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The Best Laid Schemes o' Mice and Men: Exploring the Interplay Between

Context, Role and Frame in Process Drama

Introduction

It is our experience that increasing numbers of teachers are becoming interested in using process drama in their classrooms. They recognise that this genre of applied theatre provides vivid, challenging and engaging learning experiences for their pupils of all ages, and from our point of view this is a heartening state of affairs.

However, while recognition is one thing, transforming it into action is another, and we feel that this 'slip 'twixt cup and lip' is created not least by a continuing uncertainty and accompanying insecurity that many teachers - particularly non-specialists - feel about how to plan successfully for process drama.

Getting to the bottom of this planning process and attempting to make it accessible to those who are just beginning to use process drama has been, and remains, a continuing area of inquiry for us. At the heart of this process are six principles of planning: theme, context, role, frame, sign and strategies (Bowell and Heap, 2001: 10) and the relationship between them. Whilst it is clear to us that all of these principles need to be applied in order that successful process dramas may emerge, we are becoming increasingly persuaded that three of the principles - context, role and frame - have a particular and vital interconnection. This is leading us to explore this interplay in greater detail.

Because drama contextualises learning in fictional circumstances, it is important to understand that teachers need to be able to plan these circumstances and to recognise that *multiple* dramatic contexts are available in which to explore the chosen theme or learning area. Recognising that there exists a multiplicity of dramatic contexts in relation to a particular learning area provides us with the means by which a topic can be approached from a range of perspectives. Depending on the chosen context, a whole range of roles is available - not only for the pupils but also the teacher in role. These roles, however, are not enough by themselves. Dramatic tension (and protection into the experience) needs to be generated through frame.

So context, role and frame in combination, as illustrated in Figure 1, give us the *where, when, who* and *why* of the drama.

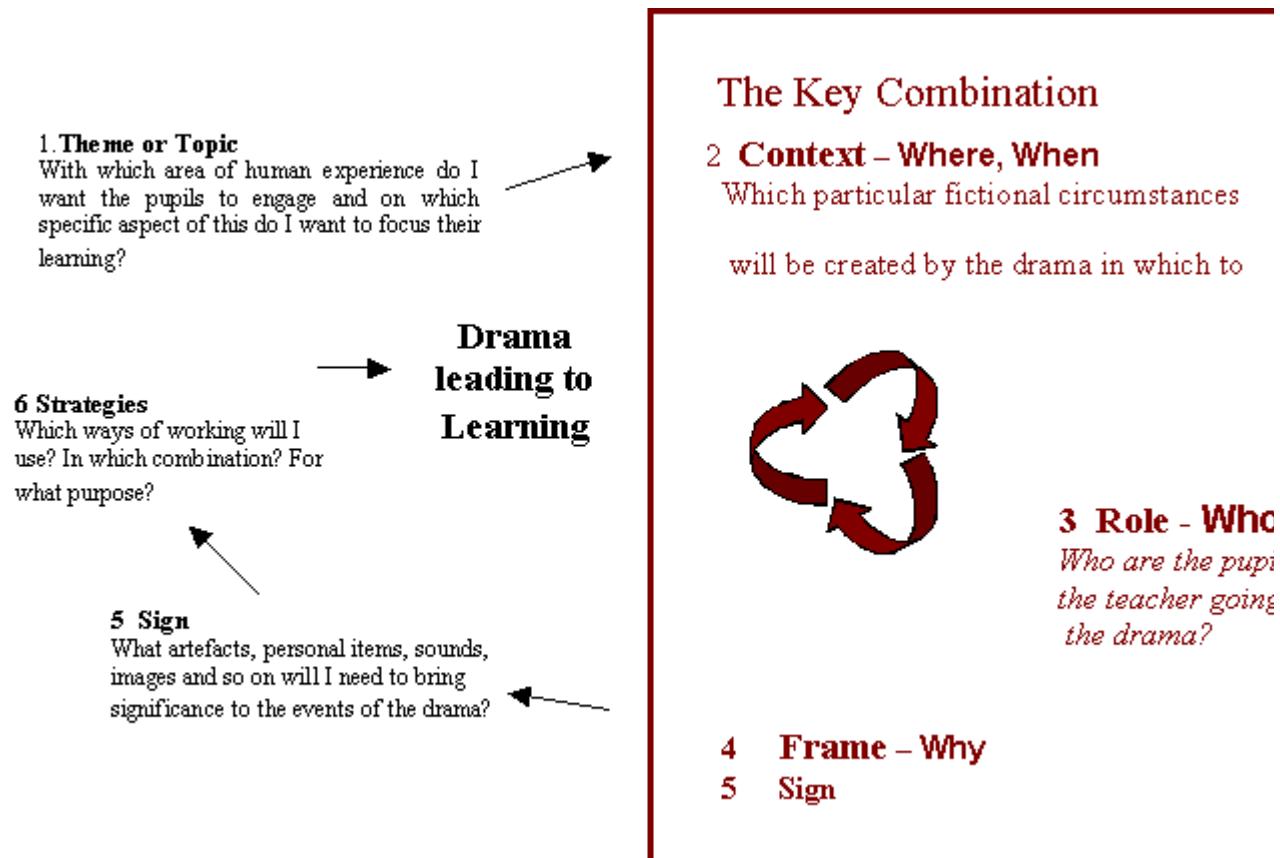


Figure 1: The key combination of context, role and frame

It is perhaps valuable to dwell individually on each of these three key elements before turning to the interaction between them.

Context

'Context', as a term, can be rather complicated in drama because the same word is applied to a range of equally important but at the same time different kinds of circumstances. However, the focus of this article means that we are concerned with just one of these sorts of context - the dramatic context. The dramatic context refers to the fictional circumstances that will be established by the process drama so that the participants may engage with the learning area in a meaningful way.

Choosing the most appropriate dramatic context is a key skill for the teacher if he or she is going to be able to translate the concept of the theme into a concrete situation in which learning can take place. A tight, specifically identified learning area will help in selecting the place, time and event which, together, will constitute the dramatic context. The dilemma - but also what we regard as the strength - of this choice springs from the understanding that, almost always, there is a diverse range of contexts in which the theme could be explored and from the recognition that it is *possible to move between different contexts as the process drama unfolds*. In due course, when we turn to the interplay between context, role and frame, we will return to a further discussion of this choice.

Role

The taking of a role is the core activity in drama, and through the process of enactment within the dramatic context we have the opportunity to behave as if we were someone else and to explore the situation of the drama from another's point of view. When planning for process drama, there are two considerations for the teacher to remember. The one that springs most readily to mind is the roles to be played by the participants - who the pupils are going to be in the drama. However, one of the distinctive features of process drama as a particular genre of applied theatre is the fundamental position of teacher-in-role. So the second aspect of planning roles in process drama is to decide who the teacher is going to

be in the drama. In making these decisions, the teacher needs to ensure that these people, the pupil roles and teacher-in-role, would be found in the time and place of the fictional context and would have a 'real' reason for engaging with the circumstances of the drama. Fortunately, through identifying an appropriate dramatic context, appropriate roles will begin to emerge naturally from within and around it; thus this task becomes less daunting than it might initially seem.

Frame

However, context and roles alone are not in themselves sufficient to establish the dramatic situation. Without dramatic tension to fuel the drama, there is no 'imperative for active participation' (Bowell and Heap, 2001: 58). Frame ensures that this imperative is created, and it is the planning principle that we have long felt to be the most important of all. Through the creation of a 'collective concern', frame provides the roles with a point of view about the unfolding circumstances of the drama and, in consequence, something to say about it - crucial when we remember that the currency of process drama is talk.

Moreover, there is a second function of frame in process drama. It is melded with context and role and is as important as the tension/communication function. This function of frame is concerned with protecting the participants into the experience of the drama through distancing. By the sensitive employment of frames that allow for distance through time and/or emotional relationship, the teacher is able to provide circumstances within the fictional context that will allow the participants to approach the central learning theme from a 'cooler' perspective. This is especially necessary if, as is often the case in process drama, the theme under exploration is a long way from the pupils' own real-life experiences or is emotionally challenging.

So, from this set of three planning elements for process drama, there springs a wide range of variables which allow for a great deal of flexibility on the part of the teacher and pupils together as they create the drama.

Why do we think that recognising this relationship is so critical? We believe the interplay between these three principles constitutes the 'essence' of process drama. Teachers may very well be tempted into believing that it is having a broad range of dramatic strategies at one's disposal that truly represents the 'essence' of the drama. This belief frequently manifests itself as an earnest attempt by teachers to become familiar with as much of the canon of available drama strategies as they can, while at the same time paying insufficient attention to other equally important aspects of the dramatic structure. Drama strategies need to be seen for what they are, which is really the means by which the substance of the drama is given shape and form. But if the critical interplay between context, role and frame is not fully appreciated and achieved, then the strategies - no matter how well chosen and executed they may be - can be rendered largely ineffective.

Out of the interplay between context, role and frame, roles emerge naturally from a particular dramatic context and get their active potential from the point of view provided by the frame, which also ensures that participants are protected into the experience through the distancing.

This relationship, illustrated in Table 1, provides an example of how context, role and frame can generate a range of different dramatic circumstances in which to explore the theme of the drama - in this case, the Vikings (adapted from Bowell & Heap 2001: 38)

Table 1: Generation of dramatic circumstances through context, role and frame

Context			Roles	Frame	
Place	Time	Event		Communication	Distance
Holy Island	Viking times	The Viking landing	Anglo-Saxon monks on Holy Island who â€¢	must face the Vikings now	HOT None
Mainland village	Viking times	Preparing to repel the invaders	Anglo-Saxon villagers who â€¢	know they will be next	Not by time, a little by relationship
Monastery	Mediaeval times	Chronicling the Viking invasion	Mediaeval monks who â€¢	know they must be accurate so that	Somewhat by time,

				those who come after will know what happened	more by relationship
Village	Modern times	Commemorating the defence of the village	Modern-day villagers who â€	want a fitting tribute to their ancestors	Somewhat by relationship, more by time
Film studio	Modern times	Making a film about the invasion	Film production company which â€	needs to find a new 'angle' on the invasion	By time and relationship
Dance rehearsal room	Modern times	Creating a new invasion dance	Dancers and choreographers who â€	need to capture the emotion of the invasion in dance	By time and relationship
Archaeological site	Modern times	Excavating the site of the battle	Archaeologists who â€	must complete their dig before the carpark is laid	By time and relationship
Museum	Modern times	Setting up a living museum display	Curators who â€	have a limited budget but must find the essence of the historical events	By time and relationship COOL

Since, as we have outlined above, multiple dramatic contexts are available to explore a particular theme, it is the actual choosing of the particular set of fictional circumstances that presents the teacher with a major challenge. The fundamental nature of this dilemma lies in having to swiftly envisage a broad range of human experience in order to choose from it the particular set of fictional circumstances or dramatic contexts that will best serve the particular learning for that particular set of learners at that particular moment. The teacher is further challenged to realise that frequently, as the drama unfolds, shifts in the particulars of the learning will demand shifts in the fictional circumstances in order to refocus the learners.

It is through this 'spectrum of circumstance' (Bowell and Heap, 2002: 80) that the drama can progress by making shifts in one, two or all three of these principles. Such adjustments will produce new situations, in addition to developing the potential for completely different sets of learning outcomes.

In defining the 'spectrum of circumstance', we are specifically referring to the vast number of different situations that can be opened up in the drama to refocus the learning through *new combinations* of context, role and frame, and this represents the main focus of this article.

Previously in our work together, when we have outlined an approach to planning process drama, we have illustrated our point with accounts of fully developed drama classes and experiences that could only have been written *after* the fact. In reality, of course, because of the essentially improvisatory nature of this genre, planning for process drama in its first phase will hardly take the teacher beyond the initial premise for the drama, even in situations where the final outcome of the drama has already been agreed on. The main body of the drama - the 'play', if you will - has yet to be generated. It will be created, 'written', discovered, negotiated in what Suzanne Langer (1953: 307) powerfully described as the 'perpetual present moment' which is 'filled with its own future'. However, adjusting the action of the drama through improvisation involves more than merely adjusting the strategies being used, since it is the interplay between context, role and frame unfolding in 'now time' which establishes the immediacy of thinking, feeling and action â€‘ the experience that '*This is happening to us, here and now, because* â€'

Part of the power of process drama for pupils lies in precisely this immediacy of thinking and feeling and action which takes place in the present moment. Termed 'now time' by Dorothy Heathcote (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984: 162), it places the participants firmly in the timeframe and experience of the 'story' of the drama. In real circumstances, we can never relive the past nor experience the future - yet we can refer to them in language and even go so far as to speculate as to what might have been or what might still be. The 'now time' of the drama is an enormously powerful feature, because it holds within it the potential to release us into a 'spectrum of presents' or 'new reals'. Learning which comes about in process drama is not achieved in the simplistic improvising of a 'now' situation, but by using the possibilities inherent within

that 'now' to explore dramatically a range of experience including a 'spectrum of whens'; 'a spectrum of wheres'; 'a spectrum of whats'; 'a spectrum of whos'; and 'a spectrum of whys'. In combination, they create a 'spectrum of circumstance' - all happening in the present moment.

Let us take a look at what these findings might mean in practical terms to a teacher in the classroom by developing an example of process drama, which uses as its inspiration a short story by the Brothers Grimm, 'The Old Man and His Grandson':

There was once a very old man, whose eyes had become dimmed, his ears dull of hearing, his knees trembled, and when he sat at the table to eat he could barely hold the spoon to his lips, spilling broth upon the tablecloth or letting it dribble from his mouth. His son and his son's wife were both revolted by this and finally banished the grandfather to sit in a corner where they gave him his food in an earthenware bowl. He used to look longingly towards the table with his eyes brimming with tears. Once, his trembling hands could not hold his bowl and it dropped to the ground, breaking and spilling its contents. His young daughter-in-law scolded him dreadfully but he said nothing and only sighed. The following day she bought him a wooden bowl from which he had to eat.

However, one day they were sitting thus when the little grandson began to gather together some bits of wood. 'What are you doing?' asked the father. 'I am making a little trough,' answered the child, 'for you and mother to eat out of when I am big.'

The man and his wife looked at each other and began to cry. Then they took the old grandfather to the table and, from that day on, always let him eat with them and said nothing if he spilled a little of anything.

In developing a drama experience for pupils from this story, the teacher may very well decide to do the following. Let us suppose the following:

- The teacher takes on the **role** of a nosy neighbour, along with the pupils in similar 'neighbourly' roles.
- The **context** is that they have just overheard their neighbour - the old man - weeping, and his daughter-in-law scolding him.
- The **frame** is the dilemma they face.
- Is some kind of abuse taking place?
- Should the neighbours mind their own business?
- Should they, as responsible citizens, report the incident to the police?
- Would calling in a social worker be better?
- What would be the most appropriate action to take?
- From this initial premise, the **strategies** used can be introduced and altered - for example, a neighbourhood committee meeting, telephone conversations with the police, writing in role to a social worker, the newspapers etc.

However, in developing the drama, all the above can be changed - and consequently the learning outcomes altered:

- To begin with, the **roles** can change. The teacher's role can be changed to that of police officer, the daughter-in-law from the story, a social worker, newspaper reporter, etc. as required. The pupils, too, could take on the roles of police, social workers, construction workers in the neighbourhood, telephone repair workers, etc.
- The **context** could be altered. Remembering that context includes the elements of *time, place* and *event*, it might very well shift to 'making a report at a police station', 'working on a possible story at a newspaper office', 'a discussion at the village meeting hall', etc.
- The **frame** might be adjusted as pupils and/or teacher adopt different points of view and are distanced in a different manner:
 - The police may be thinking along the lines of, 'You can't just barge in and arrest somebody because you heard an argument.'
 - Social workers might react by saying: 'We have no evidence, and the old man isn't one of our regular clients.'
 - On the other hand, the neighbours of the old man might insist: 'We have to be able to protect one of our own.'

However, when the teacher undertakes to make an even more radical change in the drama, the following might happen:

- The story moves several years forward in time, with the teacher-in-role as the little grandson from the story now grown into an adult. He is interviewing the pupils-in-role as workers who are applying for jobs in the factory that he owns, in which he designs and manufactures 'aids to independent living' for people who are elderly, disabled or infirm.
- The teacher (in role as the adult grandson) explains to the aspiring workers that the most important qualification for getting a job is an understanding of what older people may need to help them remain independent, and he offers to introduce them to an older person who is also one of the factory's clients.
- The teacher-in-role as the grandson is replaced by the teacher-in-role as the older person, who is faced with the challenges of failing sight, hearing impairment, restricted mobility, difficulties in getting out of a chair, having a bath, etc.
- The children use the information gathered in their interview with the older person to develop some ideas for a new line of products, which will assist in promoting independent living among older people.

Within this unit of drama work with teacher-in-role, the central *strategies* used include: meetings, interview, and writing/drawing in role. However, the teacher in this second instance has also:

â€¢ changed the *teacher's role* in the drama (twice);

â€¢ changed the *role of the pupils* in the drama;

â€¢ shifted the *context* from simply applying for a job to actively developing new technologies to assist older people;

â€¢ altered the *frame* in the case of the teacher's role as the grandson to someone who is deeply committed to helping the elderly;

â€¢ altered the *frame* in the case of the teacher's role as the older informant to someone who wishes to remain as independent as possible for as long as possible;

â€¢ altered the *frame* in the case of the pupils' roles from people who need jobs to people who need to actively demonstrate empathy with the needs of older person in order to get those jobs.

From this brief example, we hope we have made clear that it is the shifts in context, role and frame, *working together* with a range of strategies and signs, which broaden and strengthen the drama experience for the pupils and so provide a richer and more rounded learning experience through a changing set of lenses.

If we examine this premise in greater detail, we can see these shifts offer a multiplicity of opportunities to explore the theme. Each of these principles can be Table 2.

Table 2: Opportunities of context, role and frame shifts

Context	Role	Frame
1. Context shifts	Role remains the same	Frame remains the same
2. Context remains the same	Role shifts	Frame remains the same
3. Context remains the same	Role remains the same	Frame shifts
4. Context shifts	Role shifts	Frame remains the same
5. Context shifts	Role remains the same	Frame shifts
6. Context remains the same	Role shifts	Frame shifts
7. Context shifts	Role shifts	Frame shifts

If we now apply these shifts to the original scenario suggested by the Grimm Brothers' story, the scenario shown in Table 3 might be created:

Table 3: Changes to context, role and frame

Shifting â€¢

1. neighbours to a time before the events of the story might still find them with an opinion about the old man's family, which is something like: 'That couple wants locking up' - but for a different reason this time
2. neighbours to workmen in the neighbourhood who have the same point of view about the event but whose roles possess a different history, status and authority to take action
3. the neighbours' concern to whether they could be charged with creating a public nuisance should they be found to have falsely accused the family of cruelty
4. neighbourhood to newspaper office and neighbours to reporters who also believe 'that couple wants locking up'. Once again the new roles possess a different level of empowerment in relation to the main events of the story
5. situation to where neighbours are featured in newspapers, are not happy about the negative publicity they have received and are having doubts about getting further involved in matters
6. roles from neighbours to police officers who feel they cannot arrest someone on the basis of hearsay and who are worried about overstepping their authority
7. roles from neighbours to workers applying for jobs in a factory owned by the old man's grandson where they will design and manufacture 'aids to independent living' for older people

Context, role, frame

- Changing the *context* will alter the where and when of the drama and provide opportunity to explore events prior to or subsequent to the main focus.
- Changing the *roles* in the same context will change the who of the drama.
- Changing the *frame* gives existing roles in the existing situation a different point of view and outlook on the circumstances of the drama.
- Changing the *context and role* moves the learners to new roles in a new situation but maintaining a similar viewpoint on unfolding events.
- Changing *context and frame* means existing roles produce a new response to the changing circumstances of the drama.
- Changing *role and frame* puts new roles with a different point of view into the existing situation.
- Changing *context, role and frame* produces an entirely new situation through which to continue exploration of the theme.

This seems relatively straightforward - which in one sense it is. However, we have consciously kept this example simple. In fact, a change in just one element will frequently evoke subtle changes in the others - not least because, if we revisit our earlier statement, it can be recalled that we have divided context into three elements: time, place and event, so making for further richness of choice. In addition, 'role' involves the role of the teacher as well as of the pupils and the teacher's frame may well be different from theirs, so providing yet further opportunities for shifts.

All these permutations add up to a very complex and sophisticated structure which may seem overwhelming but which we would argue is hugely exciting and liberating. Add to this the ways in which signs and strategies are brought to bear upon the creation of mood, focus and action, and we see the full richness of the spectrum of circumstance that teachers have at their disposal in engaging learners with process drama experiences - a spectrum in which the interplay between context, role and frame remains the essential, creative and empowering heart.

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