**Jamie Mackay**

Could you introduce yourself and say a little about your arts? Education context?

**Clara Bloomfield**

Hi! My name is Clara Bloomfield. I am a theater maker and arts educator, slash lecturer within a further educational college, which is also university and a creative therapist as a maker, I suppose, and as an arts educator. I'm interested in creating work with, for, and by young people. And I'm particularly interested from an arts education perspective of how do we create educational environments that have coinciding health outcomes for the people that we a educate.

**Jamie Mackay**

Can you say a little bit about why you applied for the MEd program.?

**Clara Bloomfield**

Well, the reason I applied initially was to reconnect with my artistry. I just wanted a wee place to play and discover. I think I was aware that in my theatre-making life outside of the university and college, I was very much, and I'm still passionate about working with young people, but I just wondered, was I losing my autonomy, and what did that look like, or what was my role, sorry, as a 30 year-old female working with young people like, where was my agency in that? Because, a lot of the work that I make is about telling the stories of these young people within a range of frames, so it could be the direct lived experience frame or verbatim frame, an autobiographical frame. It could be through a fictitious narrative, but within that I just wondered where was my agency within that, so that was part of it from a theatre-making perspective. And as a facilitator, I felt that a lot of the time I was facilitating these playful experiences and environments for people that wasn't myself. So again, you give a lot of your energy out, and that's wholly rewarding. But I just wondered what would it be like to be a participant again, for somebody else to hold that space, to hold my learning and for me to sort of figure out what was the trajectory I was heading on as an artist. And the reason that I wanted to do it within an educational establishment is that you have the permission in these settings to get things wrong without having any impact on your reputation. I think when you become more established, and you've been in the field for a while, you take less risks in the work that you make, because you're aware that there is an impact on funding that you might get, or the review that you might get, or actually God forbid somebody should step out of their lane and do something different. There might be a ripple effect of ‘well, that's not your lane, you don't belong there’. So I think, working within the MEd it gives you permission to do all these things and road test these things in a safe space and alongside people who are hopefully wanting to do the same thing, and by do the same thing I mean, be playful, to explore, to discover, to take risks, to try new things.

**Jamie Mackay**

Could you describe your journey through the image?

**Clara Bloomfield**

So again, I very much started off both as a lecturer and as a theatre-maker, within the two camps that I spoke about, and I thought at the start, that's what I was interested in, like, what is the relationship between adults making theater with young people. And what does that look like both in a rehearsal process, and what does that look like in production? So, looking at the role of the adult in the same performance environment. And is there any sort of hierarchy within that? How does that impact on their relationship? Is it always hierarchical? Is there ever a balance? Is there ever any real co-creation? And that became something that was quite and interesting for me. So that was at the point that I applied, and then very quickly, those things still lived there, but it took on a whole life of its own. I became, I've always been interested in the intersection of theatre and health and the previous masters that I did, and the work that I do outside of my college context sits within that frame. But I was just interested in how does that work within an educational context? If you were to sort of add a third wheel into that intersection, it would be theatre, health, education. And to do that I thought I needed to start playing first, so in my first year, within Context and Culture, I just wanted, reconnecting with the main reason I applied, was just to play. I'm aware that, sort of when you play in within a theater context, or just in general as a human being, your brain releases oxytocin and dopamine. So you get that that sense of reward, enjoy. But sometimes, when you're in educational contexts, the dopamine and oxytocin is different because you're doing something because you have to pass a test or pass an exam. So the release of that is slightly different, so the reward system is slightly different. So I became interested in, so if I remove myself from just thinking about this from I'm doing this for an exam, or doing this as part of my education, what would it be to be in that environment, more fully? I engaged in a week's residency or training with Gaulier, one of the leading clowns in the world, and that taught me a lot about being playful, about being present, about connecting with other people, about not having to facilitate the play of other people. What I didn't expect, however, is in that notion of wanting to be playful and get caught up in that, Gaulier’s got a very specific approach of em, of teaching, and I'm using the word teaching very loosely here because he's very much about being present in the space, but when you get it wrong he'll tell you that you've got it wrong, but he won't tell you how you've got it wrong. So, within that whole period you become very confused about, am I doing this to please a teacher, to get the teacher to say I'm doing the right thing? Am I doing it just to be funny? And what does that even look like? And it made me really think about my role as an arts educator, because it made me think about how much of this are my students performing to please me, or please other lecturers to get it right. And how much of that ripples into their wider life of people-pleasing behaviors and whatnot. And then it made me think about my own relationship with education, my own relationship with other people. And it was really interesting. It was brilliant, but yeah, quite interesting to start digging through your own archives of your life to sort of think about well, what is my relationship with other people, and what I'm like within an educational context? And then how does that mirror how you lecture, or actually, how does that mirror how you work as a theatre-maker, or actually just how your relationships are with other people. So, that was very much the first year, and that's lasted for with me for the past sort of 5 years. Then year 2 came, and so did Covid. Hurrah! And that became really interesting, because I knew that was very much interested in the intersection of theatre and health and education, but because my education was interrupted by Covid, it really made me stop and think about my PG Cert, and the thought the thing that I thought I was working towards had to be reframed quite quickly in terms of thinking about, so, just to give a little context, I was very much interested in the role of verbatim theatre and how it can be used to develop people's meta-skills, and particularly the meta-skill of empathy and in terms of the mirror neurons that are released for people when they're watching verbatim theatre, or they're engaged in the process of making verbatim theatre, and how those mirror new neurons enhance people's capacity for empathy. But because of covid I couldn't run the whole, I suppose, research. I had to just frame it from a thought experiment perspective. But what it did me make me think about was actually the future of digital learning. And actually, what does digital learning look like through the frame of arts education, theatre. and specifically, through the role of the pandemic, health. So that then became the whole focal point, as I moved towards my MEd project, is thinking about, if we're moving towards a more digital learning or more hybrid and yeah, performing arts is very much still a practical subject, but as our world evolves, and the way that we educate changes, is there a role for performance within that digital sphere? And it really made me think about what does that look like? And also because we were sort of very much online because of Covid, it made me reframe my whole Final Project to think about digital learning, performing arts and the health and wellbeing of our students.

**Jamie Mackay**

Okay, thank you. The next question is going to be, what did you focus on for your Final Project? I think you may have answered that already, so I’ll go on to the next question after that. What impact did this have in your practice as an arts educator particularly thinking about that Final Project?

**Clara Bloomfield**

Yeah, I might just go back a little bit and say a little bit more about my Final Project, as I think it might contextualize this a little clearer. So, because my final project was very much interested in that intersection between and education from a higher educational perspective, theatre of the lived experience, and health, I think we're all aware that over the last 10 years, talking about mental wellbeing has really increased, and it's becoming less of an area of shame in people's lives. Young people's mental health, though, has unfortunately really declined over the past 10 years for a multitude of different reasons, and we're beginning to understand that one of the schools of thought is of young people's mental health isn't address fully by the age of 14, there's a high percentage of people, I think it's really high, like, 40, 50% of people will continue with that same mental health concern throughout the duration of their life. So actually, as people who work with younger teenagers, we've got a real opportunity to support that development into a lifelong aspect of their life, they have to sort of navigate and live with. So because I was aware, as an arts educator within a higher educational establishment that young people's mental health was on the decline, and a result of that is social factors, economic factors, all these things impact on students ability to be present and to learn in the classroom. Those are things that, certainly at that point were out with our control, like the pandemic. And it was really discouraging people to have that feeling of belonging and connectedness with other human beings, we all know that's one of the key factors for people to flourish is if you've got a strong social network. And in fact, Harvard did a study on that. They tracked this over, I think 60 or 70 years that the number one factor for people being well is having a strong social network. And during Covid that just couldn't happen for people. People were isolated from their peers, people were isolated from and their social networks. So that's what I was really interested in - how do we do this? And a lot of my practices I've already sort of spoken about is very much about people's lived experiences, and within, I suppose, a theatre framework, you've got to have a conflict, don't you? You have, like the establishment of the character, the quest, the conflict, the resolution. Normally, the conflict’s a bad thing, and I didn't want to put our students in a situation where they were talking about negative lived experiences because a. vicarious trauma could result of that for other people in this digital learning environment, and when they close that computer they would have nowhere to go, no one to speak to. And I wondered how much would sharing positive stories impact on people's wellbeing. So, I did a lot of research about the use of positivity and positive psychology. And I discovered an aspect of positive psychology, so called capitalization, whereby the recalling of a positive event can increase your resilience. And I just became really interested in that as a concept. And again to support our students through that, even though some people's positive lived experiences might not always be positive for other people, I made sure from a college perspective, certainly, that our wellbeing team were versed on the research that was happening, that our students had a direct link to the wellbeing and counselling team. So, if they did close the computer and they were left with feelings that weren't wholly positive that they had an outlet. They were also given a list of resources and individuals that they can contact to support them through that if they needed that. How this has impacted on my wider practice as an arts educator, it's really made me so aware of how much the education is just a small part, and what we do for our young people, or actually the people that we serve, whether it be younger, older, whatever their age or demographic is that if people are not in the right space, physically or mentally, to learn, they won't learn. So I believe, certainly, that as an arts educator, I've got a responsibility to make sure that that environment is at least giving students the right space that they can do that. And that could be from making sure I'm going in early and turning the heating on. So people who experience, perhaps heat poverty, who come from cold homes can come in, and at least the rooms warm for them, coming in. Having soft openings to the classroom, so that people come a little bit early and take their jackets off and get warm and get themselves in a position that they're physically ready to do this and not just ‘okay, the class starts at 9, let's go’. Because if you don't have the foundations of those things like Maslow suggests, then these students won't be ready. So thinking about Malsow’s Hierarchy of Needs, I suppose it's really thinking about, how am I integrating some of these things into my educational environment to go to that stage of belonging, that these students do feel ready to learn. So they're ready to learn. And they're not in a position that that learning environment is the only thing that they do. How are we making sure that our rehearsal rooms are, I suppose, supportive in terms of the role and considering our students’ mental health. And that could be thinking about either the play that you're working on, is there themes in there that could be in triggering for people as a content of your class, could that be triggering? It's really just making me really dissect the nuances of the work that I'm doing to make sure that the environment, as much as I can't control all of these things, that I'm certainly in a position that I can provide pathways to students for to get the right support should they need it.

**Jamie Mackay**

So I think you have answered the question about the impact on your own arts practice, but what has changed as a result of you studying the MEd?

**Clara Bloomfield**

Two things, really. One, I think I'm becoming a much better educator as a result of that, because it's just not about thinking about the art, it's thinking about actually what do people need to be successful in that art, and be successful, I mean, be present. I mean, be able to sort of connect with other people, and actually to have the understanding of how then to do the art or the theatre in my case. The other thing its changed is its made me really passionate about the intersection of students being able to have coinciding outcomes that aren't measured through people's health and people's educational attainment. And it's making me really aware of that in my wider arts practice. And that's been the lovely thing about this master's. It's about the two things, isn't it? It's about developing your artistry. I was given the chance to play and discover the thing that I'm really passionate about, and it's all, how that's evolved, I suppose, over time, and allowed me to be a maker again in a way that hadn't been for 2 or 3 years as a result of Covid and other things, but then also made me think about how am I transferring that into the classroom environment. So, actually, the people that benefit from this master just isn't the student. It just isn't people like me. Actually, it's the ripple effect, and I don't think we talk about this enough in this MEd, it's the ripple effect that is impacting on the hundreds, if not by this point in the masters, thousands of people who have had this ripple effect because of the number of people who have directly studied, the research that people have undertaken, the positive experiences that people have had in the classroom or in formal learning environments, the studies that people have done, the impact to literature, the impact to even individuals like the students that I worked with on my Final Project, their wellbeing increased by 50%. And if I was able to measure that 28 of the people had a positive not only learning experience, but their wellbeing was increased by 50%, that means 29 people who have benefited from me studying his master's and I think that's wholly fantastic, and that needs to be catalogued. We need to find a better way to do that. Yes, so that's certainly something that landed on my awareness.

**Jamie Mackay**

Thanks very much, Clara.