

**Submission
No 120**

**INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Submission to the Inquiry into Arts and Music Education and training in NSW.

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The following comments are made in the context of my extensive experience working with the existing and previous Drama syllabus documents. I began teaching the course in 1995 in southwest Sydney and then continued from 2000-2009 in a small independent school. I then commenced my doctoral studies in 2010 and taught the drama pedagogy subjects (method) across two Sydney universities from 2014-2019. During that time, I was also a Senior marker, member of the examination committee and Chief examiner. I continue to teach and research drama pedagogy in a tertiary context, currently introducing drama to primary initial teacher education students.

My concerns with the draft syllabus are that it appears to disregard 30 years of successful practice and a wealth of research evidence that support current practice. Specifically, **the academic research (including my own) referenced in the draft to explain and validate the document does not support the details of the syllabus, suggesting a disconnect in the process.** The emphasis on embodied learning and assessment in the current syllabus has been exemplary in generating students' knowledge, skills and understanding of drama and theatre practices as well as developing creativity, collaboration, and interpersonal skills. While there was room for reform and continued improvement, **the scale and scope of the proposed changes will undermine the effectiveness of the course and place its ability to continue to meet students learning needs in jeopardy.**

As a syllabus that needs to offer a coherent addition to the existing subject progression, **the draft syllabus does not represent an appropriate conclusion to the recently endorsed Drama 7-10 syllabus nor the Creative Arts K-6.** In particular, the reduction in emphasis on creative collaboration in the draft 11-12 syllabus directly contradicts its continued centrality in Drama 7-10.

The syllabus document has reduced the number and clarity of outcomes, as well as its content and practice descriptions. In contradiction to its stated aim of making it easier for teachers to plan for learning, **the draft document is unteachable.** Unless the educator is experienced and can reverse engineer their programs, the document does not include the essential knowledge and skills needed to teach the course.

The outcome statements offer less rigor and precision than the 7-10 syllabus. For example, the first performance outcomes in stage 5, "applies and adapts performance skills and dramatic processes to communicate intention and meaning" (DR5-PER-01) contains greater rigour than the corresponding performance outcome in year 12, "Analyses and applies forms and styles to dramatic works and experiences".

As research has shown, assessment drives pedagogy (OECD, 2024). **The changes to the assessment practices released with the draft syllabus will result in the loss of rigour and emphasis on embodied learning in the classroom and live demonstration of those skills.** Group performance has always been subject to internal NESA judgment and moderation processes that have consistently shown that the rigour of our marking practice is statistically consistent with other courses. The increase in written examinations included in the draft assessment document reflects a misunderstanding of the 'way of knowing' contained in the course. Further, the reduction of the Individual project choices and the implications of those that have been removed and those that remain, are decisions that do not appear to be pedagogically based (see below).

The removal of a compulsory collaborative devising component in year 11 and 12, and the removal of the external Group Performance (GP) examination in year 12, has significant impact on the skills

and knowledge the subject will develop and reward. The year 11 and 12 course, while indicating the need to develop devising skills, includes the requirement of an ensemble (not devised) performance, which would be satisfied by the performance (or rehearsed reading?) of an excerpt of scripted work. A major devising performance is no longer required. In its place, the ensemble experience will be assessed via a short (10 mark) response in the examination.

Pedagogically, these changes are problematic for the following reasons:

1. **The second goal of the NSW Curriculum review emphasises developing students' skills in applying knowledge, with collaboration and creative thinking specifically highlighted.** The removal of the Group Devised performance, an exemplary assessment task for assessing creativity in an authentic context (see below) contradicts this goal (Masters, 2020).
2. **The changes contained in the proposed syllabus are at odds with the intent of the review process.** The terms of reference of the review emphasised the need to 'strive to meet the needs of a wide range of students, including those who are Aboriginal, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or living with disabilities' (NESA, 2018, p. 1). Increasing the importance of the written exam is a failure to meet one of the key syllabus review intentions and obligations.
3. **The syllabus changes being proposed seriously disadvantages a range of students and are at odds with the policies regarding diversity and inclusion.** The removal of the Video drama individual project option seriously disadvantages students who are financially or geographically precluded from seeing live theatre. The availability of filmmaking technology is not dependent upon economic advantage, as most students have access to technology sufficient to make a short film. Privileging visual (as opposed to written) language also responds to **goals of inclusivity around neurodiversity and EALD students as well as differing physical abilities**, thus providing access to the full range of students in NSW schools.
4. **The removal of the Directors folio and the Critical Analysis options in the individual project does not demonstrate an understanding of the breadth of academic and conceptual sophistication demonstrated by Drama students and denies students the option to be extended in this way.**
5. The decision to digitally submit projects has implications for some of the projects. For costume and set design projects, **digital submission does not allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the tactile qualities** of their designs, which is achieved in the more common industry practice of creating renderings or models to demonstrate students understanding of the embodied impact of the fabric and material choices (e.g. under lights).
6. **The removal of the Group Performance requirement and the external examination has profound impact on the course. This change means that not all outcomes will be assessed externally.** The ensemble aspect of the outcome 'performs characters and roles for an audience as an individual and ensemble to shape audience response' will never be assessed externally. Two of the three syllabus performance outcomes will not be externally assessed for students who do not choose an Individual project-performance. **With a reduction in outcomes, all need to be assessed externally and authentically.**
7. Students need to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding in a performance exam. **The skills generated by devised ensemble work cannot be examined in a formal written exam.** A written exam can only assess *reflection* on the process (which can be imagined process rather than actual). The embodied practice of performance is essential knowledge. **Performance is the only way to demonstrate the 'verbs' in the outcome.** The

verbs require students to demonstrate their ability to use dramatic conventions to construct and refine meaning and shape audience impact. A written task can only assess that they understand the impact of these components.

8. **The emphasis on written exams and using them to moderate all assessment marks is problematic.** As they assess very different skills, students will be disadvantaged, and the validity and reliability of the assessment procedures will be compromised. The return to written exams is a retrograde step and contradicts current evidence-based understanding of best practice in assessment (Lucas, 2021). Lucas encourages adopting performative portfolio-based assessment, something the current syllabus and assessment practices do very well.
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Major concern

Most concerning for me is the lack of recognition of the excellence of the current task design for the group performance. **My current research has found that the group devised performance assessment, and its specific parameters, offer an authentic and rigorous assessment of creativity in the context of subject knowledge and understanding, something that has the potential for international influence.** Any reform, and some is needed, should build on not abandon the current strengths.

Creativity in schools is an international educational imperative (OECD, 2024). The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration argues that young people need ‘flexibility, resilience, [and] creativity’ to navigate the 21st Century (Department of Education, 2019).

My research has found that the group performance (GP) examination as a high stakes assessment task is powerful in its focus on student voice and agency and its inherent rewards for creative expression and innovation.

The task design reflects authentic industry practice (devising theatre) rather than an inauthentic exam task. **The requirement to generate original theatre that demonstrates innovation and flair, privileges student voice and encourages authentic creative practices.** As students choose the theme/story and form, the design encourages personal involvement and genuine expression of ideas. The emphasis on student agency and choice allows students to highlight their strengths. The inclusion in the assessment of a criterion that rewards powerful audience impact ensures **students focus on creating engaging theatre for a universal audience, rather than an imagined marker.** The examination practice of having a small student audience for the performance reinforces that the markers are assessing the work from the perspective of an informed audience member (as opposed to a teacher marker).

The GP develops and rewards true collaborative creative practices, with an inherent expectation of equal ensemble performance. The length of time allocated to the devising process allows students to experience and develop skills in ‘slow’ creativity – including idea generation, refinement, and iterations, that reflects authentic creative practice. As an open task it is a **true capstone assessment** that allows students to interpret, employ, and transform their entire drama understanding, skills and subject knowledge into a unique group devised form. The task design also recognises and rewards original forms in the marking criteria. The collaboration also provides contextually authentic opportunities to develop and exercise problem solving and mediation skills that are essential for future success.

The combination of voice, agency and collaboration encouraged **students to be driven by intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards.** The task design encourages students to be personally engaged and

invested in devising a good piece of theatre which would be rewarded in the marking. The opportunities for voice, collaborative idea sharing, and agency were universally reported by my research participants as beneficial for wellbeing and were unique amongst their HSC examinations.

The task inherently rewards innovation as each group in my study all began with the goal of doing something different than anything they had seen before. Innovation and creativity were generated by student personal investment, privileging their abilities and perspectives, very rare practices in high stakes examinations. In an educational landscape dominated by concerns about Gen AI and authentic assessment, the live performance and long iterative creative process reflect recent recommendations for responsive assessment redesign (Lucas, 2021).

In an international climate that continues to search for ways to operationalise creativity and creative assessment in classrooms, the existing **GP task design offers lessons that could improve practice and pedagogy across subject areas, worldwide.**

Potential reforms

As indicated, some reform is needed. There are two aspects I would address.

The first relates to **student attendance and increasing issues with group cohesion.** As this is an operational rather than pedagogical concern, more thought and the development of supportive protocols could be developed to respond to the needs of these students. The impact of students on the marks of others is part of this issue – but one that is common across all subjects. The moderation and scaling procedures in all subjects means that students' performances impact others when the marks are 'processed'. When assessment marks (and averages) are adjusted based on examination performance, a lower-than-expected performance by students after a 'good' assessment mark will adversely impact the results of the whole cohort.

The other issue is a pedagogical one and was a theme in my research. **The current task would be enhanced with the linking of the group devising to a practitioner or a form,** preferably linked to the drama and theatre work that forms part of their year 12 study. Current practice supports students in this open task by encouraging the scaffolding of a form to guide their developing piece (Gardiner, forthcoming). This extra parameters would act as liberating constraints. Students desire to 'do something new' would still be rewarded by the regeneration (Gardiner, forthcoming) of their form(s) to include modifications that reflect the abilities, interests, and motivation of the group.

The group performance is a world leading assessment practice that should be reinstated and gently reformed to respond to the needs of our students but to maintain the current benefits.

References

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