in an educational context. Whilst it is true that these skills are all present within the subject and medium of drama, as Bereiter and Scardamalia note, the problem occurs 'in a naive psychology that assumes unlimited transfer of learning' (Bereiter and Scardamalia in Kerslake and Wegerif, 2018:77). Nichols (2021) takes the argument a step further in his observation that the term "soft skills" has been used as a means of justifying the position of those who accuse drama as being "not academic", or even not a "proper" subject (DfE, 2012). To make his point, Nichols attempts to define what might be referred to as "hard skills", or skills that are deemed more useful to students as they leave education and take up their place in industry and society. As Schulz explains, 'soft skills complement hard skills...[and] fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality. It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge' (Schulz, 2008:146).

For Nichols, "hard skills" can be categorised as being skills which are 'repeatedly defined as teachable and measurable...including reading, writing, mathematical ability...web design, accountancy and financial skills and computer programming' (Nichols, 2021:112-13). His argument against such a definition is that polarises so called "academic" subjects (i.e., STEM) against creative subjects like drama and reinforces the misconception that drama 'is thought to be a soft subject, because it apparently focuses on soft skills' (Nichols, 2021:113). In response to this assertion, Nichols is clear that the skills and knowledge required by drama students (particularly at GCSE and A Level) combine so called "hard" and "soft" skills in the study a subject that is unequivocally academically rigorous:

'it is a training ground for intellectuals which relies on instinct and taking risks; it is genuinely collaborative but also allows its learners to discover what is distinctive and unique about themselves; it allows us to make sense of ourselves and who we

are and our place in the world whilst also learning from ritual, history and tradition’  
(Nichols, 2021:12).

Chell and Athayde note that ‘Usage of the terminology ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills is quite misleading’ (Chell and Athayde, 2011:616) as it suggests that hard skills are more difficult to acquire than their so-called soft counterparts. What is also omitted from such labelling is any explanation about how skills are transferred between different contexts. Jones and Lloyd (in Tummons, 2020) explain that as has been previously mentioned, there is much difficulty in transferring tacit knowledge to tangible outcomes, as is the case when transferring qualification or subject-based learning to practical, work-based contexts. Whilst transferable skills remain an undeniable natural benefit and outcome of studying drama, they should not be relied upon as the sole purpose of the subject’s inclusion in the curriculum. Given the influence of a governmental agenda that positions the preparation of students for employment that supports economic growth, it is necessary to challenge misconceptions of what is classed as “rigour”. This includes problematising notions of drama as a so-called “soft” subject, which only serves to perpetuate divisions of knowledge and skills, and theory and practice. These considerations will be drawn on in the Epilogue to the thesis where recommendations are made in relation to T Levels and the future of post-16 assessment in England.

### ***Experience (b): a need for reform and reimagining.***

The character of the Examiner as a thematic representation was afforded deeper analysis as the student-actors experimented with the representation of the role in dramatic and performative terms. In the notes that accompany the script, it is specified that ‘the Examiner can be played by a member of the company or represented in some other way’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, p.ii). It was interesting to observe the student-actors’ interpretation of this direction through a work-in-progress sharing of *Boxes*. In the first sharing of the extract, the student-actors had made the

creative decision not to include the Examiner as a character in physical form, instead opting to place the audience in the role and position of the Examiner. As an ensemble, they chose a shared point of focus in the audience and reacted physically, huddling together centre stage and facing outwards, as an expression of their collective fear and anxiety in response to the Examiner's growing presence.

This interpretation was interesting in terms of a deepening of data analysis as it emphasised a feeling of the Examiner as "other" and as something external to the lived experiences of the students (and teachers) (Finding 1a, 3a). From my position as spectator, I felt actively involved in the moment, suddenly (and perhaps unwelcomingly) part of the story and with a sense of responsibility for the way in which the student ensemble felt and responded. It also served as an effective illustration of imbalances of power, where arguably too much emphasis is placed on the role of external examiners in the assessment of creative and practice-based subjects such as drama. 'Who is best placed to examine the work of A Level Drama students?' is a question arising from the research data, and one that warrants discussion following the use of teacher-assessed grading within the Covid-19 pandemic. Of the students who participated in the research conversations, many expressed preferences for teacher-assessment (particularly in terms of the marking of practical performance work) compared to external examination (Finding 2c):

'I think it should be your teachers because there's obviously - they've been there (*makes open palm gesture*) for the whole time, like they've seen you grow' (Student participant S14)

'an external examiner comes in and what they see is the *product*' (Student participant S12)

‘I really do respect what my teachers have to say about my grade - and I respect that a lot more than some random person from Edexcel who I’ve never met, and who has never met me’ (Student participant S1)

In comparison, the teacher participants expressed mixed views. Some were in favour of the involvement of teachers in the assessment of student work within the A Level Drama curriculum: ‘we are de-skilling a generation of drama teachers now by saying it’s just over to the examiner’ (*And the Performance Speaks*, ‘Become(ing)’ p.40); ‘we can fairly assess performance’ (Teacher participant T5). Others felt that a return to assessment purely through coursework and via teacher assessment was problematic and runs the risk of drama as a subject being further de-valued in the eyes of others: ‘I did a GCSE in drama in...1995 - and I never picked up a pen in two years. I didn’t write a word, and I got an A\* - because it was just performance, and it was marked by my teacher, and she thought we were great...I don’t want to go back to that, cos I don’t think we’d have respect as a subject if we did’ (*And the Performance Speaks*, ‘Examiner’ p.19).

Nichols provides a helpful contextual explanation regarding the historical problem of teacher assessment and non-examination assessment within creative subjects such as drama, suggesting that pre-2015 reforms, ‘the level of scrutiny and external checking of the qualification was very scant’ (Nichols, 2021:66). Arguably, the system we now have has veered too far in the other direction, with an overriding assumption that ‘written assessment is somehow more useful, or more accurate, or *better*, than its practical counterpart’ (Nichols, 2021:49). Labour’s recent ‘Council of Skills Advisors’ Report’ notes a need for ‘multimodal assessment so that young people’s progress is no longer just measured through written exams’ (2022:108). This perspective is corroborated by the Rethinking Assessment movement’s publication, ‘A blueprint for change’ (2023), which critiques current methods as being narrow, outdated, unfair, one dimensional and stressful for students. The report suggests that teachers have become disempowered by

unrelenting pressures to prepare students for high-stakes examinations at the expense of the development of skills and knowledge that encourage life-long learning, creativity, and curiosity. Whilst the Rethinking Assessment's proposal identifies hope for the future of assessment reforms in England, it also recognises that significant change needs to happen for that to occur, at all levels of the system - including in the vision and processes of schools, and this thesis argues, colleges.

The research data from the study described in this thesis highlights tensions between teachers who completed their training and have significant pre-reform teaching experience, compared to those drama teachers who began their careers after the turn of the millennium. Whilst there is no difference in the passion or enthusiasm for their subject, those teachers who are later in their careers expressed a disregard for external, written examination as a viable method of assessment within the context of drama education (see 'Tightrope 3' and 'Examiner', *And The Performance Speaks*). Drama teachers who had both trained and began teaching post-millennium (and seemingly those who were younger and therefore had experienced the year-2000 reforms and the introduction of AS Levels as students themselves), held a keener sense of the need for the subject to stand shoulder to shoulder with other A Levels, and felt that 'there's evidence to say that there's a level of fairness in an exam' (Teacher participant T5) and that 'at some point, pen has to go to paper' (Teacher participant T4).

Whether in favour of external examination or not, there was consensus amongst all the teachers who participated in the research conversations that the current system is flawed and does little to assess knowledge within the context of drama education (Finding 1a, 1c). This also raises questions regarding who decides what that knowledge is in the first place, and whether it bears any relation to the real-world knowledge required in the theatre industry, or indeed disciplinary knowledge for those students who progress to HE level study. Many teachers in the study spoke

about the scope of the A Level Drama as being narrow and lacking in diversity and the representation of people of colour. One teacher participant referred to the current text choices within current A Level Drama specifications as comprising a 'canon of dead white guys' (Teacher participant T5), with other teachers similarly noting a need to decolonise the curriculum and feature plays which are more inclusive and representative of people of colour, women, contemporary theatre practitioners and international experiences and perspectives. Comments from the teacher research participants also corroborate the work of Carroll and Dodds (2016) drawn on in the literature review, adding weight to arguments that current A Level curricula fail to prepare students for the types and forms of knowledge required by universities, as well as lacking in the development of practical skills needed to progress to drama school or directly into industry. This casts further uncertainty over the validity of the A Level Drama curriculum and emphasises the need for specification reform.

***Experience (c): the use of “learner profiles” as a holistic method of assessment.***

Following the initial sharing of the scene *Boxes*, the student-actors were asked to improvise a second version of the extract, but this time, with one of the company physically embodying the character of the Examiner. In changing the state and position of the character from a presence in the audience to a physical representation on the stage, it was possible to explore the dynamics of the role and the intention behind the meaning created (Finding 3a). The teacher directed the company to play the scene again, asking the actors to physically respond to the nearing of the Examiner's presence. Acting instinctively, they cowered, turned away and recoiled. Underscoring this was the sound of a ticking clock, the volume of which was amplified to provide a distorted and overbearing, mechanical, and rhythmic soundscape to the action and stage picture. The addition of this sound effect helped to synthesise themes from the data as the Student ensemble embodied stories of drama students feeling time-pressured, creatively restricted and marked on examination criteria where it feels the answer is pre-prescribed and non-negotiable:

‘I love drama – I love coming up with new ideas and everything, but the only thing that got me through that exam was memorising the structure of how to answer it – That’s the only thing that got me through it - and I think that’s really wrong because it didn’t feel very... creative, you, know? It felt very, like I was almost doing a maths sum, or something (*laughs*) It didn’t make as much sense -’ (Student participant S11).

The unfaltering rhythm of the clock’s ticking highlights the rigidity of current systems of examination and assessment in A Level Drama. The uniformity of the sound communicates the archaic nature of a system which refuses to acknowledge drama as a distinct subject, with distinct skills and knowledge. In support of this perspective, the IAC’s ‘New Era’ report comments that ‘Decisions on what assessment approaches are used, and how they are balanced, should be informed by the curriculum area – not all areas of the curriculum will be assessed in the same way’ (IAC, 2022:61). The stagecraft of the scene demonstrates how a “one-size fits all” approach to assessment can only ever offer a crude measure of skill and knowledge as it ignores the complexities of embodied experience and the interrelationship between theory and practice that lie at the heart of the discipline (Finding 2a). As the student participants comment: ‘If I could speak to the examiners I think I would...I would try and explain that drama isn’t like all the other subjects’ (Student participant S13); ‘Maybe it’s...A Levels that don’t fit drama, rather than drama that doesn’t fit A Levels...’ (Student participant S1).

Referring again to the work of Rethinking Assessment, movement away from an over-reliance on written examination and towards assessment through ‘learner profiles’ is noted as providing a viable alternative (Rethinking Assessment, 2023). The learner profile is described as a ‘holistic picture of strengths and achievements’ (Rethinking Assessment, 2023:16) within which a student’s learning journey is documented throughout the duration of their education. This digital

alternative to summative examination is in alignment with the value of formative assessment methods, as raised in Act Two, where exam results are captured alongside other achievements and most significantly, is held and documented by the learner themselves. Rethinking Assessment (2023) claims that the learner profile system of assessment will empower students to take ownership of their learning and better prepare them for HE and employment. It also allows students to include experiences and achievements that occur outside of the context of formalised learning. This is of particular note to a subject such as drama, given that the knowledge and understanding of many students is enhanced through their involvement in extracurricular groups, clubs and activities.

Whilst the successful use of learner profiles is already being used internationally, including countries such as Australia (Rethinking Assessment, 2023), it is a method yet to gain traction in the context of English education. However, this thesis argues that an emphasis on the documentation of learning over an extended period would indeed provide creative subjects with a more flexible and felicitous assessment method. This is of note when compared to what has been identified in the research data as embodied, collaborative, and gradual processes of learning within drama education. The concept of a learner profile also shifts perspective from summative numerical and letter grades as being the “rubber-stamping” of a student’s learning journey, and towards a space that values process, personal development and a broad portfolio of skills, experiences, knowledge alongside a wide range of informal and formal assessment outcomes. In moving away from systems that necessitate uniformity of assessment regardless of subject area or discipline, it begins to be possible to reimagine a future for A Level Drama. The use of a broad range of assessment methods ‘will help build a more rounded picture of progress, talent and achievement’ (Rethinking Assessment, 2023:14) and create opportunities which encourage and allow for the meaningful application of theory in practice as a measure of understanding.

### 5.2.3. Permanence/impermanence and perceptions of value: what is art anyway?

The student-actor workshopping of scenes from the play unearthed the opportunity to reconsider a question which frames the broader context of the research this thesis describes. One of the recurring topics in the research conversations with both the student and teacher participants centres on the *value* of drama and how it is perceived in comparison to other arts-based subjects (Finding 1b). Paraphrasing headteacher Jenny Langley, the IAC's 'New Era' report stated that the 'UK is still a heavily class-based society. Assessment policy and practice dictates that students believe only a certain number of subjects and qualifications are valuable' (IAC, 2022:50). The notion of value as equating to a state of permanence is interesting to consider in relation to the assessment of drama in comparison to other "creative" A Levels within the disciplines of Art (Fine Art, Textiles, Graphics etc.). Whilst it is true that the construction of meaning is a contextually situated process, unlike a painting, or a picture, or sculpture, a moment of theatre can never be fixed. The picture hanging on the wall remains as the artist painted it, but the play or piece of performance will alter in each iteration and embodiment.

Early in the teacher research conversations, one participant commented that: 'a lot of people would say that they'd once been in a gallery, against the people who go to the theatre' (Teacher participant T1). This sentiment was echoed, almost precisely, by a student participant who said: 'everyone wants a piece of art in their home, yet not everyone goes to the theatre...art is easier and cheaper to make than theatre, and more accessible to the public' (Student participant S14). The articulation of this point made by both a teacher and a student, brings to the fore enduring questions relating to the defining and valuing of "art", a concept that is of significance to the research questions this study explores. Eisner states that 'As for the concept "artistic" it similarly has no single, simple definition. "Art" and "artistic" are terms that have been the subject of aesthetic debate and analysis for over two thousand years' (Eisner, 1981:1). The fact that the concept of "art" in relation to the subject drama features as a theme identified in the research

study is therefore unsurprising. As Teacher 2 muses ‘perhaps it’s because we are not being taught as *an art form*. I would very much like drama to be treated more like art, as a subject’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Art’ p.22). Speaking in response to Teacher 1’s question regarding a “feeble” lack of ambition in terms of how A Level Drama is assessed, Teacher 2 suggests that perhaps it is the impermanent nature of performance that leads drama to be given less credence than its creative companions.

Falling a third of the way through the text, *Art* responds to the opening scene of the play which is both titled and set in a “gallery” and enters into a dialogue with itself to explore a primary theme identified in the research data. In considering the divisions of theory and practice in the assessment of A Level Drama and how this manifests itself in what can be described as an over-reliance on writing as a means to qualify practical experience, the data infers a general mistrust of drama and specifically, performance, because it cannot be “nailed down”; it is not fixed, you cannot hold it, ‘it’s there, and then it’s gone’ (*And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Art’ p.22).

In wrestling with the question, “what is a work of art?” John Carey suggests that ‘Anything can be a work of art. What makes it a work of art is that someone thinks of it as a work of art’ (Carey, 2005:29). This is interesting to consider in relation to the comments made by the teacher and student research participants and the extent to which feelings of mistrust about drama and theatre might be owing to its inaccessibility to the general public. The analysis of the research conversations suggests that many students who choose to study drama at A Level do so against the advice of parents, peers and even their school teachers. It could be broadly assumed that whilst most people have seen a painting or have a print or picture on a wall in their home, far fewer people have been part of a theatrical experience. As has been suggested by the teachers and students research participants, this results in systems which seek to understand and measure something that is often outside the limits of many people’s experiences. In the context of English

education, this thesis argues that such systems can be attributed to wider cultures of assessment where ‘it has become easy to value what can be easily measured, instead of measuring what is valued’ (IAC, 2022:49).

The Student characters explore societal perceptions of drama and theatre in the opening scene of the play, which is purposefully set in a gallery space that they inhabit with their moving, breathing, interacting bodies. In practically exploring this scene with the student-actors, the company chose to underscore the action with music that had a distinctly Parisian feel, and which emphasised an idea of “art” being something highbrow, exclusive, and intellectual. However, as they interpreted the stage direction to ‘move in and out of postures and poses’, the notion of art as existing in a state of permanence is challenged through the physical motion of the performers’ bodies. The student-actors transitioned from frozen images reminiscent of Greek sculptures, through an entanglement of limbs and points of connection, to postures that were messy, dynamic, and alive. In the use of each other’s physical bodies to create vivid stage pictures, the student-actors practically demonstrated the collaborative nature of drama and the co-construction of meaning in its fluid and impermanent state.

The question of drama as artform, and as experience, is further interrogated through the metaphor of the Examiner’s canvas in the scenes *Art*, and *Alive* (Finding 1b, 3a). In the first draft of the script, the stage directions stated that ‘*That Examiner paints a picture on a white canvas. The image may or may not be visible*’. However, following feedback from the student workshoping of the text, it was suggested that the Examiner might instead paint on the white canvas with *white* paint. In doing so, the act of painting is both a physical act happening in real time within the context of the theatrical event, but what is depicted on the canvas remains hidden from the Student and Teacher characters, and indeed the audience. The intention here is to highlight the student/teacher experience of searching for an answer that exists only within the parameters of

examination specifications and assessment criteria: that “art”, or in this case, drama, is made measurable when it is fixed and remains permanent. The fact that what the Examiner paints remains invisible to those looking in from the outside, challenges the purpose of the written examination in the current A Level Drama specification and questions whether a subject can be both truly creative, whilst also producing measurable outcomes.

A final edit was made to this scene in response to the continued and unresolved debates regarding methods of assessment within the context of A Level Drama. In the concluding moments of the play, before the two Teachers take down the Examiner’s canvas and exit the space, the lighting state changes to reveal a question mark painted in ultra-violet paint in the middle of the frame (see *And The Performance Speaks*, ‘Become(ing) p.40).

Lecoq states that in any playwriting, ‘a sense of an ending is essential’ (Lecoq, 2002:95) if we are to see both writing and theatre as an act in motion: ‘for any movement that fails to end has no true beginning’ (ibid.). The dramatic intention for the end of *And the Performance Speaks* is to underline the concluding remarks of the play to the audience, and indeed the research study: that we must keep on questioning. Drama, education, and qualitative research are concerned with inquiry and the lived experiences of the teacher and student participants affirms a belief in that inquiry as a *process*. In moving away from a system that measure academic achievement against outcome and towards one that recognises the value of process, craftwork, and creative, collaborative, practical inquiry, it is possible to redefine the term “rigour” and acknowledge that ‘a work of art is not confined to the way one person responds to it’ (Carey, 2005:31).

#### **5.2.4. The play is given its first full read through: data is (re)(re)interpreted.**

*It's late afternoon on a hot day in mid-July. That kind of blistering, dry, shiny heat we don't often get in this country. Inside the chapel of the Oxford college though, it is comfortable and cool. The light streams through the stained glass window, which is the focal point of the space, kissing the tops of the heads of the audience who are seated in the warm, worn, wooden pews. A red carpet underfoot, and towering organ pipes with mouths agape.*

*Positioned along the steps that lead up to the altar sit the delegates who will embody the Student characters in the play. Some are seated on the steps, some on chairs or stools (I've had to improvise with the set), but they are central in the stage space and connected as an ensemble. My palms are sweaty, and I realise I am nervous.*

*To the right of the altar steps, raised up in the grandeur of the pulpit and flanked by eagle's wings, is the person who will read the stage directions. Their role is the most important, for it is they who will give voice to the physical and visual imagery that makes the script a play.*

*I swallow. I am aware of my breathing and my heart in my chest.*

*Sitting next to me at a heavy table is a delegate who will read the lines of Teacher 1, to my Teacher 2. I feel that they are more nervous than me and remember that for many, the format of the playtext and the notion of 'acting' is scary and unfamiliar. I look up at the audience, searching for friendly and encouraging faces. I wonder if they will think the play is any good?*

*I am both afraid and excited to hear the data speak and be lifted from the page.*

*What else can it tell me about itself?*

*The audience hush and settle.*

*The play begins.*

### **5.2.5. Reflections on (re)presentations: the data dialogues with itself.**

The final part of the Stage 4 of the T-R-P's creative and analytic process draws on the embodied experience of hearing and participating in the first full read-through of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*. The context for this event was a conference focussing on research in post-compulsory education, where selected delegates offered their voices and bodies in a relaxed reading of the working draft of the script, in front of an audience. The reading took place in the chapel of an Oxford college and whilst it was not a purpose-built theatre space, there was certainly something of the theatrical to the dimensions and acoustics of the environment. A make-shift set was constructed from what was available to offer a representation of the three distinct spaces suggested in the play's notes regarding stage design. The delegate-actors playing the Student characters were arranged on different levels but positioned as a collective and central to the audience, whilst the two Teacher characters were situated downstage left at a table, slightly separate from the Students. One delegate was given the role of reading the scenic titles and stage directions so as to ensure that the visual imagery and dramatisation of the data findings was communicated to the audience. This was important in the absence of the play being fully performed as the stage directions are crucial in explaining how the physical action underscores, accentuates and accompanies the spoken text.

Sallis draws on the work of Saldaña (2008) to note that 'research-based theatre should not be judged on the printed script alone, but on the ways in which the audience responds to the text when it is performed' (Sallis, 2018:55). Despite it being a read-through and not a full performance, the presence of the audience was integral to the experience. In consideration of Brook's (Brook, [1968] 1990:11) belief that actor, audience, and space are all that is needed for a theatrical event to occur, then this was fulfilled in the coming together of people within a designated space to embody, observe and respond to the play. In a continuing spiral of analysis and discussion of

research illuminations, the event allows the T-R-P to encounter the data as both performer *and* spectator, hearing their own voice and the voices of others, (re)(re)interpret the experiences of the research participants (Finding 3a, 3b).

*As an audience to the data, but participant in the play I was able to embody the data myself, which provided a deeper understanding and was a meaningful experience.*

*Delegate-Actor 1*

Ellingson calls for ‘boundary blurring work in which the social science not only inspires or is expressed in artwork, but that the production of the artwork is intricately interwoven with the development and refining of research analyses and reports (Ellingson, 2017:169). Describing the embodied representation of qualitative research, Ellingson continues to explain how ‘creative representation of research findings invokes multiple senses in material formats to go beyond writing to include images, textures, sounds, or other sensory cues and attend to details of their own and participants’ bodies in ways that bring them alive for readers and highlight their embodied beings’ (ibid.). The opportunity to encounter the data (re)embodied in a further spiral of (re)interpretation brought the fleshy, messy, feeling bodies of the research participants (including my own body as T-R-P) to the fore, re-centring human experience and narrative as the focal point of the research. As the delegate-actors begin to speak and breathe life into the words on the page, the data is able to engage in what Koro-Ljungberg describes as a process of ‘dialoging’ [sic] (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:67) with itself. As she explains, ‘Data’s dialoging with itself could be seen as a way of interacting at multiple levels, inquiring of oneself, and familiarizing or defamiliarizing oneself with nuances, complexities, and less dominant aspects and characteristics of data object’ (ibid.).

Ellingson notes that 'The process of constructing representations continually changes the researcher *and* the data' (Ellingson, 2017:181). As the data echoed through the acoustics of the space, I heard it again and in myriad different ways; an invitation to re-examine and re-experience the identified themes and illuminations. From my position as T-R-P, I was struck by how the tone and pace of vocal expression presented the opportunity to reconsider what the data was saying, the speaker's choice of emphasis adding to the hermeneutical process of analysis and interpretation. Following the event, one of the delegate-actors commented that by participating in the reading of the play, 'it felt like others (and I) were also adding our own experiences into the words we were saying' (Delegate-Actor 1) and that the experiences of the characters resonated with their own experiences as an artist. Similar feedback was received from another delegate-actor who expressed the universality of the key themes and messages of the play, in particular the questions raised about: the 'ever bubbling academic/non-academic subject debate' (Delegate-Actor 2); the 'societal appreciation of drama and theatre' (ibid.); the purpose and methods of assessment; as well as the enduring problem of how we measure creativity 'against a rigid assessment rubric' (ibid.). The transferability of the findings from this research study to other subject areas and qualification types will be discussed in the Epilogue as conclusions and recommendations are outlined.

From the perspective of the ethnodramatic researcher, Sallis (2008) draws on the work of Mienczakowski *et al.* (1993) and Denzin (2003) to note that the sharing of the script with the research participants is part of the researcher's responsibility to the contributors. This also provides a means of avoiding bias and assumption in the researcher's own interpretation and presentation of the data. In recognition of this, the full draft of *And The Performance Speaks* was also shared with the student research participants to crystallise and reflect on my subjective understanding of the data through the dramatic medium of the play. Given that at the time of sharing, none of the student participants remained enrolled at the college, which is the research

site, an invitation to review the script was sent out via email. Whilst four students responded to say that they would like to read the play, only one provided feedback. However, this was useful in gathering further evidence of the credibility of the research and supports the use of playwriting as a robust form of inquiry with the potential to analyse and express qualitative research in artistic and accessible ways:

*The play has good structure, it makes its main message concisely with strong arguments to back it. It also gives both sides of the "debate" a decent amount of time to provide the audience with a balanced view... It captures the feelings of both students' and teachers' opinions surrounding the flaws in the educational system, specifically looking at Drama, without sounding whingey or whiney. As a drama student too, I certainly feel like my frustrations and criticisms have been voiced. There's a sense of anticipation and enthusiasm, and it's made clear that Drama certainly isn't a dying subject, so long as the higher-ups are able to take a step back and rethink how they've been running things. It feels like there's a productive reform on the horizon.*

*Student participant/reviewer.*

As a researcher, it is affirming to see that the illuminations constructed from the data are speaking clearly to those both within and outside of the specificity of the research field. This offers a confident response to the research questions framing this study, highlighting the possibility for playwriting to creatively and theatrically analyse, discuss and disseminate qualitative research through the curation of dialogue and the construction of dramatic action and image (Finding 3a, 3b). As Delegate-actor 2 commented: 'having your themes/thoughts and discussion points put across in your play made them somehow more real and for me. I felt like they need dealt with more immediately than if I had read a paper about them'. It is interesting to note however, that

Saldaña warns ethnodramatists against assuming any significant change in the audience as a result of experiencing the theatrical event, stating that:

‘Ethnodramatists without a theatre background need to be aware that research in the field of mainstream theatre suggests that audience change after viewing just one theatrical performance is somewhat possible but most likely minimal. Certainly, it depends on what type of play is shown and its relevance to the spectators’ lives’ (Saldaña, 2016:584).

This correlates with Carey’s perspective regarding how we define something as a work of art as he explains that ‘it is the sum of all the subtle, private, individual idiosyncratic feelings it has evoked in its whole history. And we cannot know those, because they are shut away in other people’s consciousnesses’ (Carey, 2005:31). This is a salient reminder that irrespective of the positive feedback the read through of the play received, we can only ever know what individuals felt if they choose to share it. Tamas states that all presentation simultaneously reveals and conceals’ (Tamas 2009:6 in Kara et. al. 2021:139) and whilst the making of a play as a method of data analysis and (re)presentation arguably has more impact, ‘written presentation has a longer reach’ (Kara et. al. 2021:139). The documentation of the research study findings in the form of a dramatic script is therefore rendered useful in that it provides an interpretation with the potential to be read in multiple ways, both performatively and on the printed page.

### **Act Five: chapter summary.**

Act Five of the thesis has sought to explain the T-R-P’s creative and analytic practice of writing and *wrighting* a play as a method of qualitative inquiry. Through this process, the research questions concerned with the relationship between learning and assessment in A Level Drama have been discussed considering existing literature and the lived experiences of the research

participants. It has been concluded that current methods of assessment used to measure the knowledge and understanding of A Level Drama students are flawed and do not reflect the ways through which learning is acquired and experienced. Alternatives have been suggested as a result of the data analysis, including the potential use of viva examination and learner profiles which focus on oral retellings of learning experiences and recognise the value of process over product. These will be summarised in section 6.3 of The Epilogue in the form of implications for the future practice of assessment in the context of the A Level Drama qualification.

Methods of formative, performance-based assessment are highlighted through the research study as providing the most meaningful forms of examination within the context of A Level Drama, reflecting the embodied and practical nature of learning and the development of skill. The *space in between* where theory and practice marry in practical application of embodied and tacit knowledge, is identified through the research study as the clearest example of student learning and provides the most authentic opportunities for assessment. This requires a shift in current educational trends in relation to assessment and a focus on outcome and summative examination as the 'gold standard' of assessment and achievement. Similarly, a need to reaffirm the value and contribution of the arts on a personal, societal, and economic level is also identified as a recommendation, which can only be achieved through changes to the investment in, and support of the arts within the context of Further Education, and the curriculum in general. These concluding points will be discussed further in the Epilogue.

## Epilogue

*I gather myself and reflect on my experiences:*

*I am grateful to have worked with the data in ways which feel authentic to the subject matter under examination,  
to have explored what the data may look and sound and feel like, in its tangible form.*

*Pulling together the multiple threads of narrative,  
I take stock.*

### **Introduction: writing in motion.**

This conclusionary chapter will draw together the findings from the study and will summarise the contribution to knowledge of the work in relation to the original research questions and aims. As part of this, it will be acknowledged that what has been illuminated as a result of the research remains in a state of motion, with a future life and legacy within which data/*creata* continues to exist and be (re)interpreted outside of the boundaries of the formal thesis. This will include reflections on the use of playwriting as a practice of inquiry, which corroborates existing scholarship and supports the rigour, credibility, and potential of the craft of drama as both methodology and method. The use and potential of the play which has been constructed as an integral part of this study will also be considered in relation to modes of dissemination, and the accessibility of presenting research through the medium of the stage is highlighted as a strength and an area for the concentration of future work.

In relation to the specific context of A Level Drama, the chapter will draw out key conclusions and suggest recommendations in relation to the future redevelopment of the curriculum to reflect ways and means of learning in drama education and will outline the practical implications of the research as part of a reimagining of assessment methods. As part of this discussion, current

discourse regarding assessment practice across the English educational system, and within the context of creative and arts-based subjects, will be drawn upon to highlight the relevancy and poignancy of the research and its potential role in ongoing dialogues with students, teachers, exam boards, and policy makers. In addition, the chapter will also explore the potential transferability of the findings to other contexts, whilst acknowledging that generalisable results are not an overarching aim of the study. Finally, limitations of the research are noted and suggestions for future work and the development of the study are explored.

### **6.1. Reflections and recommendations on writing and *wrihting* as a practice of inquiry within the context of qualitative, arts-based research.**

‘The laws of movement govern all theatrical situations. A piece of writing is a structure in motion’ (Lecoq, 2002:22).

The epilogue to this thesis speaks back to the prologue. In responding to Somer’s call for research which captures the colours and textures of the “bird in flight”, the facets of this study resonate with Lecoq’s statement that ‘every living structure emerges from movement which rises and falls and has its own rhythm’ (Lecoq, 2002:20). As a creative and academic process, the making of a play offers more than a means of presenting and disseminating the research findings of this study. Using the theatrics of the stage as a site through which to explore and interrogate the data, new and exciting possibilities of meaning-making and analysis appear. Rolling refers to Creswell’s (1994) definition which ‘distinguishes between a research method as the means for “data collection and analysis,” and research methodology “as the entire research process from problem identification to data analysis” (p. xvii)’ (Rolling, 2010:106). In the context of this research project, it has been recognised that methods are bound up within an overarching arts-based methodology which ‘displays the *writing process* and the *writing product* as deeply intertwined’ (Richardson,

2000:930) and notes that 'the product cannot be separated from the producer or the mode of production or the method of knowing' (ibid.). This presents challenges for the T-R-P which have been addressed in this study through the continuation of reflexive dialoguing with self, others, and the data as a method of crystallisation. It is noted however, that there is more work to do in articulating the ways through which arts-based and writerly practices of inquiry can be used to challenge traditional qualitative paradigms in ways that are transparent and accessible to wider research communities.

Considering the arguments that have been made throughout this thesis in relation to embodiment and the importance of the physical in drama education, it would be justified to question the decision to document the data in textual form. However, as Schechner points out, 'pinning down the "real meaning" of "text" is not easy' (Schechner, 2002:193), a concept which has been interrogated through the creative and analytic practice of writing and *wrighting* a dramatic text as a form of qualitative inquiry. Schechner's conclusion supports a justification for (re)presenting the research illuminations as a script when he explains that 'texts are synthetic, constructed, crafted, made up, invented: sites of interpretation and disagreement, not fixed canons' (ibid.). In the same way, the dramatic text produced within the context of this study is transparent about its constructedness. It also, however, acknowledges the creativity and craft involved in that construction and welcomes dialogic and hermeneutic interpretation in its reading and understanding.

This thesis therefore concludes that dialogue and dialogism are key characteristics of arts-based research and writing as a practice of purposeful inquiry (Snyder and Turesky, 2022). The dialogic relationality between the multiple identities of the researcher, the literature, the participants, the data/*creata*, allow the T-R-P to use language that goes beyond words to communicate what would otherwise be inexpressible. This layering of voices and the overlapping of conversation between

the various facets of the research, is translated through 'the expressive qualities of the arts to awaken and convey meaning' (Snyder and Turesky, 2022:2). This is a point corroborated in the work of Vicars and McKenna, who describe the use of drama as a methodological practice to 'rework the notion of text-to-life or life-to-text, as an expression of a will to knowledge, of us working dramatically with our participants and students to find a way to articulate experience and place at the centre of research an agentic voice' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:416-7). What is interesting here is the focus on drama as a medium through which you can articulate the often un-articulate in a way that empowers and provides a platform for participants' voices to be heard. I am drawn to what Vicars and McKenna say regarding drama's ability 'to reflect on a subject or theme that is connected in some way with the psychic and emotional life of the teller' (Vicars and McKenna, 2015:417). In this case, words and conventional narrative structures are not enough to do justice to the physical, affective experience of living, being and doing and so we turn to 'this performative articulation of this emotionality that we contend comes through drama as a method for examining life' (ibid.).

As researchers, Ulmer (2017) believes that writing is intertwined with our sense of identity as academics and denotes a distinction between the dualism of body and mind in how we choose to use writing to theorise or "live" our research journeys. Whilst we can follow academic tradition and use the written word to report on the findings of our research, we might also broaden our horizons and view writing as 'a potential site of intervention for those who desire to produce research differently, reimagine impact, or write to something other than the rhythms of the clock' (Ulmer, 2017:201). Contrary to perceptions of drama as a pursuit that lacks academic rigour, this thesis concludes that by harnessing the complex, creative processes involved in the development of a performance text, those assumptions can be challenged and dismantled. Harris and Sinclair note that 'artists have long asserted our own systematic approaches to our work as equally rigorous, but including an affective dimension only strengthens its worth as new knowledge'

(Harris and Sinclair, 2014:5). The process of writing and developing a dramatic script for performance has allowed for the alignment of the creativity present in the subject of drama, with both the researcher and the participants as creative beings:

‘research is the process of creating data, creating analyses, creating stories and performances, creating knowledge, and (directly and indirectly) creating social change. Bodies link with minds and spirits in the creative process’ (Ellingson, 2017:191).

Shifts in thinking driven by creative and post-qualitative research movements, enable traditionally accepted approaches to methods, methodologies and the valid production of “knowledge” to be disrupted. Lincoln and Guba’s ‘shoring up and demonstrating the trustworthiness of inquiry guided by the naturalistic paradigm’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:290), is called into question in a post-pandemic context and qualitative researchers are invited ‘to take risks to interrupt existing methodological grand narratives’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016:131). This thesis argues that writing and *wrighting* can be used as a powerful tool to make knowledge visible in a creative and richly descriptive way, but this requires us to push against the grain of the established traditions of academia. Ulmer supports this in illuminating how ‘alternative rhythms of inquiry run counter to the systematic beats of the academic metronome, which results in a constant churn of articles, chapters, books, and monographs across the academy. This stream of production responds to the privileged status that writing holds within research’ (Ulmer, 2017:202). Act Three underlined an understanding that within the context of qualitative research, the truth told is not Truth with a capital T and this thesis argues against writing that presents ‘a neat account of a process which was anything but neat (Kara, 2018:123 in Kara *et al.* 2021:122). As Tamas states when describing her own journey using the arts to write about trauma and spousal abuse: ‘Testimony cannot offer totalized, complete accounts; it is a performative discursive practice in

which you produce your own speech as material evidence for truth' (Tamas, 2012:41). In fact, as Tamas argues, perhaps the goal of qualitative research should not be to search for truth and knowledge but the opposite – to engage in the process of *unknowing* as a means to discover something authentic, honest and raw: 'What we realize, imperfectly and in pieces, is that perhaps the best we can do is unknow, unlearn, undo ourselves and our preconceived notions in order to maybe, somehow see a glimmer of the otherness that stands just outside of our perception' (Tamas, 2012:40). Reflecting on the T-R-P's creative and analytic practice, it is concluded that the act of making theatre involves putting faith in the unknowable. When you begin writing or making a piece of performance work, there is much that is unknown and awaiting discovery as you journey through the creative process. It is a process within which you are required to move agilely, forwards, backwards, sideways – doing and undoing, learning and unlearning, making and deconstructing until you arrive at a point where you feel you have something that can be shared with the world. In doing so, often the best we can do is to hope that we discover some ways of staging the "otherness" that Tamas refers to, finding ways to present and (re)present a version of reality that will forever be open to being changed and reimagined in the reality of others.

To return to Lecoq by way of conclusion, 'in any process of creation the object made no longer belongs to the creator' (Lecoq, 2002:17). The dramatic text produced as one of the outcomes of this research study therefore embraces its purpose as an 'act of creation' (ibid.) which is 'to bear fruit which then separates from the tree' (ibid.). Thoughts in relation to the future life of this specific project will therefore be considered in 6.4 of the Epilogue as the potentiality of the play outside of the boundaries of the doctoral thesis is discussed.

## **6.2. Reflections and recommendations in relation to student and teacher experiences of learning and assessment in A Level Drama.**

Richard Foreman notes that ‘society teaches us to represent our lives to ourselves within the frameworks of a coherent narrative, but beneath that conditioning we *feel* our lives as a series of multidirectional impulses and collisions’ (Foreman, 1992, in Drain, 1995:68). The outcomes of the study suggest that the concept of embodiment is central to student and teacher experiences of teaching and learning in the A Level Drama curriculum in. In taking a view of embodied knowledge as knowledge that resides *in* the body, but also knowledge that is gained *through* the body (Nagatomo, 1992 in Sodhi, 2008), this thesis claims that embodiment is what makes drama unique in comparison to subjects such as sport, within which practical and tacit learning is also an essential part of the learning experience and/or pedagogic approach. This is significant when considering the future of the A Level Drama qualification and supports calls for both curriculum and assessment reform which recognises drama as possessing its own distinct forms of subject and pedagogic knowledge. The insufficiency of language to articulate embodied knowledge has been unearthed as a core theme within the study. This relates to the A Level Drama curriculum and the ways in which students are assessed, as well as to the difficulties associated with the written expression of a creative process. As Bacon concludes: ‘within the field of drama education there is a commitment to the idea that understanding comes from doing the thing itself rather than only reflecting on a thing done’ (Bacon in Ackroyd, 2006:154).

The research illuminations discussed in this thesis have found a disconnect in the relationship between methods of teaching and learning in A Level Drama, and assessment. Despite best intentions to structure the curriculum and teach in a way that acknowledges drama as an embodied praxis, the data suggests that teachers find it increasingly difficult to meet the demands of the systems designed to assess and measure the processes of learning within drama

education. This, as Beghetto notes and is corroborated in the outcomes of the study and through my own experiences as an A Level Drama teacher, can result 'in teachers short-circuiting students' creative expression' (Beghetto, 2005:262) as they wrestle with mounting pressures 'to cover curriculum, meet standards, and administer assessments' (ibid.). In striving to find a balance between the delivery of a creative and process-led drama education that is also deemed robust and acceptable by those outside of it, there are implications for students as well as teachers. Beghetto refers to the work of Runco (2003) who explains that 'pressure caused from evaluations can cause anxiety that distracts from the creative task' (Beghetto, 2005:260), giving weight to the paradoxical notion that attempts to assess creativity limit the very essence of that which is being assessed. This point is corroborated by Jacobs who similarly states that 'the formal and widespread assessment of artistic creations can result in a stifling of individual expression, imagination, creativity and originality' (Jacobs, 2016a:3). These arguments have been affirmed by this research study, most of the student participants describing their creativity as being limited, restricted and even crushed, as a result of the prescriptive nature of current A Level Drama specifications and methods of assessment.

Bailin (in Schonmann (ed.), 2011) reminds us however, that it is a misconception to assume that creativity and being creative requires complete freedom. Indeed, she notes that 'all creation takes place within constraints of some sort' (Bailin in Schonmann (ed.), 2011:210). This is significant if we agree with Fleming's assertion that 'The arts in education have to function within education in a contemporary culture of assessment with an emphasis on clear learning outcomes, targets and testing' (Fleming, 2012:6). Within a context where drama as a subject choice in England is in decline (Nichols, 2021:6), Fleming highlights a need to move past 'tension and disagreement' (Fleming, 2012:6.) in discussions about assessment within arts-based subjects, and towards the addressing of issues 'related to subjectivity, objectivity and making judgements' (ibid.). In acknowledging that assessment and qualifications matter, not only to students and parents but

also to other stakeholders including colleges, universities, employers and the government (IAC, 2022), the reimagining of assessment and examination methods is highlighted in this thesis as a priority and one requiring due care and attention, particularly in light of the flaws in the system revealed during Covid-19 (Bhopal and Mayers, 2022). The narratives of many of the study's teacher participants suggest that drama's viability as a discrete subject at GCSE and A Level is directly linked to how it is perceived in comparison to other academic and vocational qualifications. In direct contestation however, the analysis of the research data also found evidence of drama teachers and students who call for the removal of a written examination entirely, in opposition with those who believe that it is this specific assessment method which underpins assumed understandings of academic rigour and credibility. This is supported in the views of some student participants who highlight the enduring currency of the A Level qualification title in comparison to vocational equivalents which are seen as non-academic and less useful in terms of progression onto university level courses.

The dichotomisation of knowledge and skills has been found as a prevalent issue within the context of drama education, related to naive divisions of theory and practice, and academic and vocational qualification types. This is compounded by misguided and binary perspectives that seek to suggest knowledge is the product of theoretical study and residing in the realms of academia, placing lower value on the development of skills, practice, and vocational learning. A recent report by the Independent Assessment Commission concludes that:

'The curriculum is too heavily weighted towards knowledge acquisition. Knowledge is important but students need more. They need to be able to demonstrate that they can use knowledge, eg, to explore how ideas work in practice or to draw together ideas from across disciplines' (IAC, 2022:65).

Narratives from the research participants agree that drama education should include teaching and learning of both skills *and* knowledge, and that it is right to question approaches and assessment methods which attempt to separate them. This research study concludes that drama education is most effective when skills are taught in the context of knowledge, and vice versa. It also claims that within the drama classroom, learning happens through a malleable interaction of individual and collaborative creative exploration, and that both process and product should be valued and appreciated as valid outcomes of learning. Given the plurality and plausibility of approaches to teaching and learning in the subject of drama, the research illuminations emphasise the difficulties this poses in relation to assessment and acknowledges that enduring divisions such as theory and practice, and knowledge and skills, remain hard to dismantle. There is, however, tangible movement towards assessment reform (see Rethinking Assessment; Independent Assessment Commission; Pearson's report into the Future of Qualifications & Assessment in England; Arts in Schools 2023 report) and findings generated as a result of this research study contribute to a growing body of evidence that suggests change to the ways in which we measure attainment and achievement are needed. As the Independent Assessment Commission note in their 'New Era' report: 'Examinations remain one important way of gathering evidence but the current system is too heavily reliant on a single assessment method with a heavy bias towards written papers. (IAC, 2022:64)'. This is an argument corroborated by the research which this thesis presents and is emphasised as being particularly problematic in the assessment of drama where, as has been noted, knowledge is embodied, fluid and most often found in collaborative, practical, and dialogic spaces/interactions.

The findings of this research study identify the power and potential of critical, collaborative dialogue as one way of bridging the gap between theory and practice and propose the use of a viva as a form of examination that is more in keeping with the ways and means of learning in the context of drama education. Many student participants suggested oral exams as a viable

alternative to written assessment, raising the possibility of presentations, seminar discussions, and individual interview/dialogue as worthy of consideration in relation to any reimagining of the curriculum and related assessment methods. Given the points raised in Act Two and Act Five regarding continued financial and performance-related pressures endured by the Further Education sector, it is right to question the viability of viva-type exams where time and resources are already over stretched. There is also an argument to support traditionally upheld perspectives that view large-scale written examination as being fairer, more reliable, easier to administer and maintain standards across a range of centres and examining boards (IAC, 2022). This thesis, however, argues that assessment methods should be designed in line with the modes of learning utilised in and characterised by the subject being assessed, dismissing the homogeneous, “one size fits all” approach currently preferred by the English education system. This perspective is in consensus with the position of the IAC (2022), who state that a change of direction is needed, and one within which the curriculum should be placed at the heart of reform. Current systems of education in England favour a “tail wagging the dog” approach, which presupposes that curriculum is determined by assessment and qualification instead of focussing first on the distinct nature of learning within the context of individual subject disciplines.

The collaborative nature of learning within drama has been identified in the literature review and underlined in the data analysed within the research conversations with drama students and teachers. Both parties spoke with feeling regarding the benefits of shared and supported learning in the drama classroom as a result of skilful facilitation by the teacher to create opportunities for students to engage in praxis - the practical interaction and integration of theory within practice. When considering ways and means of teaching and learning and comparative methods of assessment, the use of teacher-assessed grading within the context of A Level Drama needs to be reconsidered. Jacobs (2016a) advocates for teacher-assessors in the assessment of student performance work, describing the drama teacher as an active member of the audience. In noting

the drama educator's expertise and ability, Jacobs observes how teacher assessment of student performance work considers different perspectives and works within the framework of subject-specific criteria to form judgements about the outcomes of artistic and aesthetic experience. The students in the study this thesis describes support this stance. Student participants in the research spoke favourably about teacher-assessment of their developing knowledge and skills, with many stating that they felt that their teachers were best placed to make fair and informed judgements on attainment and achievement. As Jacobs notes, teacher assessment in drama education, and specifically in performance assessment is always, to an extent, subjective and 'can never be divorced from the process' (Jacobs, 2016:12). Nonetheless, when complemented with other assessment methods and as part of a transparent set of processes that draw on both objective and subjective perspectives, it is possible for drama teachers to make informed and reliable judgements in relation to student learning and attainment.

Whilst the IAC (2022) note that an examination system free from bias is vital, they also emphasise that teacher-assessed grading of student work can be achieved fairly and objectively when subject to robust moderation procedures. Schonmann (2007) similarly advocates for ongoing assessment in the drama classroom that involves the teacher, the student and the experience of an outside eye and values the process as a valuable measure of progress, as well as the product. In the context of A Level Drama practical examination, this type of assessment was utilised, many argue effectively, prior to the qualification reforms in 2016. The subsequent move to external examiner assessment of performance work was noted by one teacher participant as "de-skilling" a generation of drama teachers by removing their involvement in the assessment and moderation process. This thesis proposes a reconsideration of teacher involvement in the assessment of A Level Drama qualifications, with an emphasis on formative methods of assessment that allow a picture of student knowledge and understanding to be built across a range of practical, skills-based, performative and 'theoretical' activities (i.e., writing, critical discussion, viva, portfolio, live

theatre review). The recommendations of this thesis therefore support a “mixed method” approach to assessment within the context of A Level Drama, in line with Pearson’s call for assessment which assesses ‘the right skills in the right way, enabling learners to highlight their strengths and successes’ (Pearson, 2022:6). This, as Eisner observes, allows us to ‘tell a fuller story’ (Eisner in Bresler, 2007:424-5) about student attainment and achievement than a single letter or number grade can do. The use of forms of narrative generated from both teachers, moderators, and this thesis suggests, students themselves, when used alongside quantitative measurements, ‘can broaden our understanding of the consequences of our practices (ibid.).

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, Learning and Assessment was established in 2022 with the intention ‘to promote and support school level education and the quality of learning and assessment for all pupils’ (APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment). The group launched an inquiry in the spring of 2023 to collate evidence in response to calls for assessment reform, highlighting the timely relevance of the research study this thesis presents. As part of the proposed inquiry, the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment will produce a report to emphasise a need for assessment reform, potential problems, and barriers, as well as suggestions for overcoming these. With specific reference to the future of the arts in education, Tambling and Bacon’s 2023 report, ‘The Arts in Schools, foundations for the future’, is of note in the underlining of the importance of the arts in improving outcomes for children and young people whilst acknowledging that there remains a lack of value ascribed to the arts within the state education system in England (Tambling and Bacon, 2023). Forums such as these broaden the potential for the data findings from this project to offer meaningful contribution to the conversation, particularly in terms of fore-fronting the voice and perspective of the Further Education and post-16 student/teacher, which is found to be often missing. Similarly, advocacy groups for the specific promotion of drama within education, such as Drama and Theatre Education Alliance, Campaign for the Arts, and National Drama, provide further spaces where the illuminations situated within

this specific research study can contribute evidence in support of curriculum and assessment reform, as well for wider recognition of the value of the arts within education, and society. Kara (2012) notes the importance of researchers being receptive to the work and research of others. The current doctoral research work of Philip Cleaves is of specific interest. His study which aims to propose 'an alternative Theatre and Performance A Level subject content and specification in which the language of assessment is grounded in principles of processual knowledge' (Cleaves, 2022) provides fertile grounds for collaboration and cross-pollination. The narratives of lived experience documented in this thesis could provide further evidence in relation to both a need for assessment reform, as well as student and teacher perspectives on alternative approaches within the specific context of A Level Drama. As Teacher 2 states at the end of the play:

T2: if there is a reform - and I'd love there to be a reform - then drama teachers  
need to pull together -

you're there to teach - but you also have a role as an advocate for the subject

*(And The Performance Speaks, 'Become(ing) p.40)*

An underpinning aim of this research project is to raise the profile of drama education as being an experience that all children and young people should have access to, with wide-reaching benefits outside of the parameters of formal curricula. That being said, it is important to draw on Neelands' observation that: 'What is hidden in the claim that 'drama is powerful' are the distinctive and preferred values, ethics and aesthetics of the author and how these socially constructed subjectivities have shaped pedagogical actions, intentions and the interpretation and presentation of the efficacy of the 'results' or effects of drama' (Neelands, 2004:48). This thesis does not seek to hide its opinion which asserts the transformative potential of drama for people, when as Neelands goes on to conclude, 'such 'miracles' lose their rarity and become part of our everyday expectation' (Neelands, 2004:53) in an understanding of learning as a 'process of continuous

transforming and (re)shaping of who we are and who we are becoming' (ibid.). However, the study also recognises barriers to inclusion and involvement in arts activities in terms of financial, geographical, and social access, particularly prevalent in the context of Further Education institutions. The data from the research conversations supports an argument which positions exposure to theatre and dramatic performance as out of reach for many, and one which shores up societally ingrained opinion that drama is the pursuit of the middle-aged and middle-class. This thesis therefore concludes that more work is needed to champion the broad benefits of the arts and to justify why experiences of 'Making drama and theatre is an essential part of being human' (DTEA). This will rely on networking and advocacy from those involved in education as well as theatre companies, practitioners, and industry specialists. This thesis also positions the student voice as fundamentally important to this conversation and gives further weight to the relevance of the research study which draws to the fore the experiences of learners as central to the development and sustainability of drama within the context of the English education system. The dramatic play as a dynamic and visual vehicle for this purpose will be discussed in the final section of the Epilogue as the research method is considered in terms of its potential reach and accessibility across a variety of academic and non-academic forums.

### **6.3. Implications for practice.**

The overarching aim of this piece of work has been to illuminate the lived experiences of students and teachers of the A Level Drama curriculum, reflecting particularly on the suitability of current assessment methods in relation to contextualised ways and means of learning and teaching in drama education. Whilst the presentation of a reimagined specification for A Level Drama is beyond the aims and scope of the study, it is however possible to offer some provocations, or implications for the future of assessment practices within accredited, post-16 drama qualifications. The implications for practice summarised below are made considering the findings from the

research data and bring to the fore the voices of teachers, and particularly students with direct lived experience of the A Level Drama curriculum. The importance of listening to those currently engaged in the current system is as noted by exam board AQA, as being of particular importance and places 'young people at the heart of the debate about the assessments they undergo and which have a key bearing on their educational and working futures' (Steedman Thake, 19/01/23).

The suggestions made are in alignment with calls for wider assessment reform across the English education system, as has been referred to throughout Act Five and within this chapter. In referring specifically to the impact of educational policy on drama education since 2010, Geoff Readman, chair of National Drama notes how 'Imposed curriculum constraints and summative assessment procedures have created a seismic shift in the culture of Drama teaching, learning values and artistic expectations. Education has become more functional, individually-orientated and assessment-driven. The identity of Drama as a subject has, out of necessity, been forced to change' (Readman, 17/04/23). This highlights the poignancy of this research within current climates and evidences the potential of the study to contribute to contemporary debates. The complex and often-problematic nature of assessment reform is noted, and it is intended that the bullet points below are seen not as definitive directives but as starting points for focused, productive discussion.

Provocations for the future of assessment practices within the context of A Level Drama include:

- A reconsideration of the weightings between practical and written assessment, with a reduction in written assessment and an increase in the percentage of practical theatre making and performance, which should be granted more credence as a reliable and meaningful application (praxis) of student knowledge and understanding in drama.

- The development of assessment frameworks which place less emphasis on outcomes of learning as the most effective measure and instead give greater consideration to the processes and practice of learning in drama.
- This includes a move away from high-stakes testing and summative written examination as the “gold standard” of assessment and acknowledges the unique disciplinary knowledge of individual subjects and the subsequent design of assessment methods which reflect ways of learning in the context of the discipline.
- That writing is a valuable method of communication and illustration of knowledge and understanding but that it is most meaningful for students and useful in assessment of learning when students write reflectively about their own lived experiences of practice.
- That an emphasis on a “mixed methods” approach to assessment should be considered as providing a more appropriate picture of student knowledge and understanding in drama which can be built across a range of practical, skills-based, performative, and ‘theoretical’ activities (i.e., writing, critical discussion, textual study and interpretation, viva, portfolio, live theatre review).
- The concept of “learner profiles” is an interesting alternative to current assessment methods in providing a broad and developmental picture of learning over time and which reflects the nature of process learning associated with drama pedagogy. This also has the potential to give learners more agency over assessment practices and reduces the dichotomisation of learning from assessment.
- That the study of plays and practitioners is a useful and important part of drama education but that there is a need to diversify and represent people of colour in the lists prescribed in the current specification.

- A reassessment of the role of teachers as assessors within the context of A Level Drama, which acknowledges the professional capacity for teachers to fairly and robustly assess their own students based on an informed judgement of both the processes and outcomes of performance making and production.
- The above is reliant on the training of future drama teachers by subject specialist and a culture of continuous professional development that allows for critical and productive collaboration and upskilling in relation to practices of assessment and subject knowledge.
- The potential for greater links to be made between qualification specifications and industry professionals and other stakeholders, including practitioners, theatre companies, HE institutions and drama schools/conservatoires.
- Due consideration given to the role and potential of dialogue within frameworks of assessment which, whilst acknowledging the implications of cost and time in administering oral viva exams, can provide a bridge between theory and practice and reflect the dialogic and collaborative nature of learning in drama.
- That changes to assessment frameworks should be made with the involvement of current practising drama teachers, and ideally, students.

Drama as a subject within the curriculum, can be said to have been 'at the centre of a multitude of reductionist educational and political priorities' (Readman, 17/04/23) over the course of the last forty years. However, it has also proven its capacity to adapt and reimagine itself in a continued effort to survive and should be celebrated for its tenacity and fortitude. Drama in independent schools is flourishing (ibid.) but there is a need for reform to ensure that an arts education is the right of all children, regardless of circumstance. This research study hopes to add to the

continuation of these vital conversations in the reimagining of future curricula which views drama as an artform and is studied as a discrete subject within all phases of the education system.

#### **6.4. Dissemination, limitations, and considerations for further work.**

Mienczakowski suggests that an accepted understanding of the possibilities afforded through a relationship between theatre and research have, since the 2000s, grown and developed into 'a coherent and cogent development of theory with practice' (Mienczakowski in Atkinson, 2001:468). The work presented in this thesis supports Mienczakowski's position that the use of ethnodramatic playwriting within qualitative research seeks 'to give the text back to the readers and informants in the recognition that we are all co-performers in each other's lives' (ibid.). Although this research study has explored playwriting and the dramatic (re)presentation of lived experience as a methodological practice, it is also important to consider the play's potential as a method of dissemination. Whilst it has been acknowledged in Act Three that the rehearsal and performance of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*, is not feasible within the boundaries of the doctorate, it is relevant to consider how its continued life could be explored within further research and as an extension of this study.

Sallis states that 'Without an ongoing awareness of audience throughout the devising process, an ethnodrama can lose its sense of purpose' (Sallis, 2008:15). Part of the T-R-P's process involved continued reflection and consideration regarding who the play was being constructed for, and for what purpose/s. To that end, the journey seems somewhat unfinished without the "giving back" of the research to the community about who the play is written. Considering future work therefore, it is the ambition of the researcher to explore avenues for the performance of the play. Kara notes that 'disseminating research is an ethical act in itself, but only if the research is presented accurately, fully, and accessibly, to the right people' (Kara, 2012:188). The intended

audience of this research study is firstly other A Level Drama students and teachers, including the research participants. It is also of interest to individuals involved in drama education at higher, strategic levels; theatre practitioners; universities; and as has been noted, stakeholders with an interest in curriculum and assessment reform. Practitioner-researchers from the FE sector, and academics interested in both divisions of theory and practice as well as the use of arts-based methods, are also possible audiences for the work, acknowledging that although the study does not seek generalisability, it notes how both the practices of inquiry, and the research illuminations can be transferred to other contexts.

The sharing of ethnographic performance work/research-based theatre in front of a live audience is also significant if we assume that the construction of meaning is a hermeneutical process. Mienczakowski states that 'Ethnodrama performances are constantly updated according to data drawn from audience interactions' (Mienczakowski in Atkinson, 2001:469) and suggests that the script may even be given to audiences as a way of developing the dialogic interpretation of the research. The aesthetic merits of the drama need also to be considered. As with the assessment of student performance work in drama education, feedback from the audience indicates the presence of 'emotional or affective responses to the art' (Jacobs, 2016a:9) and can provide useful insights in relation to the spectators' perception and understanding. This type of audience feedback can also support the evaluation of ethnodramatic performance when considering if the work has achieved a 'close allegiance to the lived experiences of real people while presenting their stories through an artistic medium' (Saldaña, 2005:3 in Sallis, 2008:17).

As described in Stage 4 of the T-R-P's process, efforts were made within the analysis and exploration of the data to seek collaboration and feedback from others, including individuals from the research sample. Future performances of the play would therefore allow for further audience feedback which would enable both the artistic merits of the dramatic work, and the analysis of the

research data, to be deepened and refined. It is acknowledged however, that this form of dissemination is time-consuming to conduct and whilst useful in terms of accessibility and communication of the research, requires skilful management, organisation, and collaboration with others if it is to be a worthwhile and effective activity. Kara *et al.* (2021) also notes the need for a holistic contextualisation of the research project if audiences are to fully engage with and form an understanding of the work. It therefore seems useful to consider the performance of the play as one mode of dissemination alongside other written and oral methods. In terms of limitations and future ethical considerations, it must be noted that as the public performance of the play was not specifically identified as an outcome of participation in the research, the study's participants should be consulted regarding any use of their data outside that which they originally agreed to.

The work also acknowledges the situatedness of the research site and a lack of diversity in the cultural, ethnic, and geographic identities of the student participants. To extend the research, future work should concentrate on gaining the perspectives of both students and teachers based in different locations within England, as well as actively seeking the involvement of people of colour and people with different abilities to add to the tapestry of narrative experiences. It is also relevant to reflect on the decision not to interview representatives from any of the A Level Drama awarding bodies as part of the formal data collection process. Arguably, it is a missing perspective, but this particular piece of research has opted to tell the story of the teachers and students directly affected by the decisions made in the offices of policy makers and examination boards. There was a danger that the power of the lived experiences of the research participants would be diluted if the Examiner was given an audible voice. As Belfield notes: 'It is your task and responsibility to decide what to do with these voices - which to lift up and which to suppress. Like the orchestration of a piece of music, a different mix of voices will give the same piece of music a different sound' (Belfield, 2018:83). However, it is noted that the research could be developed in the future through both a sharing of the findings with examination boards, awarding bodies, and

policy makers, as well as seeking their experiences and reflections on current methods of assessment as new practices for a future A Level Drama curriculum are explored and reimagined.

Thinking away from the potential creative and dramatic outputs of the study, it is relevant to briefly discuss the research's possible contribution within other contexts. T Levels were referred to in Act Two as a new form of post-compulsory technical qualification designed to marry theory with practice, and academic with vocational training. In their recent assessment of the T Level qualification, Orr and Terry (2023) assert that 'T levels will struggle to gain favour among young people and society' (Orr and Terry, 2023:545). This, they state, is largely because of societally ingrained perceptions that persist in holding A Levels and university-based education as the "gold standard". In drawing on what they describe as being 'a discrepancy in perceptions of quality' (Orr and Terry, 2023:547) between the government and teachers of T Levels, similarities with existing tensions raised in this thesis are highlighted.

The differing agendas of government and policy makers, and the direct and lived experiences of students and teachers appear endlessly at odds within the context of the English further education system. Whilst qualification types are re-badged and re-imagined in efforts to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and academic and vocational learning, these dichotomies endure and remain difficult to deconstruct. T Levels still employ externally assessed, written examinations as a method of assessment, unlike traditional vocational qualifications which utilise the continual assessment of a students' developing knowledge and understanding but continue to be seen as less rigorous and academically worthy. Indeed, the IAC notes that in fact, the 'T-levels policy advocated by ministers arguably further separates technical and vocational learning from the academic' (IAC, 2022:16), exacerbating the separation of vocational and academic routes within post-compulsory education. It therefore seems evident that we are some way off the shift in thinking needed for other forms of assessment to be seen on a par with written exams. Writing

remains the preferred choice of communication within frameworks of assessment in the English education system, privileging theoretical and substantive knowledge and devaluing practice and embodied forms of disciplinary knowledge which demonstrate understanding in action. There is also a case to be made that whilst rigour is important within systems of assessment, this does not mean a reliance on pencil and paper testing which examines all subjects in the same way. Instead, what is needed are methods of assessment which reflect what matters in the specific subject, which needs to be determined in agreement with teachers, industry experts, HE professionals, and arguably, also students themselves.

This research study has found evidence that the A Level Drama qualification is not considered by teachers to properly prepare students for work within industry, and the restrictive parameters of the assessment methods and specification objectives result in an understanding of drama and theatre that is often narrow, knowledge-focused and lacking in skills development and creative freedom. Orr and Terry draw similar conclusions in relation to T Levels, noting that the qualification is 'perceived to be demanding in terms of knowledge and that their assessment of knowledge mirrors practice in credible academic qualifications through having examinations' (Orr and Terry, 2023:569). What is lacking still, however, is the transferability of embodied skills and knowledge which are of use to employers. As many of the teacher participants in this study observe, genuine, sustained and detailed involvement of industry professionals (in the case of drama: theatre practitioners; playwrights; theatre companies; directors; actors; as well as HE institutions and exam boards) is needed if reforms to the qualification are going to provide an education in drama that goes beyond forms of knowledge that are "assessable" through traditional examination. This kind of systemic change does not happen quickly. However, the work presented in this thesis contributes to a growing body of evidence which highlights a need for real change in how we design, deliver and most significantly, assess the learning, knowledge and understanding of students in post-compulsory education.

This need is arguably ever-more pressing for drama, as reform is linked to its survival as a discrete subject within the curriculum. It has not gone unnoticed that as yet, there is no T Level in Drama or Performing Arts, further emphasising its current value within the hierarchy of an education system pushing an instrumentalist agenda. What is clear as a result of this study, however, is that the arts matter, drama *matters*, and that the most important learning process for students is realised in their exploration and growing understanding of how to *make* a piece of theatre. Within this process are embedded skills and embodied knowledge of innovation; creative thinking; problem-solving; risk-taking; practical application of theoretical concepts; collaboration; the presentation of argument; research; political, social, historical contexts; diversity; forms of communication - to use the adage, "the list goes on".

Perhaps most important however, is that in engaging in drama education, we understand our lives as storied, each individual narrative existing within the interwoven stories of others. As we consider this concept, we grow in our appreciation of others, in our differences and similarities, in our shared attempts to make sense of a complex and changing world through processes of interaction with each other and the physical environment. In seeing learning as a mapping of ourselves, we are encouraged to go 'beyond the frontiers, passing from one territory to another and overlapping them' (Lecoq, 2002:172) until we find spaces where creativity can be nurtured and 'new territories come to light' (ibid.). At the end of the play, *And The Performance Speaks*, the teachers observe the students as they freely draw new maps of the space, deconstructing the predetermined confines of the stage and stepping outside of the boundaries within which they are placed. Whilst this is arguably an idealised version of what education can and should be, this thesis concludes by holding hope for a future where teaching, learning, and assessment in drama is understood as situated within its own unique forms of disciplinary, pedagogic, and embodied knowledge.

## **Epilogue: chapter summary.**

This doctoral study has sought to illuminate the lived experiences of A Level Drama students and teachers, bringing their voices to the fore within contemporary discourse regarding curriculum and assessment reform. Significant flaws in current systems of assessment have been identified and corroborated through the narrative accounts of the research participants, further highlighting the existence of deeply ingrained tensions surrounding how creative and arts-based subjects are perceived and measured. Whilst an alternative specification and assessment framework are beyond the scope of this project, possible alternatives have been considered, drawing on the participants' experiences and suggestions, as well as current research, policy groups and campaigns which seek to reimagine the future of achievement and attainment within the English education system. Simultaneously, the project has sought to demonstrate that the purposeful use of playwriting as a practice of creative and analytic inquiry can provide opportunities to work with qualitative research data in ways that are empathic, responsive, organic, and collaborative. In doing so, tacit, embodied, dialogic, and collective ways of knowing which are present in drama education and have been recognised as lacking in current assessment methods, are adopted by the researcher in a 'process that utilises the energy of the group and that develops meaning not only verbally but also viscerally, emotionally and socially' (Greenwood, 2012:16).

## Coda

*And from the page, the performance begins to speak  
taking physical form, it dances across the stage*

*a bird in flight*

*we invite it to stay, to say more  
in the knowledge that everything is transitory, impermanent*

*the utterance of words does not pertain fixity of thought  
it is the start of a movement, an action, a process of being*

*the conversation begins*

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## **Appendix A**

### **Student participant information sheet, example.**

Note: this sheet was accurate at the time of distribution and reflects the programme registration, MPhil supervisory team and funding structures. Much of this changed on transfer to PhD, however, the content, purpose and approval for the research remain consistent and was normal and expected for the University of Sunderland progression from funded MPhil through to PhD.

*See pages 273-4.*

## Participant Information Sheet

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.*

**Study Title (working title): *Breaking the fourth wall; reimagining assessment in A Level Drama***

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

Your lecturer (hereafter referred to as the 'researcher') is conducting a research study as part of a PhD into Education Research with the University of Sunderland. As part of the project, the researcher will be conducting interviews with learners at Exeter College, aged 16-19, who are studying A Level Drama. The data generated as a result of the research will be used to explore student and teacher experiences of learning and teaching in A Level Drama in England and offer thoughts in relation to curriculum and assessment.

### **Why have I been approached?**

All students studying A Level Drama, in year 1 and year 2, in the academic year 2020-2021 have been invited to take part in the research study. You have been approached as full-time students studying A Level Drama at Exeter College and your opinions and experiences of the course will be used to inform the research presented in this study.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary; you do not have to consent to your participation in the research. Any interviews or discussions conducted will be recorded by audio/visual means and transcribed for potential inclusion in the final project report. Direct quotations from interviews may be used within the presentation of the research, but the names and personal details of participants will be kept anonymised. All data will be securely stored in line with GDPR and the BERA 2018 Ethical guidelines and will not be shared with anyone for any purposes outside of this specific research project. You have the right to refuse consent or withdraw from the research study at any time.

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not to provide a reason for withdrawal and this will in no way affect your place on the course or the quality or experiences you will receive. If you wish to withdraw, please inform the researcher (Beth Curtis). All data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be immediately destroyed.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you consent to taking part in the research, in addition to your normal classes you might be asked to take part in questionnaires and focus groups. These focus groups might be audio or video recorded and transcribed for data purposes. As stated, any statements you may make in the interviews or focus groups will be securely stored and anonymised. All footage will be securely destroyed after 3 months of the end of the study (anticipated September 2023). All data collection will take place within the place of research (Exeter College). You might be asked to take part in a short, individual interview or focus group, but this would take no more than half an hour-an hour, on no more than 3 occasions. If you take part in an interview or focus group you may be asked about how confident you feel in relation to the theoretical aspects of the course (talking critically about, and writing about theatre), as well as your experience of the teaching and learning activities and assessment of the A Level Drama curriculum.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

The researcher does not anticipate any disadvantages or risks if you choose to take part in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The aim of the research is to investigate how specific teaching techniques and the design of the A Level Drama curriculum can help you as a student, make stronger connections between the theoretical and practical elements of the course. Your participation in the research study will help to increase knowledge in the topic area.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you are unhappy with the conduct of this [study](#) please contact myself, Beth Curtis, Patricia Spedding or the Chair of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group John Fulton. Contact details are included below.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

All participant information (data) will be treated in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act (2018) and GDPR (2018).

Some personal identifying information will be collected: Personal identifying information will be kept in a secure place (e.g., locked cabinet or password protected computer). Participant responses (e.g., transcripts of audio-/video-recordings or any other response data) will be pseudo-anonymized using participant codes and kept separately from personal identifying information.

Completely anonymised data from the project may be shared with other researchers and/or used for teaching purposes.

The data may be looked at by staff authorised by the University of Sunderland for audit and quality assurance purposes.

**What will happen to the results of this study?**

Results will be written-up in project reports for educational qualifications and/or may be published in academic journals, and/or presented at academic conferences, and/or shared with external organisations, such as the ETF who have funded the initial stages of the research.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is organised by Beth Curtis, who is an MPhil student at the University of Sunderland, Faculty of Education.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group.

**Further information and contact details:**

Beth Curtis

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Dr John Fulton (Chair of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group)

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Phone: 0191 515 2529

**Thank you for taking time to read the information sheet!**

### **Teacher participant information sheet, example.**

Note: this sheet was accurate at the time of distribution and reflects the programme registration, MPhil supervisory team and funding structures. Much of this changed on transfer to PhD, however, the content, purpose and approval for the research remain consistent and was normal and expected for the University of Sunderland progression from funded MPhil through to PhD.

*See pages 276-7.*

## Participant Information Sheet

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.*

**Study Title (working title): *Breaking the fourth wall; reimagining assessment in A Level Drama***

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

Beth Curtis (hereafter referred to as the 'researcher') is conducting a research study as part of an MPhil/PhD into Education Research with the University of Sunderland. As part of the project, the researcher will be conducting interviews and facilitating focus-group discussions with students and staff who are either studying or delivering A Level Drama in the academic year/s 2018-2021. The data generated by the research will be used to amplify the experiences and narratives of staff and students, with a specific focus on curriculum design and assessment processes within the A Level Drama course.

### **Why have I been approached?**

After a period of close-to-practice research within the researcher's own college of further education, the study now aims to take in the opinions and experiences of teachers of A Level Drama working in other contexts/geographical areas to further inform the development of the research.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary; you do not have to consent to your participation in the research. Any interviews or discussions conducted will be recorded by audio/visual means and transcribed for potential inclusion in the final project report. Direct quotations from interviews may be used within the presentation of the research, but the names and personal details of participants will be kept anonymised. All data will be securely stored in line with GDPR and the BERA 2018 Ethical guidelines and will not be shared with anyone for any purposes outside of this specific research project. You have the right to refuse consent or withdraw from the research study at any time.

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not to provide a reason for withdrawal and this will in no way affect your place on the course or the quality or experiences you will receive. If you wish to withdraw, please inform the researcher (Beth Curtis). All data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be immediately destroyed.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you consent to taking part in the research, you will be invited to an interview/research discussion with the researcher. This interview will be audio or video recorded and transcribed for data purposes. As stated, any statements you may make in the interview will be securely stored and anonymised. All footage will be securely destroyed after 3 months of the end of the study (by September 2023). If you take part in an interview, you may be asked about your thoughts and experiences of studying or planning and delivering the A Level Drama curriculum, including your views about the breakdown of the course, teaching and learning methods, and assessment, as well as concepts such as achievement and creativity.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

The researcher does not anticipate any disadvantages or risks if you choose to take part in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Your participation in the research study will help to increase knowledge in the topic area and amplify the experiences of students and teaching staff studying/delivering the A Level Drama curriculum. It is the belief of the researcher that Drama and the creative arts should be an essential part of a young person's educational experience. This project aims to bring discussions of achievement, creativity and assessment in A Level Drama to the fore and argue the case for reimagining a curriculum that is shaped by the values it nurtures and promotes, without an emphasis on summative, written examinations to qualify the subject as 'academic'.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you are unhappy with the conduct of this study please contact myself, Beth Curtis, Patricia ~~Spedding~~ or the Chair of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group John Fulton. Contact details are included below.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

All participant information (data) will be treated in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act (2018) and GDPR (2018).

Some personal identifying information will be collected: Personal identifying information will be kept in a secure place (e.g., locked cabinet or password protected computer). Participant responses (e.g., transcripts of audio-/video-recordings or any other response data) will be pseudo-anonymized using participant codes and kept separately from personal identifying information.

Completely anonymised data from the project may be shared with other researchers and/or used for teaching purposes.

The data may be looked at by staff authorised by the University of Sunderland for audit and quality assurance purposes.

**What will happen to the results of this study?**

Results will be written-up in project reports for educational qualifications and/or may be published in academic journals, and/or presented at academic conferences, and/or shared with external organisations, such as the ETF who have part-funded the research.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is organised by Beth Curtis, who is an MPhil student at the University of Sunderland, Faculty of Education.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group.

**Further information and contact details**

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**Thank you for taking time to read the information sheet**

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant consent form, example.**

Note: this sheet was accurate at the time of distribution and reflects the programme registration, MPhil supervisory team and funding structures. Much of this changed on transfer to PhD, however, the content, purpose and approval for the research remain consistent and was normal and expected for the University of Sunderland progression from funded MPhil through to PhD.

*See page 279.*

## CONSENT FORM

**Study Title (working title):** *Breaking the fourth wall; reimagining assessment in A Level Drama*

	Please initial box
I confirm that I am over the age of 16 years.	
I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

	Please initial box	
	Yes	No
I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded.		
I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded.		
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.		
I agree that my data gathered in this study may be shared (after it has been anonymised) with other researchers.		
I agree that my data gathered in this study may be shared (after it has been anonymised) may be used for teaching purposes.		

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Name of Researcher    Beth Curtis

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix C

### Interview schedule: semi-structured question list, students.

*Why did you choose A Level Drama and/or A Level Drama as opposed to a vocational qualification?*

*Do you think people view A Level and vocational qualifications differently?*

*Was/is the A Level Drama course what you expected? / How would you describe your experiences as a student on the A Level Drama course?*

*Do you think the A Level Drama qualification teaches you more knowledge, or skills?*

*Do you think drama is an academic subject?*

*What are your thoughts about the balance of practical/practice and theory in A Level Drama?*

*What would you keep/change from the current A Level Drama specification?*

*To what extent do you feel you had/have creative freedom as a student studying A Level Drama?*

*What are your thoughts and experiences in relation to how A Level Drama is assessed?*

*Do you think that there should be a summative written examination in A Level Drama?*

*Do you have any thoughts or ideas about alternative assessment methods that could be used in A Level Drama?*

*Who do you think should assess you?*

*What does achievement look and feel like in A Level Drama?*

**Interview schedule: semi-structured question list, teachers.**

*Why is a creative education important for young people?*

*How do you feel drama is perceived as a subject: in your centre; nationally?*

*Do you think the A Level Drama qualification teaches you more knowledge, or skills?*

*Do you think drama is an academic subject? / How do you define 'academic' within the context of A Level Drama?*

*What are your thoughts about the balance of practical/practice and theory in A Level Drama?*

*What does the A Level Drama course teach students? / What does it assess?*

*What should the A Level Drama curriculum contain? What would you keep/change from the current specification?*

*What are your thoughts and experiences in relation to how A Level Drama is assessed?*

*Do you think that there should be a summative written examination in A Level Drama?*

*Do you think you can assess creativity?*

*Do you have any thoughts or ideas about alternative assessment methods that could be used in A Level Drama?*

*Who do you think should assess A Level Drama students?*

*To what extent do you feel that the current A Level Drama specification offers creative freedom - for teachers / for students?*

*When do you feel/experience a sense of achievement in your role as a drama teacher?*

## Appendix D

### Digital transcription of interview, example.

Student participant code: S9

Researcher code: BC

Interview date: Thu, 11/03/21

Interview time: 8:21PM

Interview duration: 30:56

#### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

writing, drama, exam, people, level, skill, feel, costume, achievement, performance, qualification, play, theatre, Weebly, thought, study, piece, devising, training

00:00

BC: So, if you could cast your mind back, why did you choose to do a level drama when you started and not go straight into the kind of vocational pathway?

00:12

S9: Uh, mainly because I've always loved media, um, and I knew, I knew I wanted to do drama, but I also loved media as a hobby of mine, but I also think the two kind of inter-linked really well, um how like, again, like media, how it's perceived or how it's shown and stuff. So that's mainly why I did a level, just so I could, I could get that side of it as well.

00:37

BC: If there had been a vocational option for drama or performing arts, but that allowed you to do other subjects alongside it, would you have chosen that? Or would you have still chosen the a level?

00:49

S9: I think I would have still chosen the a level, um, I don't really know why. Because I just I really liked, I liked the practical side of the a level, of the studying the different things, and then get into do performances in the kind of style of, um, theatre companies that I liked, um but then like make it your own. So I think because of that reason, I would have probably still done the a level.

01:17

BC: Do you think there's any difference in the way in which people view the two qualifications? Did you have any experience of that? Did you feel any pressure from school or parents or friends to do a levels as opposed to a vocational qualification?

01:44

S9: Er, I think so, I think a levels, er, gets less questions. Like, when people ask what you're doing, and I was like, oh I'm doing a level drama, questions over, but when I was like, I'm doing a full time like, drama course, people are like, what you're working towards? What's that? like, um, and also, a lot of drama schools, um, er, I know most, most don't take into account, um, past grade and stuff, but some do and on their thing it always says like, you must need this many a levels, and then you have to click something else to try to work out what that is with the other, stuff

02:20

BC: ah, yeah, the vocational equivalent... Why do you think that is? Why do you think a level, 'no questions asked'? What is it about that kind of title?

02:28

S9: Er, I think it's just, er, that it sounds kind of, er, smarter, I guess, it's the, it's got that kind of, it's, it's got a, quite easy qualification of like, an a level, and I think it just sounds smarter. And it's probably also because like, you get a lot of people being like, Oh, I'm taking a level English or a level rocket science, I dunno, but like, it's kind of like, a level, just because of all those other ones as well, it makes it sound like, oh, you're, it's a bit smarter, you're not just bunging on a costume

## **Appendix E**

**And The Performance Speaks: a play.**

# **And The Performance Speaks**

*A play by Beth Curtis*



With deepest thanks and gratitude to the students and  
teachers who trusted me with their stories.

This play belongs to all of us.

i

*And The Performance Speaks* is a documentary play about the lived experiences of students and teachers of the A Level Drama curriculum.

The text has been created using transcripts from interviews, although the students and teachers interviewed are purposefully unidentifiable: they represent shared voices and stories.

The hand of the playwright is visible in the curation of the verbatim text. Whilst no text has been changed, certain edits have been made to allow the narrative to flow and be knitted together.

The play is episodic in structure: the episodes shape a narrative and bring together the collective experiences of the characters.

Visual moments are the result of the playwright's own imagination and experience.

### **List of characters**

An ensemble of Students  
(7 voices but can be adjusted for more/fewer as required)

Teacher 1  
Teacher 2

The Examiner

### Notes on the characters

The Students have all studied the A Level Drama curriculum. There are individual voices present, but a sense of ensemble is important.

The two Teachers represent a collection of teacher voices, opinions, and experiences, distilled into a dialogue. The two Teachers are both experienced teachers of the A Level Drama curriculum.

The Examiner can be played by a member of the company or represented in some other way. Whatever decision is made, the presence of the Examiner is significant and needs to be felt.

### Notes on the text

The two Teachers talk to one another in dialogue. Their conversation feels naturalistic.

The Student ensemble speak mainly out to the audience, although occasionally may acknowledge or respond to one another. Some of their text reads like a dialogue – or two conversations that inter-cut one another. Others are a series of disconnected, independent voices. At points, they speak in unison.

/ indicates an interruption or overlapping of speech, a quickening in the pace of the dialogue.

*Beat* indicates a brief pause, a momentary break.

Full stops and capital letters are used sparingly, but where indicated should be noted and given weight.

### Notes on the set

The stage is set in the round.

The stage is minimalist. Three distinct spaces need to be determined at various points in the play. It is imagined that the perimeters of the spaces can be illuminated.

It is important that the three spaces can move and change, expanding, constricting, over-lapping, intersecting, disappearing.

### Notes on lighting and sound

Directions for lighting and sound have been left to the minimal. It is important to have moments of illumination and shadow, and moments of noise and silence – these binaries are significant.

The precise nature and origins of the lighting and sound is left up to the creative interpretation of the company.

# One

## Framed

*Darkness.*

*A single light slowly flickers and crackles into life.*

*The sounds of an art gallery. People moving and talking.*

*Gradually, more lights crackle and pop into their bright existence, intermittently revealing bodies; shadows cast like sculptures.*

*The intensity of the light and sound increases. Faces and bodies are framed, as portraits.*

*Sudden silence.*

*Illumination.*

## Gallery

*An ensemble of students is revealed; brightly lit.*

*They move in and out of poses and postures. A living gallery.*

*The students speak to the audience.*

S3: there's nothing...like...you can't hold it...

S7: I just feel like the way that our society, especially in England, and like the conservative government /

S3: / it's not something you can /

S7: / they do – not – give – a /

S3: / hang on the wall /

S7: / flying 'thing' about the arts.

*Beat*

*Another part of the gallery comes into focus, is alive.*

S4: it was one of the only subjects I enjoyed at school...it was really the only thing I thought I was good at, at the time

S2: but because I still do quite well like, in more academic subjects...I think some teachers were kind of a bit, like, reluctant to let me do it

S6: I think my parents were pretty big on saying, you need to get, like, *an* academic subject

S5: the creative arts are notoriously hard to make a living from

S1: I'd always gone to see shows with my family – it was a big part of my upbringing – and I just wanted to go further with it, I guess

S6: people kind of look at it and think, 'oh well, it's like, a waste of time'...

*Beat*

S7: everyone wants a piece of art in their home, yet not everyone goes to the theatre...

S3: people think - 'theatre' – that's for people who are well off

S7: drama is just like so – upper-class – and just to be able to go to the theatre, is a lot /

S3: / the word /

Student Ensemble: / 'drama' /

S3: / puts people off

S7: art is just more accessible to people...the industry is so exclusive, and very...um...yeah, exclusive of class, and wealth, and also like, diversity...

S3: it's more about what's in here (*the ensemble, in unison, points to head*) and what's in here (*as above, points to heart*)

*Beat*

*The gallery stills.*

S2: I feel like A Levels are more respected... but I don't actually know where that properly comes from

S5: yeah... I think a lot of the time courses that are viewed...as...like a final exam at the end of it, no coursework, none of that, are viewed as like *harder* and more... like *better* A Levels....

S1: A Level gets less questions... it sounds...err...kind of...err... "smarter"

*Beat*

S4: ...I've never been the most academic.

*The gallery melts away.*

## **Tightrope 1**

*A tightrope dissects the space - it is illuminated.*

*A single student mounts the tightrope and begins to walk it. They wobble, and balance.*

*Their movement continues through Tightrope 2 and Tightrope 3, underscoring the dialogue.*

## Tightrope 2

*Two teachers are suddenly apparent.*

*They sit adjacent to the students, but their space is separate, disconnected.*

*They talk to each other.*

T1: it's a constant rumbling debate about our subject... it's not an 'either/or' situation

T2: I think there's a place for it – theory - but it's learning how those theories can impact on making your own work, in a different way, and how that work impacts on an audience...understanding the theory helps you to understand your intentions, so, I think it's very wrong not to call it an academic subject

T1: it's become a very silly term to use because, drama in itself, has got as much theory in it as English Lit /

T2: / but why can't practical work also be academic? the claims that it's academic because there's a lot of written work in it, for me is just, a complete fallacy

T1: people don't recognise rigour as a practical thing – they see it only in terms of academia

T2: that word 'rigour' is the word that drove the reform

T1: but that's what happened in 2014, wasn't it: they wanted to bring drama in line

*The tightrope walker wobbles, then regains balance.*

T2: yes, but honestly, every time I hear the word 'rigour' - it's is like a trigger, it makes me want to throw up

*Beat*

T1: what I 'think' is thought of as academic... I think most people think it's either reading *old* stuff, or writing stuff

*Beat*

T2: I'd argue that it's *harder* – I don't know why practical is seen as more or less academic than a written task... I certainly don't define 'academic' as being good at writing

T1: I agree - it's important to open up the idea that there is a theory behind what we are practicing in the lesson /

T2: / absolutely. I mean, the *making* of theatre – you just can't under-value that, you know, in their learning experience /

T1: / the theory underpins the practice of theatre /

T2: / it's practical – *and* it's academic - but so is blinkin' Biology! you're not gonna let a brain surgeon loose on a brain if he can't actually open up a head!

*Two members of the student ensemble support the tightrope walker.*

*For a short time, they help the tightrope walker to move effortlessly, quickly, with fluidity along the tightrope and across the space.*

*They are held; precisely balanced.*

*The Teachers watch.*

T2: we've noticed as well, haven't we, that students – aren't coming up, alright? - aren't coming up with the skills they would've five or ten years ago

T1: the GCSE doesn't set people up very well for the A-Level - because it talks nonsense

T2: I don't blame secondary school teachers, but that because of the nature of the syllabus at GCSE, it tends to be quite prescriptive – so every student has their first few weeks at A Level and can talk about nothing other than, you know, frozen images and heights and levels

T1: and then, when we get them at A Level, you have to spend time breaking that down so that they're freer to experiment /

T2: / plus, there's less opportunity for students to partake – yeah – like, in *affordable* – kind of, like creative arts outside of school – they're being stripped /

T1: / unless you're in private education – which was the experience of most of the policy makers!

No school, no state school, no FE institution that's in the, you know – in the public arena – is ever going to be able to afford to provide to provide that level of enrichment activity.

*Beat*

T2: I think it's *essential* that there is some kind of element of creative work in the curriculum.... but the only way that things land on the curriculum – at all – is if they merit some kind of examination and grade

T1: that's why, at Key Stage 3 it's *the best* because you can teach whatever the bloody hell you want. There's no curriculum – drama's not in the National Curriculum – so you can teach whatever you think the students need

T2: and then by the time you get to GCSE, secondary teachers are kind of, unwilling participants in...having to kind of, play the game to get them through the exam

*The supporting students leave the tightrope walker.*

*The tightrope walker is suddenly alone again. They continue to walk. It is painstaking work.*

T1: drama I think, is seen – and it *is*, I suppose - more child-centred, it's more progressive – it's the creative, leftie thing – so, I think you're also kind of swimming against the tide politically, in that broader context

T2: we're still this kind of fringe element, in, you know, some black-painted classroom doing god knows what

*Beat*

T1: theatre is only a very small thing in people's minds....

it's to do with recognising that acting out something is as good as a piece of art on a sheet of paper, or a sculpture – and I don't think our society recognises that

### **Tightrope 3**

*The tightrope grows suddenly brighter, and the tightrope walker is lifted higher from the ground.*

*Sounds of electricity, or white noise.*

*The stage is illuminated and noisy.  
The tightrope walker's face is in peril.*

*The student ensemble and the Teachers watch.*

*Suddenly, there is silence.*

T1: I got a letter from Michael Gove – this was ages ago – saying that drama wasn't a subject, it's just a series of pedagogies

*The tightrope flickers*

T2: that's unbelievable...

*Beat*

There must be something, fundamentally, not trusted about drama.

*The tightrope flickers once more and disappears.*

*The walker is left suspended in the darkness.*

## Two

### Bodies

*A long line of bodies, touching and connected. They move fluidly and rhythmically.*

S3: lots of creatives, and actors, and performers, don't do very well

– okay, this is quite a generalisation –

but when it comes to the academic side, often I've found in my personal experience, is like all my creative people are, like, versed more in physicality and like, performance, and so trying to turn that creativity – that is expressed through acting, and drama, and physical theatre – into like, written words, like writing, and answering exam questions, sometimes can be a bit crushing...

S1: I know what I want to say, but it's learning how to put it down, in the correct way, with the right layout and structure and techniques put in... the problem for me is getting the right vocabulary

S3: I absolutely loved studying it, it was my favourite, like, thing I studied.... but, just with the exam part of it, I think, that was forty percent which I think, didn't... –

there was just, complete – it was just separated into two halves /

*The line of bodies splits in two; the students are divided.*

S2: I feel like it was a given that there was always going to be a lot of theory

S6: I like exploring texts and writing about them – that's something I think I'm good at and enjoy doing

S2: I wanted to be pushed, and I wanted to be able to write, erm, about drama

S5: the theory kind of shocked me a bit! - I was like, 'ahhgggh!' – but, oh my god, it can be a craft! - it opened my eyes to a different way of looking at it...the theory gives you a chance to reflect on the practical

S2: um, I actually quite like written exams! um, that's only cos I, I do English, so I've sort of been, it's sort of been, like, grained into me how to write, essays, if that makes sense?

S6: I find writing quite, like, not easy, but it's, it's quite natural for me to just like write...with the written, um...I feel like I know how to get a good grade in it but with the practical I find it harder to know whether I'm doing the right thing to get a good grade, I dunno...

S5: I definitely learnt a lot from the theory lessons but it wasn't until I got to uni that I reflected back on *how*

*much* I had learnt....it made me grow in an academic way, and as a performer

*The student ensemble attempt to reform as a collective body.*

S1: for a sense of formal, standard education, I suppose it meets the criteria...? I don't think it's as like...sounds bad, but as enriching as it could be, because it seems quite 'rigid'...the knowledge is essentially to pass the exam, so it feels a little trivial

S3: maybe people don't think you can get er, decent knowledge of something just through practical work...

...with the skills, you have that in your body, you have that for life

S1: cos, like, what do you define as education?...

...everything's experience, isn't it?

*As the teachers talk, they interrupt the two lines of students, separating them into individual spaces.*

*Separated, the students' movement becomes increasingly stilted.*

T2: how do you assess drama?  
- all those big questions, they follow all those creative subjects, you know?...

when that started in drama, there was a lot of people saying we mustn't ever examine this - because once we start to do that, we will destroy it.

And I think that's what's happened, actually.

Now we've over-examined everything.

T1: I've always thought, particularly with A Level Drama, that it's very hard to fail it...it's also very hard to do very well in it - because it demands so much of you, in so many different directions /

T2: / but it's not testing the skills, the application of skill, and it's not testing the knowledge particularly - and, and, that actually invalidates those two exams as far as I'm concerned, and I know it does for the students too -

a lot of the drama kids - *some* are ok - but a lot of the drama kids are not going to be the kinds of kids who perform particularly well in the exam - their grades are not going to improve through the exam, they're only ever going to go down

*Beat*

would you keep a written exam - you know, if you could change the syllabus?

T1: Ohhh! The million-dollar question! ...I think that there's evidence to say that there's a level of fairness in an exam

T2: I hate – I do, I hate them. I hated exams as a student myself, I've never seen the relevance of them.

All that writing in those um, two exam papers tests is - can you, have you got a good memory, and can you scribble for er, two and – or for however many hours – in a room, and keep your head, and not have a nervous breakdown!

T1: I'm not saying I agree with the ratio, but that there should be some written work there

at some point, pen has to go to paper

T2: I wouldn't have any written in it at all.

T1: let's be honest, the exam isn't about assessing everything, is it? it's about like, how can we capture...you know, capture the student knowledge and understanding

T2: it's a completely artificial way of dealing with the skills-base of the professional element of that subject. It's a misunderstanding of what theatre's about.

*From their individual spaces, the students reach for one another.*

## **Boundaries**

*The students write.*

*Their spaces are isolated. The boundaries are illuminated.*

*The sound of a clock. Grating, persistent, perhaps exaggerated.*

S6: in my head the only way it's possible - to succeed – is to do well in the exam – which isn't right, but it's what universities look for, it's what employers look for, so, yeah...

S7: I was really daunted by the exam. There is so much pressure in exam halls. The knowledge that you don't know what the question's going to be – *petrifies* me.

Student Ensemble: YOUR – WHOLE – GRADE

S2: – or like, part of your grade /

S5: / just depends on what you can produce in two hours

S1: you fall down anywhere where you have to assess something, don't you really, cos it's just like...you need 'proof'

*Beat*

*The students stop writing.*

S4: I love drama – I love coming up with new ideas and everything, but the only thing that got me through that exam was memorising the structure of how to answer it – that's the only thing that got me through it - and I think that's really wrong because it didn't feel very... creative, you, know? it felt very, like I was almost doing a maths sum, or something /

S3: / it was a lot of writing about stuff that I definitely don't have any skills in...I could not do any of the stuff that I wrote down 'I would do it like this', in the exam /

S4: / it was like a 'yes' or 'no' thing – you couldn't, really... cos I remember, in one of my questions I tried to do something creative and I went –

Student Ensemble: 'NO'

S4: - because I don't think I'll get any marks for this because I'm not answering it correctly – even though I thought it was a good idea /

S3: / Horrible written exam...

S4: I just don't think some people are capable of doing that exam...cos I know *a lot* of people who just started giving up – and I think people were like, "I can't do this, I'm not going to be able to do this, so...you know...?" - it just wouldn't click for so many people...

*Beat*

S3: I know I didn't read a play for quite a long while after the exam.

## Examiner

*The Examiner is suddenly there. They are 'other'.*

*The Examiner moves silently amongst the student ensemble.*

*The teachers are distant and separate.*

T1: I have a bit of a dilemma with this myself: I'm not a huge fan of exams, but I can also see...the possibilities for, you know, an open door for certain students to gain a huge amount of support if they're just writing coursework –

it's not a level playing field, is the problem

T2: Process is King.

- the process far outweighs – and it's the process where the *learning* happens...and that's the stuff – particularly in drama – that doesn't get highlighted enough – it's all based upon outcome and a memory test at the end

*Beat*

T1: it's about the role of written work in a drama syllabus - and then it's about the role of the exam. I wouldn't want to see written work taken out of the GCSE and A Level completely, because I think we've got an issue, haven't we, of drama being seen as a non-academic subject /

T2: / but the problem is this 'needing to have it nailed down'. it's constantly to do with the boundaries that an exam board is putting around what we are doing... you do this, you get that tick, or that mark

T1: I did a GCSE in drama in...1995 - and I never picked up a pen in two years. I didn't write a word, and I got an A\* - because it was just performance, and it was marked by my teacher, and she thought we were great...

I don't want to go back to that, cos I don't think we'd have respect as a subject if we did

*The presence of the Examiner grows. The stage is bright.*

T2: Writing isn't a proof of everything.

T1: you're right, and I certainly feel that, yes, they feel much safer with, a kind of, data-led, words-led, way of assessing but if we take the written exam out, all that in affect does, is just de-values the subject in the eyes of universities and employers – it just de-values it because out there, there's just this attitude that, you know, creativity is not as valuable as academic knowledge

T2: and that's just *their*...kind of, inflexibility - that's *their* problem! - that they should deal with! It's not our problem.

## Boxes

*Lights flicker.*

*The student ensemble move slowly, as if in a black and white film.*

*They repeat the stylised motions of reading, writing, turning pages.*

*The illuminated boundaries of their spaces fade in and out.*

*The Examiner watches from a distance.*

S1: I don't think there's anything I've taken from the written exam that I couldn't have been taught practically /

S4: / I think everything I've learnt how to do, it could've been done without an exam, proving that I could

S6: it's such a niche way in drama of talking about, like, what you're going to make an actor 'do', in an exam, in a written exam... it's such a weird situation to be placed in /

S7: / to justify what you're doing, in a performance, sometimes you don't want to – like, why should you be telling everyone why you're doing stuff it that not what – do they not need to work that out for themselves?

S5: it's to prove a certain kind of competence – it's the idea that you should know what you're talking about – grossly enlarged... taken out of proportion /

S2: / it's hard to explain...why you're making choices for something in the future that's not going to happen!

S5: ...you're just regurgitating stuff you've just memorised, it's not...the creativity has all happened before

S6: I think that a lot of the time we're just sort of taught how to answer the questions, how to do the exam in the *exact* way-

S3: the whole system is rigged by being extrinsically motivated - I'm only validated if I get a certain score

*The movements of the student ensemble become more and more stilted, mechanical.*

*There is a spotlight on S1.*

S1: it, it, puts – it wants to put you in boxes, and...err, me personally, like, I don't think humans fit in boxes...we, all that we try to do is put ourselves into boxes and then we realise we don't fit into them...and then, society as a whole has been realising that over centuries – creating boxes, and then breaking boxes – and... when you put drama into boxes it, it inhibits you and, your, your creativity is just squashed a little bit, each time, in each exam...

...you have so much more to give – yeah, you're just crushed a little bit...

Um... that, that, that's what education seems to be, now...is how to pass the exam

*The Examiner conducts the students' movement.  
The lights continue to flicker.*

## Three

### Art

*The teachers and students' spaces now intersect.*

*The Examiner is separate.*

*The Examiner carefully and precisely paints a picture on a white canvas, with white paint.*

*The student ensemble watch.*

T2: why do we not assess children and young people in a more interesting way? why are we so feeble in our ambition for what assessment can be?

T1: well, to start with, the people outside of it don't understand it - and, and, in many ways, they don't *want* to understand it...

T2: maybe it's the nature of it, of drama, and performance... that it's there, and then it's gone....

*Beat*

perhaps it's because we are not being taught as *an art form* – I would very much like drama to be treated more like art, as a subject. I would very much like drama to be

taught as an art form, not as an extension of English and history academia /

T1: / but the problem lies in the fact that people can go *into* an art gallery, and they can look at something hanging on the wall, and it's kind of tangible – but the thing about theatre is that it's ephemeral – as you said, it's there, and then it's gone, and you are there in the moment with it, and that's the experience you have – but people often just don't want to invest in that. The idea of investing in that *time* to go to the theatre, and actually sit in the theatre, and have that experience, which is then just going to evaporate at the end, is just *such* a huge concept

T2: we know how much time it takes to create art – *we* know how much time it takes to create a piece of theatre! There's a real hierarchy in the arts...I feel like – it's a bit like – within the arts...we are bottom of the pile....

T1: I agree – we are rooted to an art form which is, which is based in practice – and we get compared to art – but I would politely argue that our qualification is more robust – drama qualifications – are probably more robust and have more facets to them than art qualifications /

T2: my partner is an art teacher... they have one piece of written work for the A-Level

T1: / and one of the reasons is because we have the written element – that understanding of theatre, and drama, and how theatre is made, what designers do –

but all of that can be – and *should* be – explored through practical exploration

*Beat*

T2: I think it should be more about what you've done in a workshop, during the two years on the course... or could the exam, in that case, be like A Level art? – you know- it's going to be a devised project, you're going to have a three-week window during which time you're going to make a piece, you know, the stimulus will be given to them, and they're going to make a piece.

They've got twelve hours to make their piece, and that's their exam?

*The Examiner carefully hangs the canvas. It is hoisted above the stage floor.*

*The Examiner admires the work.*

T1: hmm, you could argue though, of course, that with art, there is a *tangible* form in the portfolio – so, there's tangible evidence of the process that individual's gone through. And you can check whether or not they've done it – whether that's been their own work

T2: it just kills that joy about the creative process....

...assessment of a *process* would almost be better through viva exam

T1: Ofqual felt that the viva approach was not reliable...the viva approach fell off the cliff at that reform – because it wasn't seen as reliable

T2: there's not enough practical assessment in the course, simple as that

They do two performances. That's it. It's not enough.

T1: the trouble is – we are dealing with people who are not in the same world, and people are really afraid of things they don't know.... that's the risk – if it's so different to how other subjects work, then there might be a challenge... we don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot, do we, by saying 'we don't want an exam, because being creative is enough', and then...

*The canvas is suspended. Prominent. Fixed.*

*The student ensemble begin to move in semaphore. They add to the movements until they move as one. They speak and move simultaneously.*

*The examiner's gaze remains fixed on the canvas.*

S2: I think there should be a written exam – however – erm...I don't know if it should be... well, I'm not sure, I'm quite torn about it...

S6: um, so, I think it works quite well for *me*, at the moment, because...I can write and because...like, that's such an important part of it, but, I think it would be more fair... if...the written exam was made, I dunno, more accessible....just so that people who, um, are better with, like, they have the creative ideas and they can do the practical, to just make it easier for them to express that, instead of having to do it in that structured, tick-box way that the examiners want to see

S5: yeah, I think something, like, more coursework-based for the text piece would be much better, and more, more, 'equal', like, people, like, people of equal like, skill and idea level – I guess – would, get the same grade, even if one person's better at exams

S2: I think, maybe, I might enjoy it more, to be fair but I think other people would look at it and be like, that's not a proper A Level because A Levels are about the exams at the end of the year, in like May and June, and like –

Student Ensemble: - THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF THESE PAST TWO YEARS –

S2: - is building up to these written exams where you sit in a hall, and that's people's view of it

*Beat*

S1: the coursework was one of the most helpful bits of drama writing I'd done because I was actually *really* working out, and trying to pick apart what I'd devised.../

S4: / I *loved* writing those, bl, like, blogs, because I think it's how you discover and you can put on paper how your mind worked – and you have time, and you have help to...create it...and, I enjoyed that process because it was getting all my ideas on paper and, like, it was like satisfying seeing the development throughout

S1: I'd rather be talking about what I've *done* as a performer and *show* my reasons for that. With the coursework, we relate to ourselves, to the performances that we've *done* – it's just so much more meaningful /

S4: / and I think, because if you can explain it to someone in front of you, what it means on paper, then you can get your ideas across – cos, I think it's just a creative subject so everyone is going to work differently – you can find your own way of doing well

*Beat*

S7: if an examiner were to sit down and watch me explain on video, why I'd done things a certain way, I feel like it would make it so much *clearer*...they can't see who we are as people when they're reading our writing

*Beat*

S3: for me, in anything, it's hard for me to write down what I'm thinking – to show what I'm thinking – it's so much easier for me to show it with my *body*, with my *voice*, and just present it like that... I don't see why that's not done as a sort of exam itself for drama?

*The students stop the semaphore and are still.*

S2: If I could speak to the examiners, I think I would...I would try and explain that drama isn't like all the other subjects.

*The Examiner turns. A brief moment of acknowledgement.*

## Alive

*The students move vigorously throughout this section, they work together seamlessly, like a dance.*

*They rearrange the parameters, constructing and deconstructing spaces. It is important that there is fluidity.*

*The spaces expand and contract around the teachers.*

T2: I just find it so frustrating, this notion that it can only fit within these parameters - all this periphery is to justify it to people who don't understand it - and I can tell you from first-hand experience, um, the chief examiner for the A-Level on the board we study, herself,

thought that this course was a pile of - (*indicates bleeping out of a swear word*)

- she was not happy with the course in which she is chief examiner of - it was not the course she wanted – and the powers that be, whoever they may be, did not give them the course that they

T1: Yes, the exam boards don't have complete agency, it's all JCQ.

It's got to please Ofqual – who are going to accredit it – and that's really, really difficult...Everything becomes a compromise /

T2: / but drama *is* distinct, and it *is* different – so how do you legitimise it without conforming?

*Beat*

they go into an exam hall, alright?, yeah, and have to write about a medium which is LIVE...It's archaic – absolutely archaic

T1: I agree. It's problematic.

this whole notion that we 'imagine' a production – and we write an 'imagined' production – to me, that doesn't exist in academia, it doesn't exist in theatre criticism, it doesn't exist in professional theatre, it doesn't exist in anything – it only exists in their weird little island of drama qualifications

T2: and all of the made-up words they use – in the specifications – like, ‘proxemics’, and things like that – you’re like, ‘what are these?!’

these aren’t used by theatre makers, and they’re not used in academia, so why are we making this stuff up?

T1: certainly, those exam questions are so, really... it feels like a lot of them are written with the answer already in mind

T2: I speak to lots of drama teachers – in general, drama teachers are not happy with the current A-Level – as it stands, it’s not fit for purpose.

it’s a flawed course...it’s a flawed course...

*Beat*

T1: I would get rid of the imagined performance – the ‘I would do this with my face, and this with my mouth, and this...’ - I would scrap that

why can’t the exam paper more related to their experience? - if there has to be an exam paper - their *actual* experience, writing about their own work, rather than, um, you know, faking it as if they were Marianne Elliot!

T2: yes! that’s another problem I have, which is - why do we only assess practical performance if an actor or a performer can tell you what they’re going to do? that

process doesn’t have to be written down to be acceptable /

T1: / at least it’s their voice, at least they’re writing about what they experienced, as they did it /

T2: / sure, but at the end of the day, it’s what speaks to an audience, and whether or not it hits, and does it work, or not?

T1: absolutely: our art form, it’s live - you have to smell, and breathe it, and taste it, and hear it

T2: what you are fundamentally wanting them to do at the end is to *make the play!* - and to make the performance – AND THE PERFORMANCE SPEAKS – that’s the whole point! ...

The Performance Speaks.

*The teachers begin to join with the students in the movement.*

*They work as if solving a puzzle. It is intricate, complex, methodical.*

*It builds to a crescendo:*

*the lights grow brighter, glowing neon  
the movement becomes intense,  
the space grows,  
the parameters are dismantled, and the Examiner is left alone.*

## Four

### Play(ing)

*The space is as one. Teachers and students occupy the space together and move freely.*

*The Examiner is noticeably absent.*

S5: all three of us were kind of huddled behind one of the flats, waiting for blackout, there was just such a sense of achievement between the three of us

*The students construct shapes and spaces with their bodies; they balance, lift, build. There should be a sense of risk and energy to the way they move with each other. The teachers support.*

S1: I did actually really like doing the devised piece – I'm really glad that we were given the opportunity to do it – I'm grateful for that, even if it was cut down - um, I think I did actually cry when they told us we couldn't do the whole thing

S4: um... just with the practicals – I just felt really happy – and like, I loved working with different people - it felt like being in your own little theatre company... we created something that we were really proud of

S1: for me, that's the only piece of theatre I've done in like, two years... live... with, I mean, there was like four people watching...five maybe, but...yeah, that's, that's the closest thing I've come to - so it sticks out

S4: if I get a laugh from an audience when it's meant to be funny, then, great – that means more to me than the grade, I guess /

S5: / there's just something about being in that space, with all the other students and the teacher – creating, and devising, and performing /

S4: / or...like afterwards when...I would feel -

Student Ensemble: - that *good* feeling -

S4: - after the performance...

S1: the devised piece being the last thing, was really nice, as well, that was like the last thing we ever did – and that was, it was almost like going out with a 'bang'

S5: what I've learnt is that the creativity of the actor comes in the spontaneity of the moment

*A lift, or jump, or balance. There is tension in the precarity of the moment.*

You shouldn't really know the answer.

## Create(ing)

*The students paint, underscoring the teachers' dialogue.  
The floor becomes a map, a journey. Paths cross, conjoin,  
divert, re-route – but continue.*

T1: I want to give students ways into them having their own voice – when you see students being able to express things *in their own way*, that's when you feel achievement

T2: it's about their ability to communicate, and the confidence – and the employability skills – which you can embed in a subject like drama

T1: yeah, but the issue with those so called 'soft skills' though, is that it doesn't translate to a grade, does it, and it's, it's really hard to measure because it's incremental – that's the difficulty, isn't it?

T2: but what *are* we examining? we're obviously not examining creativity /

T1: / it's because there is no measure for creativity. There's no unit of measurement.

T2: I mean, what is 'creativity'? we'd have to define that, anyway – it's going to mean different things to different people

T1: I just don't think we can test creativity – we can only look to see if the concepts have been understood in some way, and within the demonstration of the work, if some of that has been applied

*Beat*

T2: I think so often within practical drama, that, you know, it is such a sort of, transient, changeable space – theatre, like the rehearsal room - and it *should be* - because the second you set it up to be like, 'we devise like this' - then it's turgid stuff they're producing

T1: I agree. Surely, we should be empowering learners to be decision-makers, and to take leadership opportunities?

I would like to see A Level introduce – don't freak out here – but almost like a mini action research project – a theatre action research project

T2: that's an interesting idea... broadening some of the scope of the practitioners would be useful too

T1: yeah, if you're not careful then you could be teaching a very old-dead-white-guys sort of curriculum - it isn't the canon anymore

a lot of practitioners that are still working today, are horrified that students are being told to copy how they do their work, they say –

'our theatre is constantly evolving, and we are not a canon that should be copied'

T2: you're right - the curriculum isn't diverse, and it isn't representative.

T1: I taught the IB theatre diploma before I came here, which is very international, very global in its approach, and that's one thing that is quite difficult to find in the current A Level specs... students need to understand the concept of history and our subject's place within that historical context

T2: it seems to me that context is everything...  
*They turn and watch the students.*

## Be(ing)

*The students look at what they have created.*

*They move to the edges of the space and turn to face outward.*

S7: drama should be for everyone...it's a safe space to explore things. it really shows you who *you* are

S1: I think it's nice because you're learning something, which is really important, but it's a creative outlet as well, you can express yourself

S4: for some of the boys in my class, I think, it was a real, lovely, release for them, you know?... it got them

creative, out of their shells, really helped them...as a tool, you know,

with the practical, it makes, it helps students do beautiful, wonderful things...

S6: it's a creative outlet for me

S2: it was a safe space for us to share our opinions without worrying that we're going to get graded on it... I think it's learning, but in a way everyone feels comfortable with

S3: it's a personal thing as well, like you can't just...it's not black and white, and I think that's what scares a lot of... the 'education' system, because it's not like maths where it's right or wrong, like, it's a *personal* thing.

S5: the drama A Level gave me a confidence for a lot of things, and it's given me so many ideas

S1: I know that I've come away from the course...and my mind is now very much more...you know, *expanded* – in the ways that I approach theatre...and that um, you know, I have a much more open mind – you know?...

Do you know what I mean?

*They cross the space and leave, each following the maps that they have marked out across the floor.*

## Become(ing)

*The teachers pack away the paints and brushes, examining the work of the students, perhaps adding to the mark-making.*

T1: on the coalface – and the thing that actually keeps you there – is, is, our interaction with young people – and *we know* what the importance of the arts are, yeah - in our own lives, as well as in making sense of the world around us

T2: that's the bit they remember – the practical, the performance work

T1: yes – and it's the bit that always feels celebratory. You can bring parents in to watch the performance – you can make it a community-based thing

T2: you're creating a climate of learning and, and creativity – that's when you feel you're doing something worthwhile.... being able to create a place – a, a, um - an environment where young people can, can *surprise* themselves –

that's, that's really what makes an extraordinary teacher, and also makes you feel that you've achieved something...special...

*Beat*

...it confirms your belief that that creative experience is actually fundamentally healing, and positive, and necessary for human beings...as a means of expression...

*Beat*

*The light begins to grow gradually dimmer.*

it's going to be so important going forwards that we find platforms for young people to be able to express themselves creatively and have routes into the arts...

that's what we're in danger of losing

T1: I would've just hoped that after the pandemic, that we'd've had the opportunity to *re-set* a lot of stuff that happens in education, and I feel that there's a real opportunity being missed here

T2: at the moment, I think that what we've really got to do, is get the subject back into a fighting position – because numbers are in decline – it's on the slide... and the more we're in this situation where we're being judged all the time on grades, you know, then the more anxious you feel about that, the more you don't operate creatively yourself

T1: the institution's search for the holy grail of high grades!

T2: it's true. the moderation process empowered teachers to understand the specification... we are de-skilling a generation of drama teachers now by saying it's just over to the examiner

*Beat*

*A UV spotlight on the Examiner's suspended canvas appears and grows in intensity.*

*A focal point.*

*As it is lit, the canvas reveals a large question mark, painted in the centre.*

T1: I hope it happens  
I hope there's a massive systematic educational reform – but who's going to do it?...

T2: if there is a reform – and I'd love there to be a reform – then drama teachers need to pull together - you're there to teach – but you have a role as an advocate for the subject

*Looking up at the canvas -*

T1: - to fight for our own little corner of creativity.

*The teachers take down the Examiner's canvas that has hung suspended above the stage. They leave, taking it with them.*

*The students occupy the open space for one last time.*

*-a bright flash of light-*

*Briefly, they frame themselves, as a portrait.*

*It is a momentary act.*

*Constructed and deconstructed, they melt away.*