

The Importance of Drama in Education

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Abstract: This study takes as its basic aim the use of drama in classroom settings to maximize classroom interaction. Undoubtedly, drama has proved to be an important classroom technique with very positive impact on raising the standards of learning. All types of dramatization is essentially a process of communication, in which both participant and spectators are engaged. Dramatized classes are easily understood as they replicate real life situations into the classroom. A creative interaction takes place, a sharing of ideas. A great many studies show that drama develops thinking, oral language, reading, and writing. Six of these respected studies show that drama improves students' cognitive growth, as reflected in language skills, problem-solving ability, and I.Q. Moreover, the changes are lasting. Several studies show that drama also improves role taking,³ which is comprehending and correctly inferring attributes of another person. These inferences, which include another's thinking, attitudes, and emotions, are a function of cognitive perception. In Piaget's terms, to engage in role taking is to "decenter" or move away from a predominantly egocentric stage of development. Growth in cognition is dependent on growth in role taking.

Keywords: dramatization, positive impact learning, personality, language, pedagogy, cognitive growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Not surprisingly, drama improves oral language as well as thinking. I looked at thirty-two quasi-experimental or correlational studies of the effects of drama on oral language development, and found that twenty-five of these show that drama improves or correlates with improvement of oral language. And what is the effect of drama on reading? Five literature reviews conclude that drama seems to be effective in promoting literacy. Eighteen out of twenty-nine quasi-experimental studies I found in the literature show that drama improves story recall, comprehension, and/or vocabulary. To illustrate, let's look at the stunning results of the Whirlwind Program in Chicago. Whirlwind has developed a Reading Comprehension. Through Drama program that is currently conducting a series of twenty drama lessons in many public schools. Their widely respected statistical study (Parks & Rose, 1997) of fourth-graders showed that the students who participated in the Whirlwind program improved three months more than the control-group students in their Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading scores. This test is administered each spring to all Chicago public school students. The Whirlwind students improved 12.1 months from 1996 to 1997 on the Iowa test, and those without Whirlwind 9.1 months in the same period.

In the Reading Comprehension program, a group of Whirlwind actors read short stories to the children in grades K-8, and then they work together with them to act out the stories, draw pictures of them, and create three dimensional mini-versions of them. In the process, they form more detailed images in their heads as they read; these images are what help them remember and understand the facts of the story. The program's results have recently come to the attention of Cozette Buckney, the Chief Education Officer of the Chicago public schools. If Whirlwind had chosen to measure only the effect of the program on the drama skills of children—which did improve significantly, by the way—the impact might not have been noticed. But when reading skills improved, it was front page news in the Chicago Tribune (Beeler, 1999). This is why it is politically important for those of us who advocate drama to share results like these with policymakers.

Drama has a positive effect on writing as well. Emergent literacy studies show that children give their early writing multimodality associated with gesture and graphics. Drama serves as an effective prewriting strategy, clarifying for children concepts they might want to explore through writing.

Recent observational studies report remarkable maturity in student writing that emerges from drama. Significant shifts in audience awareness occur before, during, and after drama. The writing produced in role shows more attention to sensory imagery, awareness of the reader, insight into characters' feelings and empathy, and the need to clarify information and to disclose it selectively.

Seven statistical studies, including one I conducted, show that drama improves the quality of writing. It also significantly correlates with early word-writing fluency. Preschoolers who engage in symbolic play and drawing are more likely to read and write early.

Some of the best writing my own students have produced over the years has come when they are writing in role. At this stage in my career, I cannot imagine teaching any content at any level, including the graduate level (as my doctoral students will tell you) without drama. It is a powerful stimulus for thinking and writing.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It has been advocated for the past twenty-five years that educational drama is a basic and central experience, not an expendable frill in the classroom. When the late Jim Moffett and I were coauthoring the text *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-12* (1992), we expanded the notion of basic language arts beyond the commonly accepted reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Then "dramatic inventing" was added as one of the five basic skills because we firmly believe that drama is the matrix out of which all the other so-called basic skills emerge, namely, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In other words, drama is the most basic of the basic skills.

What is the theory that explains the efficacy of improvisational or educational drama as a foundation for thinking, reading, and writing? The theory is this: Both educational drama and literacy are rooted in the same assumptions about learning. Two of the most generative learning theories to explain the role of improvisational drama are those of Lev Vygotsky (1966; 1978) and Jerome Bruner (1983; 1986; 1990). Both were instrumental in ushering in the constructivist theory of learning, and both provide a solid foundation for using drama in the classroom as a way to deepen and enlarge understanding of any subject matter.

Several other major theorists have asserted that imaginative role-playing is central to the development of thinking: Douglas Barnes (1968), James Britton (1970), and, of course, my coauthor, Moffett (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). Nor should we overlook the guiding educational philosopher of the early decades of this century, John Dewey (1959), nor Jean Piaget (1962), who, like Vygotsky (1966), showed how pretend play, especially the use of objects in a non-literal fashion, parallels cognitive development. Piaget (1962) asserted that conceptual thinking develops through activity, spontaneous play, manipulation of objects, and social collaboration. He showed how participation in drama leads to improved listening, comprehension, sequential understanding, and the integration of thought, action, and language.

3. CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY OF LEARNING

Our understanding of the learning process has undergone a sea change in the last three decades, and thanks to the brain research quantum scientists are currently conducting, we may be on the verge of another such profound change. Simplistic behaviorist models of learning are now largely discredited, except to account for mastering the simplest of mechanical skills. Back in the 1950s when I was immersed in behaviorism at Yale University, Jerome Bruner and other cognitive psychologists in New York were discovering the brilliant Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. They were not just tinkering with or reforming behaviorism; they were replacing it by putting the significance of meaning and values back into the center of human psychology. They began a quest to discover and describe formally how human beings create meaning. In so doing, they climbed into bed with thinkers who had been banished from psychology's house for most of this century: philosophers, historians, anthropologists, linguists, novelists, poets, and dramatists.

The result has been the positing of the now widely held constructivist theory of learning based on the recognition that knowledge is constructed by each learner. As children actively engage in experiencing the world, they are just as actively constructing models in their minds to account for what they are undergoing. The way they think is literally transformed by

their experience and by their attempts to make sense of it, and especially by those experiences that call for responses that are just beyond what they can generate on their own. Except for those psychologists who in the last quarter century have shifted from the construction of meaning to the processing of information, likening the brain to a computer, major learning theorists keep the making of meaning at the center of their understanding of how the human mind works (Bruner, 1990, p. 4).

Constructivist theory posits that human beings actively create their own models or hypotheses as to how the world works not just with the mental stuff of their biological brain but in dialogue with the culture in which they live. As Bruner (1986) suggests, humans construct meaning in the presence of three worlds: the world they are born with, their innate human propensity to make sense of the world and their capacity to acquire language; the objective reality of the real world; and the culture in which they are immersed.

According to Bruner, all theory in science and all narrative and interpretive knowing in the humanities are dependent on the human capacity to create—to imagine a world. This is the amazing capacity that markedly sets us off from other members of the animal kingdom. As Susanne Langer (1957, p. 57) puts it, “Imagination is the primary talent of the human mind, the activity in whose service language has evolved.”

Children are active meaning-makers both in their play and in their work. They imagine how things work, and they test out those imaginings. In other words, learners are active, goal-oriented, hypothesis-generating symbol manipulators.

Learners express the understandings they have constructed in symbols—in gestures first, then in spoken words, drawings, and, finally, in written language. As they are pressured to find answers on their own, they are actively learning. A recent comparative study of the differences between Japanese and U.S. math lessons showed that teachers in Japan first ask students to solve a problem on their own before they teach a lesson. U.S. teachers tend to teach the lesson first and then ask the students to apply what they have learned. The Japanese students learn faster and more thoroughly. Drama is more like the Japanese math lesson. Each drama creates a problem for students before they have been taught how to respond. They act first and then reflect on their actions. Perhaps this accounts for drama’s power in effecting learning.

Another characteristic of drama is its emotional component. Because of the immediacy of the dramatic present and the pressure to respond aptly in role in a social setting, participants become vividly alive to the moment and alert to what is expected of them. As they get caught up in the emotion of the dramatic activity, they are often able to express themselves in a more mature manner and language than they could otherwise.

4. PROCESS DRAMA IN SECOND-AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

In the field of second-/foreign-language teaching, there is a need for us to reflect on what we have accomplished so far in language teaching methods over the last century. Ever since Anthony (1963) proposed to distinguish between approach (something akin to a theory), method (a curriculum, program, or procedure), and technique (any action in the classroom to implement the method), there have been many refinements in terminology and other ways of describing what we do in second-/foreign-language classrooms. A fine-grained, historical analysis has been offered by Strain (1986), in which such terms as Method, method, and methodology are distinguished in subtle ways along with method-procedure, method-technique, design, procedure, presentation, implementation, activity, syllabus, materials, evaluation, tactics, strategies, curriculum, and so forth. All these terms and various arrangements were used in one way or another by Anthony and Norris (1969), Rivers and Temerley (1978), Strevens (1980), Richards (1983), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Strain (1986), Nunan (1991), and Brown (1994).

Despite the general disagreement in terminology for what teachers use to teach a second/foreign language—an approach, method, technique, procedure, or otherwise—there is consensus in identifying the following ways of language teaching, based on a historical perspective: Grammar-Translation (e.g., Darian, 1972; Howatt, 1984), Direct Method (e.g., Hornby, 1950; Jespersen, 1933; Palmer, 1923, 1940), the Audio-lingual Method (e.g., Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957, 1977), Total Physical Response (e.g., Asher, 1969, 1977), the Silent Way (Gattegno, 1972, 1976), Community Language Learning (e.g., Curran 1972, 1976; Rardin & Tranel, 1988), Suggestopedia (e.g., Bancroft, 1978; Lozanov, 1978), the Natural Approach (e.g., Krashen, 1981, 1982; Terrell, 1977, 1982), and Communicative Language Teaching (e.g., Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Canale & Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1978). Although none of these methods seems to be applicable to all situations given the diverse backgrounds of language learners, different learner needs and various learning contexts, the

place effective teaching methods play in language classrooms is undeniable. In fact, language teachers are constantly searching for effective teaching methods to use in their daily classes.

In second-/foreign-language classrooms, there are generally two options in teaching. One option is Focus on Forms, and the other is Focus on Meaning. Focus on Forms is considered a traditional approach in which course design starts with the language to be taught. The teacher and the textbook writer divide the second language into segments (e.g., phonemes, words, collocations, morphemes, or patterns), which are presented in models, initially one item at a time, in a sequence determined by frequency, or difficulty. Learners are to synthesize the parts for use in communication. Synthetic techniques often used include explicit grammar rules, repetition of models, memorization of short dialogues, linguistically simplified texts, transformation exercises, or explicit negative feedback. When the primary focus of teaching a language is on forms, lessons tend to be rather dry, consisting principally of work on linguistic items, which students are expected to master, often to native speaker levels, with anything less treated as “error,” and little if any communicative second-language use.

Unlike Focus on Forms, the starting point of Focus on Meaning is not the language but the learner and learning processes. It is the learner, not the teacher or the textbook writer, who must analyze the second or foreign language. Advocates (Krashen, 1981, 1982) believe that much first- and second-language learning is not intentional but incidental (i.e., while doing something else) and implicit (i.e., without awareness). Therefore, grammar is considered to be learned incidentally and implicitly. Second- or foreign-language learning is thought to be essentially similar to first-language acquisition, so that reestablishing of something similar to the conditions for first-language acquisition, which is widely successful, should be necessary and sufficient for learning a second or foreign language. Lessons with focus on meaning, which are often interesting, relevant, and relatively successful, are purely communicative, and learners are presented with gestalt, comprehensible samples of communicative second-language use.

There are, however, a number of problems with each option. In the first option, Focus on Forms, for instance, there is no needs analysis to identify a particular learner’s or group of learners’ communicative needs, and no means analysis to ascertain their learning styles and preferences. Second, linguistic grading, both lexical and grammatical, tends to result in pedagogic materials of the basal reader variety, textbook dialogues and classroom language use being artificial and stilted. Moreover, Focus on Forms tends to produce boring lessons, with resulting declines in motivation, attention, and student enrollment despite the best efforts even of highly skilled teachers and textbook writers. Although considerable progress in a second or foreign language is clearly achieved in the second option, Focus on Meaning, studies also show that even after many years of classroom immersion, students’ productive skills remain “far from native-like, particularly with respect to grammatical competence” (Swain, 1991), exhibiting, for example, a failure to mark articles for gender. Such items have been in the input all the time, but perhaps not with sufficient salience, and with inadequate sanction (e.g., negative feedback) on their accurate suppliance. Similar findings of premature stabilization have been reported in studies of adult learners with prolonged natural exposure by Pavesi (1986), Schmidt (1983), and others. Therefore, a pure focus on meaning is also insufficient.

5. PROCESS DRAMA: ITS NATURE AND FUNCTION

Process Drama, a term widely used in North America (but originally from Australia) and synonymous to “educational drama” or “drama in education” in Britain, is concerned with the development of a dramatic world created by both the teacher and the students working together. Through the exploration of this dramatic world in which active identification with the exploration of fictional roles and situations by the group is the key characteristic, second- and foreign- language learners are able to build their language skills and develop their insights and abilities to understand themselves in the target language. Like theater, it is possible for Process Drama at its best to provide a sustained, intensive, and profoundly satisfying encounter with the dramatic medium and for participants to apprehend the world in a different way (O’Neill, 1995). A fundamental theoretical basis of Process Drama is Strategic Interaction (Di Pietro, 1987), which recognizes that language learning is both a personal and a social behavior. Strategic Interaction includes such essential elements as the ability of language to create and engage students in new roles, situations, and worlds; dynamic tension; the motivating and challenging power of the unexpected; the tactical quality of language acquired under the stress of achieving a goal; the linguistic and psychological ambiguity of human interaction; the group nature of enterprise; and the significance of context. Though all these elements in Strategic Interaction become the core characteristics of Process Drama, Process Drama tends to incorporate these aspects in a more complex, immediate, and flexible format. Process Drama puts more

emphasis on immediacy, involvement, student autonomy, and teacher functions. Rather than merely a series of brief exercises, explorations and encounters in Process Drama include a variety of strategies and modes of organization (O'Neill & Lambert, 1982; O'Neill, 1995). As Kao and O'Neill (1998) posit, Process Drama involves "careful sequencing and layering of dramatic units or episodes, often in a non-linear way, to cumulatively extend and enrich the fictional context" (p. 13). The intense series of episodes or scenes bring about the tension of drama, the motivation to overcome obstacles, and the fluency and accuracy necessary to accomplish the task with both the support and challenge of the teacher who is also a participant in the dramatic world.

6. CONCLUSION

This study is about the importance of drama in education. In some educational circles, drama is included as a module and method of teaching at preschool and school education. Drama in education is not trying to make children into actress and actors more than physical education is trying to make them into athletes or gymnasts of the future. Using drama with young children puts them on the path of a creative journey and helps them to develop their social, cognitive and language skills. Drama is about humanity in all its complexities, helping us to make sense of the world around us.

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