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## Humour, drama education, and drama curriculum in Ireland

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### ABSTRACT

Humour is discussed in this article in relation to drama education in Ireland. Humour is identified as a potentially important feature of children's engagement in drama, and this is explained by an exploration of humour theory. Examples of how humour positively affects the experience of drama participation are also considered. The discussion is in the context of drama curriculum review in the Republic of Ireland and the article identifies an over emphasis on teacher-centric, talk based conventions which has emerged in practice. A more artistic experience which enables children to communicate naturally, and thus humorously, is proposed.

### KEYWORDS

Humour; drama; education; curriculum

### Introduction

This article considers the complexities surrounding the use of humour in drama education practice, and presents humour and laughter as valuable features of curriculum drama practice in Ireland that have been missing since its formal introduction in 1999. In the Republic of Ireland, the drama education curriculum is being reviewed, within a broader redevelopment of the primary curriculum in its entirety. The consultation phase has ended, and the development of curriculum specifications will now begin. O'Connor and Gregorzewski, in discussing a similar review taking place of the New Zealand drama curriculum, emphasise the need 'to locate our work not only within a global understanding but also within a local reckoning' (O'Connor and Gregorzewski 2022, 17). In the local context of Ireland, my observations as a teacher educator and frequent visitor to schools suggest that what has occurred has been an overly talk oriented, serious approach to drama which misrepresents the full potential of what the drama curriculum could offer. This article explores why this might have been so and why humour in drama pedagogy and practice could enable agentic drama practice which respects local and global understanding. Humour which is linked to joy and playfulness is presented here as an important component of children's engagement in drama.

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## Humour in drama education

Ireland's first drama education curriculum was explicitly based on the process drama approach (NCCA 1999, 9). Humour is a concept rarely discussed in connection with process drama. It is possible to locate the reason for the scant reference to humour in process drama literature as implicit in its conception as a serious business in which the educator seeks to move beyond superficiality into a situation in which participants take responsibility for what occurs within the fictional roles and worlds they inhabit. In that paradigm, humour seems unnecessary and counterproductive. When humour is discussed in drama education literature, it is frequently referred to as a negative force. Heathcote and Bolton refer to 'painful memories of dying of the plague becoming a laugh a minute' (1995, 84) and it is a typical example of the kind of superficial engagement that practitioners wish to avoid. Reflections of experienced drama educators on experiences that went wrong refer to inappropriate laughter either directed at the teacher (Heap 2015) or at what was created by participants (Dawson 2015). 'Having a laugh' is not the purpose of drama education, and diminishes the potential power of drama and disrespects the human narratives that might be shared and explored.

The benefit of humour is discussed in relation to education more broadly however. Research beyond the field of drama suggests that humour is a vital component of human behaviour and that learning is improved when humour is a component of the learning, and teaching experience (Banas et al. 2011), although with the caveat that it should not be forced. Research indicates a link between the use of humour and resilience and social competence (Haire and MacDonald 2019; Wu and Chan 2013). Humour is also viewed as an important pedagogical tool (Stenius, Karlsson, and Sivenius 2022) and Hoad, Deed, and Lugg (2013) find that humour is a trigger for positive emotional engagement.

There are some positive references to humour, and laughter, in drama education literature. For example, Hornbrook points out that in our daily lives we use many narrative forms to communicate stories and ideas about ourselves, and that when these stories are dramatised, 'they employ conventions, timing, humour, climax and so on to register meaning' (Hornbrook 2012, 47). Winston and Stinson (2016, 51), in discussing their work in drama and second language teaching refer to the fact that a sense of humour was instilled in the classroom. They comment that children laughed when they saw the teacher in role, but also appreciated that the teacher was engaged in the drama. Hatton finds that 'drama can provide spaces for students to experience and rehearse joy, laughter, control and agency as voices and views are embodied and tried on for size through role play and performance' (Hatton 2015, 74). O'Neill (2015, ix) observes that a sense of humour is an important quality in a drama educator. So it would seem that humour and associated laughter is appropriate sometimes. An exploration of humour theory helps to explain when and why that might be so.

## Humour theory

Loizou states that 'smiling and laughter are two of the earliest social behaviours developed by children' (Loizou 2005, 196). As drama contexts are specifically a site in which the aim is to develop social behaviours it would then seem important to encourage laughter. It is important though to note that 'laughter is linked to humour, but it is not the same

thing' (Stenius, Karlsson, and Sivenius 2022, 296) but they do acknowledge that laughter is usually used as a measure of humour. There are three main theories of humour which explain why we find things funny: superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory (Carroll-Monteil 2022). Superiority theory outlines that people laugh when they feel a sense of superiority over others. We can conclude then that this kind of laughter is not productive in drama education contexts, as the existence of a feeling of superiority implies a requisite sense of inferiority in another and is therefore antisocial in nature. Relief theory was developed by Freud (1927) and is based on the idea that humour and laughter are used to release emotions and reduce tension. This may be the type of laughter most familiar to those working in drama contexts because it is the reason for the specific use of theatre games to lighten the atmosphere, especially as participants begin to work together. Incongruity theory suggests that we find things funny when they are surprising (Hull, Tosun, and Vaid 2017). Drama fundamentally engages participants in the unknown and the unexpected, at a personal and collaborative level. This suggests humour based on incongruence may be inevitable and even frequent in drama contexts, but the idea that laughter might be welcome still needs further consideration. Topics explored through drama and applied theatre are typically of a serious nature, with the explicit intention of finding out more about the impact of issues on the people they affect. The association of laughter with their exploration instinctively suggests disrespect for participants. Yet Morreall (2014, 120) explains that in incongruity theory 'humorous amusement is a reaction to something that violates people's mental patterns and expectations'. So as the purpose of drama education is to examine lived experiences in a unique way which reveals new understandings, humour based reactions may be inevitable and even an indicator of quality.

### Examples of humour in drama education practice

Having outlined the types of humour that exist, I will locate examples of where they occurred in a recent project. The examples indicate that overall, humour was a positive element of the experience. I worked, with some of my students, with a group of thirty eleven to twelve year old boys in a school in an Irish urban primary school. I devised a piece with the boys in which we explored celebrity culture and addiction, with a central character of a boxer called Benny. Initially, theatre games were used as 'ice-breakers' which resulted in typical relief based laughter as tensions related to the new situation eased. Early on in the work, children used writing in role to create social media posts made by the character of the boxer. Their nuanced understanding of social media content meant that the posts they wrote, shown in tandem with images created, made their work highly comic. Their work, while extremely humorous, showed their understanding and development of the narrative. The sharing of their work was a point which greatly enhanced group cohesion and their ownership over the narrative became apparent, as they realised the humorous way they enjoyed communicating would be permitted as a legitimate way of working. Incongruence, or surprise, resulted from the unpredictable nature of what the group created. In the same session however, work was also created which was not comic in nature. In a scene in which the boxer phoned his father the night before a fight, a boy took on the character of his father. Answering the phone, using an adult tone, he replied 'hello, son'. His peers

laughed and it can be surmised that this was a result of incongruity or even superiority, and maybe as a defence mechanism, he laughed too. But we restarted the scene with a reminder to commit to the work. The result was a powerful scene in which the child in the role of the father explained to his son the pressure he too was under in his life. Comedy here was not purposeful, and laughter did not occur because the content was delivered in a serious manner. The same group, devising a later scene, participated in a meeting with Anti Doping officials. There was some laughter and much smiling as the children engaged. When they broke their roles through laughter, they engaged again quickly, so it was not problematic or counter productive. Laughter occurred when someone used a different tone than they normally used, or said something surprising. It was striking that all of the examples which caused laughter as a result of incongruence were completely congruent with the fictional situation.

### **Humour, the Irish context and the curriculum**

The examples described above might suggest that humour doesn't require discussion as it will naturally emerge during humour moments that result from artistic creation. For those who are new to the practice of drama however, balancing moments of laughter and serious exploration is difficult. When a young generalist primary school teacher struggles with the implementation of process drama, there can be an over reliance on conventions and strategies. My own observations suggest that, for the more reluctant students, the convention of teacher in role has been a particular strategy of choice, probably because it appears safe and suggests an element of control. Conscience alley seems to be a close runner up for the convention of choice for those struggling with drama, as well as writing or drawing conventions. These approaches were intended in process drama as strategies for reflection on dramatic action, rather than constituting drama itself. So due to reasons such as discomfort with drama or an overcrowded curriculum, what is sometimes referred to as a 'drama lesson' is simply a talk based session with a teacher. Any laughter which might occur is particularly unwelcome to the teacher in this context as there is more intent to control than develop participant agency. This has resulted in an implementation of drama in Irish schools which unfortunately, at times, has been dull and unengaging.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that this limited practice has not helped to win over those who might doubt the potential of drama. There is an additional problem which has negatively impacted the implementation of Ireland's drama curriculum. There has been too deep a disconnect between the drama curriculum and any dramatic traditions which have existed in Irish schools prior to 1999, to local culture, and to the other components of the primary curriculum. Finneran describes the drama curriculum as 'a confused, flattened and problematic understanding of the manner in which children learn in/through/about drama and presents little clarity on what is learned (Finneran 2016, 118)'. The content of the drama curriculum explicitly distances drama completely from performance (NCCA 1999), and as a result, theatre. It seems as a result of this distinction, (perhaps necessary in the introduction of a new, process drama oriented approach), elements of humour have been lost. Drama has struggled to have a presence in schools since its introduction. If drama is being used, it is most likely to be used as a method only (McDonagh and Finneran 2017). The drama as method only approach has

resulted in a very serious, talk based, group role oriented practice, which hasn't always prioritised the child as an artist.

The existing Irish drama curriculum (NCCA 1999) does make reference to the theatrical element of genre. Within the teacher guidelines relating to the element of genre there is an appreciation of the comic and the absurd, which is not negated by the overall process drama approach of the curriculum. The present drama curriculum does not acknowledge aesthetics generally though, nor does it make any link to aesthetic traditions that exist in Ireland (Finneran 2016). There needs to be a closer relationship with the practice of drama and theatre in Ireland both historically and in the present day. In Ireland, humour is viewed as a means of communication and social cohesion. In a list of plays that define theatre in the twenty-first century in Ireland (Murphy 2022), humour is strongly evident as a means of communicating serious issues. Satire and farce has frequently been used to expose those in power in drama on Irish radio, television and podcasts. The winner of best new play in Ireland's national theatre awards in 2022 was *Conversations After Sex* which is an exploration of the need for communication in a lonely atomised city and is described as 'funny, tender and brutally honest' (Thisispobaby 2022). Children also need the opportunity to explore the world in a way that reflects the absurd or humorous elements of an increasingly complex social world. Drama, and the arts, have an important role to play in this exploration and so a refocus of curriculum content that clarifies drama's place in the arts curriculum is needed. Clarity around drama's status and inherent characteristics as a genre and an art form can provide a curriculum that bridges the wide trench that currently exists between theatre and drama education in Ireland. Ironically, the problem of what has been lost in our curriculum was perhaps best identified some time ago by the drama consultant of Ireland's drama curriculum. He pinpoints the problem as the emphasis of role over character (McArdle 1998, 8). With the loss of character, humour is lost, because the subtleties of psychological make-up that produce humour or humorous situations are gone too. This reduces the potential for drama to be truly effective in its exploration of life because humour, and laughter, are universal elements of life, evident in every culture.

## Conclusion

While humour is not a primary goal, it seems crucial that there is space for humour. A space in which humour is not expressed is a space which doesn't function as an authentic artistic space for the child. The introduction of drama as a primary curriculum subject in 1999 was a moment of significant progress in Irish education. A new senior cycle drama, film and theatre studies curriculum is also being introduced for the first time, and so a continuum of drama practice for young people can finally be achieved. In the development of these curricula, it is hoped that there can be a purposeful return to base camp to properly prepare for the journey ahead, rather than the use of a recycled bag of resources which do not reflect the advances in the field. In a broader conception of drama, in which theatre and performance are embraced alongside process drama, humour has a place. Busby (2017) discusses a project in which young people in Dharava create theatre that celebrates same sex relationships, and she links humour and pleasure to utopian thinking. Breed (2016), in Forum Theatre based work, discusses the use of humour as an intervention strategy to bring awareness to a situation.

Woodland (2016) finds that children are less interested in the stages of her project that lack playfulness and laughter. She changes her practice based on the realisation that 'our shared knowledge, troubled or not, can be approached as much with humour as it can with gravity' (2016, 125). If Ireland's redrafted drama curriculum is to be socially, personally and artistically beneficial to all children, it should support a change in practice. The change should embrace the joy and laughter that is associated with humour and genuine artistic co-creation, through which children have a right to express themselves and explore the world.

## Ethics

In relation to the section which refers to children's engagement in drama, Informed Assent was obtained from the parents/guardians of each child involved and Informed Consent was obtained from the School Principal, prior to the project. Ethical clearance was obtained from St. Patrick's College (which was incorporated into DCU).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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