APPLIED THEATRE RESEARCH, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

APPLIED THEATRE RESEARCHER ISSN 1443-1726 Number 2, 2001

Article No.4

TABULA RASA: STARTING AFRESH WITH CLASSROOM DRAMA

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Abstract

An action research collaboration investigating the implementation of pedagogical and curricular change in an Ontario grade eight classroom led researchers to unanticipated and valued findings. The vehicle of drama for the teaching of a new History curriculum methodologies that redistributed power and re- defined roles among grade eight students. Working ‘in role’ and critically reflecting on practice often uncovers ‘surprising’ findings when practitioners are able to systematically ‘think their practice’ (Freire, 1998) and create possibilities for learners to challenge previous assumptions about classroom achievement. The approach taken in this study fostered democratic principles in classroom teaching and learning, and the subsequent representation of classroom-based inquiry. The group's well-established social order was contested when drama became a new way to ‘succeed’ for three of the classroom's most academically challenged students.

Biography

Kathleen Gallagher is Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. In 1999, her doctoral research was awarded the American Alliance of Theatre and Education's distinguished dissertation award. In 2000, her dissertation also received the Barbara McIntyre distinguished research award. Dr. Gallagher's new book is entitled Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities (University of Toronto Press, 2000). Her research in drama continues to focus on questions of inclusion and democratic practice as well as the pedagogical possibilities of learning through the arts.

TABULA RASA: STARTING AFRESH WITH CLASSROOM DRAMA

Classrooms are powerful places with well-established social orders. Whether the teacher sees a ‘bell curve’ of abilities when she looks out on her thirty students, or thirty unique individuals each bestowed with talents and gifts of their own, the classroom has entrenched a social (and learning) order all of its own. Within it, there will be ‘over-achievers’, ‘under-achievers’, ‘middling students’, trouble-makers’, and the kids - better than anyone - will know who's who and where they all stand. As Pinar et. al. remind us:

> Schools may have been designed as neutral places, but neutral places they have never been; always they have been places where some people's children are subordinate to other people's children (p380).

That is why, I would say, that teachers who use drama in their classroom can often cite ‘epiphanic moments’ in which their understanding of their students and students understanding of themselves and each other is radically altered. These moments that story-telling teachers share are key to our understanding of drama's special ability to shake up the social order of classrooms, redistribute power, and re-define the rules of the game.

In drama, the wearing of new identities in fictional worlds is the modus operandi. Students are invited to engage in the building of these worlds through analogy or simulation (Johnson and O'Neill , 1984), to role-play (Booth, 1994) to devise scenes (Neelands, 1990; O'Neill, 1995) and create alternate realities. What I have observed in my recent action research collaboration with an eighth grade classroom teacher is that new roles/identities beyond the drama worlds - within the actual classroom - often become possible for those students marked most ‘at risk’ for failure. Further, that these new roles or identities help to uncover ways of being for students that encourage participation at their fullest potential. In short, drama has both intrinsic and extrinsic value for the most alienated learners in classroom settings.

My project with Ms. Judy Blaney, an eighth grade teacher with twenty years experience, represents an action-research, school-based collaboration. The concept of ‘research partnerships’ has been an influential one in recent educational reform discourses (Grundy, 1998). This study of practice aims to document the actions of one teacher in her classroom and the challenges faced in the implementation of a new, mandated provincial Social Studies curriculum and assessment tools for grade eight students. Implicit in our method, then, was a belief in the usefulness of action research in the implementation of pedagogical and curricular change. That is, it is research with an often immediate and ultimately practical application. As Maxine Greene (1996) has reminded us, new voices, responsive to the talk of reflective practitioner, are becoming audible in education research and novel modes of participant observation in actual classrooms are asking practitioners to think about their own thinking. In essence, this means that teachers can begin to explore beyond their own pedagogical boundaries.

The project also addresses specific issues related to student motivation and drama as a teaching methodology. In short, it not only investigated reality in order to change it but, as Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) suggest, it has changed reality in order to investigate it. An intermediate teacher with twenty years experience changed her approach to the teaching of a new Social Studies curriculum in order to critically reflect with a university teacher-educator on her own teaching style and the learning outcomes of her students.

Methodology

The research activity included field participant-observation as well as interviews/ongoing discussions with the teacher implementing, reflecting upon, and evaluating her new teaching methodology. Our action research became a way to create a culture of inquiry through her reflection on action with her students and her collaboration with a university researcher. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have described elsewhere, this project, too, involved a systematic learning process in which one teacher acted deliberately to improve her educational context and emancipate herself from institutional constraints. The project has, therefore, dimensions of knowledge production and action that make meeting the demands of the new curriculum possible.

Our interview schedule centred around three basic phases. The pre-study interview invited the teacher to describe her teaching methodologies and her philosophy of Intermediate teaching (How have you taught your History and Geography curricula in the past?; What kind of evaluation tools have you traditionally used?; What has your students' interest been in the Canadian History Curriculum?·). I wanted the teacher to paint a vivid picture of herself and her working environment (What do you like about your teaching environment?; What do you find challenging?; What has changed for you over your seventeen-year career?) During these initial conversations, I attempted to understand the teacher's goals for the teaching of the History and Geography curricula as well as her relationship to her profession and her students.

After my demonstration lesson in her classroom, we reflected on what she observed about drama as a teaching strategy and what effects she believes it may have had on her students. Her fieldnotes and journal entries recorded the observations she made of her students as they worked through dramatic role-play with the ‘guest teacher’ (What was it like watching your own students?; Did anything happen that surprised you?; What did you see that pleased you/disappointed you?·) In this discussion, I aimed to bring to light the teacher's assumptions about her students, the curriculum, and teaching in order that we might explore together how these assumptions can be challenged by drama methodologies.

Next, we met after the teacher, herself, designed and implemented a History lesson using drama strategies. I observed her during this teaching and our interview following the lesson began to uncover the changes (both anticipated and unanticipated) she experienced in her teacher role as well as the limitations of the methodology (How would you describe the rhythm of the lesson?; What did you find difficult/interesting?; How would you describe the nature of your students' engagement with the work?; What would you do differently next time and why?)

It is this ongoing reflection on practice, long-term observation, hours of videotaped drama work, students' writing-in-role, reflective writing, formal and informal feedback, and test results that provided us with triangulation of data and clear emergent categories of analysis in our research.

Teacher Assumptions about Learners

It is the second phase of our data collection that will be the focus of this chapter. During this phase, I was invited into the classroom to lead a 2.5-hour drama with the grade eight class. In our pre-study discussions, Blaney had described her students to me, reflecting on the ‘difficult ones’ and describing previous efforts she had made to encourage their participation and success. As is the mark of many committed teachers, Blaney, too, focussed on those students she worried about, the ones who found school hard. We began to hypothesize about the different ways that drama education invites participation and she revealed that she'd noticed a new and unusual interest among some of her students during her ‘dabbles in drama’, as she called them. Before my session with them, she selected three specific students whom she would track in order to begin to analyse the nature of participation in drama for some of her ‘weakest’ and most challenging students. One video camera, therefore, was fixed on the classroom, while a second hand-held camera, operated by Blaney's team teacher, was focussed on three students: Jenna, Katie, and Nigel.

Jenna suffers from tourettes syndrome for which she follows a regime of medications to prevent ‘outbreaks’. In addition to her medical condition, Jenna is painfully shy. Hiding behind her mane of long brown hair, she never speaks voluntarily, and when addressed, responds only with great difficulty. She has undergone school board testing for a learning disability but her parent stopped the process before she was formally ‘identified’. Katie, by contrast, appears on the surface, to have more confidence, although her often unpredictably aggressive attitude betrays her severe insecurities. She is what her teacher describes as a ‘reluctant learner’ and was discovered once this year to have gone home on her lunch break and consumed alcohol. Katie is identified with a ‘learning disability’ and is considered by her teacher as her most ‘at risk’ student. Nigel is officially labelled ‘learning disabled’ and considered a ‘behavioural’ student. A recent study by Statscan has flagged the underperformance of boys- accounting for two-thirds of elementary students receiving special education- as a problem in Canadian elementary schools. Statscan reports in its recent Education Quarterly Review that, according to teachers, males accounted for 65 per cent of all children receiving special education because of a learning disability, and 83 per cent of all children receiving special education for an emotional or behavioural problem. (Galt, 2000). In the classroom, Nigel is alone, always the last to be ‘put in a group’ for projects, and is known to be suffering from depression. Diminutive in stature, this grade eight boy is considered socially awkward by his peers

and has, at times, been the object of their unkind taunting.

Discovering History Through Drama

The new Ministry of Education Arts Curriculum Grades 1-8 seems to call for the integration of disciplines in its specific outcomes. For instance, the Dance/Drama Curriculum states:

> Through exploring drama and dance, students will develop an understanding of themselves and others, and will learn about the lives of people in different times, places, and cultures. They will develop practical, artistic skills in both disciplines, as well as critical-thinking skills and a variety of communication skills.
>
> Role-playing is a key component of the drama and dance curriculum. Pretending to be someone else involves an act of the imagination that is of central importance in the development of the ability to understand others. As students 'live through' experiences of others, they learn to understand a variety of points of view and motives, and to empathize with others. They also learn to clarify their own point of view and develop their ability to think carefully.
>
> In all grades, students will draw upon a variety of sources - such as literature, historical and current events, and topics and themes from other subject areas, particularly the other arts - in order to create presentations in which they communicate their interpretation of situations and the motives of various characters (The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8, The Arts, 1999).

I was asked by their teacher to create a drama that would teach the students something about the Chinese migrant workers' experiences of building the Canadian Pacific Railway and the development of the Canadian west in the mid- 19th century. Using Paul Yee and Harvey Chan's children's book, Ghost Train, I began with this story of a young girl named Choon-yi whose father left China to build the railroad in Canada. After reading the first few paragraphs of the story, I asked the students to draw a picture of what they figured Choon-yi's farm looked like in China. All set about drawing except Katie. When I passed her desk, she asked me - with a smile- if I liked her picture, and revealed a blank page. She shared this 'picture' with the videographer, as well, when he strolled around with the camera. Katie's insecurities, masked by an obvious defensiveness, were apparent in the very first activity.

Moving into a whole-group role-play, I assumed the role of William Cornelius Van Horne and the students became the Chinese workers being enticed to come and work in Canada. Reading the teacher's research journal sometime later, I saw that she had remarked on this initial invitation into role:

As the students stood silently, I initially feared that perhaps no one would respond to the invitation to 'ask Van Horne any questions they might have'. After perhaps a minute of silence, one student raised his hand and asked, 'Will we be allowed to return home after the railroad is finished?' At that point, I knew this would work. I was reminded of Gallagher's own comments in her chapter in Booth's (1998) book, Writing in Role, when she says, 'When we are working with drama and writing-in-role, we are interested in engaging the whole of the student in inquiries relevant to her/him. Because of the great security of role, students and teacher can take greater risks. Because you are in safety, you can go into danger' (150).

I thought how often as teachers, we provide students with challenges that demand risk taking on their part (write a story, move around the gym like an elephant, sing out loud as part of the choir...) while we merely observe and encourage. In this situation, I observed that the students were able to take a risk and enter into role because the teacher was risking along side of them (Reflective teacher journal, November 1999).

When I asked the students to find a partner, with one playing a recruitment officer for Canada and the other playing a Chinese worker, the officer was to determine whether this would be a suitable candidate for the job of building the railway. When they reported back, I noticed that Nigel was taking his role as officer very seriously and was one of the first to enthusiastically report that he would recommend his partner for the job. After this, I asked the class to get into groups and create a scene of the migrant workers in Canada. For this, each group received a different descriptive excerpt from their History text, detailing what life was like for the workers. For this activity, Nigel had to be placed

in a group by the teacher, as he was left wandering once the groups had begun working. After some preparation time, the groups shared their work. Blaney's journal reveals her observations of her students' work:

It occurred to me as I watched the scenes and listened to the students recite passages, that they achieved a greater understanding of this event in history than if they had silently read the entire chapter and subsequently answered questions. They were there, actually swinging their heavy mallets, standing knee- deep in muskeg. They were actually walking carefully to ensure that the nitroglycerine strapped to their backs did not explode (Reflective teacher journal, November, 1999).

Next, I read a letter aloud to the class, explaining that it had come to Choon-yi from her father. After I shared this letter, I invited the students to write a diary entry- as Choon-yi - after receiving the letter from her father. Nigel wrote one sentence and then spent the rest of the time tossing his pen in the air and catching it. Jenna and Katie, however, seemed consumed by their writing. Blaney remarked how the sheer quantity of writing was more then she'd seen either of these students produce before. Jenna writes:

> *Dear Diary, I miss you so much, my father. He has been gone for two years now. He hasen't seen how Im growing up. He write me letters, but every time I read them I have to cry. I wish I could just see him. What ever I do, Im always thinking about him, but I got to stop thinking about him. Choon-yi.*

When I later read Jenna's reflection on that day of drama, she revealed something important:

> *...I think she [gallagher] maid it sound real when she was trying to convince us to come over. She lied about how good it was coming over, but that was what she was supposed to do, to make us come over. We started skits after that. I thought most of them were good. I dont really like drama because Im shy and I dont speak very clearly. I liked writing that letter because I felt what she was thinking alot.*

They shared their letters in a sound collage, as I moved about the room signalling students to read a chosen excerpt from Choon-yi's diary. Next, accompanying music and in groups of eight, students were asked to create a sequence, using movement and sound, from a dream Choon-yi might have. Katie's group's presentation had a few obvious glitches and she became visibly angry with her group members. She was terribly disappointed that her group didn't ‘get it right’. We asked them to take another run at it, at the end of which Katie explained to the class the details of what they were doing so that everyone could follow the ideas they'd had. She was greatly invested in being understood. The teacher remarked that this investment in being understood was new behaviour for Katie. After we shared the ‘dreams’, we situated their chairs in the room to resemble a train. Each group created a frozen picture of the migrant workers moving across the country on the train and this image was to be ‘painted’ by Choon-yi. From the four groups, there emerged four different Choon-yi characters whom I interviewed about what they had ‘painted’. Nigel took the role of Choon-yi within his group and his responses in role were so eloquent that others took note. Instead of giggling, his peers were obviously impressed. While the class sat on the ‘train’ I finished the drama by reading them the end of Yee and Chan's story.

Student Assumptions about Learning

Katie's final reflection about doing drama was especially revealing. As a student with poor self-esteem, she illustrated a profound understanding of her own abilities as a learner and about learning, in general, for those who are sometimes identified as ‘learning disabled’. She writes:

> *I thought this morning was fun, the best part was that we didn't get marked on this activity if we did me and Heather would have probably have failed! I like doing stuff like that better than having to write notes and learn this kinda thing that way. I think that we have more understanding of the lesson when we do activities like that because when we write notes and stuff I don't know about everybody else but I know that I can't stay focused and I have a lower level of understanding the lesson. Then again when we do stuff like we did this morning, I understand better because I having fun and it doesn't look like it but I actually concentrate and understand better. I think it gets too distracting when we are quietly writing a note because everyone jumps at every little noise! So it gets really distracting an boring and annoying! In other words, I like doing drama activities better and I think everyone else*

does too!

Ms. Blaney had all her students reflect on ‘learning history through drama’ after our first morning together. The teacher and I had hypothesized about drama's special ability to draw ‘reluctant learners’ into the classroom activities. Nigel's reaction during the first history test he wrote after his experiences of drama was very telling. The following is an excerpt from Blaney's diary:

> *Test day - I assumed the role of Lord Durham as I handed out sheets. I told them that in Britain we were concerned about our colonies in British North America as they had always been better behaved and more reasonable than our rowdy cousins to the south. I understood that some of them had concerns about the future of the colonies. I asked them to write me a letter explaining to me what their concerns were and what recommendations they would like me to take back to Britain. Out of role, I explained that they had the option of adopting a rebel, moderate or conservative point of view.*
>
> *I loved watching them write the test. Two students were concerned that they hadn't understood the instructions (Do we get to pretend we are farmers?) As I walked past Nigel, he said: ‘This is fun. I feel like I really am a farmer and that I really am angry at the government!’ It was silent for 15 minutes as he wrote (Reflective teacher journal, October, 1999).*
>
> *There was a further education for us as we read the reflections of the academically strong students in the class. Some of these ‘high-achievers’ had taken special note, without any solicitation, of the unusual participation of their peers who were normally quiet or unsuccessful in their work. One student explained in her assessment:*
>
> *I suppose that this [doing drama] was less tiring, and more fun than writing notes. I know that I learn just as good by reading, but this was still an interesting idea.*
>
> *I did like the casual atmosphere, and the freedom to express our feelings creatively. The only thing that could have been improved would be to include more facts and information into the technique.*
>
> *I feel that if this could be met, it would be nearly perfect. Some of the less attentive students may be intrigued by the idea of learning through drama. In fact, they may not even realize that they're learning at all, but the information is more likely to ‘stick in their minds.’*
>
> *Many students in the class had taken note of surprising and new participation from their peers in the drama work and the subsequent breaking of old patterns and dynamics in the classroom.*

Turning Over a New Leaf

Ms. Blaney has continued to use drama in her classroom, convinced by its ability to invite all of her students into the experience of learning, especially those who have long forgotten the excitement of being successful. She has reported that when the class was recently asked to establish their hotel room groups for their big History class trip to the country's capital city, Nigel was left again without a group. This time, before she could select a group for him, a few of the most popular boys in the class intervened, saying they'd like Nigel in their room. A small sign perhaps, but Nigel was good at drama and being good at drama had earned him new social status in the classroom.

In a lucid description, Swortzell (1996) recalls:

> Each time we leave a performance, we are reminded that theatre and dance are the most evanescent of art forms, and that what we have just seen can never be beheld again in the exact same way. Even if we should return the next night to repeat the aesthetic process, a second viewing cannot reproduce the reaction of the first because we have been changed, by both the production and by everything else that has happened to us in the interim (Taylor, 1996, 97).

In a classroom where drama has been exploited, there is often, too, this experience of profound change for the participants. For the weaker students we tracked in Blaney's class, they had the

surprising and necessary experience of success and in so doing became different learners and different people. Much educational research confirms that success begets success. What we could not have anticipated is the extent to which this success would change others' perceptions of their peers. For Jenna, she transcended the limitations of shyness through her writing in the drama. This reflective writing helped her to validate her own perspective in a kind of dialogue with herself and rehearse what she might say in advance, able then to participate in a way she had not imagined possible. For Katie, she felt able to take pride in her work; to be angry when it did not go as planned. She had come a long way from her initial refusal to draw, masking her fear of failure with a contempt for success. For Nigel, drama enabled him to communicate, despite being an outsider to the dominant mode of expression in the classroom.

In our action research, we aimed to take up Gallas's (1994) challenge presented to the research community, that is, to:

> ...look carefully at the stories teachers uncover and to consider the ways in which teacher knowledge articulates a more complete picture of the teaching community and learning process. In this way, when teachers' stories are weighted equally with the body of knowledge coming from the research community, a larger and more powerful picture of how children learn, and the contexts which best foster that learning, can be obtained (162).

What we have learned in these early stages of our inquiry is that action research- with its focus on interpersonal relationships and context- can take in these relationships in classrooms to the extent that the data remain moving and changing phenomena. This research, grounded in the natural setting of a classroom comprised of students engaged in drama, allowed us to observe and critically analyse the negotiation and re-negotiation of power and role that existed both within and beyond the drama worlds. The drama frame, in other words, afforded students in the classroom - weak and strong alike- the opportunity to re-configure their default settings, to re-frame their classroom relations inside and beyond the world of fiction. What began as one teacher researching her own practice soon became an investigation of the ways in which drama affords academically weaker and often labelled students the opportunity to reinvent themselves. The greatest mark of Ms. Blaney's success for her was not that History became more interesting, but that Jenna, Katie, and Nigel became learners in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.
And as learners, these students had a glimpse again at their own potential, essentially connecting them to what Freire (1998) has called their ‘unfinishedness’. He writes:

> I like being human because I know that my passing through the world is not predetermined, preestablished. That my destiny is not a given but something that needs to be constructed and for which I must assume responsibility. I like being human because I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigned to fatalistic stagnation. Consequently, the future is something to be constructed through trial and error rather than an inexorable vice that determines all our actions (54).

Freire insists that this awareness of our ‘unfinishedness’ is essential to our human condition. For Ms. Blaney's ‘reluctant learners’, doing drama renewed their curiosity, allowed them to shed preconceived ideas and rediscover their ‘incompleteness’; doing drama afforded them that most critical educational experience of becoming - the very t antithesis of their fixed and labelled identity.

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