

Research Paper

Looking Through the Lens: A Level Drama and Theatre Studies and the changing phases of Post-16 Education

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Contextualisation

This article looks at the teaching and learning of 'Drama and Theatre Studies', a topic that is seldom addressed even in research areas focussing on post-16 education. As an American teaching in the British school system I have been able to constantly compare and contrast my own educational background in Theatre Arts with that of my British students. Understandably, practical methods of working, references to practitioners, and text selection varied. The elements that differed the most, however, were in modes of assessment; particularly for examination-aged students.

When I began my current position as Head of Performing Arts, predominantly teaching Advanced (A) Level courses in a sixth form college, I was eager to further develop my understanding in this area, as a way of compensating for my lack of personal experience of exam taking in this country. I found it necessary to research the evolution of A Levels from their introduction in 1949 to the present day and in particular, the development of Drama and Theatre Studies. My research has analysed how this subject's specifications (offered through three different awarding bodies) were being implemented in a number of classrooms used as case studies. This study was important because, unlike heavily researched areas like primary and secondary school applied drama and theatre practices, very few studies have considered how these subjects were being delivered in a sixth form setting.

Abstract: *This article examines the teaching and learning of the two-year Drama and Theatre Studies A Level. It details Curriculum 2000 and leads the reader to ask whether change to the delivery of this performing arts subject is needed. Also, by outlining the processes that are continuing to influence the British educational system as it changes in response to wider pressures, it questions how governmental reform impacts on educational practice. The subject specifications from three awarding bodies are discussed and the government's proposal to the existing A Level system, the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005), is also outlined. This article offers a summary of the key features of this White Paper and identifies how the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) interpreted these proposals when drafting their subject criteria for Drama and Theatre Studies. Each awarding body interpreted these criteria and then designed draft General Certificate of Education (GCE) specification proposals, which at the time of this study, are being considered for accreditation by the QCA.*

Although there are many studies that focus on the effects of drama techniques in primary and secondary school classrooms, this article is different in that it stimulates the debate about how to deliver this specialist subject in a sixth form setting, bearing in mind examination specifications. Also, by outlining the latest processes that are ongoing during this period of educational change, it questions how governmental reform impacts educational practice. Much has been written on educational policy making, and this article contributes to the debate about how governmental policies should be developed and how the results should be mediated and disseminated into day-to-day teaching practices.

Curriculum 2000 and the Drama and Theatre Studies A Level

Following the Strafford Review in 1995, the A Level examination system in England (which occurs at the end of post-compulsory schooling as a preparation for students entering university) changed resulting in alterations to the structure of many academic courses. This led to hybrid- Drama and Theatre Studies courses that married Drama, previously a progression from General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Drama, to Theatre Studies; the academic study of set texts and theatre history (Bennett, 2003). England's A Levels changed even further when the government published *Qualifying for Success* (1997), a document that suggested breaking A Levels into two, three-unit stages beginning with a one year AS course and a second one-year (A2) course. This reform, introduced in September of 2000, was labelled *Curriculum 2000*. Under this model, the former two-year course was separated into two stages, involving a one-year course that could be used as a final qualification, or as the first half of an A Level qualification.

This article addresses A Level Drama and Theatre Studies courses, rather than considering the broader disciplines of the Performing or Expressive Arts. Out of the awarding bodies offering A Levels to students in England, three examining groups; Edexcel, The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) and the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) are focused upon. All have similar aims that drive and inform their assessment objectives. These similarities arise from the need of each examining body to comply with specifications laid down by the QCA, a public body sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES).

It is important to note, however, that the three exam boards in question, differ in their approach to certain elements of the courses they offer: specifically, assessment criteria and content. The weightings of particular assessment objectives and the way in which they are distributed throughout the specification, are interpreted differently by each awarding body. Also, the three exam specifications vary in their content. When considering examinations and written coursework, Edexcel allots approximately 52.5% of its A Level qualification to written work and 47.5% to practical work, AQA allows 70% written work and 30% practical work, and WJEC candidates spend 65% of their studies on written work and 35% of their time completing practical work. The sequencing, balance of internal and external assessment and organising of unit areas also vary. Although these differences appear to be slight, they represent an opportunity for the 'academically-conscious' teacher, whose students may excel in practical performance techniques but lack essay writing skills, to achieve far better results through offering the Edexcel course with a 52.5% weighing of written work, over offering the AQA course with a 70% weighing of written work.

Within these courses there are also relatively few restrictions on teachers' classroom delivery methods subject to their being of an appropriate standard as judged during school or college inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who are tasked with ensuring consistency in educational standards. Drama and Theatre Arts teachers are free to interpret their choice of specification within the prescribed syllabus framework. They do, however, have recourse to the booklet *Inspecting Post-16 Drama and Theatre Studies with guidance on self evaluation* (2001) which was published to help Ofsted inspectors and staff in schools and colleges, "evaluate standards and quality in drama and theatre studies for students post-16" (Ofsted, 2001, p 1).

My qualitative research highlighted the different ways Drama and Theatre Studies A Level teachers interpreted their chosen specification when designing their own learning pathways. It revealed that while a teacher has a level of creative freedom when designing his or her course, the day-to-day execution of the specifications vary between centres. Even terms like 'drama', 'theatre', and 'performance' are defined and interpreted differently by both A Level practitioners and learners.

Proposed Government Changes to 14- 19 Education

Historically, there have been a number of changes to the A Level system in England and Wales since it was introduced in 1949. Recently, Michael Tomlinson's Working Group for 14-19 Reform responded to the DfES *Opportunities and Excellence* document by publishing a framework for an English Diploma. Much of this document was dismissed, however, when in February 2005 the then Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, produced a government White Paper outlining plans for 14-19 Education. This proposal recognised the strengths and weaknesses of the current educational system, but planned to "retain but strengthen A Levels and GCSE's and to develop a better respected (sic) vocational route through the creation of specialised diplomas" (Edexcel, 2005, p 2). It was proposed that three-level 'specialised' vocational diplomas would intertwine with academic routes and be featured in future league tables. These would be introduced into 15 subject areas including 'Creative and Media' from 2008 but pupils would have to pass Maths, English and other GCSEs in order to qualify for these new diplomas. A separate and new diploma would then be awarded to pupils who passed five GCSEs at grade C or better (including English and Maths). GCSE coursework burdens would be considered, too. In addition, a parallel and major review of the Key Stage Three curriculum was proposed. Specialist schools would be awarded extra funding as part of the same proposals to allow them to become centres of excellence in vocational education.

With regard to A Level education, the White Paper indicated that the number of A Level modules would be reduced from six to four. The government also intended to 'stretch' the learning of the most able students by introducing more demanding questions set at the level of existing Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs). Coursework, as an element of assessment, would also be reviewed. In addition, extended projects could be implemented with students able to opt for Higher Education (HE) courses while still completing A Levels. Finally, universities would have students' individual unit grades on each A Level paper made available to them.

The Future of Drama and Theatre Studies A Levels

In 2005, the government began this ten-year educational reform programme. In March of the same year, the QCA interpreted the proposals in the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper when designing their *Draft GCE AS and A Level Subject Criteria for Drama and Theatre Studies*, published in 2006(a). A period of consultation followed which allowed 'key stakeholders' the opportunity to access the QCA website to give their 'professional views' on the aims, content, assessment, progression, accessibility, and challenges present in the draft proposal. These draft criteria had a fourth assessment objective (in addition to the original three - See Table 1) requiring candidates to "make critical and evaluative judgements on the effectiveness of theatre performance" (QCA, 2006a, p 6).

Also, specific mention was made of the importance of devised work, scripted work and student attendance at live theatre. These elements were previously included in Drama and Theatre Studies specifications, but not specifically mentioned in the Aims and Skills sections. The QCA also stated that A Level candidates must study a minimum of four published plays, of which one must be a pre-twentieth century text. This furthers the approach currently being taken by the WJEC, who require candidates to study "an extended range of texts" (WJEC, 2004, p13). Finally, candidates would be required to study the work of one influential director, designer or practitioner; whereas previously a broader and more general knowledge of work was acceptable, with AQA as the only awarding body who emphasised the study of specific practitioners.

Table 1. Draft GCE AS and A Level Subject Criteria for Drama and Theatre Studies (QCA, 2006a, p 6)

	Assessment Objectives	Weightings (%)	
		AS Level	A2 Level
AO1	Demonstrate the application of performance or design skills through the creation and realisation of theatre	30-40	30-40
AO2	Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of practical and theoretical aspects of drama and theatre using appropriate terminology	20-40	20-40
AO3	Interpret plays from different periods and genres	20-40	20-40
AO4	Make critical and evaluative judgements on the effectiveness of theatre performance	10-25	10-25

The GCE AS/A Level *Consultation Summary Reports* (2006b) were then published by the QCA in September 2006. These indicated that from 3,252 respondents to all subject areas, only 51 individual teachers throughout the country logged-on to the QCA website to record their comments about the proposed Drama and Theatre Studies AS and A Level. Of these 51, not all respondents answered every question, with the result that results could have been viewed as misleading.

According to the QCA poll, “96% of respondents felt the aims for drama and theatre studies, as currently stated, were appropriate”(QCA, 2006b, p 18). In fact, this percentage accounts for only 24 people out of the 25 who completed the poll. Likewise, QCA claims that 87.5% believed that the content for this subject was up to date, appropriately allocated, and would enable appropriate progression. In this poll, the 87.5% was out of 16 respondents to this question and represented only 14 replies. Six people among the 11 responding to the specific question (54.5%) believed that “the assessment objectives indicate clearly what is to be assessed by the qualification” and that there was an “overlap between assessment objectives”(ibid. p 19). Ten out of 11 people (90.0%) felt all of the competences were essential to the study of this subject at advanced level and 8 out of 11 people (72.7%) felt that no essential competences had been left out of the draft proposal.

While the response statistics appear valuable, they could be misleading if not analysed within the context of the number of online respondents. According to the QCA, 90% of those who answered the specific question (in this case, nine people) felt the relative weighing of the assessment objectives were appropriate at AS level and 80% (8 people out of those responding) felt they were appropriate at A2. Similarly, only 10 respondents out of 51 answered a question about whether a four-unit structure was appropriate for Drama and Theatre Studies even though this aspect of the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper was considered integral to the design of the reformed A Levels. The DfES believed that it would reduce the assessment burden, reduce costs and address exam timetabling issues (DfES, 2005) but only 20% of consultation participants registered their opinion on this issue, with half disagreeing that the four-unit structure was appropriate for this subject.

The document *GCE AS and A Level subject criteria for Drama and Theatre Studies* (2006c) was published by the QCA in September 2006 soon after the publication of the GCE AS / A Level *Consultation Summary Reports* (QCA, 2006b). The fact that very little changed in the newly revised edition of the previously published draft subject criteria implicitly acknowledged that the QCA recognised that their consultation had only had a limited impact with 51 respondents showing concerns. Specific changes include the terms ‘skills’ and ‘design skills’ being more clearly defined as “performance and/ or production skills” (QCA, 2006c, p 5) with

the word 'drama' being added alongside the word 'theatre' in some instances. Also, the phrase 'live theatre' had replaced that of 'theatre performance' (*ibid.*). The most significant difference is visible in the section addressing the courses' synoptic element. Sentences had been added which indicated a synoptic element "...should be included at A2" (*ibid.* p 7). It also stated that there should be both practical and theoretical elements to the synoptic assessment, which should draw on all the assessment objectives, "although not necessarily with equal weighing" (*ibid.*).

The three awarding bodies that offer Drama and Theatre Studies A Levels each responded to this QCA document by drafting specification in 2007. It is likely that these will be delivered in classrooms in September 2008 but, at the time of writing this article, Edexcel, AQA and WJEC are still awaiting accreditation from the QCA. Again, each specification was informed by the QCA and, "as a result, despite differences of approaches, emphases and assessment weightings within syllabuses, there are a number of common factors" (Kempe and Nicholson, 2001, p 42). However, although the content is similar between specifications they still differ slightly in their course structure, the demands made on AS students, and their balance between practical and written elements (See Table 2).

Table 2: Drama and Theatre Studies Draft Specifications (Edexcel, 2007) (AQA, 2007), (WJEC, 2007)

	Edexcel	AQA	WJEC
Practical assignments:	Weightings unknown at this time	32.5%	Weightings unknown at this time
Written assignments:	Weightings unknown at this time	67.5%	Weightings unknown at this time
AS Content:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Study of 2 plays in a practical and active way. One play is explored in the light of a theatre practitioner. Exploration notes and live theatre evaluation coursework is completed. ▪ Perform or design in a scripted play. Also perform a monologue, duologue or create a design from an additional play. A rationale of the interpretation must be provided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written exam on a piece of live theatre. Written exam on a set text ▪ Perform (or design for) in a scripted play. Supporting notes of the preparatory and development work is completed as coursework. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perform (or design for) both a scripted and devised performance working on the ideas of 2 practitioners ▪ Written exam on two set texts. Additional written exam on a live theatre visit
A2 Content:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Devise (or design for) a piece of drama and complete a coursework evaluation of the process and performance with evidence of the research completed. ▪ Written exams on a set text. Additional written exam on a piece of live theatre from a set time period, comparing the live production with the original performance conditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written exam on two set texts. Additional written exam on how to stage an extract from a set text ▪ Devise (or design for) a piece of drama. Supporting notes of the preparatory and development work is completed as coursework. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perform (or design for) three scripted and devised scenes from different texts, based on a set theme. <p>An evaluation piece of coursework is required.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written exam on two set texts. Additional written exam on a directorial analysis of an unseen text.

The vocational Creative and Media Diploma strand (the only diploma strand that delivers elements of performing and expressive arts) will also be available in classrooms for September 2008 and will intertwine with academic routes and be featured in future league tables. "They will complement existing qualifications" (CMD, 2006). Questions about the specifics of these lines of learning remain unanswered, though. In the government's July 2006 document entitled *Specialised Diplomas- Your Questions Answered* (DfES, 2006) the DfES stated that students would have, "a great flexibility in the qualifications they can choose" and can mix GCSEs, A Levels and Diploma strands. Martin Ward, Deputy General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders has acknowledged that, "GCSE and A Levels will still be offered alongside the diplomas" (Ward in Finnegan, 2006) and Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examination (OCR) explains, "there will be more scope for existing qualifications to fit into the Additional/ Specialist Learning [elements of the diploma](Finnegan, 2006)" The DfES added, "Some diplomas may also contain GCSE and A Levels" (DfES, 2006). It appears very likely that in the near future, teachers of Drama and Theatre Studies will be delivering their A Level subject to students of the Creative Arts and Media diploma strand but little is known about exactly *how* these subjects will intertwine. It is likely that answers to these questions will not come until schools and colleges form consortia in their local area and the 'gateway' process is undertaken to decide how each geographical location will offer all diploma subject strands.

Conclusion

The fact that out of all A Level subject teachers in the country, only 3,252 respondents completed the QCA's online GCE AS / A Level *Consultation Summary Reports* (2006b) indicates that either teachers are not interested in the proposed governmental changes to post-16 education, or they have failed to demonstrate enthusiasm, primarily because of the over-abundance of educational policies that have been introduced during their careers in the classroom. It seems more likely, however, that most educators were not made aware of the government's online request form, and yet this source proved to have an integral impact on the way subject specifications were designed. These issues of Policy Development and Structure and Agency Theory (Giddens, 1984 and 1995) could be further researched to highlight how governmental policies evolve from concepts of educational reform into practices utilised in everyday teaching and learning practices.

It is important that Drama and Theatre Studies teachers in England and Wales urgently become aware of the proposed changes, as after receiving accreditation the A Level specifications will be distributed to centres in time for the new courses to be taught in 2008. Teachers need to insist on being informed about the impact that assessment burdens may have on them once the extended project and harder question options for the most able students are implemented. Other specific issues also remain unresolved: How will the vocational Creative and Media Diploma work together with Drama and Theatre Studies at A Level? Will the new specifications allow a teacher to maintain their independent level of professional input when delivering the course, but still allow for a consistency across centres in matters such as defining subject specific terminology, practical and written assessment weightings and content? This article has focused on research that comes at a pertinent time of educational change. Perhaps, the answers to these questions will not be fully known until the actual implementation of the government's policies but by that time it may be too late for A Level teachers of Drama and Theatre Studies to join the educational debate.

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