With the increasing interest in practice as research, dramaturgy, already understood as the research space within traditional theatre production, seems a logical place from which to generate an understanding of this activity. To understand dramaturgy as a kind of practice as research – as opposed to dramaturgical practice as a kind of research – it is important to understand a sense of on-going process that is usually, but not always, highlighted in dramaturgical work, and to clarify the scope of dramaturgy, itself contested. One understanding of a dramaturg’s role, often labeled a literary manager in the United States, is to help shape a season’s offerings and assist an artistic director in thinking through the vision of the institution. A second commonly invoked role is stewarding a new play through development. In new play development, the notion of working with a writer to shape a piece provides the clearest evidence of dramaturgical creative activity, but this contribution is often contested in relationship to questions of authorship (how much credit should a dramaturg’s influence receive) and is troubled by a presumption, sometimes accurate, that the dramaturg serves the institution first rather than the playwright’s vision. This latter concern emerges problematically in attempts (conscious or unconscious) to satisfy the conventionalized expectations of an institutional space’s predetermined audience.

Perhaps the most recognized and least controversial role is the production dramaturg. Typically, the production dramaturg works with the director and creative team to help bring a production to fruition. According to Mary Luckhurst:

Production dramaturgs are theatre practitioners who form working partnerships with directors and are generally textual specialists of some kind. They develop the “concept” for the performance with the director in the pre-production phase, are present in rehearsal, and may also work on publicity, programme material or publication of the text. Such dramaturgs are concerned overwhelmingly with textual issues and with articulating processes of production.
This pragmatic definition is widely shared. While many forms of dramaturgy may in fact offer rich possibilities, I start with Luckhurst’s traditional definition in order to point to a smaller but crucial intervention that can be widely practiced as a form of practice as research. Luckhurst’s definition contains three phrases that need to be investigated: “pre-production phase,” “textual issues,” and “articulating processes.”

Concern with defining the role and scope of the dramaturg in a particular context has a pragmatic rather than a philosophical function since dramaturgs are often perceived as dangerous for performing custodial roles, not merely in terms of the institution but in terms of the text as a protected site. These “textual issues,” understood both as a focus on research on language and selection of text, often get transformed into an anxiety about the primacy and sanctity of a text, exemplified in culturally protectivist stances manifest in relationship to Shakespeare’s canonical status. While the Shakespeare industry is unfairly criticized for this practice, a strain of Shakespearean studies that insists on historical re-creation is often placed at the center of this form of protectionism. In this model of dramaturg as policeman, the assumption is that a text is something in need of preservation and that it is the intellectual’s role to sustain this protection, as if actors, designers, and directors are necessarily dismissive of the text. While this practice does occur, a more useful discussion focuses on shifting the orientation of the dramaturg in relation to the production team and the process of creation.

Assuming that the relationship between director and dramaturg has been successfully negotiated, the “pre-production phase” involves selection of the text and translation (if necessary) as well as research that helps support and develop the conceptual framework for a production. While this is an effective and exciting form of dramaturgy – working with a director to deepen and strengthen her vision by providing means to think about historical and cultural contexts, including production history – this practice is essentially supplemental to the material manifestation of a particular director’s artistic vision. Ironically, this can result in a form of idiosyncratic textual policing where the dramaturg is placed in the service of facilitating and deepening the representation of a pre-established concept.

To counter this more subtle form of policing one must shift the emphasis towards a sense of process. Although Luckhurst suggests the dramaturg’s investment in the “articulation” of process, the necessary and subtle shift is based on the continuation of that process. Most understandings of dramaturgy as process discuss the role of documentation and production memory and assistance with the realization of a text in performance. All of these are essential elements of production dramaturgy in its different manifestations, and most dramaturgs already accept process as a fundamental constituent of dramaturgical practice. Dramaturgy as practice as research, however, emerges within the space of the rehearsal, not merely as a precursor and frame for this period. In part this is a shift between the realization of