

Facing the Storm: Reimagining Dorothy Heathcote in the University Theatre Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based article explores how Dorothy Heathcote's work might be reclaimed in university theatre classrooms. Drawing on an example activity from a Theatre History course, I reflect on how my professional practice rooted in theatre education has shaped my pedagogical approaches. Teaching Theatre History provided me with the opportunity to support a broader population of theatre majors and minors, primarily theatre education students, before taking this course. While I often model strategies informed by Heathcote's work in preparing future theatre educators and teaching artists, I had not previously examined how those principles might function within an expanded academic theatre context. Through a play-based learning experience in which students co-constructed key moments from Twelfth Night, I revisited a 1983 interview with Dorothy Heathcote as a catalyst for my reflection. This article considers how reimagining Heathcote's work in university theatre classrooms invites an

opportunity to honor her legacy and reinforce the importance of presence, co-constructed meaning making, and embodied inquiry as an integral contribution to an ever-evolving educational landscape.

Slowly, a tornado emerged.

The task was deceptively simple: Using only LEGOs, build five key moments from William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Theatre majors and minors in my Theatre History course were exploring characteristics of Renaissance Theatre. This in-class assignment provided my students with an opportunity to make meaning of Shakespeare's play by co-constructing their ideas rather than engaging in a whole-class discussion. Grappling with how to build the inciting actions of the play, a storm at sea, a group of students began creating their first key moment from the play. However, it was not enough for them to show the aftermath of the storm, which initially consisted of fragmented pieces with a mini-figure resting on a small patch of tan bricks, representing Viola safely on shore. Instead, they were captivated by the storm itself, which Shakespeare describes with limited detail yet enough clues to convey the severity of what ensued. Unlike *The Tempest*, which describes a storm in detail, the storm in *Twelfth Night* is only implied; the students wanted to build this as a key movement because it was the action that made this story possible. Without the storm, there is no separation, no disguise, no mistaken identity. It is from this storm that the play unfolds. Returning to the text, the group searched for clues about the storm and deeply explored the following account from the Captain in Act I, Scene 2:

Assure yourself, after our ship did split,
When you and those poor numbers are saved with you
Hung on our driving boat, I saw your brother,
Most provident in peril, bind himself,
Courage and hope both teaching him the practise,
To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves
So long as I could see (Shakespeare, n.d., p. 13).

Noting the waves had to be strong enough to split a ship, they began building. As they began building the waves, one student had a vision: "What if the storm were a typhoon?" I could hear the group asking him to show what he meant. As he angled a series of blue rectangle bricks, stacking them off-center to create a towering spiral, the group could see his vision take shape. Their excitement over what their peer had made drew the rest of them in to witness his process. We could not help but be curious, and we soon could see it too: a tornado rising from the sea. The LEGOs were no longer toys but a tool for co-constructing shared language and meaning-making.

As we unpacked the process and reflected on the discoveries we had made, several students thanked me for allowing them to play. It was the word "allowing" that continues to linger with me, and where I find myself considering how Heathcote's work might be an opportunity to reimagine what occurs in university theatre spaces. Through the LEGO exercise with *Twelfth Night*, I began to understand that building the tornado was more than fun; it was a discovery. This activity illuminated a shift in how learning unfolded in the room, reminding me that Dorothy Heathcote's work not only shaped my instructional practice more than twenty years ago but continues to guide and challenge my pedagogical approaches today. As I share examples of what emerged in my experience teaching a non-theatre education course, I offer a reexamination of how Heathcote's distinction between learning "over there" and learning "here" might reposition principles of embodied inquiry within a higher education context, reposition the university classroom as a critical space for human-centered learning experiences amid an ever-evolving educational landscape (Heathcote, 1983).

LEARNING HERE AND OVER THERE

Heathcote described much of what occurs in formal education as happening "over there," meaning students are often prompted to analyze texts, examine events, and interpret meaning after the fact. (Heathcote, 1983). The knowledge students learn has already been defined for them. Students engage in their learning by studying what has happened, what has been concluded, and what has already been established. In contrast, learning "here" invites students to enter a situation and experience it as if it were happening then and in the now

(Heathcote, 1983). Learning "here" is not an exercise in adapting what students learning in a more contemporary context, but an opportunity for them to make their own meaning (Heathcote, 1983). Rather than being distant from what they are learning, they assume responsibility for it, taking ownership of their process of meaning-making. Learning "here" is often relational, meaning that how learners shape what they learn often occurs through engaging in this process together (Heathcote, 1983).

In the university theatre classroom, the distinction between learning "over there" and "here" is particularly significant (Goldstein, 2025; Heathcote, 1983). As an art form and an academic discipline, theatre is rooted in interaction, immediacy, and embodiment (Lewandowska & Bojnarowicz, 2025). Yet, not all university theatre courses are structured to facilitate learning "here." This may be especially true in courses often perceived as learning about theatre rather than through it, such as my Theatre History course (Smith & White, 2021). When students learned I would be teaching the course, their first questions centered on how much reading and writing would be required. These questions reinforce their perception that Theatre History is a course where content is studied rather than experienced.

As I expanded my instructional practice to support a broader population of theatre majors and minors, particularly in a course often defined by written deliverables (Smith & White, 2021), I began to recognize a shift in how learning unfolded in the room. Theatre History courses in undergraduate programs are typically structured around a central textbook and a curated selection of plays tracing the historical development of theatre (Smith & White, 2021). Ironically, our primary text is *The Living Theatre*, yet there is often very little living happening in this space. As we study theatre, an art form grounded in presence, it can sometimes become archival and abstract, treated as historical, artificial, and conceptual analysis rather than lived experience. The LEGO exercise we used to actively explore *Twelfth Night* disrupted this approach.

FROM BUILDING TO EMBODYING IDEAS

The exercise I facilitated in Theatre History was inspired by an activity I developed in an elementary arts-integrated unit of study, in which I used LEGOs to explore Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles

in my instructional practice (Craig et al., 2022). The purpose of field testing this exercise was not driven by novelty but by how I might be more intentional in how students access opportunities for embodied inquiry. In teaching a university class about theatre, I wanted students to encounter the art form not only as content to be studied, but as a practice through which meaning is made. As Heathcote articulates below, I wanted students to engage theatre as a method of inquiry, expanding beyond the performance and production contexts they were accustomed to and into the academic spaces where theatre is often studied rather than practiced:

It's the pressure, or the authenticity, of that dramatic moment that creates the new knowledge, that makes different connections, and that suddenly brings connections that have been dormant in my previous knowledge into active use in making sense of new information. (Heathcote, 1983, p. 695)

Revisiting Heathcote's concept of pressure helped me understand what occurred in my Theatre History classroom as more than a playful exercise, but the emergence of dramatic action as a pathway into deeper learning. The student's decision to build a tornado did not stem solely from a creative use of LEGO bricks. The students know from the outset that selecting five key moments was not simply an exercise in recall, but an opportunity to explore what resonated most with them in *Twelfth Night* and why. By initially shaping each moment as a kind of tableau using LEGO bricks and figures, students were able to visualize their ideas before collaborating on how to represent a synthesized concept through their own tableau.

The storm at sea, represented through the tornado, became the first of five moments that the group developed. They then selected 1.) Viola's decision to disguise herself, 2.) Olivia's affection for Cesario, 3.) Malvolio and the forged letter, and 4.) the final scene where identities are revealed as the remaining four moments. From there, the group analyzed the themes that emerged from their choices, synthesizing their interpretation of *Twelfth Night* as a story about finding order within chaos. To embody this concept, the student who created the first moment with the tornado stood at the center of the tableau and embodied it. As he became the tornado in the tableau, the remaining students positioned themselves around it, each representing one of the

remaining moments. What they created was not a tableau of a particular event but a progression from chaos to order, an interpretation made possible only by allowing their learning to process what was "here" rather than "over there" (Heathcote, 1983). This learning experience generated the kind of pressure that sits at the center of Heathcote's work and what can be uniquely cultivated in academic theatre programs. When my students saw the LEGOs, they were excited about the opportunity to play with them. Still, this activity revealed to them something more deliberate, a dramatic task which required them to act within a problem rather than merely discuss it.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE ACROSS SHIFTING CONTEXTS

As a theatre education faculty member, my professional practice often shifts between K-12 classrooms, where I serve as a teaching artist and professional development provider, and university settings, where I prepare future theatre educators and teaching artists. The strategies I field-test in elementary and secondary contexts often inform the pedagogical approaches I model in my theatre education courses. Until last academic year, however, my teaching methods had primarily been experienced by students majoring in theatre with a concentration in theatre education. Adapting this UDL-inspired strategy for my Theatre History course allowed me to share this learning experience with a broader group of theatre students, many of whom had not yet had a class with me.

Similar to how I field-tested this strategy in an elementary classroom, I introduced the LEGO activity as a precursor to a frozen tableau exercise, this time scaffolded for university theatre students. Drawing from *Twelfth Night*, students identified five key moments from the play and shared their ideas through a series of constructed scenes using LEGO bricks and minifigures. This exercise required close reading and engagement of the play, as small groups of students collaborated on how to represent their key moments. From these co-constructed moments, each group developed an overarching concept to unify their choices, which was then translated into a frozen, human tableau in which they embodied their interpretation. From a UDL standpoint, this exercise offered students multiple modes of expression to represent their ideas, underscoring the principle that meaningful learning occurs when students are provided with varied ways to

engage and demonstrate their learning.

At the time I designed this learning experience, I did not explicitly consider its alignment with Heathcote's work. Nor did I intend to explore the relationship between UDL principles and Heathcote's methodology. It was not until I revisited Dorothy Heathcote's 1983 interview, *Learning Knowing, and Languaging in Drama*, that I began to recognize more clearly what had occurred in my Theatre History course. I had not returned to Heathcote's words for years. Yet reading her interview within today's higher education landscape takes on new meaning, particularly in her distinction between learning "over there" and learning "here." Her description of how learning should occur offered me language I had forgotten since I first encountered her work decades ago. Reflecting on the relevance of Heathcote's work today, I was not only reminded of how her educational philosophy has shaped my instructional practice but also of how it is deeply embedded in my work, often in ways I rarely consciously name.

Heathcote often insisted that teachers resist separating thinking from creating (Heathcote, 1983). What I have learned from Heathcote is that understanding does not necessarily precede expression. They often occur simultaneously. When students are encouraged to think while they create, and create while they think, they become more involved in the learning itself. Heathcote further explains this:

I don't think that big people ever create these daft splits between the information part of their understanding and the inspirational part of their understanding. So you have big engineers talking like poets at times. Their engines are poetry in motion. I do believe that a scientist can understand a poet. It's the small people who don't want to know the other half because they're frightened of it. I think it's a very great shame that teachers can't take a stance midway between these two ways of knowing. (Heathcote, 1983, p. 696)

Her point is simple. In real life, people do not typically separate information and imagination. Skilled individuals draw on both. However, in classrooms, educators often separate them. We are accustomed to teaching content first and creating later, as if one must perceive the other, rather than both processes informing each other. Revisiting Heathcote's words helped me realize that I understand what

happened in my Theatre History course. The student's tornado did not emerge because I prompted him to be creative. It emerged because of how the group was working through the problem. They had to revisit the text and search for evidence about the storm to justify their decisions. As they discussed the imagery, they also experimented with the form. Even when one student was primarily building the tornado, the rest of the group was still invested in the process. They were each interpreting and constructing ideas simultaneously.

As I continued reflecting on how Heathcote's work resonates with my instructional practice today, I also reconsidered how I approach the concept of drama across the curriculum. For much of my career as a teaching artist and theatre education faculty member, I have positioned theatre as a discipline that brings other content areas to life. I have experienced how drama has helped students make meaning of historical events and literary situations and has developed their social-emotional learning. While this work remains important to me, revisiting Heathcote during the current educational landscape has made me question the extent to which I may have unintentionally positioned theatre as a tool for something else. This realization is both humbling and clarifying. While I believe theatre can serve as a bridge for making other content areas more accessible to learners, I had assumed that approaching theatre from an interdisciplinary lens was sufficient, in itself, to reinforce its importance. What I may have missed about Heathcote's use of theatre in education was that its "use" was not intended to be a means to an end but rather an opportunity to reinforce the value of learning about, in, and through the process of theatre-making. The clarity I am discovering at this juncture in my instructional practice is approaching theatre not only as a catalyst for learning across other content areas but also as a discipline worthy of its own inquiry.

In a moment when higher education is increasingly pressured to support workforce development and measurable competencies, academic theatre programs often focus on developing transferable skills such as collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking (Petersen Jensen, 2024; Schmidt & Charney, 2018). While these contributions matter, this framing sometimes inadvertently reduces the function of higher education theatre programs to the utility of their discipline (Zakopoulos et al., 2023). While graduates from theatre programs bring many applicable skills across a range of

professions, theatre in university contexts is often justified by what it produces rather than by the kinds of individuals it cultivates. This distinction matters and is a tension worth sitting with. While Heathcote might consider the pragmatic aspects of her work, her legacy raises a deeper question: How does learning through theatre shape not only what students can do, but who they are becoming? For Heathcote, the purpose of learning in and through theatre extended beyond curricular goals; it was about what theatre could illuminate about the people engaged in the process of meaning-making (Heathcote, 1983).

Reimagining Heathcote in university theatre spaces invites us to examine not only how we teach our discipline but also the purpose of artistic development. However, if academic theatre programs are to remain responsive to industry needs, how can we approach this purpose without overlooking critical contributions we make: preparing graduates to navigate uncertainty, inhabit complexity, and assume responsibility within shared human experience? This is where the LEGO exercise from my Theatre History course becomes more than an isolated learning experience. My students were not simply demonstrating their comprehension of *Twelfth Night*. They were negotiating meaning in real time. They were taking creative risks with peers who could challenge and reshape their ideas. They were accountable not to me but to one another. The pressure to decide, to respond, and to stand by a choice is fundamental to the process of theatre-making, as well as to navigating multiple personal and professional situations that students will face beyond the classroom.

THE PRESSURE OF PRESENCE

In the current higher education landscape, the pressure Heathcote described as central to dramatic action and embodied inquiry takes on a new meaning. Ongoing technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), are requiring many of us to reconsider what it means to be human in our teaching and learning spaces (Li, 2025; Zhou & Lee, 2024). Regardless of what technological innovations come next, the ability to create and allow what we create to shape our thinking will remain a mainstay, not only in how we, as humans, learn, but also in how we thrive (Runco, 2025). Reclaiming Heathcote's work in higher education is not about positioning it in opposition to our shifting circumstances. Rather, it is about reaffirming what is uniquely

ours as theatre makers: the capacity to engage in shared, embodied, and in-the-moment meaning making.

As I continue exploring how my instructional practice will remain responsive to the theatre majors and minors I serve at my institution, I find myself returning not to new techniques, but to new questions. Heathcote has not given me a new strategy to consider. She has given me a lens through which to examine how I approach these questions. Her work presses me to consider: Where is the pressure in my classroom? Where are students encouraged to decide, to respond, to commit? But also, where am I unintentionally relieving this pressure in moments where I feel compelled to teach "over there" instead of "here?"

Academic theatre programs are increasingly challenged by accreditation standards, program outcomes, and workforce-readiness language, which may tempt many of us to translate what we do into job-related competencies (Stoytcheva et al., 2024). We often speak of collaboration, adaptability, communication, and creative problem-solving, all of which are invaluable across a variety of professions. Yet, if the pursuit of a degree in theatre is reduced to a set of transferable skills, we may risk overlooking the deeper kind of pressure our art form cultivates within all of us. This pressure entails the ability to respond to situations in real time and to remain present in the moment (Heathcote, 1983). It's less about knowing the right answer and more about responding with intention and purpose. Heathcote's work reminds us that theatre is not only a vehicle for development but also a discipline that requires individuals to respond to one another, adjust, take responsibility, and remain accountable to the shared moment at hand. The pressure is about being present.

This is where I return to my Theatre History course and consider how to continue reshaping the university theatre classroom as an opportunity to be present in our learning. In Heathcote's interview, she also explores the purpose of the teacher. Here she describes the purpose of the teacher as not only delivering information, but also as creating the conditions for students to actively engage in their learning:

So I suppose the teacher is the journey-maker. But I think it's a journey of learning access to knowledge and responsibility for the access. It would be wonderful if today's teachers could distinguish between just giving stored knowledge to kids and helping them

take on the responsibility of tapping that stored knowledge and discover the ways to do it. (pp. 699)

Her description challenges me to think less about the content I teach and more about the kinds of journeys I am constructing. While the tornado built in my Theatre History class was small and temporary, what it revealed during its brief existence continues to shape my thinking. I am more attentive to where pressure exists and where it has been unintentionally removed. I am more intentional about asking students not only what they know, but also about their willingness to stand behind their thoughts and ideas. If we embrace the notion of the theatre faculty member as a journey maker, then perhaps our task is not to shield students from the storm. Perhaps we are charged with designing the conditions where they can face it together. In doing so, we may discover that reimagining Heathcote is less about preserving a legacy and more about reclaiming what is uniquely ours as theatre practitioners and educators—the capacity to remain present with one another as we make meaning in real time.

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