

Drama as a Tool in Interpretation: Practitioner Perceptions of its Strengths & Limitations

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Abstract

Although environmental and heritage interpretation aims to connect humans with their natural and cultural heritage, and has the potential to contribute to a vision of sustainable living, it often falls short of engaging and inspiring its audiences. Some interpreters advocate the use of artistic approaches to create more affective (imaginary-emotional-sensory-aesthetic) experiences. One approach considered compatible is drama. Powerful dramatic experiences can embed interpretive stories in the emotions and leave enduring impressions. Drama is accepted as an interpretive tool overseas, yet it is under-utilised in Australia. How can it be used to strengthen interpretation in this country? This paper presents the outcomes of research investigating the perceptions of ten Queensland practitioners of dramatised interpretation regarding drama's strengths, limitations and value as a tool in interpretation. The authors contend that drama has much to offer interpretation, although further evaluative studies are clearly needed.

Introduction

As a form of “strategic communication” (Ham, 1997), environmental and heritage interpretation has potential to reconnect people with their cultural heritage, refresh their sense of wonder and place in nature, and contribute to their vision of a sustainable future (Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1995; Kohl, 2003; Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998). In Australia, millions of people visit interpretive settings each year to enjoy free-choice, informal learning experiences (Ballantyne & Packer, 2005). Yet despite being ideally situated to deeply impact visitor conceptions of the human-nature-culture milieu, it has been argued that only rarely is interpretation truly imaginative, engaging, provocative or inspirational (Beckmann, 1994; Uzzell, 1998; Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998) and only rarely does it explicitly address the issue of sustainability (Kohl, 2003).

The paucity of imaginative and sensory experience of nature in Western culture is arguably a major contributor to the current ecological crisis (Berry, 1999). Psychologists tell us that transformative experiences involve the whole person – thoughts, actions, emotions and spirit – and in some ways represent “a change in the personal sense of self” (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, p. 39). In fact, “a human society makes (or discovers) meaning through its arts” (Hawkes, 2001, p. 24). Interpretation has the rare privilege

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of making factual knowledge accessible to visitors via the use of parables, analogies, mental images and metaphors (Tilden as cited in Shively, 1995, p. 8). Such artistic approaches have the capacity to “deepen the emotional connections between people and places” (Dungey, 1989, p. 230–1) and “fire people’s imaginations with a place so that their minds form and retain images so powerful that they live on in their memories” (Dungey, 1989, p. 231).

Story, or narrative, plays a critical role in communication (Richardson, 1995; Schauble, Leinhardt & Martin, 1997), education (Dyer, Hodgson & Laycock, 1992; Gulikers, 1997; Schauble, et al., 1997; Tooth, 1997) and sociocultural meaning-making (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hawkes, 2001; McNaughton, 2004; Tooth, 2006). Its use in interpretive settings is consistent with the application of constructivist and sociocultural educational approaches, which focus on the personal and social processes of discovery, meaning-construction and meaning-sharing (Allen, 1997; Ballantyne & Bain, 1995; Ballantyne & Packer, 1996; Dierking, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Meredith, 2000; Schauble, et al., 1997).

Drama is an artistic means of telling stories, exploring meanings and creating understandings (Pascoe, 1998). It is considered by many to be a useful tool in interpretation and non-formal education (Bicknell, 1994; Broughton, 2002; Dungey, 1989; Gaskell & Taylor, 2002; Ham, 1992; Nwadiigwe, 2007; Powell, 1995; Shively, 1995; Smith, 1998) and compatible with environmental education goals and principles (Appleby, 2001; Dyer et al., 1992; Gulikers, 1997; McNaughton, 2004 & 2006; Tooth, 1997, 2006; Tooth et al., 1988). Drama adds another dimension to the interpretive experience (Bicknell, 1994; Dungey, 1989). Dramatists claim that dramatic experience can evoke a powerful sense of connection, shed new light on issues and develop clarity of understanding about a bigger picture (Appleby, 2001; Cockett, 1998; Errington, 1991; Powell, 1995). Empirical research exploring the effectiveness of drama in interpretation and environmental education is, however, extremely limited.

Regarding education for sustainability, UK researcher, McNaughton (2004 & 2006) established that drama has value in engaging students in environmental issues and developing their communication, collaboration and citizenship skills. Similarly, in Australia, Appleby (2005) found it capable of catalysing deeper levels of engagement and meaning-making for classroom teachers and students, with students demonstrating higher level thinking and communication skills. In a landmark UK museum study, Bicknell (1994) confirmed that drama can be used successfully to communicate complex factual information, provide context and offer different perspectives for debate. A small-scale investigation into UK student experience (Jackson & Leahy, 2005) found that ‘museum theatre’ helped to create a resonant and memorable learning experience; children readily related to characters and more deeply grasped historical narratives when presented through dramatic means than via more traditional activity-based means. Malcolm-Davies (2004) related educational outcomes to level of investment in museum theatre. Other UK and North American museum studies have confirmed a high degree of visitor receptiveness (Hughes, 1998) and the achievement of predetermined content-learning outcomes (Hughes, 1998), although they largely failed to explore the broader impacts of drama on participant experience (Hughes, 1998; Jackson & Leahy, 2005).

Although Powell (1995) noted a degree of interest in drama amongst Australian interpreters, drama tends to be under-utilised in this country (Broughton, 2002). Are Australian interpreters overlooking a valuable interpretive medium? Suspecting that drama has much to offer interpreters seeking to develop programs that give the affective dimension of the human response “as much significance as the cognitive” (Ballantyne & Uzzell, 1999, p. 64), a study investigating the perceptions of Queensland practitioners

of dramatised interpretation regarding drama's strengths, limitations and value as an interpretive tool (Adcock, 2005), was carried out. This paper presents its key themes.

Methodology

In Australia, there are a small number of practitioners with substantial, although largely unpublished, knowledge and experience in dramatised interpretation and environmental education. In this exploratory study, the authors set out to ascertain these practitioners' perceptions of suitable drama forms and interpretive themes, and the required resources, skills and engagement strategies. These perceptions would give insight into the broader application of drama to interpretation, deepen the existing understanding of dramatised interpretation's strengths and limitations and provide useful background and direction for the much-needed empirical investigations of participant experience exploring affective and cognitive impacts and the individual and social processes of discovery and meaning-making (Allen, 1997, Schauble, et al., 1997).

A qualitative research methodology was adopted and semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten practitioners of dramatised interpretation in Southeast and Far North Queensland. (Refer to Table 1 & Figure 1.) The 1-1.5 hr duration interviews were transcribed and analysed using Lincoln & Guba's (1985) constant comparative method as described by Maykut & Morehouse (1994). Emergent themes and patterns relating to the use of drama in interpretation were identified.

In order to ensure as wide a range of perceptions as possible, and maximum relevance and transferability across the field of environmental interpretation, purposeful sampling was undertaken to cover a wide selection of practitioners, programs and settings (including festivals and environmental education field study centres as well as more traditional interpretive venues.) Table 1 details the range of drama forms, themes, target audiences, engagement strategies and required resources covered in the sample. The participants used drama in a variety of ways, some as a "hook" (BEEC) during introductions and other "key focal times" (BEEC), others (experienced dramatists) basing their programs entirely on dramatic processes. Forms ranged from performance to improvisation to process drama (developed by group processes), audiences included both children and adults, and a variety of themes were explored.

Of the ten participants, five were theatre-in-education professionals, or experienced or professional actors or theatre directors with at least ten years' involvement in interpretation; two were interpreters or educators with over ten years experience in organising educational drama programs and events; one was a professional director with limited experience in interpretation; and two were experienced interpreters with limited drama background. Practitioners' cumulative experience in dramatised interpretation approximated one hundred years. (Refer to Table 1.)

Results

Key issues emerging from the interviews in relation to the strengths, limitations and value of drama as an interpretive tool are presented below, illustrated by practitioner quotes with acknowledgement in the form of abbreviated organisational names. (For full names refer to Table 1.)

Perceived Strengths of Drama in Interpretation

Practitioners reported a firm conviction that drama is a powerful means of facilitating emotional connection to natural, historic or cultural heritage, as well as an understanding of conservation issues. They identified its efficacy as originating from:

TABLE 1: Practitioners and Programs Included in Study Sample

Organisation & Interpretive Goals	Experience: Interp/Ed. & Drama	Drama Form Employed	Program Title & Theme	Targeted Audience	Key Engagement Strategies Used in Drama Element	Resources for Drama Element
Brisbane Forest Park (BFP), SEQ General awareness of wildlife & habitat. Inspiring environmentally-friendly behaviour.	Experienced interpreter with minimal drama experience.	Interactive scripted theatre: role, puppetry, song & dance. Supplemented by bushwalk & fauna presentation.	"Brambles the Brat Cat": Responsible pet ownership, awareness/observation of wildlife & bush environment.	School holiday program: children (3-8 yrs) & parents. Large group (50-60 people).	Colour. Humour. Involvement/interaction & participation. Variety & surprise. Dramatic tension.	Interpreters comfortable with acting & puppetry. Amphitheatre.
Bunyville Environmental Education Centre (BEEC), SEQ "A wow' on one day": immersion, awareness of interconnectedness & action.	Experienced educator with minimal drama experience.	Interactive unscripted discovery bushwalk led by characters in role, puppets and interactive technology (a talking tree).	"The Bush Preschool": Responsible pet ownership, awareness/observation of wildlife & bush environment.	Preschool – Yr 2 school children, parents & teachers.	Dramatic elements at key focal times. Props, puppets & interactives. Humour. Improvisation. Participation. Dramatic tension.	Imagination. Flair with improvisation & puppetry. Props & theatre space.
Pullenvale Environmental Education Centre (PEEC), SEQ Inspiring emotional connections to place. Initiating meaningful & attainable actions.	Professional Theatre-in-education practitioner.	Interactive theatre-in-education performances incorporating characters (actors) & complex puppetry.	"Gas": Air Pollution. "What Goes Around": Recycling.	School students, parents & teachers. "Gas": Yr 1-5 "What Goes Around": Yr 4-9.	Humour, fun, joy, positivity. Characters. Props. Image & colour. Music & movement. Interaction. Dramatic tension. Drama structures.	Experienced practitioners with instinct & enthusiasm. Drama skills. Venue. Props.
KITE Theatre Company, (KITE) SEQ Professional, curriculum-relevant educational theatre for early childhood. Highly interactive approach.	Professional Theatre-in-education practitioner.	Interactive theatre-in-education performance (including a boat trip on Brisbane River).	"Down the Drain" & "Around the Bend": Where does water come from & where does it go? Catchment messages.	Annual Brisbane Festival: Early childhood & parents/teachers.	High degree of interaction/participation. Humour. Music & Song. Larger than life characters. Melodrama & shocks/surprise. Dramatic Tension.	Experienced, talented & passionate practitioners. Theatre skills. Costumes/props. Venue. Finances.
St Helena Island Theatre Troupe (SHTT) & ABSea Cruises (ABSC), SEQ	Experienced actor & teacher. Experienced interpreter - drama/events experience.	Dramatised walking tour by actor in role with visitors en-rolled. Poetry/recitation, song, story enactment with visitors taking roles.	St Helena Island Dramatised Tour: Portraying history through personal stories & different characters' perspectives.	Broad audience: schools, family groups, interstate & overseas tourists. Groups of 60-100.	Stories enhancing site's evocativeness. Role. Accent. Costume. Highly interactive. Building group mood. Surprise. Shock. Humour. Song. Movement. Role-play.	Improvisation & sustained role-playing skills. Historical site, artefacts & knowledge. Costumes.

TABLE 1 (CONT'D)

Organisation & Interpretive Goals	Experience: Interp/Ed. & Drama	Drama Form Employed	Program Title & Theme	Targeted Audience	Key Engagement Strategies Used in Drama Element	Resources for Drama Element
Matrix Productions (M), SEQ Theatre company adept at adapting old stories to new situations. A wide variety of themes and issues, and use of open-air venues.	Professional theatre director with minimal interpretation experience.	Night-time open-air performance of adapted classical plays/stories in Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens. Supplemented by flaming torch-lit walk to seating.	"The King & the Corpse"; Characters with spiritual sense of the land. References to colonialism & use/abuse of environment.	Annual Brisbane Festival. Broad audience: Adult/family, general public. Very large audiences.	Use of epic stories. Instinct & Improvisation. Physical imagery (actors playing animals, props etc). Humour: Novelty & surprise. Live musicians.	Engaging story. Actors fit & adaptable. Suitable outdoor venue (3 phase power, lighting). Technical skills. Funding.
Community Artsworker (CA), Innisfail, FNQ Celebrate multiculturalism & biodiversity of Johnstone Shire, FNQ. Showcase the shire's richness through the arts. Engender ownership & appreciation.	Experienced teacher with experience in organization of community drama/events.	Performances - street theatre (mask, mime, speech) & scripted play based on local oral histories. Prepared by drama professionals working with local community volunteers.	"Splash" & "Waterborne": Water bringing life (ecologically & in terms of cultural migration).	Annual Harvest Festival Parade. Local family audiences, over 10,000 people. Participants: local cultural communities & adults/teens.	Community involvement in entire process. Lighting/sound effects. Humour: Variety. Music & Dance. Local references.	Willing participants. Professional dramatists (playwrights, directors etc). Funding & vision.
Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park (TACP), Cairns, FNQ Cultural tourism, education & entertainment. Interpretation of aspects of Djabugay & Yirganydji Aboriginal cultures.	Professional director experienced in community theatre & interpretation/cultural tourism.	Amateur actors and holograms interact to tell creation story in Djabugay language. Audience wears headsets & hears translation in one of eight languages.	"The Creation Theatre": Aboriginal cosmology.	Broad audience. Overseas tourists. Local schools/families. Developed & performed by Djabugay community.	Special effects. Use of Djabugay language. Djabugay people telling own story to visitors. 'World class' standard.	Theatre skills. Cultural sensitivity. Framework for training. Technical crew. Audience.
Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE), Cairns, FNQ Regional theatre company contributing to cultural wealth & diversity of region. Addressing local issues, involving community, providing access to arts development.	Professional director experienced in community theatre, events & interpretation.	Walking tour led by two protagonists & mediator. Short performances (poetry, story, spruiking, dance, movement, art, song & film). Audience participation in discussions about pros/cons.	"Pushing Paradise": "Is tourism good for our town or is it spoiling paradise?" Highlighting aspects of social impact of tourism & inviting decision: what is 'paradise'?	Cairns Festival 2002. Family audiences, over 100 people. Participants: local cultural communities & secondary drama students.	Movement over 'place'. Interaction/participation. Audience meaning-making & decision. Local community involvement. Portrayal of variety of perspectives. Accessible. Variety.	Dramatists with teaching/directing skills. Willing participants. Framework for community involvement & appropriate timelines.

1. Its ability to grab and maintain attention and facilitate the emotional and imaginative engagement of audiences or participants. Simply put, drama is “a more animated way of presenting information, and hopefully more interesting” (BFP). More explicitly, drama “works with the attention span ... The human mind doesn’t like to be inundated with facts ... If you put the other senses

1. It isn’t all that common to see people using drama in interpretation. Can you briefly outline your interest and experience in dramatised interpretation and define or describe drama and interpretation and their goals?
2. What is the goal of your organisation’s interpretation or education program?
3. Is there any particular reason why your organisation is using drama in interpretation?
4. Please briefly describe your dramatised interpretation program.
5. What guidelines did you use when planning and developing this (and other) dramatised interpretation programs?
6. How effective or successful do you think dramatised interpretation is? Please define or describe “effective” or “successful” and “ineffective” or “unsuccessful”.
7. Do you evaluate your programs? If so, how?
8. What are dramatised interpretation’s strengths? Limitations? Pitfalls?
9. Do you target any particular audience with your dramatised interpretation program?
10. What strategies or techniques do you use for engaging visitors in the program?
11. Would you say that drama is an effective tool for interpretation? Why or why not?
12. How can drama be used to help achieve the aims of interpretation?
Are some drama forms more suitable for interpretation?
Are some interpretive themes or messages suited to telling through drama?
Are some people more open to dramatised interpretation, or get more out of it?
Is there anyone you would definitely not target?
13. In your opinion, does drama have to be “good” to facilitate learning or successful interpretation? If so, what constitutes “good” drama?
14. Do you see any skills, experience, training or resources as necessary for interpreters or performers to carry out quality dramatised interpretation?
How does your organisation ensure that its interpreters or performers are suitably qualified?
15. Would you have any guidelines or suggestions for interpreters wanting to explore the possibility of using drama as a tool?

FIGURE 1: Interview Questions

into it as much as possible ... [it] bombards your brain and makes it more enjoyable ...” (SHTT). Also visitors to interpretive settings “want to know what something feels like, and immersing them into it ... steps them outside themselves” (SHTT), giving them a personal experience. In other words, drama helps “make the bridge to the imagination a shorter journey” (SHTT), making it much easier for visitors to understand things outside of their everyday experience (SHTT).

This emotional and imaginative engagement in story or place through the use of drama can be very powerful. For example, audiences who are gradually “en-rolled” in an unfolding story tend to “feel that they’ve got a commitment to the outcome of the story” (KITE), so that the story’s climax often elicits strong emotional responses:

We had kids just [screaming] “Don’t pull out the pluuggg! Don’t pull out the plug!” ... We had kids ... sitting there clutching each other going “It’s moving! Look! The plug! It’s starting to move! Oh no!” ... It’s great! It’s a piece of [agricultural] pipe just stuck in the river with a bit of plastic that we made look like a chain ... (KITE).

Thus, by presenting abstract concepts in concrete, imaginative ways (BEEC), drama helps visitors make cognitive and emotional connections between the interpretive experience and their everyday lives (CA).

- 2. It provides a multi-sensory experience that reinforces the interpretive messages.** Practitioners (BFP; BEEC; JUTE; KITE; PEEC) explained that drama is essentially a form of play or “information experiencing” (PEEC), which allows visitors to explore and discover for themselves - to feel, think and interpret for themselves. This experiential, multi-sensory aspect brings stories to life in appealing, engaging and memorable ways (BFP; CA; JUTE; ABSC).

Drama is especially a “highly visible form of communication” (TACP). The use of imagery, sound and movement make it a very powerful, symbolic medium (CA). This symbolism raises the level of communication (JUTE; TACP): “Somebody talking comes and goes, but if you can create image ... sound ... movement and shape as well as content then it ... makes the message more powerful” (TACP).

Practitioners used such multi-sensory and/or symbolic experience to help interpretive audiences engage with or see their environment in a different way (JUTE).

- 3. It is a “natural” and “human” communication medium.** A belief shared by all of the practitioners was that “story is intrinsic to all human cultures, whether done orally, through music, dance or all of those components” (PEEC). As story and drama are an essential part of human experience, audiences intuitively understand this form of communication. Thus, drama is “a natural ... human way to connect” (PEEC).

Theatre is appropriate not only for use with children, because the issues that they are enquiring about are “natural theatre” (KITE), but also with adults. As one practitioner pointed out “theatre has survived as a way of a community expressing itself since forever” (JUTE). Drama is just as relevant today - provided it reflects topical issues (JUTE).

- 4. It has broad appeal.** Drama’s ability to capture the attention of “the masses” (CA) makes it “a great way to get a message across to a large number of people”

(TACP). Interviewees valued drama as a viable means of attracting a new audience to interpretation and to theatre (ABSC; M). When drama was used to “broaden the appeal” of historic heritage by incorporating “the entertainment angle” (ABSC), the result was a highly competitive commercial enterprise.

- 5. It is an holistic tool useful for addressing serious issues in an engaging, non-confrontational and inspiring manner that gets people thinking.** As well as engaging audiences affectively, drama addresses the cognitive dimensions of human experience (JUTE) and learning (BEEC; KITE). Audiences not only have an enjoyable time, laughing, hearing music and otherwise getting totally involved (KITE), but the dramatised story contains cognitive content or “a whole bunch of really good stuff for them to chew on afterwards” (KITE). In this way, drama is a positive way to educate (KITE).

In particular, by offering “a number of perspectives for people to look upon an issue” (JUTE) drama is “a really accessible way to learn” (JUTE). One of drama’s main strengths is its ability to tell human stories (ABSC; TACP). Several practitioners (BFP; BEEC; KITE; PEEC) therefore used drama to highlight the human element of environmental issues, whilst others told the stories of a particular culture (TACP) or historic setting (SHTT/ABSC), highlighting the respective approach to the local environment. Using a variety of characters’ viewpoints, programs presented different value systems, stakeholder motives and information about environmental processes, issues and action strategies. In the process, visible role-models were provided.

Role-modeling, rather than preaching, is considered to be one of drama’s strengths in terms of addressing serious issues (JUTE). Costume, puppetry and mask are all valuable “distancing effects” (CA) which audiences find less confronting “because they aren’t feeling that someone is preaching to them so much” (CA).

- 6. Drama experience can have a profound, long-term impact.** By engaging the whole person – mind, emotions, imagination and senses – drama can facilitate a very powerful, resonant and memorable interpretive experience. “Theatre is ... more successful in getting the message across and really basing that message ... in an emotional area, so that it’s a good, strong memory for people ...” (JUTE). Practitioners reported audience members being moved to tears (TACP) or other powerful emotional reactions (JUTE; KITE), and recalling strong memories many years later (KITE).

For community members, participation in the design and performance of dramatised interpretation is enjoyable, meaningful, freeing and empowering (CA; JUTE; TACP). For some, “getting the chance to get up on stage ... and to tell their own stories ... has changed their lives” (TACP). Group meaning-making processes also serve to strengthen the dramatisation’s messages, making it more powerful for audiences. One practitioner elaborated:

When you get a group of people who are not professional actors and give them the opportunity with guidance to put together their own stories and put behind that professional production values ... you frequently get something that’s really quite magic ... because ... people are not just saying words that somebody else wrote, they’re saying things they really believe (TACP).

Perceived Limitations of Drama in Interpretation

The experienced dramatists conceded a few limitations, the biggest being that drama is “a specialist skill” (KITE). Although “good theatre-in-education” is “rich”, “textured”, “appealing” “dynamic”, “insightful” and “fun”, and although it “is meaningful”, “creates deep understanding” and touches “the heart” (PEEC), these outcomes are not easy to achieve. Hence the prevalence of “trite”, “simplistic” shopping centre shows with “characters in koala costumes” (PEEC).

Given the apparent tendency to underestimate the degree of skill required to create meaningful dramatic experience (CA; KITE; PEEC), the experienced dramatists placed an important qualifier on the value of drama in interpretation - the dramatisation must be of high quality: “You’ve got to have a good coherent story ... more than just a mouthpiece ... The narrative has to be fascinating ...[and] explore a breadth of human experience, not just one or two things ... the form of the piece has to be done well. The production values have to be high ... It’s got to grab the audience” (M).

In addition, certain drama structures, such as gradual en-roling, reflection and debriefing, must be incorporated to help visitors participate “safely” (PEEC) and comfortably and get the most out of the creative experience.

Accordingly, the involvement of theatre professionals is integral to creating quality productions (CA; JUTE; KITE; M; SHTT; TACP). However, whilst the involvement of a professional director was seen as vital, the majority of practitioners believed that amateur actors can produce good drama as long as they receive drama training and the program is developed under the guidance of this director. This safeguard is vital to ensuring the production matches the expectations of the target audience (CA; JUTE; TACP) and gives interpreters broad scope to utilise styles of dramatisation not requiring professional acting skills or expensive logistical support (JUTE; KITE; M; TACP). (Refer to Table 1 for examples of such programs: BFP, BEEC, CA, TACP; JUTE.)

Dramatised interpretation’s other main limitation is that it is less suitable for communicating specific “technical information” (TACP) or facilitating “in-depth discussion” (KITE; PEEC): “There’s facts and figures that people need to learn ... that aren’t the business of theatre ... But theatre can motivate that learning” (KITE). Likewise, because it takes longer, it may not cover as much ground (ABSC; SHTT). Addressing these shortfalls by designing supplementary activities and materials, practitioners found that drama’s only other limitations were “the limitations of your imagination” (BEEC).

Perceptions of Drama’s Value as an Interpretive Tool

Convinced that its strengths outweigh its limitations, practitioners saw drama as broadly applicable to interpretation. (Refer to Figure 2 for more details.)

Discussion

A discussion of the value of practitioners’ perceptions and a comparison with the limited empirical evidence, followed by an assessment of the applicability of drama to interpretation, ensues.

Practitioners were deeply concerned about the impact of their (and others’) programs and reflexive in their practice. Their perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses and applicability of drama to interpretation were largely based on their long-term experience combined with personal observations of participant involvement and feedback from participants, parents and teachers. From all accounts, these informal feedback mechanisms indicated high levels of engagement and enjoyment and a degree of provocation and long-term resonance. For example, one practitioner cited being made

<p>Drama Forms:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Most drama forms are suitable for interpretation, but programs with high levels of interaction and participation are favoured, as they are most likely to be engaging, resonant and provocative. Humour, music and movement are vital. ii. Quality of the experience is ultimately more important than the drama form itself. <p>Themes, Messages & Settings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Drama is suitable to communicate most interpretive stories and messages (but less suitable for conveying technical information). ii. It can be used in a wide variety of interpretive settings. <p>Target Audiences:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Drama has wide (almost universal) appeal with Australian audiences. Age is no barrier and mime, theatre and song can cross cultural and language barriers. ii. Different people are open to different types of dramatic experience. Match audience expectations, and provide “safe” experiences. iii. Avoid using drama for audiences seeking only detailed factual information. <p>Interpreter Skill Levels:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Drama training and professional guidance are available to assist Australian interpreters to develop and conduct quality “safe” dramatised interpretation programs that effectively convey desired stories/perspectives.
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FIGURE 2: Perceptions of How Drama Can Help Achieve the Aims of Interpretation

aware that participants were “still discussing it, later that night, at coffee” (JUTE), subsequently concluding that the respective program had “got the message across in an entertaining way” and “made people think” (JUTE). Another reported “we get a certain amount of feedback ... about learning outcomes ... If the kids follow you through the story, if they’re into it, ... get up and sing ... listen ... laugh and they’re focused ... you know it’s working on some level” (KITE). However, this practitioner added: “How deep that goes, it’s hard to tell” (KITE). Yet this same practitioner cited examples of young people reliving the dramatic experience they were involved in as children many years later, indicating how much of an impression it had made.

Unfortunately, although some practitioners conducted visitor or participant surveys, gaining evidence of satisfying visitor or participant expectations or needs, little formal evaluation of the impacts on learning processes or other cognitive, affective or behavioural dimensions has been carried out. Grappling with the limited time to impact audiences and the complexity of learning processes (KITE; PEEC), practitioners lamented the difficulties of evaluating learning from both drama and interpretation: “Getting a measurement tool ... is extremely difficult. Where did that idea, ... event, ... issue that culminated in action ... happen? It might happen right there and then, ... ten minutes later, ten years later. You just can’t put your finger on it” (BEEC).

Practitioners instead aimed to “make people think ... plant that seed ... maybe ... change a belief or an attitude” (BFP), and considered it a success “if kids go away ... singing the songs and discussing the environmental issues because they’ve hit a chord with them” (PEEC). In other words, they focused on maximising the impact of

their programs by employing solid interpretive and dramatic guidelines. (Practitioners' design guidelines will be reviewed in a follow-up paper.)

Despite this lack of formal evaluation, on the basis of the cited participant feedback and practitioners' considerable experience and observations, as well as their reflexive approach, their perceptions are considered valuable in exploring the strengths, limitations and potential value of drama in the interpretive context. However, evaluative studies, particularly a series employing a sociocultural framework to investigate the affective and cognitive experiences of visitors and the social meaning-making processes occurring during a variety of dramatised interpretation programs, are needed to verify, qualify, expand upon, or dispute practitioners' perceptions of dramatised interpretation's strengths, limitations and scope, and overcome any issues of bias.

Nevertheless, practitioners' perceptions of drama's strengths and limitations are consistent with those evidenced by the limited empirical studies of participant experience: drama's capacity to deeply engage audiences in historic heritage (Jackson & Leahy, 2005) and environmental issues (Appleby, 2005; McNaughton, 2004 & 2006) and create strong memories (Jackson & Leahy, 2005) or memory triggers (Bicknell, 1994); its limitation of covering less ground contextually (Jackson & Leahy, 2005) balanced by its ability to provide in-depth understanding of human stories and inspire closer attention to interpretive props and artefacts (Jackson & Leahy, 2005); its ability to communicate complex factual information, clarify detail and context and provide different perspectives for debate (Bicknell, 1994); and the need for 'safe' interaction or participation (Bicknell, 1994). Other evaluative studies have confirmed practitioners' perception of educational benefits from higher quality dramatisations (Malcolm-Davies, 2004), including visitors' abilities to articulate complex abstract concepts delivered through theatre (for example, Baum & Hughes, 2001). Significantly, practitioners' perceptions provide valuable insight into the how's and why's of these strengths and limitations as well as the where's, when's and with whom's, painting a very broad picture of drama's application across the field of interpretation.

It would seem that drama has much to offer interpreters seeking to engage visitors in more imaginative, inspiring and memorable experiences of place, deepen visitors' emotional connections to nature/history/culture, role-model appropriate behaviours and inspire deeper thought about the human aspects of conservation issues, or the human place in the grand scheme of things. However, its apparent limitations cannot be overlooked. Drama is a specialist skill and the reasonable requirement for skilled dramatists and/or personal drama training is likely to present logistical-fiscal problems for many interpreters. The time required to develop dramatised programs may preclude the use of this medium in some situations. Also some interpreters may decide that drama does not offer the *best* means to reach particular target audiences or engage particular visitors in an experience of place. Perhaps most importantly, it could be argued that to preserve the special appeal or "uniqueness" of dramatised interpretation, it should be employed somewhat sparingly, or with discretion.

To address these issues of applicability, greater communication and collaboration between interpreters and dramatists is needed. Such dialogue would assist interpreters to become more familiar with dramatic experience and various dramatic styles and techniques, and assess their suitability for specific interpretive settings, audiences and purposes. This experience would eventually enable the choice of dramatised interpretation when and where it is likely to be of most value. Likewise, drama training would enable interpreters to develop and conduct high quality dramatised programs in collaboration with experienced playwrights and theatre directors. The inclusion of drama training in interpretation courses and conferences is therefore recommended, as is greater collaboration between interpretive organizations and their

local arts networks. Interested interpreters are encouraged to explore existing high quality dramatisations (via contact with experienced practitioners) as well as funding opportunities for collaboration with experienced dramatists.

Conclusion

This study has not attempted to provide an empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of dramatised interpretation in Australia; quite clearly a series of studies is needed. However, personal interviews provide a good insight into the perceptions of experienced and reflexive practitioners allowing a broad exploration of the strengths, limitations and scope of dramatised interpretation. The issues raised expand upon the limited empirical evidence to date, providing further direction for the much-needed studies investigating visitor experience during/following participation in dramatised interpretation programs.

Nevertheless it would appear that drama has a potentially important role to play, in Australia and overseas, in strengthening the affective dimension of interpretation so that it is balanced with the cognitive. Means of strengthening dialogue between interpreters and dramatists should be explored.

Keywords: Interpretation; environmental interpretation; environmental education; story; drama; dramatised interpretation; sustainability; visitors; practitioners; perceptions; engagement; provocation; learning; meaning-making; affective; cognitive; holistic; constructivist; group learning; sociocultural perspectives; personal interviews.

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