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Changes in Thinking About Drama in Education

In teaching students of all ages during my occasional visits to North America, I often ask, "What do you expect to be doing during this drama session?" The most popular answers from younger children include "having fun," "doing skits," "rehearsing plays," and "acting stories." Older students tend to suggest various components from their theatre arts syllabi—improvisation, voice, acting skills, theatre games, stage movement, or, in response to their visitor, how to do an English accent.

From these kinds of answers and from talking to teachers I have concluded that North American schools have a major interest in formally staged productions and that even elementary school teachers see drama as training in acting. In the few opportunities I have had to watch creative dramatics classes where free expression is said to be encouraged, I have observed a tacit assumption by students and teachers alike that what is required is technique. The following excerpt from the CEMREL project (1972) reinforces this view:

The teacher (using the so-called "Creating Characterization" package) gave simple instructions to "listen, watch arms, body, etc." The first three children were sad, happy and surprised in turn. The sad girl rubbed her eyes, commenting "Oh, I'm so sad"; the happy boy exuberantly jumped up and down and commented "Oh, I'm so happy. The sun is out."

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Later, anger and fright entered the parade.
(p. 318)

The skill being tested is the children's ability to simulate and "parade" emotions in a vacuum. Of course, I have also met American and Canadian teachers who have challenged this traditional performance orientation in favor of an approach having greater educational integrity. But such teachers are in the minority, often struggling for survival against mainstream opinion.

A visitor to England taking an equally cursory glance at our educational drama scene is likely to find a parallel situation. Although public performance does not carry the prestige it appears to carry in America, the general public and a fair proportion of the teaching profession associate drama with the school production. Other approaches to drama are still struggling for universal acceptance.

Many factors may contribute to explaining why progress has been slow, but the one that interests me in this article relates to the work of our pioneers in the field. In their enthusiasm for supporting a particular educational fashion, our leaders in drama education have sometimes inadvertently distorted the nature of drama itself. I propose to give a brief historical account of the principal rationales of drama in education promoted in this country, an account which will pursue the notion of distortion. By looking at past mistakes we may well be in a better position to assess the place of drama in today's curriculum. We shall consider the theory and practice of great educators who recognized the needs of their times and who hammered out principles and methodol-

ogies to meet those needs. In order to do this, their assumptions about the relationship between the art of drama and children's education have not always been well founded. They have been appropriate to a particular historical stage of development rather than to universal truths.

The Early Years

John Dewey (1921) observed:

The old education . . . may be summed up by stating that the center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself. . . . Now the change which is coming into our education is shifting the center of gravity. . . . The child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized. (p. 35)

Although Dewey was referring to the American scene, his comments could have applied to England and the swing away from the "empty pitcher" model of education where the pupil is perceived by the teacher as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. The "new movement" in education, which began around 1870 and introduced the concept of child-centered education, combined a Rousseau-esque view of a child as an unsullied little being with the growing interest of evolutionists in the phenomenon of child play. The battle between the empty pitcher model and the "flowering seed" model (taken from Froebel) had an interesting effect on the development of drama in education. Some early progressive educators, in looking for good examples of an enlightened approach to teaching, gave drama that accolade. Acting behavior seemed close to children's play, was child-centered rather than subject-centered, process rather than product oriented, active rather than passive and, above all, self-expressive. It is not surprising that a senior government inspector (Holmes, 1914) declared:

In Utopia acting is a vital part of the school life of every class, and every subject that admits of dramatic treatment is systematically dramatised. (p. 174)

In the eyes of the progressives, drama was seen as "the play-way" to education. The majority of teachers, however, remained unimpressed by or oblivious to such idealism.

Teachers with a flair for drama thus found themselves as banner carriers for the new education

movement and drama was introduced into schools under the shibboleths of "child-centeredness," "activity-method," and "self-expression." One of the purposes of this article will be to argue that the medium of drama is not altogether appropriate as a vehicle for the promotion of any of these particular educational concepts. But first let us look at how these new ideas were translated into practice. Initially a dramatic method of teaching was introduced, the most notable record of which came from a village schoolteacher by the name of Harriet Finlay-Johnson who gives us our earliest example (about the turn of the century) of a kind of classroom drama in which the irrelevance of an audience is stressed. She started teaching at a time of growing theoretical interest in make-believe play. That it was something different from theatrical performance impressed itself on a number of leading child psychologists including Sully (1897) who wrote:

The scenes he acts out . . . are not produced as having objective value, but rather as providing himself with a new environment. . . . The idea of a child playing as an actor is said to "play" in order to delight others is a contradiction in terms. . . . The pleasure of a child in what we call "dramatic" make-believe is wholly independent of any appreciating eye. (p. 326)

A closer look at Finlay-Johnson's teaching reveals that she did not allow her pupils to play. Although her approach required pupils to be active (in the literal sense of being involved in actions) in their learning, this was to some extent countered by her immediate purpose of teaching facts connected with nature study, history, scripture, and other subjects. The primary focus of attention was not on the child's opportunity for self-expression, but on a body of knowledge dictated by the school curriculum. Dramatic activity was seen as a vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge.

What excited the early progressives about drama was not innovation in terms of curriculum content but the learning *process*. Children, it was correctly argued, would enjoy learning facts if they were illustrated in this attractively active way. Paradoxically, this revolutionary approach to teaching and learning, welcomed by progressive educators because of its supposed links with what children do naturally when they play, was in practice oriented toward traditional outcomes. That the pupils were active in the physical sense of being on one's feet and performing lines of a script seemed all that

mattered and the high degree of passivity embedded within the activity passed unnoticed.

What also often passed unnoticed was the very real innovation in Finlay-Johnson's work—that dramatic method had little to do with getting pupils ready for a public performance. She saw it as a dynamic way of illuminating knowledge; it was not important in itself as a product. The subject matter or content of the drama was all important. I emphasize this for in looking at the historical development of drama in education in England we need to understand that the view of "whatever the drama is about is what matters" did not arise again for another 50-60 years. When it was reintroduced in the '60s (in a significantly different form from the Finlay-Johnson approach, I hasten to say) by Dorothy Heathcote it was met with almost universal opposition varying from bewilderment to hostility. Given that such a view is now relatively commonplace, providing the very *raison d'être* for drama in the curriculum it is interesting to trace what happened in the years between Finlay-Johnson and Heathcote that caused teachers to deny the importance of content and to feel so threatened by Heathcote's ideas.

Speech and Drama Specialists

The history of the growth of the speech movement in educational circles and in the professional and amateur theatre world in England is complex and fascinating. It achieved its major momentum in the period 1920-1950, but started long before and remains influential. What the movement offered was some sense of standard. The view of drama as a "progressive" subject gained government support as early as 1905. However, official enthusiasm was somewhat tempered by the government inspectors' concern about the need for teachers to be more specific about what they were actually teaching through drama. Throughout the decades there seemed to be some tension between what might be called formal and informal approaches. To government observers, the one aspect that all teachers should be concerned with was the obvious *means* of expression—speech. Thus began official backing for the notion of drama as speech training.

This focus on speech switched attention away from content to skill. As years went by, other skills related to the art of acting crept in. Play productions became the teacher's goal; the subject of speech and drama became a vehicle for training children to act. To cater to this philosophy schools needed to be staffed by specialists. These changes were

achieved in the name of progressive education for, it was argued, drama epitomized "activity method." Because individual attention could be given to students' powers of speech (thereby enhancing their confidence to communicate) it was claimed that this was child-centered education par excellence. This was a false claim, however, as the focus was really on mastering elocution and other techniques such as mime, acting, and choral speech. The "what" of Finlay-Johnson's method had changed radically to the "how" of the speech and drama specialists.

What mattered over the decades was not the content of the plays to be performed (a profitable industry of writing inferior texts for child performers emerged) but the skill with which they were presented. At its worst, the teacher's directorial skill was being demonstrated; at its best, a school production became a *group* enterprise. Cook (1917), a progressive educator teaching in the private school system, gives an interesting account of his attempt to counter the sterile teacher-dominated school production by having the pupils take entire responsibility for a production.

Slade, Way, and Child-Centered Drama

The stranglehold of the speech and drama movement became so strong that by the time Peter Slade appeared on the scene in the 1930s and '40s the original conception of drama education having links with child play had been lost (if indeed such a view had ever been implemented). There had been much high-sounding talk from the beginning of the century about the kinship between dramatic activity and a child's natural make-believe play, but Slade was the first to attempt to bring natural play into the classroom. He deplored public performances, the proscenium arch, the use of scripts, the training of children to act, and, above all, teacher intervention in children's playing. Rather, he encouraged spontaneity of expression. This represented the antithesis of the speech and drama approach. Teachers in the '50s, as they became inspired by Slade's philosophy, found themselves having to choose between two mutually exclusive educational ideals: The school play and child play were seen as incompatible.

Content did not matter for *what* was expressed was seen to be of less importance than the freedom to express it. However, such a degree of freedom made even Slade's most devoted followers feel uncomfortable. Slade himself came to their rescue by including in his seminal publication (1954) what he called his "ideas game," a method of building

up a story with a class of pupils prior to their simultaneously experiencing it in action under the direction of the teacher's narration—a rather curious application of his free-expression philosophy. Although he had only intended this to be a device to help teachers feel more secure in attempting child drama for the first time, it became popularly accepted as a legitimate form of practice.

This led to two kinds of misunderstanding. Giving exclusive attention to the story line distorts the nature of dramatic form, for situation must predominate over plot in drama. Also, the method denied the spontaneity of self-expression. Far from the participants experiencing each moment, each moment became but an anticipation of the next moment as the pupils followed through the teacher's narration of the predecided actions of the story.

This method of teaching drama was given further backing by Brian Way (1967), who won over the hearts and loyalties of many teacher-training institutions and consequently had a great deal of influence on how drama teachers were trained. Way espoused Slade's philosophy but added a new perspective on practice by adapting some of Stanislavski's early method of training actors to the classroom. He devised a system of exercises (often involving direct, nonsymbolic, sensory experiences) which would develop pupils' concentration, sensitivity, imagination, etc. Like the speech and drama teachers he set out to challenge, he focused attention on training, not in acting skills but in life skills. This gave teachers greater security, for in following the child drama philosophy of self-expression, they had felt uneasy at the seeming lack of purpose and progression.

Way also introduced the notion that drama was concerned with the "individuality of the individual," a phrase which echoed the philosophy of progressive education in the 1960s. Once again drama was seen to epitomize liberal education. In drama each child could "find himself," to use a catchphrase from the American humanist movement. I suggest that to see drama in this way is to misunderstand drama. Of all the arts, drama is a collective experiencing, celebrating, or commenting, not on how we are different from each other, but on what we share, on what ways we are alike. To encourage individual children to search for a drama within themselves is to distort the meaning of dramatic form. Drama is not self-expression; it is a form of group symbolism seeking universal, not individual truths. Progressive educators throughout the century have been mistaken in their view of drama as

child-centered and self-expressive, and drama teachers have been foolish to believe them!

As teachers entered the '70s, the emphasis on drama as training in acting had virtually disappeared but it had been replaced by equally damaging misconceptions: Pupils were encouraged to see drama as a story line, teachers were encouraged to train children through a shopping list of exercises in life skills such as sensitivity and concentration, and the importance of individual activity and self-expression was stressed in the name of progressive education. Drama as a symbolic art form was ignored and replaced by an emphasis on direct sensory experience. The content or subject matter of the drama was seen as irrelevant.

A generation of teachers has been trained to give their pupils sensory instead of symbolic experiences. Teachers have themselves failed to be alert to the power of the symbol and have been quite incapable of passing on a sense of dramatic form to their pupils.

Heathcote: Redefining Drama and Education

The writings and practice of Dorothy Heathcote (cf. Johnson & O'Neill, 1984) represent a Herculean attempt to bring dramatic form back to classroom drama, to redefine the relationship between drama and education, and to recast the role of the teacher. Once more subject matter of the drama is all important, Heathcote taking it beyond the factual level embraced by Finlay-Johnson to a way of looking at issues, principles, implications, consequences, and responsibilities behind the facts. This is a critical difference between these two pioneers, but they share a respect for the objective world. Heathcote understands that all artists (and therefore all children for she treats them as fellow artists) must look outward before they can look inward. Neither art nor education are about subjectivity. She does not automatically offer children freedom to express themselves, believing that the right to express oneself must be *earned*. It is not given.

On the surface Heathcote appears as a teacher to be dominating and manipulative. This is because she knows that children must work for autonomy; they must find resources within themselves to earn power. Power is not something to be handed on a plate. Teachers must take power unto themselves, constantly opening up opportunities for their pupils to relieve them of it. Heathcote's approach has not, of course, met with universal acceptance. One observer (Faulkes-Jendyk, 1975), expressing the bitterness felt by some established practitioners to

the challenge of Heathcote's revolutionary thinking, asks "Is this drama?" "Is this creativity?" "Is this education?"

But Heathcote's followers have also fallen into a trap of distorting the medium of drama. Anxious in the '60s to reestablish the importance of the art form, to get away from endless exercises and "messaging about," and to reintroduce the importance of content, they referred to drama as "living through" and "at life rate," phrases many people took as implying that drama was close to real life—a simulation. Heathcote's use of teacher-in-role gave participants and observers alike a strong sense of feeling "it is happening now," for the emotions felt were real emotions.

The pretense long associated with make-believe was rightly denigrated by Heathcote as false, second-hand experiencing. However, a fashion for giving pupils real experiences began. Followers of Heathcote coined the phrase "in depth" drama, implying a process of getting right inside a situation. Just as Slade never intended that story-line drama become established as a method, so Heathcote did not intend to bring such a strong flavor of naturalism to children's work. Her approach in practice rests much more heavily on Brecht's notion of "distancing" than on verisimilitude. As the final section of this article points out, distancing is the key to understanding drama as education.

Drama at the Center of the Curriculum

Common to all pioneers throughout the century has been the assumption that when pupils are involved in drama some kind of learning occurs. Some teachers are content to accept as sufficient the claim that drama brings confidence and enhances the pupil's self-esteem. Others see its social potential for improving the pupil's ability to be a member of a group. For yet others drama is a matter of improving skills, from communication to problem-solving skills and, of course, skill in creating drama. All these are important, but if we are to seek to place drama at the center of the curriculum we have to turn to what Norman (1981) describes as "the core concept of drama in education—making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of the drama" (p. 50).

We may usefully examine this core concept under the following headings: (a) metaxis; (b) aesthetic/referential attention; (c) subsidiary aware-

ness/unconscious learning; and (d) natural understanding.

Metaxis is a Greek term which has been interpreted by Boal (1981) as a way of identifying two worlds, the real and the fictitious, which are necessarily held in mind simultaneously by a participant or percipient of drama. The meaning of the drama lies in the interplay between these two worlds. It is obvious that a child using a stick as a sword in drama is aware both of stick and sword. What is less obvious but equally true is that when a real object is used (i.e., a real sword) the child is still aware of a distinction between sword and "sword." "Sword" of the drama is bracketed off from the sword of the real world.

Thus even where reality and fiction merge in the physical world a distinction must be mentally retained for drama to operate. Above all drama is a *mental* state. The old slogan of progressives that "drama is doing" is to see its concreteness as absolute, whereas even when expressed concretely in action, drama is essentially an abstraction. Because of the concreteness of its medium of expression, however, to the participants drama feels real and real emotion is expressed. But because of its level of abstraction, any raw emotion of reality is also tempered by a duality of feeling. As Vygotsky (1933/1976) says: ". . . the child weeps in play as a patient but revels as a player" (p. 549).

The ambivalent position between fiction and reality is what creates drama's potency. Attempts by teachers to set up drama as a piece of real life to be lived through is to misunderstand drama. On the other hand attempts by teachers merely to train children to be performers misses drama's potential for significant learning. During the '80s practitioners have developed more sophisticated methods of harnessing contrasting modes of dramatic behavior (e.g., mantle of the expert,¹ depiction,² direct and indirect focusing on a theme, and projected and personal dramatic playing). The appearance of a drama lesson has now changed almost out of recognition because of the rich combinations to which these techniques may be put.

Participants in drama can attend to its meaning in two ways. They can see what is happening in the drama as an illustration of what happens in the world outside. This can be described as referential attention where the action of the drama is seen as an instance of a more general case. Or they can attend to the action of the drama "for itself." This is the aesthetic attention where the essential meaning of the drama, resonated through symbolic object

and action, lies in its particularity. Indeed, without the conscious use of symbol (at least on the part of the teacher) the activity should be defined as role play rather than drama.

Part of a teacher's responsibility is to be open to possible symbolic overtones of meaning, especially when working with students who are determined to churn out a sequence of actions related to plot. And yet to a large extent they must focus on creating a drama; only subsidiarily can they attend to aesthetic meanings within the dramatic situation. Resonances are picked up, not sought. They are felt and may remain unarticulated.

Even the learning that occurs within the drama at a more intellectual level (for instance, a group of pupils in role may successfully probe the possible range of consequences of the decision they are about to make) does not occur because they intended to learn something from the beginning. The intention to learn is subsidiary to their main intention, their minds and feelings being necessarily engaged at a level Polanyi (1958) terms "subsidiary awareness." Dunlop (1977) speaks of unconscious or "tacit" learning, a concept which gives credence to the idea of connecting learning with an art form. Fleming (1982) expresses it thus:

Now it is one thing to claim that there is a tacit component in learning which must be acknowledged, but it is another matter to suggest that it is the tacit component which is of central importance, which would seem to be the case in most drama work. (p. 134)

Are we able to identify what *kind* of learning takes place in drama? Much learning in school is additive; that is, new facts are acquired and stored by the pupil. Learning in drama is essentially a reframing. What knowledge a pupil already has is placed in a new perspective. To take on a role is to detach oneself from what is implicitly understood and to blur temporarily the edges of a given world. It invites modification, adjustment, reshaping, and realignment of concepts already held. Through detachment from experiencing one can look at one's experiencing anew.

The kind of knowledge drama opens up is not the received knowledge of the school disciplines. It is akin to what Elliott (1975) describes as common or natural understanding. It supersedes the bodies of knowledge of the disciplines, but is itself rigorously disciplined in a unique subjective/objective relationship with the world. It is the kind of understanding any writer whose subject matter is human

life must have in abundance. Most educational institutions fail their pupils in developing natural understanding. The need is urgent. We are not teaching pupils to cope with the complexities of relationships in a modern society; in future years drama may become one of the important means of dealing with this pressing concern.

Notes

1. "Mantle of the expert" refers to a dramatic method popularized by Dorothy Heathcote which requires the participants to behave as if they have the knowledge, skill, and responsibility of an expert; e.g., a doctor (see also Heathcote & Herbert, this issue).
2. "Depiction" is a mode of acting behavior relying on external representation of an event or of feelings. It is usually static as in a tableau, photograph, or sculpture.

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