

DOROTHY HEATHCOTE, DLITT

Mr Chancellor,

I wonder if I might ask our audience, does anybody here know this woman? Hands up if you do.... hands up if you don't. Most of you claim not to know who she is but you've already formed an opinion. She is an elderly lady you might give your seat to on the bus. She has a nice face, obviously important or she wouldn't be where she is now. You've read the programme, perhaps, and see she was once a lecturer here; one of those intellectual types. Imagine how she feels now. A little embarrassed but proud too, pleased to be remembered but wondering what I'll say about her. And how do you think I feel? Trying to make sure I don't make mistakes or make it sound like an obituary.

If any here today were asked by a drama teacher the sort of questions I just asked it was probably due to this lady's teaching. Dorothy Heathcote has been described as one of the greatest teachers of the 20th century, famous for almost single handedly introducing drama into UK secondary education: She dared to challenge the orthodoxy that children were blank slates on which their teachers could write. She argued that to truly communicate, teachers must begin with that person's existing knowledge, learning together. Dorothy's teaching reached millions, driven by her passion, her intellect and her international travels. For 36 years she was a key member of our University, yet she left school at 14 without formal qualifications and became a weaver at the mill, an ungainly girl working to make ends meet alongside her disabled widowed mother. Her life has been as amazing as any character she conjured.

Dorothy grew up with her gran surrounded by adults. Her mother, blinded in one eye, lived in as a servant on a farm. She had tried setting up a fish and chip shop but it didn't work out, despite considerable support from a chap who was doing well in neighbouring Guisely, one Harry Ramsden. Dorothy's environment was materially limited, she shared a bed with two aunts, but it was safe, supportive and rich in experience. An avid reader she was an able pupil but failed the eleven-plus. Their school normally sent the three highest scoring children to the grammar school and that year the three were the headmaster's son, who had never scored higher than Dorothy before, the son of a local mill owner and the daughter of an upmarket dress store manager who later married the headmaster's son! Dorothy's reaction at the time was one of relief; she didn't know how they'd afford the uniform.

Dorothy kept back a shilling from her initial £1 per week wages to attend elocution lessons in Keighley and travelled with an amateur acting group. In 1945, a 19 year old skilled weaver, she read of a new Theatre School and presented herself for audition. She was offered a place but explained she couldn't afford the fees. When her boss Sam Clough heard he offered to meet the two year fees provided her mother returned to the mill in her place, adding "there'll be three looms waiting for thee, when tha's finished". But she didn't finish. Her obvious talent but unusual size for her age caused her tutor to suggest she should teach. A year at what became the Northern Theatre School in Bradford revealed to her the poverty of school drama teaching and set the scene for the development of her own style. Her first teaching practice was being presented by a forgetful headmaster with all the boys who were standing outside their classrooms for bad behaviour. He announced "this is Miss Schutt. She's going to do drama with you". She reacted by asking:

“if you were the captain of a ship, what would you look for in the men who were going to sail it”. This random makeshift beginning became her style. She began teaching an evening class attended by a senior English teacher who invited Dorothy to help at the school and her career blossomed.

In 1951, Dorothy joined a new institute at Durham University. The following decade saw her evolve a teaching style which encouraged collective learning, with the drama being a “now” event rather than rote learning of scripts. During this time she met and married Raymond Heathcote. When Durham University was split to form Durham and Newcastle universities, Dorothy became part of the faculty in Newcastle. Three years later in 1966 her talent reached a wider audience when the BBC filmed her creating a drama called “Death of a President” with boys at Aycliffe Approved School. The filming was a few weeks after the delivery of her daughter Marianne. In 1972, an acclaimed documentary “Three looms waiting” in the Omnibus series recounted Dorothy’s life. Such coverage and her international journeys and writing made her a reluctant celebrity who attracted a flood of overseas students, but she always struggled with the formality of university structures; her head of department has fond memories of Dorothy’s unique presence at staff meetings, usually knitting!

Despite the apparent lack of structure in Dorothy’s style, she was meticulous in her preparation and very hard working. She sometimes seemed unsympathetic to students who pleaded poverty, having experienced hardship herself, but her generosity to those in real need was unreserved.

Dorothy lost Raymond 4 years ago and now lives near her daughter in Nottingham, but she remains part of our university. We can be proud to have accommodated such a unique talent despite her lack of formal qualifications. She has always been a worker who grounded theory in practical experience. Since her retirement almost 20 years ago she has continued to work and inspire. In 1993 Lancaster University held a conference devoted to her work and have established an archive of her papers. But perhaps a greater accolade is to be found in the words of a Maori boy who had just taken part in a drama she had devised. He said: “This drama is all in your head, so it feels true”. Mr Chancellor, in recognition of a lifetime of inspiration, I invite you to confer on Dorothy Heathcote the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa.

Citation by Professor John Burn