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Using Drama In The Classroom

**J. Lea Smith
J. Daniel Herring**

Drama is a potentially powerful tool for connecting students with learning and content. We know that learning is an active, constructive process of coming to know. And through our classroom involvement with students, we have found that drama can provide a process for learning by living through or experiencing an event. Drama by its very nature involves students in social contexts where they are required to think, talk, manipulate concrete materials, and share viewpoints in order to arrive at decisions (Siks, 1983). Thus, through drama, students explore both factual knowledge and content concepts while “trying on” social experiences. Heathcote (cited in Johnson and O’Neill, 1984) believes that drama confronts students with situations that may change them because of the issues and challenges they must face in the dramatic playing.

The classroom teacher must address the challenge of creating an instructional environment that bridges what students know with what they want to know (Cooter and Chilcoat, 1990). Beane (1992) states that genuine learning involves an interaction between the learner, the environment, and the content; this interaction integrates what we experience into our system of meanings. Drama can initiate this interaction. It empowers students to learn new knowledge and also, as Bolton (1984) has noted, enables them to understand more deeply what they already know. Dramatic

episodes actively engage students and contribute to ownership of the educational process (Atwell, 1987).

Thus, drama is action in the present. This action prevents academic content from appearing lifeless, abstract and beyond understanding. Piaget (as cited in Wadsworth, 1979) points out that physical activity can lay the groundwork for developing abstract mental concepts. Thus, drama provides students with a means of living through content in a way that deepens their understanding and appreciation of the subject. Although teachers may recognize the power of learning through drama for students, dramatization is still a relatively rare event in most classrooms (Collins, 1992). Our goal in this article is to present two approaches for integrating drama into the classroom curriculum.

Linear drama approach

One way to initiate drama in content studies is through a linear approach (Ward, 1957). The teacher initiating drama into the classroom for the first time may prefer this approach. With this structure, drama activities are primarily planned and outlined by the teacher before involving the students in the dramatic playing. This tends to give the teacher great control while allowing the students creative input. The linear drama session resembles a recipe, with a series of steps that produce a selected learning outcome. The stages include planning, playing, evaluating and, optionally, replaying.

Planning stage. The first stage begins with selecting a theme or concept for students to explore through drama. This theme may reflect content under study, as well as issues or conflicts presented in content readings, or it may build on students' interests. Poems, short stories, selected

textual passages, or original improvisations drawn from content are suitable materials. The selected materials build on the theme and provide opportunities to extend learning.

The teacher outlines a strategy for engaging the students with the drama materials. A good beginning point for developing a linear session is to focus on the physical characterization of the theme or concept (Siks, 1983). In the linear drama session example below, the unifying theme is *insects*, which we explore through creative movement and poetry (see Figure 1). Motivating and focusing the students for dramatic activities is essential. The warm-up moves students through physical activities that loosen the body, and uses visual imagery activities to encourage mental concentration. Students' performance skills including voice, sensory awareness, movement, memory and characterization are nurtured. In our example, the warm-up uses guided imagery to help students physically create an insect.

The teacher's role during a linear drama session is usually as narrator or side-coach. In this role, the teacher is able to orchestrate the action by giving instructions and cueing students as needed. The teacher may also narrate the text that is part of the dramatic activity and help students stay focused on their roles.

Playing stage. The teacher begins this stage by sharing the material to be dramatized with the students. Methods for sharing include reading, telling or choral reading. For original improvisations, descriptive instructions focus on character, setting and action development. After sharing the material, the teacher leads students through a trying-on of the characters to acquaint them with the roles to be dramatized. The trying-on is structured so that students briefly encounter life as the character, enabling them to find

the elements of voice and body that work in portraying the character. In our example, students explore their space as a cricket.

After the trying-on period, the selected dramatic material is brought to life as the students develop the theme through their dramatic actions. This can be done in a number of ways. Small groups might act out a particular section of the material or small groups might dramatize the entire piece. Or the group as a whole could enact parts or the entire piece. The playing also may be structured as duet dramatizations. In our cricket example, students are divided into small groups where they develop a dramatic enactment of a stanza of the verse which the small groups then perform sequentially as part of the whole group dramatization.

Evaluation stage. Involving students in assessing the session encourages reflective analysis of their learning experience. The content of the dramatic session guides the evaluation which may involve discussing topics related to concepts of language arts, science or social studies. During this reflective evaluation, students discuss their personal reaction, the content and theme, and how they can extend the experience or skills to other situations often including real-world circumstances.

Replay stage. A linear session may employ a replay stage following the evaluation stage. This permits further development of the initial dramatization by incorporating observations from the evaluation into further dramatizations. This stage can be a second enactment of the first dramatization or a new drama using other materials.

Holistic drama approach

In contrast, the basic holistic method has students drop into a role at the "gut level" (Wagner, 1976), without

Figure 1
Example of a Linear Drama Session

- I. *Objectives* To construct insect characters through physical movement; to foster group cooperation and communication through creative dramatization.
- II. *Planning* **Warm-up.** Students listen to appropriate music while the teacher uses guided imagery to assist the students in visualizing an insect character of their choosing. This includes verbally walking the students through the transformation from a person to an insect.
Teacher dialogue. "In your own space with your eyes closed, think about how your body can become the body of your insect. What can you do with your arms? Show me. Now, show me what your legs would look like. Don't forget that your face is a part of your physical character. Now, as the music continues to play, move around the room and explore it as the insect would." The students move through the space portraying their insects.
- III. *Playing* **Sharing of the material.** The teacher reads the poem, "House Crickets" (Fleischman, 1988).
Trying-on. The teacher uses guided imagery to assist the students in picturing a cricket in their minds. In their own space, students create a statue of a cricket. When the teacher gives a signal (hand clap), the cricket statues come to life and move about the playing area. After this, the teacher signals the students to add sound effects to their crickets.
Dramatization. Students are placed in groups of about five. Each small group of students is given a section of the poem, "House Crickets" (Fleischman, 1988) to develop for a large-group presentation. The working groups are given ample time to prepare. Each group then presents their portion of the poem in sequential order which constitutes the large-group playing. The small group's enactment may be done in several ways: one person reading, two voices reading, choral reading, or dueling voices as group members perform their stanza dramatization.
- IV. *Evaluation* After the dramatization, the teacher and students discuss the experience. This discussion focuses on interpretations and characterizations that were effective as well as drama skills that were used in developing the dramatizations.
- V. *Replaying and evaluation* The same groupings of students may be given a copy of the poem, "Fireflies" (Fleischman, 1988), for developing a second group dramatization. After the groups work through how they will handle verse reading, characterization, and physical interpretations, they share their dramatization with the class. The group discusses the interpretations, characterizations, and other drama elements including sound, movement, sense awareness, concentration, and group cooperation, which may vary considerably.

instruction in dramatic skills. Students are encouraged to live the life invented through the drama. This improvisational framework creates an element of surprise that can lead to new understanding of the concept being dramatized. In a holistic session, students assume the attitudes of a character, display external actions that symbolize internal meaning and develop an understanding of the themes, values and issues surrounding the material enacted (Wright and Herring, 1987). *Teacher in role* is a key element in holistic drama. The teacher takes on a role as a character within the improvised drama which helps focus the students' attention while challenging feelings of apathy or uncertainty. This unites students in problem solving and propels them into action (O'Neill, 1991).

The *tableau* or frozen picture is another effective strategy in holistic drama. By stopping the action, students gain an opportunity to reflect on what has happened in the dramatization and plan for what may occur next. During the tableau, the teacher supplies students with comments or questions to develop their characters, examine their characters' emotional states and propel them into the next episode or scene.

Planning a holistic drama session begins with identification of a theme that is selected jointly by the teacher and students. The holistic episode might be to examine some aspect of the curriculum being studied. An example is to explore the depths of the oceans as a part of a science unit. Once the theme is identified, the teacher studies the topic and prepares dramatic structures that provide focused learning episodes including development of the role the teacher will play during the improvised drama.

Figure 2
Holistic Drama Structure

- I. *Objectives* To create an historical event through dramatization; to develop realistic 3-dimensional characters and "walk in their shoes."
- II. *Structure I* **Tableau.** Students sit with their eyes closed, and the teacher explains that they are crew members on the voyage of Columbus in 1492. The teacher guides them in visualizing the crew member they have chosen to portray. The guided imagery could include known historical facts, suggestions for character development, and establishment of the setting that begins the dramatization.
Playing. Students board the "ship" (designated playing area) with their gear. Columbus, the teacher in role, welcomes them aboard, gives them directions for storing their gear and encourages them to become acquainted with the different areas of the ship. Then Columbus answers their questions about the voyage ahead. The action of the characters is spontaneous and develops as the structure is played.
- III. *Structure II* **Tableau.** After the question and answer scene is played out completely, the teacher freezes the action and steps out of role. In this tableau, the teacher reports on the first days of a successful voyage — beautiful weather, bountiful supplies, and smooth sailing ahead.
Playing. Crew members are celebrating at a banquet in honor of Christopher Columbus. Crew members salute Columbus, acknowledging him as a great admiral. These unrehearsed acknowledgements may be short speeches, cheers, salutatory comments, or whatever evolves as the scene is played.
- IV. *Structure III* **Tableau.** The teacher propels the students into creating the mood of an unhappy crew ready for mutiny. Information used to create this mood includes the description of a longer journey than anticipated, announcement of rationed supplies, and recalling of bad weather that damaged one of the ships. Students have time to reflect on this information before action resumes.
Playing. Crew members begin the scene boisterously demanding an audience with Columbus. They shout and chant their demands until Columbus appears and a confrontation occurs between the crew members and Columbus. This scene continues until Columbus refuses to answer and leaves the main deck.
- V. *Structure IV* **Tableau.** The teacher suggests the crew has come to a state of despair and doom culminating in fears that death at sea is imminent.
Playing. Disheartened crew members are bemoaning their doom. They speak of their homeland, families, and curse their unfulfilled dreams of wealth and fame. The dramatization is open to allow each student to respond as their character might in these circumstances. As the action evolves, land is sighted by Columbus who calls to his crew. An impromptu celebration unfolds.

In our holistic drama example, the theme is the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492. We begin by studying the man and his time using an adolescent literature thematic text set that includes *Christopher Columbus* (Haskins, 1990) and *The Story of Christopher Columbus* (Osborne, 1987). Other resource materials include *Rethinking Columbus* (Bigelow, Miner and Peterson, 1992) and *Foreigners: A Play of Cristoforo Colombo* (Schlitz, 1991). The literature is reviewed by the teacher and passages are chosen that will generate the most playable dramatic action. These become dramatic structures that will be developed by the students and teacher. Opportunities to develop an original character and experience varying emotional states associated with the 1492 voyage are desirable features in selecting passages. Examples of playable passages include boarding the ship and meeting Christopher Columbus, celebrating after several days of smooth sailing, confronting Columbus after many grueling weeks at sea, and sighting of land. Before playing Structure One (see Figure 2), the tableau technique is used to get the students into role. Stopping the action allows students to move from one structure to the next and allows the teacher to step out of the dramatic role and coach the students. For example, during the tableau between Structures Two and Three (see Figure 2) the teacher enhances the dramatic action by describing the bad weather experienced, the damaged ship, and rationed supplies. In our example, the teacher orchestrates dramatization of the structures in the role of Christopher Columbus.

Conclusion

Both linear and holistic drama can enrich and sustain students' understanding — not only as they develop their own dramatic interpretations, but also as they contemplate the work involved in dramatization. Providing opportunities

for learners to engage in dramatic activities tends to improve students' attitudes toward learning. This improvement stems from the opportunity to make unique, individual contributions to their learning through drama. The holistic and linear formats differ in approach. The former offers a flexible framework while the latter provides a step-by-step sequence. Clearly, both offer teachers a practical technique to implement an active approach that engages students as they seek to master content.

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