

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Series 2, Episode 2:

Daron Oram



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Daron Oram

Guest 2: Kirsty McMunn

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[theme tune plays. SCOTT starts speaking]

HOST - SCOTT BELLAMY:

Welcome to Discover Central, the podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at the life of students, staff and alumni at London's Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

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SCOTT:

I'm your host Scott, and welcome to Episode Two of our Second Series. Today we'll be speaking with Daron Oram, Central's principal lecturer in voice, whose work and research into anti discriminatory training practices have led him to develop a range of approaches that challenge some traditional practices within actor training. These approaches help to enhance the experiences of student actors who come from diverse backgrounds, as well as those who face additional challenges in engaging with voice and

actor training. We'll also be speaking with Central's Student's Union Welfare Officer Kirsty McMunn. But first, Daron Oram teaches on Central's BA Acting Collaborative and Devised Theatre course, as well as its MA/ MFA Voice Studies: Teaching and Coaching programme. His work is centred on developing anti discriminatory approaches to voice training for the actor. His research has looked at the experiences of acting students who are dyslexic and dyspraxic learners. He has also developed a new approach in training accents and dialects that engages with voice work and identity. Daron's research and scholarship was recognised with the National Teaching Fellowship Award in 2019. Hi, Daron, thanks for joining us.

GUEST 1 – DARON ORAM:

Hello.

SCOTT:

So first, tell me: how long have you been at Central, and what first brought you to the school?

DARON:

So, I'm in my ninth year now at Central and prior to that I was teaching at Arts Ed where I was Head of Voice on the Musical Theatre course there. And Central offered me an opportunity to come and work in a School where I could begin to focus more on classical text as well as contemporary texts that I was doing at Arts Ed. And also, the Collaborative and Devised course is very close to my own training, which is based in devising practice, and I also have experience of Lecoq and Michael Chekhov techniques, which are some of the techniques that are taught on the course. So it was a really nice fit in terms of my own skills and training, and the interest I had in terms of teaching.

SCOTT:

And I spoke a little bit in the introduction about your research, maybe you can tell us a little bit more about that.

DARON:

Yeah, so I've been working on this for the last six years or so now. And it started off with a research project looking at neurodiversity, particularly dyslexia and dyspraxia. And that was a real response to the needs that were emerging in the training. Often on our acting course, we can have 60, even 70% of our students who are neurodiverse in some way. So that was the first period of research, and then following that I used the same model of research to look at our speech accents and dialects training. One of the things that's notable about the CDT course is the diversity of the students that we work with. There was a real recognition that the traditional approaches to that speech training were not that inclusive. And the research has kind of reinforced that finding. So it was then about how we, how we change that. And more broadly, I guess all of the research is looking at anti discriminatory approaches within voice teaching.

SCOTT:

And in terms of that research, how would you say it has impacted on your teaching work with students?

DARON:

Overall, it has completely transformed it. And because the research has been embedded in my teaching practice, it's something that I've really been thinking about and working with every day of my teaching, the methodology of the research that I use is a heuristic methodology, which is really about immersing yourself into the work. So rather than scientifically sitting on the outside and observing my students, and keeping my own thoughts, feelings outside of that, it was very much in the middle of that with

my students. And it really does change your position as a teacher where you're really in the position of not knowing, not knowing what the answer is, not knowing quite how to find the answer to the problem. And so your engagement with the students is much more collaborative through the research and the teaching process, rather than just repeating and filling them up with the knowledge that's already predetermined.

SCOTT:

So as you said, Daron, equitable training is at the heart of your practice, and particularly your work and research into decolonising voice training, an area in which you've also published widely. Can you tell us a little bit more about this work.

DARON:

Yeah, so the article I published early last year was called 'Decolonising Listening', and that talks about an approach to speech training, foundation speech training in the first year of actor training. I have a second article which has just been completed and will be out, hopefully, in the next few weeks or so where the title has shifted has shifted to 'Decentering Listening'. And the focus has shifted much more on to anti discriminatory practice. I think one of the things to note is that the position I've taken on this work has shifted quite a bit over the time that I've been doing it. So when I was doing the neurodiversity work, I was very much talking about diversity and inclusion, and equitable practices. But the more I've looked into race and class and had a really good dialogue with my students of colour, my colleagues who are Black and of colour, that the more I've shifted my relationship to the language of the research and how I'm framing it. So, within the speech work, I started off using decolonising as a framework. And that came from a great book that I read, which was called 'The Sonic Color Line' by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber. And in that book, she talks about racialised listening in the United States, and how that people's listening is colonised to predict or

try and hear race in particular ways. And that research was really informative for me. And when I took that framework and looked at actor training in the UK, what I started to see was this, the idea, the concept of a listening ear, which she talks about is really embedded in training and rehearsal practices and performance within the UK. So an example of that is when people talk about clarity in terms of speech, often people will say well, you don't need to change your accent, but could you just put this consonant in on the end of the word or this consonant in the middle of the word to make it clearer? And those consonants are often consonants that we find in Received Pronunciation. And whilst people weren't on the surface trying to move people towards Received Pronunciation, there was always an underlying feeling that the work the training, the performances, were being tuned just a little bit towards Received Pronunciation. And so taking Stoeber's idea, I kind of really started to imagine that there's this listening ear implanted in all of our rehearsal rooms, all of our training rooms, which is listening from the perspective of a white, middle class audience member. And so the work in terms of decolonising was around decolonising, that listening ear. And within, practically within the training, what that's meant is that in our first year training, we no longer teach RP, and we no longer teach something called 'Speech and Articulation' as a foundation, because what that always has been is some form of RP, even if it's just articulation based on consonant sounds. So what we now work with is our students' everyday speech patterns. And some of our students have variable everyday speech patterns. So they will code switch. Some of our young students, when they're with their friends will speak with one accent, and then when they're with their parents, or families or authority figures will switch into another accent. So it's about recognising what actually that is, is a great skill of dexterity and performance a student is already bringing to the work and bringing to their training. So we really spend the first year looking at what those speech patterns are, and how the students can embody those speech patterns in various ways through performance. So if they're using the accent or speech structure that they use

with their friends, if that's on stage, how can they really engage that in a way that works in a large theatrical context that, that's clear, without needing to shift towards a different structure of language in that. So that was the beginning of the work. And then as I started to shift into looking at accent and dialect training, the questions change a little bit. So if we're looking at a group of students, which might have some European students, some Black UK students, some Asian UK students, white students, Australian, and North American, South American, Russian students... This is the kind of mix that we're working with, that if you're teaching a set of standard accents, General American, Irish, Scottish, then you're asking those students to perform what are predominantly white standard UK accents, but for many of them won't be accents that they're going to use in their performing lives. So the question became about how to deliver a model of training, which engages that full range of students, prepares them for the industry, and really kind of works across that diversity and through into performance. So it was a whole new set of questions. And I started from the perspective of the decolonising listening because often accents are modified so that they can be again understood. And that's again, a modification towards the local, 'neutral' standard accent. So in America, General American, General Australian, and in the UK Received Pronunciation. So it was about applying that, but it became a bigger question. And also there's questions of class in there, regionality, internationality. So it's more than just race. And the more I was reading about decolonising, the more I read, where people were critiquing that as an idea within Higher Education, because its root is really in colonised lands, in indigenous communities, and the basic thoughts of decolonisation is the repatriation of land. It's become used as a metaphor for a whole, a much wider range of social justice projects. And that's become more and more critiqued, there was also a suggestion that academics were jumping on the bandwagon of decolonising, particularly white academics to raise up their own standing in terms of their academic profiles. And many might say, but, you know, I was awarded a national teaching fellowship off the back of this

work that actually, I may have done that myself, and that's something that I was really grappling with. And so I started to shift my perspective in the later work towards decentering. So decentering the white, middle class, Eurocentric perception within accents training, and looking at that from a more intersectional point of view from class, race, regionality. So the language around it has shifted to anti discriminatory practice. Some people call it anti oppressive pedagogy. And this begins to draw on something called critical pedagogy, which again, shifts the relationship between the teacher and the students. So it's much more of a collaborative process as I was talking about earlier. So what happens in terms of our accents and dialects training is that we work through a process of verbatim theatre. So verbatim theatre is where people use recorded sources, interviews, they recreate those recordings, they restructure them into a performance and create a verbatim performance. And we've been teaching this method of contemporary theatre making on the CDT course for a number of years, what we started to do is use the technical work around the voice and the recreation of those interview subjects as the source for our work on accents and dialects. So students will build on that verbatim process. And to cut a rather long story short, the end point is, I will, in the second year of the second term, be teaching a class with 18 different students of the range I described a moment ago, all of whom will be working on a different accent, all drawing on a verbatim source material, but with the skills to collaborate with me to take those accents and apply them to a mock audition that would use the accent. And the interesting thing is because the students start with the verbatim research, they often know more about their source material than I do. And so that really does shift the power dynamic in the teaching. And I think if there's a common thread in all of the research and the work I've been doing, that's that shift of the power dynamic between the students is the key thing that's that's happened.

SCOTT:

And it's a fundamentally different experience for the students, isn't it? And, and actually, quite fundamentally different from what, I imagine, is the kind of training that you would traditionally think of as your kind of Conservatoire voice training. It's, it's fascinating stuff.

DARON:

Yeah, even some of the students when they arrive to the training have a, they bring an expectation with them of what first year speech and voice training will be. And as we begin to explore identity and voice and code switching, they're really surprised that that's, that's where we're going. And it's not that they don't get to do Received Pronunciation. In our second year, they will do that for a project for performance where that accent is necessary. It'll be a period piece, which involves that accent, so they get that skill. And one of the things that came up in the research was that even though some actors may not use that accent in performance, many of the industry gatekeepers: agents, casting directors, are expecting our actors to have that skill, even if they're not going to use it. So it's very important that we maintain that as part of the package of work that we do, but that we also have this kind of diverse and inclusive approach as well.

SCOTT:

And alongside this, you've also led a large scale teaching and learning project investigating the impact of psycho physical training techniques on neurodivergent actors who are dyslexic or dyspraxic learners on Central's Collaborative and Devised Theatre Acting course. What has this project entailed. And again, how is that benefited your students?

DARON:

So this was the first project that I worked on. And quite simply, what happened was, I was working with a group of students, and it was the

particular year that I was working with, there was a large number of students who were dyslexic or dyspraxic learners. And I was really recognising probably for the first time because of the number of students in the room or where I was in my career in terms of experience, that these students were really struggling with the work. And so it began with a small conversation with our dyslexia and dyspraxia coordinator, Tanya Zybutz, who has been a great ally in this research project. And we looked at what might be happening and kind of came up with some ideas, and I tried to kind of quickly jump in and fix it, and I wasn't really getting anywhere. And so that then became set up as a research project. And within all of the research projects, what I've done is set up focus groups where the particular students I'm interested in hearing from can talk about their experiences. And these focus groups have always been run by external people so that the students feel a little freer to talk about how things have been going for them. And listening to the experiences of those neurodivergent students was quite tough at first, kind of realising that many of the well intentioned things I was doing in my training, were really not working for them. And as I looked at the picture more and delved more into it, what became clear was that actually, there were some similar things happening across all of the psychophysical training subjects that we were doing within the training. So that includes some of the Michael Chekhov acting work, Feldenkrais, movement work, Lecoq work. And so I started to get a clearer picture of what was happening. And one of the things that I began to understand is that for actors, when we talk about psychophysical work, it's really that the thinking, feeling and sensing is happening in the body rather than the mind, thinking about the work that the actors are immersed in the moment of performance, in the sensory experience of that. And that's, that's kind of one of the aims that we're working towards. And what I realised was that many of the things that we were doing in the training, were creating little hurdles, which would trigger those actors to come out of that sensory place, and into a narrative place where they were starting to ask questions in their mind questions. Am I doing this right? What's the next exercise, what's

happening now, what's happening in the room, things were happening to confuse them in the process. And some of those things were really simple things such as working with eyes closed. In the work that I teach, many exercises have always been taught eyes closed. The idea being that it helps you to visualise, it helps you to imagine in your body more. But for a dyspraxic student, that takes away their orientation in space. So for many of those students, they then have to work harder just to follow the instructions. And that again, is taking them into a narrative analysing place rather than be able to immerse and relax into the exercises. And the other thing that happens for neurodivergent students is that for many of them, their experience of education either in English class or maths, or on the sports field for dyspraxic students, has been one of a succession of failures or hurdles to overcome. And there's a sense within these students of a slightly deeply learnt sense of self critique that these students have. Often they've found that theatre is a way out of that, theatre is where their strengths are, you know, dyslexia and dyspraxia have great creative strengths. And so theatre is a really positive experience. And then suddenly, they come into a training at professional level, which is bringing up all of these issues and challenges for them. And so that triggers a lot of negative self talk and self critique that for many of them, they thought they'd left behind from their schooling and education. So there's a combination of things that are going on. And basically what the research was, was looking at what are the things that trigger these moments from these students, and how can we train in ways that that don't create those triggers, that help the students to stay immersed in a sensory place that helps them to stay connected to their emotions and that kind of thing. So eyes closed simply became, well if you want to work eyes closed you can, but if it's easier for you to work eyes open then we put that optionality in. Which is a simple choice, but the tradition of eyes closed in some exercises is something that also almost became like a truth for people. That that's the only way to do it. So whilst many of the changes have been

quite simple, it's actually overturning some principles in actor training, which have been held on to for quite some time.

SCOTT:

So taking those principles from the neurodiversity research, would you say this also applied to the work, you've done training actors with visual impairments as well?

DARON:

Yeah, so there is a real overlap between learning differences and disabilities. There's a model of disability called the social model of disability. The idea behind that is that it's the structures of society which discriminate against students who have learning differences or disabilities. And that rather than us asking those students to adapt to our way of working, the main thing that needs to happen is that the training needs to adapt so that all of those students, regardless of any learning difference or disability, are able to engage with the training equitably. So on the MA Voice Studies course, I had taught a lovely student who was visually impaired. And so I'd had some experience of working with visually impaired students. And then we were really fortunate to have two visually impaired students join us on Acting CDT in the same year, and I think that was a real stroke of luck, actually, for them as students, for their group, for us as a course in that we had two young people one was Australian one was from the UK, one had a guide dog, who themselves had very different perceptions around their own disabilities, and how they want to frame that. So the thing to kind of throw in here is that there's not one size fits all, it's not 'I've got the solution, this is, this is always the solution'. It's always around a dialogue and conversation. So taking those principles from the neurodiversity research was simply about looking at those visually impaired students, working with them, and rather than going well, I, this exercise involves ball throwing, how do I adapt to the exercise? Rather

than looking at that, going what is the learning outcome here? What are we teaching through ball throwing? And what's an alternative way to teach that learning outcome in a way that includes all of the students that we have in the room? And as soon as you start to take that approach to it and look it in that way, then actually, all of the learning outcomes across the course become possible. Even sight reading, it simply needs reframing. What is sight reading for? It's for audition. And so if we look at what what is audition technique, then all of those students can engage, will be engaging with auditions, what is their individual technique for approaching auditions? And so it's that, it's a shift of perspective more than anything that's really helped in this work.

SCOTT:

So it's very clear, Daron, you've done a heck of a lot of work in quite a short space of time. What, what is next for you?

DARON:

At the moment, I'm finishing a book chapter, which will go into an edited collection. So this is returning to the neurodiversity work. Because I've been living with this work for quite some time now, I've been able to distil it down into what I'm now rather grandly calling a 12 Step Approach to neurodiversity. And it's just the key, the key principles that I've, I've found helpful in my work. So that's a chapter that will go into a book, which we publish next year. And I'm also considering whether to bring all of this work together into a book of my own, in the next year or so that's something to consider. And an area of interest at the moment that is coming up a lot with our hybrid working with our online working was around mental health in actor training, and how we support actors' mental health through the training. Again, I think that's a big shift in approach to training. And there's lots, lots of work to be done there and new things to discover. So that will likely be something I begin to explore in coming year or so.

SCOTT:

I think it's also worth saying that whilst we wait for that book to come out, it may also be worth our listeners, watching the video that is on the Central YouTube channel, which talks about your work with actors with visual impairments, as well. Daron, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. We really appreciate it and look forward to hearing more about your work soon. I'm also pleased to introduce the Student's Union Welfare officer Kirsty McMunn, who has more information about the range of support available to Central students.

GUEST 2 – KIRSTY MCMUNN:

Hello, my name is Kirsty McMunn, and I am Welfare Officer for your Student's Union. I'm currently a third year student on Contemporary Performance Practice Drama, Applied Theatre and Education, or DATE. My role within the Union is mostly behind the scenes work, especially now with COVID meaning that remote learning is the new normal for most of us. Not being able to be at Central in person does restrict the student connection that is really important for this role. I have learned now what is needed right now is really just information and ideas and an online presence as much as I can while keeping my mental and physical health OK, also. General welfare is of course a key aspect of my work right now. And tips for that along with any events or meetups, law abiding, of course, which will most likely mean Zoom, will be posted over on my Instagram, at CSSDSUWelfare, all one word. Right now though, I'm currently making leaflets, which will take a digital form, but I'm sure can be made physical if needed, for people's identities or life situations that are vulnerable during this time in lockdown and over Christmas. Not all of us are lucky enough to have a support network that accepts us for who we are. And so making sure there is support out there for them is my main aim before Christmas. We are a great team and work together on lots of things, but this is specifically in collaboration with Felix and

Johnny, LGBT+ Officers, Gabe, Trans Officer, Harris, the International Officer, and Daniella, the Dyslexia and Disability Officer. I'm also looking into the policy around bereavement and returning to school, etc. as there needs to be a greater system to check that the individual is getting all the support they need, when they need it. I will also be raising awareness and finding ways of helping connecting those with mental illnesses, extended further than depression and anxiety, as it can be very isolating having a diagnosis and no one to talk to you about it, especially when the stigma is so detrimental. In the meantime, please do reach out if you aren't feeling yourself and need a little bit of support. Do message me on Instagram or email me su-welfare@cssd.ac.uk. You can also contact the Student Advice Service who are lovely and super helpful at SAS@cssd.ac.uk. Central also has a counselling service that any student can access if needed. Try and look for the light in the little things during this dark time.

SCOTT:

Thank you, Kirsty.

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SCOTT:

And thank you for tuning in to this episode of Discover Central. We hope you'll join us for our next episode. But for now, from all of us at Central, take care and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]