

THIS IS SCHOOL (or "CHANGING THE SCRIPT")

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A Play within a Play

By

Rachel Bolstad



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PO Box 3237  
Wellington, NZ  
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### Author's note

This play was written especially for NZCER's Shifting Thinking Conference, and was first performed on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, at Circa Theatre in Wellington.

The inspiration for the play came from ongoing discussions amongst the conference organising team as we struggled with the complexities of imagining and choreographing a 21st century learning experience at the conference. Originally we thought of performing a play about our seemingly endless and often mind-twisting planning meetings - but later I took this idea in a new direction and was inspired to write a play-within-a-play featuring an imagined cast of players. The play was a metaphor for the conference, and for 21st century thinking in general. It shows the difficulties of trying to "direct and stage manage" something when everyone is taking an active role in trying to build ideas collectively and collaboratively - but it also shows that wonderful things are possible once we begin questioning our assumptions and start thinking together about how these could be different.

A video of the original performance of the play can be viewed at <http://www.shiftingthinking.org/?p=1822>

### Sources referred to in the play

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Ministry of Education (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

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Prensky, M. (2006) *Don't bother me mom, I'm learning! How computer and video games are preparing your kids for 21<sup>st</sup> century success - and how you can help!* St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House.

Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

## Cast of Characters

The Director	The director likes to be in control. She is firm and expects her actors to follow her directions. When she is challenged, she gets increasingly irritated.
Actor playing Teacher 1	He is very enthusiastic and excited about being part of the play. He is like a bouncy puppy but (from the director's point of view) he is a bit "clueless". He is constantly puzzled about why his questions and ideas are not taken well by the director.
Actor playing Teacher 2	She is serious and thoughtful and wants to really understand her character's "motivation. Through her questions she develops quite thoughtful ideas and suggests some good ideas for scripting science education differently. Unfortunately, the director won't engage with these suggestions because they weren't in the script.
Actor playing Student 1	A casual and laid-back user of digital technologies. He's willing to question authorities, but at the end of the day he's not too fussed what they have to say - he'll draw his own conclusions.
Actor playing Student 2	A young person who can't even see the point of putting on this play - She is preoccupied with what she sees as much more important and critical issues - like the future of the planet! She's become morose and overwhelmed by the challenges of climate change etc - and wants the director to face this reality.
Early childhood educator	She isn't an actor but is a real early childhood educator who has stumbled into the play and wants to engage with it, bringing in her ECE knowledge and experience. She's very interested in ways to engage parents and families in shaping education.
Tertiary educator	He isn't an actor but is a real tertiary educator who has stumbled

into the play and wants to engage with it. He's excited because he hardly ever gets to talk about teaching and learning with his tertiary colleagues. He sees this as a chance to talk about it with people from other education sectors.

Community educator

She isn't an actor but is a real community educator who has stumbled into the play and wants to engage with it, bringing in her knowledge and experience in community education. She knows that many people she works with as a community educator have not had successful or happy experiences of formal education. She wants to share some of her ideas and experiences drawn from community development.

## SETTING

Four actors are sitting on stage. They are all holding paper scripts. Two sit in chairs on the left side of the stage, two sit on chairs to the right. Each pair is chatting quietly to the person they are sitting next to.

The pair on the left are actors who are about to play the roles of TEACHER 1 and TEACHER 2. The pair on the right are actors about to play the roles of STUDENT 1 and STUDENT 2.

A screen behind the stage displays a message (a powerpoint slide with white text on a black background). The message says "Quiet Please"

As the audience falls silent, a cellphone ringtone is heard. A woman (THE DIRECTOR) walks into the room and onto the stage speaking loudly on her cellphone. She announces to the person on the other end of the phone that she has just arrived at the theatre for a dress rehearsal. She explains that she will have to call back later - and hangs up.

(The screen at the back of the stage goes black)

DIRECTOR

(To all the actors)

OK, you've all got your scripts have you? Right let's do a run-through.

(DIRECTOR looks around and sees TEACHER 1 and TEACHER 2, gestures to them)

Ah yes, you two are playing the teachers, aren't you. Can I have my teachers over here please?

(The two "teachers" come to where the DIRECTOR is standing. TEACHER 2 is dressed in today's clothes, TEACHER 1 is dressed in 19th century garb)

DIRECTOR

(To Teacher 1, bemused)

What on earth are you wearing?

TEACHER 1

(Looks at self, puzzled)

What do you mean?

DIRECTOR

What do you think this is, Oliver Twist? This is a play about SCHOOL. You look like you've stepped right out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century!

TEACHER 1

(genuinely surprised)

Is that not right? Oh, sorry, I must have got the wrong end of the stick.

DIRECTOR

(Annoyed)

Did you even read the script?

TEACHER 1

Yes.

DIRECTOR

And you thought this play was set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

TEACHER 1

Yes.

DIRECTOR

THIS IS THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY!

TEACHER 2

(to DIRECTOR)

Um... actually it's the 21<sup>st</sup> century

DIRECTOR

(flustered)

Yes, yes of course, that's what I said - this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century...

TEACHER 1

Sorry, my mistake.

DIRECTOR

Never mind, we'll organise a proper costume for you later. Let's just carry on. Alright now in this play, you'll be playing the science teacher (points to teacher 2), and you'll be playing the English teacher (points to TEACHER 1). Now obviously you won't be doing any scenes together...

TEACHER 1

We're not doing any scenes together?

DIRECTOR

(To TEACHER 1)

No.

DIRECTOR

(Turns to TEACHER 2)

Now in the first scene, you're teaching the Nitrogen cycle...

TEACHER 1

(interrupts)

Excuse me...

DIRECTOR

Yes, what is it?

TEACHER 1

You said "we won't be doing any scenes together"...

DIRECTOR

Yes, that's right...

TEACHER 1

Why?

DIRECTOR

What do you mean, why? Because you're the *English* teacher. You are in the *English teaching* scenes. And s/he (*points to TEACHER 2*) is the *science* teacher. She is in the *science teaching* scenes.

TEACHER 1

But couldn't we do a scene where we're *both teaching* together?

DIRECTOR

Of COURSE not!

TEACHER 1

Why not?

DIRECTOR

Because that's not in the script! The script doesn't say "The English teacher and the science teacher teach together". It wouldn't work. What would you call that, "English-Science" class? Don't you remember secondary school? They don't mix all the subjects together. It wouldn't fit on the timetable.

TEACHER 1

Hmm yeah that could be a problem...

DIRECTOR

Yes.

(Turns attention back to TEACHER 2)

Ok so in this scene...

TEACHER 1

(interrupts again)

Couldn't they just change the timetable?

DIRECTOR

(Has lost patience with TEACHER 1)

Look - People can't just go around changing timetables. And that's not in the script!

(Shakes script at TEACHER 1)

Can we please just stick with the script?

TEACHER 1

(Deflated)

Sorry.

DIRECTOR

In fact, why don't you go sit down, you're not even in this first scene, off you go.

(DIRECTOR regains her composure here and reasserts her authority/control over this play by shooing TEACHER 1 offstage)

(TEACHER 1 goes and sits down. He flips through the script for a few moments, and after a while he picks up Jane Gilbert's book *Catching the Knowledge Wave* which is lying near his chair, and start thumbing through it. In the background we see him reading the book engrossedly and maybe he even starts nodding to himself and putting post-it notes on the pages he's getting excited about)

DIRECTOR

Now where were we?

(to teacher 2).

Ok you, science teacher. In this scene you are teaching the Nitrogen cycle to your Year 10 class.

TEACHER 2

OK, what's the Nitrogen Cycle?

DIRECTOR

Ah, let's see

(looks at her script)

Yes here we are, "It's the biogeochemical cycle that describes the transformations of nitrogen and nitrogen-containing compounds in nature."

(TEXT ON SCREEN READS: "The Nitrogen Cycle: the biogeochemical cycle that describes the transformations of nitrogen and nitrogen-containing compounds in nature." (Source Wikipedia)

DIRECTOR

(Notices the screen, is surprised)

Hey why's that up there? Who's doing that?

(Looks around to see who might be doing it)

TEACHER 2

(Shrugs to DIRECTOR)

And why am I teaching it to these students?

DIRECTOR

(annoyed)

Because it's a *science class*, and you are a *science teacher*.

TEACHER 2

Yes but what's my motivation?

DIRECTOR

Your motivation is that you want these students to learn the Nitrogen cycle!

TEACHER 2

Yes but *why* do I want them to learn that?

DIRECTOR

Because that's what you'd cover in Year 10! There would be a test on it.

TEACHER 2

Yes but I mean, *why* is it important to learn? Can they do something with it?

DIRECTOR

Do something with it? They aren't playing scientists here, they're playing Year 10s. They don't have to "do" anything with it, they just have to learn it.

TEACHER 2

Why?

DIRECTOR

I don't know! So they can go for a walk and show mum and dad where the nitrogen is in the trees and the soil and the air. Maybe it will help them with the garden. Maybe they'll grow up and be scientists one day.

(ON SCREEN Picture of nitrogen cycle.

Picture of garden. Picture of scientists.)

DIRECTOR

(Sees screen, irritated)

I don't know *why* that keeps happening, It's so distracting.

(To TEACHER 2)

Anyway what does it matter? You don't need to be worried about all these things.

TEACHER 2

Going out to look at the trees and the soil, that's a good idea... Can we do that?

DIRECTOR

(Flustered)

Well, that's not in the script...

TEACHER 2

Actually, my friend in Tai Tokerau monitors water quality for the council up there. It's something to do with fertiliser and animal waste run-off into streams, does that have something to do with nitrogen?

(Doesn't wait for DIRECTOR to reply)

Anyway, it was so cool, these kids at a High School decided to fence off their wetland and do some replanting to keep the water healthy...Could we do something like that?

(As TEACHER 2 talks, slides appear on the screen: an image of the Northern part of the North Island of NZ, a photograph of a fenced-off wetland, and a group photograph of school students holding nets, shovels, and other gear they have used to look after their wetland.)

DIRECTOR

(Looks at the screen, is annoyed, looks back at TEACHER 2)

Are you doing that? Have you got something in your pocket? Look. These are very nice ideas. But we don't have time and it's not very realistic. Don't you know how long it takes teachers to organise something with people from outside the school? *Then* they have to get parents' permission to take them out of school. *Then* they've got to sort out a bus, it's a nightmare! And what about getting them back in time for their next class? We've got a whole English teaching scene coming up next

(Shaking the script to indicate that this is where the answer lies)

Would you want them to miss out on English? The English teacher's not going to like that!

TEACHER 2

Let's ask him! He could come along?

DIRECTOR

(Frustrated)

NO! We're just doing the script as it's written! Look, why don't you go sit down and practice your lines and I'll just work with the students for a bit.

TEACHER 2

Yes, where are all the students?

DIRECTOR

(points to the STUDENTS)

They're over there.

TEACHER 2

But there's only two of them.

DIRECTOR

Yes, well they're the good ones.

TEACHER 2

What do you mean, "good ones"?

DIRECTOR

Oh, you know, they're the ones who like learning. They do what they're supposed to do. You'll see. They'll put their hands up and ask sensible questions. We didn't cast any bad students, they tend to cause trouble.

TEACHER 2

But won't it look strange, only having two students?

DIRECTOR

(Excited)

Oh, no, no, don't worry about that. The set designer's going to paint the rest of them on. You know, he'll just paint them on the backdrop. It's much better that way, they won't be so disruptive. You can just get on with your teaching.

(TEACHER 2 walks off, looking puzzled)

DIRECTOR

Right now where are my lovely students?

DIRECTOR

(Sees the "students").

Ah yes - you two are playing the students.

DIRECTOR

(Looks at them, frowning)

Hmm...you do look a bit *big* for Year 10.... Oh well. Never mind. If we have you sitting behind desks the audience won't notice...

(DIRECTOR notices STUDENT 1 is wearing headphones, while texting. DIRECTOR, irritated pulls out his headphones)

DIRECTOR

What are you doing! This is a dress rehearsal!

STUDENT 1

Yeah, I was just trying to get in character.

DIRECTOR

Your character is supposed to be a good student!

STUDENT 1

Yeah but aren't I like, a "digital native" or something?

DIRECTOR

What's that got to do with anything?

STUDENT 1

Dunno, but I think I'm supposed to be really bored at school, because all the real learning happens in my own time with my digital technologies. Actually I wanted to talk to you about that - I can't pick up a wifi signal in here, what is UP WITH THAT?

DIRECTOR

Where are you getting these ideas?

STUDENT 1

Oh, I was just listening to a podcast about it... this guy Marc Prensky, he says you're supposed to "engage me", or else you'll "enrage me"! (gestures with finger quotes)

DIRECTOR

Pardon?

STUDENT 1

Yeah, he says schools are "old skool". He says you're teaching me for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but you're supposed to give me what I need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

DIRECTOR

And what is that?

STUDENT 1

(shrugs)

I'rruno, I didn't finish listening yet.

DIRECTOR

(to STUDENT 2)

What about you, I suppose you've got something to say about that as well?

STUDENT 2

(Sadly)

I don't care.

DIRECTOR

Don't care about what?

STUDENT 2

Don't care about technology. No point. We're all doomed anyway.

DIRECTOR

Beg your pardon?

STUDENT 2

Peak Oil. Runaway climate change.

(Definitions come up on the screen as she spakes: **Peak oil** is the point in time when

the maximum rate of global petroleum extraction is reached, after which the rate of production enters terminal decline. (Source Wikipedia). **Runaway climate change** is a situation in which the climate system passes a tipping point, after which internal positive feedback effects cause the climate to continue changing without further external forcings. (Source Wikipedia))

DIRECTOR

Well I've heard about these things, but honestly what's climate change got to do with education?

STUDENT 2

Don't you know how serious it is?

DIRECTOR

Is it?

STUDENT 2

(glumly)

Well - just look at all that...

(points to the screen. On-screen are a series of images and excerpts from IPCC reports showing climate change predictions)

DIRECTOR

Are you doing that?

(STUDENT 2 shakes head)

DIRECTOR

Well, yes, that does sound quite bad... But it wasn't in the script! Can we just forget about it for now? This is just a nice simple play about school and we're never going to get there unless you all stop questioning everything!

(TEACHER 1 comes back on stage holding copy of *Catching the knowledge wave*)

TEACHER 1

Hey, look at this!

DIRECTOR

(groans)

Oh no, here we go...

TEACHER 1

Yeah, I've just been reading this book, *Catching the Knowledge Wave*, listen to this, it'll blow your mind (reads aloud) "The world outside education now values the ability to produce knowledge over the ability to consume old knowledge.... The ability to "think outside the square" is more important than the

ability to follow rules, as is the ability to learn, to go on learning, and to help others to learn..."

(ONSCREEN Quote as above)

DIRECTOR

Whaaat?

TEACHER 1

There's more, listen: "people foresee the current focus on delivering a sequential, one-size-fits-all curriculum to batches of students giving way to individualised learning plans that allow individual students to work at a level and a pace appropriate for them, and to achieve their goals via a variety of pathways. The curriculum will be an integrated network of possibilities, delivered in a modular form on an as-and-when-needed basis - often offsite."

(ONSCREEN Quote as above)

DIRECTOR

What's all that supposed to mean?

TEACHER 1

I'm not sure, but listen to what it says about teachers: "As individuals, they will need to be innovative, systems-level thinkers, who work well in cross-disciplinary teams. They will need to be strongly committed to their ongoing learning, and to being part of several different professional learning communities, only some of which will include other teachers..."

(ONSCREEN Quote as above)

(TEACHER 2 comes back onstage, carrying *The New Zealand Curriculum*)

TEACHER 2

Hey look at this, I found something in here that says: "Future focus The curriculum encourages students to look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship, enterprise, and globalization" - What do you think that means?

DIRECTOR

I don't know! Why are you asking me?

TEACHER 1

Isn't it relevant?

STUDENT 2

Of course it is! Education's supposed to be about the future isn't it? Otherwise what's the point? Look at what it says in this North and South article (Reads aloud) "Rosemary Hipkins says that dealing with complexity and ambiguity will be an important part of the education of Gen Y. She gives the example of omega-3 being found to protect against heart disease. Great, but if everybody ate more oily fish, what

would happen to wild fish stocks? "We have to find a way to educate kids to see the big-picture connectedness and to understand that there isn't one right answer anymore..."

(Screen shows the quote and cover of *North and South*)

TEACHER 1

(Pointing to screen)

"There isn't one right answer anymore"

(to DIRECTOR)

Wow! See that?

(Just then three other people walk on stage)

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR

Well *that's* a bit of a challenge for you, isn't it!

DIRECTOR

Excuse me - who are you?

ECE EDUCATOR

I'm an early childhood educator

TERTIARY EDUCATOR

I'm a tertiary educator

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR

And I'm from the community development sector

ECE EDUCATOR

Yes - we've been watching you, we've just had a chat and realised we've all got quite different ideas about teaching and learning.

DIRECTOR

So?

TERTIARY EDUCATOR

Well you seem to be having some problems with your script, we thought we could all bounce a few ideas around.

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR

Yes, for example I work with people in the community sector and lots of them had a terrible time at school. Our ways of supporting learning aren't anything like what happens in your script. I've got heaps of ideas you could use!

TERTIARY EDUCATOR

Yes and coming from the tertiary sector, you know half my colleagues are only interested in talking about research. But this is great - I'm getting a chance to talk about teaching and learning for a change!

ECE EDUCATOR

Yeah, it's really cool isn't it!

DIRECTOR  
 (to all 3 of them)  
 But you're not even in this play!!

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR  
 But couldn't you write us in?

DIRECTOR  
I didn't write it!

ECE EDUCATOR  
 Well, who did?

DIRECTOR  
 I don't know! But I'm sure they wouldn't be happy about you trying to write yourselves into it!

ECE EDUCATOR  
 Well as long as we're writing more people in, can we please add in some parts for parents and families?

TEACHER 2  
 (still holding *Curriculum*)  
 Yes - look, it says something about that in here too!  
 (reads aloud)  
 "**Community engagement** The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities."

TEACHER 1  
 How do you do that though? Listen to this  
 (reads from *Catching the Knowledge Wave*)  
 "industrial-age schools are specialist entities run by experts and so are necessarily distinct from other community activities. And because they are run by experts, the community tends to leave them to get on with it. As a result, most schools, while they may be the site of many community activities, are not well set up to engage with, or contribute to, whatever is really going on in their communities..."

(Onscreen: Quote as above)

ECE EDUCATOR  
 Well, we've been doing that in early childhood education for a while, I could tell you a bit about it if you'd like?

DIRECTOR  
 OK THAT'S IT!! I QUIT!!!  
 (DIRECTOR tears up script and storms off-stage. Others on stage look at each other for a few moments)

STUDENT 1  
 So, um, whadda we do now?

TEACHER 2

(uncertainly)

I suppose we're just going to have to figure it out for ourselves...

TEACHER 1

But what about all these ideas? What are we supposed to do about them?

TERTIARY EDUCATOR

(pointing to self, ECE EDUCATOR and  
COMMUNITY EDUCATOR)

Well, we can help

STUDENT 2

(points towards audience)

What about all of them, do you think they can help too?

(ALL turn to look at audience)

ALL

Can you?

(END)