

# Performing the Interview



# Performing the Interview:

*Embodied Reflections  
and Data-Dramas*

By

Jane Isobel Luton

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Thank you to my wonderful husband Tim and son Alex for all your patience, practical assistance and loving support throughout the process and in the ten years since. I was privileged to be joined in my 2014 doctoral performance by my daughter, Holly, who then encouraged me to perform in the productions she directed as part of her own masters and doctoral Journeys. A circle within a circle, our shared performances have deepened and extended the heart of this work.

My creative practice component, an hour-long play: *Battles and Barricades: A Drama about Drama Education* performed in The Musgrove Studio at The Maidment Theatre, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand is available on YouTube. It was filmed by Media Productions at the University of Auckland: Mia Silverman, production co-ordinator, and Michelle Vergel de Dios, production assistant on July 22, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryA2Ezsdn3U>



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology have all been usefully pressed into service to illuminate our practice in drama and to guide us towards appropriate research paradigms. Although these and other disciplines have served us well, we have not always recognized that the most useful sources of illumination and enrichment may lie closest at hand—for example, in theatre and performance studies. (O'Neill 1996, 137)

This book has three key aims. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate how *Embodied Reflections* and *Data-Dramas* can serve as valuable methodological tools within arts-based research, offering an alternative way of exploring lived experiences and generating data. Secondly, it explores how the doctoral journey, particularly within the field of education, can be navigated through a creative practice component, highlighting its potential as both a scholarly and artistic endeavour. Finally, it hopes to inspire educators in their own pursuit of well-being, encouraging them to reconnect with their artistic practices and pedagogical philosophies as sources of renewal and professional fulfilment.

What follows is not a conventional academic analysis, but a guided journey. I invite the reader to travel with me through the unfolding of a creative practice doctorate: from the early discussions around its focus, through the development of a methodology, ethical decision-making, and the unexpected discovery of how drama could be used in a new way to interview participants—allowing them to share their stories in deeply embodied and imaginative ways. I reflect on how I made sense of the data I generated and how I felt my way through an academic process that was as performative as it was intellectual. Along the way, I offer insights into what it means to prepare performance as examination and suggest how others might adapt these approaches for their own research. In this book, I refer to my methodological framework as *Embodied Reflections* and my performance-based analytical outputs as *Data-Dramas*. I capitalise these terms throughout to indicate their status as named elements of my creative research practice.

Interwoven through the early chapters are scripted episodes from my *Data-Drama: Battles and Barricades: A Drama about Drama Education*. These were devised not only to mediate the data but also as a form of dissemination—both for the examination process and to engage wider audiences beyond the academy. I have included the detailed outline of how the data was generated through dramatic means and later offer guidance on how others might shape similar work to suit different research purposes and participant groups.

I also consider the challenges and joys of this journey, particularly as a middle-aged drama teacher stepping out of the classroom and into the uncertain but thrilling space of doctoral research. Several years on, having presented this work in conferences, articles, and other publications, I now return to it with renewed perspective and the understanding that this journey not only shaped my research but profoundly reshaped me as an educator and artist.

I hope in this book to inspire doctoral students, drama educators, and academics engaged in arts-based research and performative and embodied inquiry to consider drama as a dynamic and evocative research methodology. Drama offers a rich interplay between playfulness and critical inquiry, opening expansive possibilities for the collection and interpretation of research data. It is my intention that this book contributes to the expanding discourse on undertaking a creative practice doctorate—particularly within a Faculty of Education.

### **Setting the scene: A journey through creative practice and performance**

While the field of drama education has long drawn on other disciplines for exploring its questions and frameworks, in 2014, I turned to theatre itself—becoming the first creative practice doctoral candidate in Education at the University of Auckland’s Faculty of Education and Social Work to present a devised *Data-Drama* as both research and performance. What began not as a necessity but as an obvious absence—a way to conduct an interview dramatically—led me to develop a new methodology, which I termed *Embodied Reflections*. The performance used to disseminate the research was formally assessed by two examiners, and several months later, I submitted a 60,000-word thesis that expressed, through poetic and dramatic form, the processes and findings that had emerged throughout my research journey. My supervisor who had encouraged this innovative

journey embraced the idea that “doctorates have become far more diverse, they do not have to follow a formulaic template, and increasingly they reflect the personality of the student” (O’Connor 2014, 70).

Although a decade has passed since I completed my arts-based and performative research, I have come to recognise that the challenges faced by doctoral students undertaking creative practice research remain significant. This realisation has been reinforced by witnessing my own daughter, who, in an unexpected parallel to my own journey, embarked on her creative practice doctorate in November 2021. While her research—situated within a Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies—differs in focus from mine, we have encountered striking similarities in the challenges we have navigated. However, the creative practice doctorate brings with it countless moments of intellectual and creative exhilaration that reaffirm the significance of creative research. Craig Batty and Arezou Zalipour have described this approach to research as “a distinct paradigm where knowledge is not only explored or examined but is also actively discovered or constructed through creative expression and reflexivity. This results in an embodied, emotive, and experiential understanding of knowledge” (Batty and Zalipour 2024, 5).

Reflecting on my own experience, I recognise that my whole doctoral journey could be described as embodied, emotive and experiential. It was marked by both triumphs and struggles. Undertaking a doctorate later in life, I often questioned my abilities, particularly as an older woman entering an academic landscape that can feel both isolating and exclusionary. Yet, one of the most profound lessons a doctorate imparts is not just the accumulation of knowledge, but an acute awareness of the vastness of what remains unknown—an ongoing process of questioning, critiquing, and re-evaluating.

Over the years, I have written several articles and book chapters published both nationally and internationally and have presented my research at conferences around the world. That said, I remained largely independent in my scholarly pursuits, as after completing my PhD, I returned to the secondary school classroom to continue teaching drama and directing productions. This return allowed me to apply aspects of my research in a setting where I felt most at home. Yet, despite knowing that my work had inspired other doctoral candidates, I could not entirely shake the lingering sense of failure—an awareness that, somehow, I had not ascended to the so-called “Ivory Tower.”

This self-interrogation led me to ask: if I share my research more widely, can I, in some way, enrich others' journeys and contribute to their growth? My *Embodied Reflections* method, developed through my own research, has demonstrated itself to be an interactive and effective means of gathering stories, not only from drama practitioners but across a broader spectrum of disciplines. In revisiting and expanding upon my work, I seek to contribute to the evolving discourse on “Performative Research” (Haseman 2007), advocating for its recognition as a rigorous and transformative mode of inquiry.

### **Between the classroom and the ivory tower**

My doctoral research using creative practice began when I entered academia in 2011. I did so at first part-time still teaching drama and running a drama department in an urban state secondary school in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. I had recently completed a Master of Arts in Theatre and having tasted the possibilities of research felt I wanted to do more. I was also battling with a profound sense of exhaustion, a recently diagnosed auto-immune disease and unacknowledged by myself at the time, professional burnout. This research—and the book that has emerged from it—is rooted in my search for well-being after years immersed in the dynamic yet demanding environment of the secondary drama classroom. Over the subsequent four years, my academic journey became one of resistance and reimagining: I fought metaphorical battles, navigated symbolic barricades, and conceptualised the *Museum of Educational Drama and Applied Theatre* [MEDAT], a space in which my data could be, as Joe Norris suggests, generated, mediated, and disseminated. (Norris 2009, 10)

In the process, I developed the research methodology *Embodied Reflections* deeply informed by my own drama and theatre practice, one that honours both the rigors of academic inquiry and the fluid, expressive nature of performance. Throughout this book, I draw upon pivotal moments from my final performance and original thesis to illuminate this journey. At times, I deliberately shift from past to present tense, a stylistic choice that reflects the tension between academic convention and the immediacy of creative and performative research. These “present tense” moments occur when I recount key scenes from my research or performance, inviting the reader into an experience that is not only analysed but also felt.

Beyond offering a personal and scholarly reflection, this book serves as a practical guide for those navigating the creative practice component of a doctorate. I provide insights into the complexities of integrating performance into research, offering strategies for crafting one's own *Embodied Reflection*. As a culmination of this work, the book also includes the final performance script, a theatrical inquiry into the landscape of drama education and its broader implications. The script entitled *Battles and Barricades: A Data-Drama About Drama Education* is interwoven between select chapters, illustrating how its five episodes narrate the story of my research from initial reflections and the rationale behind my chosen field, to the challenges and joys of the process, participant experiences, and a vision for the future.

My methodology was rooted in arts-based research, with a particular emphasis on “Performative Research,” defined by Brad Haseman (2007) as the “third paradigm,” and “Performative Inquiry,” as defined by Lynn Fels (2012)—approaches that extend beyond intellectual analysis to embrace the physical and emotional dimensions of data collection and interpretation through a wide range of mediums not limited to numbers and words.

My research provided an opportunity for my participants to engage in creative exploration and critical reflection through role play and imagination. For me it provided a way to engage not only intellectually but also physically, allowing me to immerse myself in an embodied research process. However, as I briefly mentioned, this was a body depleted by years of leading drama departments in secondary schools across England and New Zealand—a body that carried the weight of exhaustion and a growing sense of cynicism. This condition is widely recognised as *burnout*, defined by Melinda Smith and Sheldon Reid as “a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place” (Smith and Reid 2025, under “The Difference Between Stress and Burnout”)

I had lost my passion for drama education and being a drama teacher. This disillusionment stemmed not only from the act of teaching itself and running drama departments but from the relentless demands of directing and producing extracurricular productions to a professional standard, with its required long hours spent at school, alongside the ongoing struggle to

assert the academic legitimacy and inclusive value of my subject. But what does burn out look and feel like? Smith and Reid explain that “being burned out means feeling empty and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don’t see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress feels like you’re drowning in responsibilities, burnout is a sense of being all dried up” (2025, under “What Is Burnout?”)

This definition resonates deeply with my own experiences, where the overwhelming demands of my role felt like I was stuck in a cycle with no way out. The sense of emotional exhaustion left me questioning my ability to continue. Some might argue that undertaking a doctorate would only compound this stress, but it was refreshment that I needed and a chance to challenge my brain and dive more deeply into the art form that I loved. And indeed, with hindsight the research process proved unexpectedly therapeutic.

A pivotal moment for my research came during the International Drama in Education Research Institute [IDIERI] conference in Ireland, where I encountered the concept of *melancholy*, courtesy of Kathleen Gallagher’s conference talk. This was not simply exhaustion, but as I later found an aesthetic sensibility that, paradoxically, became a catalyst for renewal. This recognition set me on a path to rediscover my enthusiasm for drama education—an often-marginalised pedagogy, art form, and academic discipline.

## **The difficulties of being a drama educator**

I have taught in several secondary schools in England and Aotearoa New Zealand, but the experiences have much in common. In both countries I have witnessed drama’s unique ability to engage students who remain disengaged elsewhere. I have seen young people grow into confident communicators, develop self-belief, and take a greater interest in the world around them. However, drama and theatre education in secondary schools is sadly not universally embraced. In the UK it has long navigated a complex and contested history which continues today. Some practitioners advocate for it as a child-centred pedagogy—one that fosters personal growth, therapy, and social justice—while others insist on its identity as an art form, firmly rooted in the history and theory of theatre. While some educators may dismiss the significance of debating the drama wars that shaped drama education in the UK before and during the 1980s, Geoff Readman for *National Drama* has recently highlighted the historical

impact of the “unhelpful distinction” between ‘drama in education’ and ‘learning about theatre’ suggesting that the “the historical consequences of this rift are still apparent” (Readman 2023, 1).

This rift has huge repercussions for drama teachers working in contemporary state secondary schools particularly in the UK, but also, I contend in New Zealand, where I have lived and worked since 2002. Drama is often perceived as an expendable luxury, dismissed by government bodies and internal management teams seeking to prioritise subjects deemed more economically viable and educationally purposeful. In England, Conservative governments have systematically marginalised Drama, diminishing its status within the curriculum. In the New Zealand Curriculum Drama has been designated as one of the four Arts subjects since 1999. While this may seem a luxury to drama teachers in England the reality is that this formal recognition does not necessarily translate into widespread understanding or acceptance among senior managers, staff, parents, or policymakers regarding drama's significance in the holistic development of young people.

Readman describes its value in education as being “‘academic’ because it develops skills in planning and generating ideas; imagining; negotiating; exploring; rehearsing; questioning; interpreting; researching; reflecting; problem-solving; presenting. It is ‘artistic’, because its artistic forms enable children and young people to both explore their World and also comment on the kind of World they wish to see” (Readman 2023, 1). Jenny Soffel writing on The World Economic Forum website supports the idea that “today's job candidates must be able to collaborate, communicate and solve problems—skills developed mainly through social and emotional learning” (Soffel 2016). Students, they suggest need the skills of creativity, critical thinking and curiosity taught through “play based learning” for life in the twenty-first century (Soffel 2016)—skills that drama clearly and evidently develops. I often remind students and senior management that, like Maths, drama has been around for over two and a half thousand years—and in ancient Athens, it wasn't just entertainment; it was how they taught (male) citizens to engage with democracy.

Despite its rigorous intellectual and artistic foundations, drama education is often underappreciated as an academic discipline, even though its unique capacity to engage and support students with special or additional needs is widely recognised. As in the UK, New Zealand senior students can undertake assessed courses that serve as valid university entrance qualifications. Students have often told me how much they want to

continue doing drama at senior level, but senior managers and parents have persuaded them otherwise. I have spent countless parents' evenings listening to families express gratitude for the transformative impact of drama on their children—their newfound confidence, creativity, and ability to articulate their thoughts with clarity. Yet, many of these same parents, influenced by school leadership, ultimately discourage their children from pursuing drama at examination level, steering them instead toward subjects such as mathematics, science, and business studies, which are perceived as more valuable. The all-too-common refrain that drama is “not really an academic subject” reflects the persistent struggle for its legitimacy.

It was in response to these tensions that I embarked on my doctoral journey. Like many doctoral students, I initially grappled with uncertainty—unsure of both my research focus and the methodological approach I should take. However, as I began to examine my own sense of disillusionment, I sought a methodology that could authentically capture my experience. Through my supervisor, Peter O'Connor, I was introduced to arts-based research and ethnographic performance, both of which profoundly influenced my approach. At the time, the University had only just approved *creative practice* as a valid doctoral research pathway, and when offered I seized the opportunity to explore this emerging field.

### **The joys of being a creative researcher**

As my research evolved, I developed *Embodied Reflections*, a new methodological approach grounded in dramatic theory to generate and analyse data. Seeking to expand its application, I invited several internationally recognised drama educators to engage with my method, using it to share their own experiences of navigating the “battles and barricades” of drama education—an enduring metaphor drawn from the field’s history of heated debate and advocacy. Six international educators from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the UK generously accepted my invitation: Professors Peter O'Connor, John O'Toole, Andy Kempe, Jonothan Neelands, and Lynn Fels, along with Ron Price—an Advanced Skills Teacher of Drama, author and founder of the Ufton Drama Summer School. These participants, to whom I remain deeply grateful, were experienced voices and influential contributors to the international field of drama education. While I was the researcher, they held the power—in the stories they chose to share (or not share), and in the feedback they offered (or withheld). With their consent, my participants chose to be identified

rather than remain anonymous. Through their stories, I hoped not only to uncover the sources of their resilience and passion but also to reignite my own, ultimately forging a pathway toward renewal in my practice.

Having developed an arts-based performative research methodology grounded in the very strategies I employed daily in the drama classroom, and having co-constructed narratives with my participants, I was faced with an inevitable challenge— to embody my research in practice. This necessitated not only theorising my findings but also enacting them— bringing my data to life through performance. Thus, I devised and staged a *Data-Drama* as part of my doctoral examination, an experience that was both intellectually rigorous and creatively fulfilling. The performance took place at the Musgrove Studio, part of the larger Maudment Theatre in Auckland. The production incorporated a range of theatrical technologies, including lighting, multimedia, sound, costume, properties [props], and set design. While I assumed multiple roles within the performance, I was supported, with permission, by a fellow performer—my daughter—who, at the time, was in her penultimate year of secondary school. The following year, I submitted the written component of my thesis.

A few months after my submission, the oral examination took place at the Faculty of Education. To prepare, I bought a new red dress and created a short presentation, accompanied by one of my key characters—Melony the Orangutan, the critical voice of my research. It was comforting to have the large orange puppet seated at the central boardroom table.

Also present was the university representative from the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, who later remarked that it was the most interesting oral examination they had ever attended. As I completed this challenging journey, their words echoed in my mind. I shook hands with those in the room, and for the first time, I heard the title *Doctor* attached to my name. While the title cannot be used officially until graduation it certainly makes one feel that the previous few years has, in the end, been worthwhile.

I had a four-month wait until Graduation Day—my family and one of my supervisors were there to celebrate. For a drama educator, wearing the regalia of an ancient tradition was truly special. Over the course of my four-year research journey, I occupied multiple roles: researcher-in-role, actor, director, designer, and dramaturg. As I engaged in the iterative processes of devising, rehearsing, and performing, I found myself reconnecting with the fundamental essence of drama education—not only as a pedagogical tool but as an art form in its own right. Through play,

imagination, and performance, I began to reawaken the passion that had once driven my practice. This led me to question whether other drama and arts educators, similarly disillusioned, might also rediscover their creative and professional vitality through embodied, playful engagement with their own art form.

Ultimately, I came to view my melancholia not as a hindrance but as an integral aspect of my identity as a drama educator—one that underscored my deep artistic sensibility. Yet, as I returned to teaching in a secondary school, I could not have anticipated the extent to which issues of burnout and teacher well-being would soon dominate educational discourse in both New Zealand and England. In the years that followed, hundreds of educators would leave the profession, citing unsustainable workloads and chronic exhaustion—an exodus that signalled an urgent need for systemic change.

Teachers continue to grapple with their mental health, striving to meet the demands placed upon them by schools, governments, parents, and the wider community. In 2018, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association Te Wehengarua [PPTA], conducted a survey examining teachers' perceptions of their own well-being. The findings revealed that many were leaving the profession due to increased workloads which aggravated *burnout* seriously impacting their personal lives (Walters 2019). Since Covid-19 the situation has only continued to get worse with schools struggling to find staff across all subjects and subsequent repercussions for teaching and learning. Had my research begun just a few years later, I might have had the confidence to use the terminology of *burnout* directly. Instead, I chose to frame my inquiry through the dramatic imagery of battles, barricades and melancholy. Perhaps now, my research and its narrative offer a new contribution to the discourse on drama education—and education in and through the arts more broadly—by presenting an alternative approach to conducting research, one that is both embodied and playful and which may contribute to teacher wellbeing.

### **A summary of the methodology: A new way to interview**

In this section I will briefly give an overview of the methodology that I developed to carry out my research. My approach was a pragmatic one helped along by my imagination! My research began quite traditionally with a focus on interviewing participants to gather data for analysis. Interviews are the traditional means of carrying out qualitative and quantitative research particularly the face-to-face interview conducted

between two people. My methodology uniquely provides a means of conducting *dyadic* interviews, face to face with participants, that extend beyond verbal communication, drawing on embodied forms of expression. It then facilitates the transcription, mediation, and sharing of these interviews in a way that seeks to restore some of their original vitality. Oliver Taplin, a scholar of ancient Greek performance, made an excellent observation that written transcription of spoken communication is incomplete: “On one level we miss the tone of voice, nuance, pace, stress; and we miss facial expression, gesture and the physical posture and positioning of the speaker and addressee. Even more profoundly the transcript does not convey the roles and social or personal relationships of the real people involved, their past, their shared assumptions, the full circumstances of the speech act. It lacks context” (1978, 2). As drama specialists know no script is ever complete until it is performed on the stage.

Taplin’s insight underscores the inherent limitations of conventional transcription, which strips spoken exchanges of their embodied and relational dimensions. My approach seeks to counteract this loss by capturing not only the words but also the performative elements of communication—gesture, movement, and spatial relationships—thereby preserving the rich contextual layers that make meaning in human interaction. In doing so, it acknowledges that an interview is not merely a verbal exchange but a dynamic and situated encounter between individuals.

Designing an interactive dyadic interview process that harnesses the power of drama opens vast possibilities for research. While drama workshops typically offer a group-based approach to playing, experimenting, and exploring ideas—often in preparation for performance—a dyadic approach enables a participant and an interviewer to explore ideas dramatically. It uses drama as a tool to gather stories in a way that extends beyond traditional verbal interviews, capturing meaning through embodied experience.

Drama not only conveys ideas and knowledge but does so in ways that engage, entertain, and evoke emotion for both actor and audience. Theatre operates on multiple sensory levels—it is both an auditory and visual experience and, at times, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory. Crucially, it demands a response, even if that is as simple as applause. Audience members share a space, attuned to the reactions of those around them, collectively shaping the experience. No performance is ever identical; each iteration is unique, making the act of communication dynamic and

interactive. By incorporating drama into this research, I draw on its power to create meaningful engagement, transforming the way knowledge is shared and received.

This method of *Embodied Reflections* is distinctive in its emphasis on body language and gesture, moving beyond reliance on voice or spoken words alone. This approach allows both participants and the researcher to engage in play and reflection, developing their ideas organically rather than simply providing direct answers to predetermined questions. The process is deliberately structured to encourage storytelling, offering participants the freedom to interact with props and artefacts, engage their imaginations, and move through the space rather than being confined to a seated position. Rather than straightforward questions, participants can interpret the provocations they are given. Drawing on Brecht's concept of the street scene, in which people naturally tell stories using more than just words—gesticulating, adopting voices, and embodying those they have encountered—*Embodied Reflections* acknowledge that we all dramatise aspects of life, even without formal theatrical training. The use of body language, spatial awareness, and objects enhances communication, allowing for a richer emotional exchange. Additionally, when participants are invited to *imagine* their storytelling as contributing to a larger purpose—such as offering their experiences to a museum or a research centre—their engagement deepens. The researcher's willingness to take on a seemingly lesser role within the interaction further balances power dynamics, creating a more equitable and open exchange of ideas.

### **Back to the beginning**

During the years following my doctorate I felt as if my brain had been shaken up just as my supervisor had promised in our initial meeting. It altered the way I think, and even what I believe. It gave me a renewed belief in the power and value of drama education in secondary schools. It showed me that drama and theatre are valuable, and exciting tools for research. I discovered that I could call myself a researcher and an *artist*. It led eventually to my own daughter undertaking her own doctoral journey in creative practice. Doing a doctorate would mean that nothing would ever be quite the same again. The curtain had risen on a new act—one filled with uncertainty, questions, and quiet resistance. So now, I invite you to return with me to the opening scenes of this doctoral journey: to the hesitations, the muddled beginnings, and the challenges that demanded their own kind of rehearsal before the research could truly begin.

## CHAPTER TWO

### KNOCKING ON THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION DOOR

In the opening scene of my performed Data-Drama *Battles and Barricades: A Drama about Drama Education*, the character "Jane" approaches the institutional threshold with a mix of curiosity and resolve:

Jane:

And so, I knock on the Faculty of Education door.

May I come in?

What for?

*(Steps forward quickly, quietly)*

Well, I'd like to study the battles and barricades of drama education; metaphors drawn from the sometimes-vociferous discourses of over a century of practice. (Episode One, Battles and Barricades)

When I entered the School of Critical Studies at the Faculty of Education, O'Connor had begun setting up The Critical Research Unit in Applied Theatre [CRUAT]. Until this time "arts-based research had very limited recognition in the Faculty of Education or the University of Auckland" (Fitzpatrick, Mullen and O'Connor 2015, 41). I was therefore fortunate to find myself among this dynamic community of scholars, where inquiry was both rigorous and creatively expansive and opportunities to collaborate were frequent, which can be an unusual experience for doctoral students. O'Connor organised several conferences inviting a wide range of international arts-based researchers to share their methods and methodologies and introducing us all to the wider world of arts-based research.

In the early days I spent several months navigating the possibilities and direction of my research. Articulating a precise research question and identifying an appropriate methodology took time—an experience not uncommon for doctoral students. Initially, my research ideas were fairly conventional, but through collaborative drama workshops with the other members of CRUAT, we began to explore, interrogate, and forge

connections between our diverse educational inquiries. Notably, not all members of CRUAT were drama specialists; some had little prior engagement with drama, yet we were united by a shared commitment to innovative research under the guidance of our supervisor. His approach championed the idea that research could be enacted, embodied, performed, and made tangible through creative practice.

As we began to develop our research interests, we each took it in turn to lead a workshop with our CRUAT colleagues to explore our methodological approaches. My workshop took place in a large black box drama studio. At this point I had developed an early prototype of *Embodied Reflections* and introduced this to my doctoral colleagues, offering them a chance to play with the props and prompts that I offered. Later some of my colleagues would describe the process we all shared in these workshops: “CRUAT created a playful space in which time was given for open-ended experimentation. It was a space in which risks could be taken and from which unexpected outcomes could emerge. For myself and other members of CRUAT, collaborating through the arts and performance at different stages in our research journey encouraged synergy and the cross pollination of ideas. Rather than the generation of skills per se, the embodied, creative, collaborative experiences extended both individual and collective knowledge-making” (Fitzpatrick, Mullen and O’Connor 2015, 36).

Molly and Esther recounted a moment from the workshop I had led:

**Molly:** I remember your first CRUAT workshop Jane, remember where you created a dramatic encounter to generate data from your participants, and you worked with us to play and perform this method.

**Esther:** I believe it was through these playful moments created within the CRUAT workshops, many of us developed some of the most important ideas and methodological practices in our doctoral research. (Fitzpatrick, Mullen and O’Connor 2015, 37)

Later, within this collaborative space, I wrote the following poetic monologue for performance which I co-performed with my CRUAT colleagues at several conferences. This was a creative articulation of the tensions and discoveries that shaped the beginning of my doctoral journey. This monologue later became a part of my *Data-Drama* and was included in my thesis.

## Where do I begin?

I'm lost in words:  
Where do I begin?  
Qualitative, Quantitative  
Subjective, Objective  
Epistemology,  
Ontology  
What methodology?  
Empirical, Theoretical  
Narrative, Historical  
Paradigm and Praxis  
Complexity and Chaos  
I'm at a loss.  
Interviews and questionnaires?  
Critical Inquiry?  
Indecisiveness.  
Help!! Help!! HELP!! (Luton 2015b, 11)

Navigating the myriad possibilities and theoretical frameworks within research presented a considerable challenge, particularly when confronted with competing philosophical perspectives. However, what truly invigorated my scholarly journey was the realisation that I could draw on my own experiences and emotions especially given that the communication and experience of emotion are central to drama and theatre. As creative practice researchers confirm nine years after the completion of my project “personal experiences and practice offer fresh perspectives that challenge and expand the existing corpus of knowledge (Batty and Zalipour 2024, 5).

I finally recognised that my own sense of disillusionment should not be suppressed and given my usual British “stiff upper lip” treatment but rather embraced as a critical entry point into my research. Acknowledging the tension between my enduring passion for drama education and my growing frustration with its pedagogical challenges allowed me to position my study within the emotional complexities of the field. Rather than viewing my research as emerging from a place of detachment, I saw it as propelled by frustration, exhaustion, and a deep-seated struggle with the marginalisation of drama education—a landscape marked by persistent battles and barricades. By embracing these emotions as catalysts rather than obstacles, I could harness them to drive my inquiry forward.

## Shaping the question: Navigating doubt, and discovery

In trying to articulate my research question, I recognised a growing sense of frustration as a drama educator, accompanied by an internal critical voice—one that persistently highlighted my perceived shortcomings in the classroom. This voice undermined moments of joy, rendering me unable to fully acknowledge my contributions to student success or my own professional achievements. While I was acutely aware of the rich possibilities that drama education offers, I often felt constrained by curricular demands that prioritised rigorous and judgmental assessment over creative exploration. The tension between fostering students' artistic experimentation and evaluating their work within a structured framework presented an ongoing pedagogical dilemma. Paradoxically, although I was a confident and highly experienced director of school productions, I frequently questioned whether I was “doing it right” in the classroom. These internal struggles became the daily battles that ultimately shaped my research inquiry. During the first year as I reflected on the beginnings of doing a PhD, I scripted my thoughts with those of my supervisor constructed from the many pages of notes I took during our regular meetings.

*[Jane sits at a table, opposite her supervisor, pen in hand, a notebook filled with notes]*

**Jane:** Why, oh why did I become a drama teacher? I feel caught between worlds, torn between drama as an art form and a medium for life changing effects and drama as an assessment subject.

**Peter:** Ah the betwixt and between world of drama education

**Jane:** I always feel that any lesson I teach could be taught in a million different ways; it makes it so difficult.

**Peter:** Is that because drama teachers mediate a living art form that has such endless possibilities?

**Jane:** The possibilities are endless, but I wonder if key drama theorist-practitioners experience self-doubt? What motivates them and keeps them in the field? Can the classroom practitioner and the university researcher have common ground?

**Peter:** Nice question.

**Jane:** Why do I teach drama the way I do? Have my methods changed? How have I been influenced by the big names of drama in education praxis?

**Peter:** Your story will be vital to the research. It will be a touchstone to provide reflection on the other stories too. I almost have a sense of separate but interweaved stories, thematically linked.

**Jane:** I could explore these interweaved stories through the medium of dramatic conventions. I could include thoughts, feelings, experiences, theories, hopes and dreams.

**Peter:** Lovely idea. It will be useful to look at Joe Norris' new book and talk to him later this year. Have you thought about talking to some of those drama theorist-practitioners who have influenced and inspired you?

**Jane:** I'd love to but they're so important and knowledgeable. What if they don't want to talk to me?

**Peter:** You're not a drama teacher anymore. You're a researcher. They will want to be involved.

**Jane:** I'm not a drama teacher any more.... I *am* a researcher...

By scripting the ideas and conversations, I was able to foreground emerging themes and concepts that were becoming central to my research. Particularly significant was the emerging recognition that I was now a researcher, and that my narrative as a secondary drama educator would play a vital role as the "touchstone" in shaping the inquiry. Until this moment I had not recognised that our own stories can be integral to our research projects as previously I had embraced a level of objectivity rather than subjectivity. As Saldaña has since said "you can't learn how to tell someone else's story until you first learn how to tell your own" (Saldaña 2018, 1). As the research began to take shape, a central question emerged: *How does a drama educator navigate and sustain themselves through the inherent "battles" and "barricades" of drama education?* I recognised that there might be no singular answer instead there may be multiple possible answers. Could a passion for drama truly be sustained, or were the challenges insurmountable? Was it possible to overcome "burnout" and rediscover a sense of well-being?

I began compiling a list of influential drama practitioners—those whose work had shaped my own teaching and who appeared not only to have endured but to have thrived. If I posed these questions to them, what insights might they offer? Could their experiences illuminate strategies for negotiating or confronting the tensions within drama education? It soon became evident, as my supervisor wisely pointed out, that in telling their stories, I would inevitably need to confront my own. I would have to

reflect on my personal journey—my struggles, disillusionment, and evolving relationship with a pedagogy and art form that defined me. In doing so, I hoped to provide a source of insight for other drama educators grappling with exhaustion, disillusionment, and the relentless pressures of teaching, assessment, and extracurricular production work.

Yet, articulating the research question was only the beginning. The challenge lay in determining how best to generate data to explore it. Over the ensuing months, I encountered a growing body of scholarship recognising artistic and creative methodologies as legitimate forms of academic inquiry. Immersion in CRUAT and participation in conferences where drama was not only a subject of study but also a methodological approach fundamentally shaped my thinking. At a pivotal early moment, my supervisor introduced the possibility of pursuing a PhD in Education incorporating a creative practice component. This opportunity was both exhilarating and uncertain—an academic risk, but one I felt compelled to embrace. Engaging in creative practice offered a way to harness my skills and longstanding passion for drama and theatre as methodological tools within the research process. It enabled me to explore narratives, metaphors, and embodied ways of knowing, approaches deeply familiar to me through years of classroom teaching and directing theatrical productions. Some months later my supervisor would ask me if I was willing to perform the research myself rather than using my original plan to engage teachers as actors— but by then I knew there was no other alternative. I had to embrace the role of actor and artist.

## **Creative practice for a PhD in Education**

The introduction of the PhD with a Creative Practice component at The University of Auckland in 2011, marked a significant shift in research methodologies and possibilities. This pathway requires candidates to produce both a substantial written thesis—albeit 60,000 words rather than the traditional 80,000-100,000—and a creative performance component. Together, these two elements were designed to form a cohesive, integrated whole.

*Creative Component + Written Thesis = Integrated Whole*

The university statutes stipulated at the time that this pathway was only available to candidates who had “demonstrated advanced training or experience in a relevant creative practice” and who had, within their provisional year, “identified their intention to present a corpus of creative