

Youth Leadership In Pedagogy and Performance: Lesson Learned from a Global Theatre Collective

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In today's presentation, I will be exploring "Youth Leadership In Pedagogy and Performance: Lesson Learned from a Global Theatre Collective". And I think that this is the perfect presentation to have after Jordan's presentation, because hopefully, this will actually give some examples of the opportunities that can be offered creatively for young people to be able to explore their voice and find their voice and ask the questions that they need if they are to take on the kind of roles that have been suggested so far.

So once again, good evening from Abu Dhabi. I am the director of Performing Arts at Cranleigh Abu Dhabi and one of the founders of Pretzel Theatre. And in both of these roles, I have the great good fortune to see the progress of young people and to see that leadership skills, however those may be defined, develop and thrive. And my talk today will focus on drama, but I would like to emphasize that the following also applies equally to dance and to music. And in today's presentation, I will focus on three main areas. Firstly, how the devising process for drama can generate the skills required for leadership. Secondly, how providing collaborative opportunities can generate both creative empowerment, the bridging and connecting, which Jeff referred to in his opening presentation. And thirdly, how the strength of these opportunities lies not only in the performance that are presented to the public and to audiences, but the navigation and reflection that is obviously somewhat not obviously sometimes often overlooked when reflecting upon a creative process.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am recognizing, devising, and devising within drama as a pedagogical tool used within drama lessons and also beyond the classroom. As opposed to scripted work where the content is presented to the pupils and roles are defined, devising is generated from stimuli. These starting points could include newspaper articles, a picture, a piece of music, a poem, or a work of art. The joy that I find when doing this work is that it opens up opportunities for pupils to bring of themselves to the piece: what have they found, what interests them. These offerings can then become the point of discussion, which is an opportunity for the skills that emerging leaders need.

Rather than imposing their views onto others, a process of listening and negotiating is required for everyone to be invested within this piece. The creating and performing that emanates from this point is only possible if that negotiation has taken place with an agreement to experiment and take creative risks. The joy of this work is when people see ideas come to fruition through the collaborative process.

At Cranleigh Abu Dhabi, we offer drama from age seven to age 18 and we use devising at all ages. It is especially used in the upper areas of the school and is part of the UK's GCSE and A-level drama curriculum. However, the joy of devising is that you can use it on many and all levels. In 2016 and 2018, we were lucky enough to be part of Opera projects that were created from the people's ideas during a devising process. The starting point for the first Opera Project was "Beautiful World", a poem written by Sheikh Zayed, the Founding Father of the UAE. In 2018, which was the UAE's 'Year of Zayed' we performed another Opera which focused on water and Zayed's legacy of 'greening the desert'. This was devising at another level as the peoples engaged in the same discussions and negotiations that they usually would, but were then able to hand their ideas to professionals who turned their words into a libretto. This was a stunning opportunity, and although the music was fabulous, it was the responding that I would like to focus on today.

Within our international school with over 60 different nationalities, it is easy for our time in the UAE to be filled with shopping malls and cosmopolitan life. However, this was an incredible opportunity for us to connect in an entirely different way with the UAE's history and legacy.

In the Opera Project, the starting theme was established for the peoples. However, Pretzel Theatre takes on a very different style. It allows the pupils to really think for themselves. Pretzel Theatre was established in 2019. And started after a group was met in Frankfurt at the WAAE conference, which is where I first met Jeff. And this was the point where these discussions started. Our work has been documented in a number of blogs and previous presentations that I would encourage you to follow via Creative Generation. The pretzel practitioners were inspired by the UNESCO Seoul Agenda, particularly Goal Three, that invites the creative process to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world. Let me just say that, again, to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world.

Now, Jordan has just spoken to us about pupils rising to a challenge if it has been set for them. And if the size of that challenge gets set that they will rise to those opportunities. Now, when we asked this question, when we started prep, we put this phrase at the center of the discussion process, and then handed it over to our pupils who work around the world in China, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and for myself within the UAE. And some of the themes that they came up with are evident on this slide. And just by looking at some of those themes, you can see that the discussion that was generated was both powerful and mature. So I would say this is an absolute example of what Jordan was talking about where the standard was set by the context that we provided as their teacher leaders. But we were providing and offering them this opportunity to express their voices. And not only would their voices be heard by us, the people who were their practitioners,

who were encouraging that discussion, but they will also be heard by their peers and the practical practitioners themselves around the world.

We've spoken in a number of settings about an inherent sensitivity that existed between these countries. When the discussions first started, COVID was only just being heard of in China. And a key point for us was when the New Zealand pupils were starting their discussions and they decided that within their group that they did not want to mention COVID at the time because they did not want to hurt their feelings of their counterparts in China. We have reflected upon the fact that these pupils actually showed a greater sensitivity in many ways than a number of the politicians, or a number of the adults that were around the world at that same time.

As performances began, and were sent around the world to be received by Pretzel peers in other countries, the opportunity for reflection was especially noted. Once the performances were sent off, creative control was relinquished. And the responding that subsequently occurred as performances arrived back from other countries was especially interesting to observe. Obviously the pupils really enjoyed the performative opportunities and this will always remain a highlight within the creative process. However, for us, it was absolutely wonderful to see how their different ideas evolved.

One example of this was in New Zealand, where the peoples looked at an extract that was shared from Abu Dhabi. So if you look at this image, the image that's projected onto the wall is the image from the final image from the devised piece that was sent to them from Abu Dhabi. What they had chosen to do was to create a movement piece that was exploring the theme of well being. So if you imagine, to a piece of music, the pupils walked on and created a tableau screen, created a freeze frame in different positions. The New Zealand school, the New Zealand group, took this image, they were a smaller group, and they chose different people to represent. And their starting point was our finishing point. And whereas the Abu Dhabi version had created a soundscape that was a little bit introspective, was exploring the struggle of well being, the struggles that people might go through mentally, what the New Zealand group did was that they took that language and they took the physicality, the body language, and then they changed it. They reversed it and were able to take some of the phrases, but in this case, make them more positive. And this was wonderful. It was a fantastic performance opportunity that was shared with all our counterpart schools, and organizations.

And what was fascinating was seeing the reaction of my own pupils when those videos came back, because they were then in a position to reflect upon the work that had been done. And the discussion, the analysis, the thought, the questions that then went into that discussion, what are the essential points that we are talking about when we're talking about emerging leaders. We are not training people to be the ones who rush in and take the space. Going back to what Jeff said, at the very opening of this piece, there is the time to take the space, and there is a time to give space. And I think what is incredible about the devising process is that it allows for both. There are times when you sit and you listen, and you respond. And there are times when you feed in your ideas, you question, you negotiate, and you actually form that bridge between the initial ideas and the performance

that you're going to create. And on that journey - and I love the idea of the journey and the emerging leader, and how you cross that bridge and are aware of why you're crossing it and how you then reach the other side - I would say within our context that that bridge is the devising process.

You start with the ideas, and then through the devising, through the questioning, through the offerings that are given within performance, then the different ideas emerged. And our outcomes have been wonderful. Again, not just in terms of the drama and the performance side, but in terms of the reflection, in terms of the connections that have been made, both within pupils within the school, but also between pupils with within other countries.

The next stage for us in terms of Pretzel as we enter Act Two - the examples I've given were all Act One and now we're at a very exciting point where we are starting Act Two. And we are very excited to have added different countries to our Pretzel community. So we now have schools and organizations from the USA, Australia, Hungary, Iran and Ireland who have now joined our group. So now the offerings that are being shared are coming from an even wider range, covering more of the world than we were doing beforehand. And by sharing the digital performances, by introducing each other to different peoples from around the world, and having that discussion, I think that this can only lead to the kind of reflection and collaboration on a global scale that we are looking for from our emerging leaders.

And my view is that as we enter this next stage as we enter Act Two, one of the things that we need to do is to make our Pretzel pupils more aware of the skills that they are developing. We have observed them. We have been delighted to see them, but it is important for them to identify them themselves and to be able to consider these and how they will transfer into the leadership opportunities in the future. And we are so very excited to see what those leadership opportunities will be.