

KATHLEEN GALLAGHER AND RICHARD SALLIS

### 3. LEARNING ON THE GROUND

*How Our Research Stories Teach Us about Ethics*

#### INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that a consideration and application of ethics and ethical conduct is important when it comes to drama/theatre research and that this should apply throughout the entire process – from the earliest stages of planning through to the dissemination of findings and associated forms of reportage. This chapter looks at some notable ethical challenges Kathleen and Richard have encountered in their work as drama/theatre researchers and how these experiences have helped shape their ongoing practice. Based on their curiosity in the other's research, each poses questions for the other to address related to the role ethics has played in their research and how they have negotiated various ethical encounters. In addressing the questions, each author considers their relationship to ethics as it relates to their drama/theatre research and how they have built an ethical framework for their work. Through their conversations they discuss some key incidents and moments in their research and each provides a critical audience for the other. In doing so they unearth aspects of ethics in drama/theatre research which may be appropriate for a range of research contexts, forms and practitioners.

#### A CONVERSATION (PRESENTED AS A DRAMATIC NARRATIVE) BETWEEN KATHLEEN AND RICHARD ABOUT ETHICS IN DRAMA/THEATRE RESEARCH

*[It is late at night for Richard in country Victoria, Australia and early morning for Kathleen in Toronto, Canada. Richard is sitting at his kitchen bench, staving off tired eyes, for this Skype session with Kathleen. They are recording their conversation. What follows is based on the Skype sessions that took place between them as they shared their views and experiences in regard to how ethics has played a part in their research and associated writing. Richard has scattered in front of him the notes he has made based on questions posed to him by Kathleen.]*

Richard (*drinking a cup of hot tea*): So Kathleen, the questions that you asked me to consider about my research before we Skyped were:

How would you characterise your ethical relations with young people?

What controls do you give them in your research processes?  
Can you share a difficult story of such relations and how you resolved the challenges?

Well, I have found that one of the greatest challenges when working with young people as research participants, particularly in more longitudinal studies, such as conducting an ethnography, is that after a while they tend to become more relaxed with me as the researcher. And while on the one hand as an ethnographer, that's something that I cherish because this can be an indicator that they are more willing to open up to me, it can be ethically challenging too because sometimes they reveal more intimate details of their life that goes beyond the scope of the project. When I am interviewing students in a school and this happens I can't simply ignore what they have told me. Accordingly the 'researcher', cop-in-my-head (Boal, 2002) says to me, "Now you've just heard that, you've got to deal with it in some way". And my 'responsible teacher' voice says, "well you'll have to tell the student that you probably can't keep that information to yourself; you may have to tell someone in authority about this".

Once such a disclosure from a participant occurs it can potentially change forever the relationship the researcher has with them because they have been privy to something about that person's life that may be very personal, even intimate. Once the informant has disclosed this, that person may become concerned that they can't undo or take back what they've said. Even if they ask for the information not to be documented as part of the research, there's no getting away from the realisation that what they've said was heard by the researcher. From my experience this can often be exacerbated in drama/theatre research because many young people can feel safe in the environment of the drama class and this may lead to them letting their guard down more so than they may do in other aspects of their life (in or out of school). Now I've never as yet had a situation where I've been privy to something so personal and so concerning that I thought I needed to report it to anyone in authority. However some of my informants (especially young people) have come very close to crossing that line on occasions and I've had to say to them [for example] "Are you sure you want to go here?" or "Maybe we don't need to go into that level of detail!" Of course what I am trying to do when I say this is to create a protection for them so that they don't say something they may later regret. I am often conflicted at such times because whilst I'm grateful and respectful that an informant can feel so at ease with me that they can enter