

ARTICLE NO.3

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING 'IN ROLE'

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse and understand why drama educators find the teacher in role strategy so challenging and looks for ways to further support teachers in applying this strategy in their classroom practice.

Teachers, in qualifying as drama educators, have many opportunities to participate in dramatic exploration where the various facets of working in role are employed, worked and analysed. While teachers are struck by the power of teaching in role, many still have considerable difficulty integrating it into their daily drama programs while others avoid it entirely. As a drama educator, in both the university setting and in a secondary school, I take another look at what might be at issue here and offer suggestions on how to make this strategy less daunting. The many teachers who courageously seek to learn and struggle within the evolving and often ambiguity-laden work of employing drama in the classroom have contributed greatly as inspiration for my thoughts and analysis.

Biography

Julia Balais, PhD, is a high school teacher of drama and cooperative education for the York Catholic District School Board in Ontario Canada. Julia also teaches drama specialist courses at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her doctoral thesis and continuing research interests, in educational curriculum, focus on the many aspects of experiential learning. She also works as a sessional instructor in the drama qualifications program for teachers at OISE/UT, teaching the drama specialist/Part 3 courses.

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING 'IN ROLE'

Training in drama education provides novice drama teachers with many opportunities to explore and analyse various facets of working in role. While teachers are struck by the power inherent in working in role - how it engages emotionally, stimulates cognitively and creates a climate for greater understanding, many still have considerable difficulty integrating it into their daily drama programs while others avoid it entirely. As a drama educator, in both the university setting and in a secondary school, I attempt in this paper to analyse and understand the challenges teachers face with working in role and offer one way of resolving the problem.

The many teachers who struggle to learn the evolving and often ambiguity-laden work of employing drama in the classroom have contributed greatly as inspiration for my thoughts and analysis.

The convention of teacher in role, briefly revisited

Process drama, akin to whole group drama and story drama, is learning that merges thinking and feeling, head and heart, when players negotiate meaning within a dramatic context. This negotiation process is distinctively facilitated when the teacher also assumes a role. While the teacher works in role within the dramatic context, the students are actively engaged, kept in the momentum of the work, and guided in the process of navigating through the complex life situations and human intricacies of the drama. Thus students are further enabled to make connections, come to understandings and, as Stephen Lewis (2000) highlights as a supreme value of arts education, 'foster our humanity'. While the teacher intensifies the drama and otherwise focuses student attention through role, the means and goal is, according to Bolton's (1986) understanding of Heathcote's work, 'a process of handing power over to the children' (244).

The teacher, through her role, provides a model of high expectations for the enterprise that at first seems out of reach, but that, in time, the student seeks to emulate: framed as a human being responsible for the enterprise, he has no choice but to aim beyond his normal ability - and to break the confines of rigidly held concepts. (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995:35)

Teacher in role contributes to a constructivist understanding of the educational process 'that construes learning as an interpretive, recursive, building process by active learners interacting with the physical and social world' (Fosnot, 1996:30). While drama worlds allow for the construction of knowledge and meaning within the experience of *real pretending*, they democratize the classroom on account of their reliance on co-creative input. Drama learning is explorative and experiential and not about assimilating a set canon of knowledge. Collaboration and mutual decision making are central to the process that depends upon and fosters greater respect, equality and empowerment. Such sharing of power in the classroom parallels the transformative models of Shor (1992), hooks' (1994) empowering pedagogy, and Boal's (1979) education as the practice of freedom where the dialogue of empowerment replaces the monologue of oppression.

Richard Courtney (1989) makes the important distinction that drama is about gaining 'knowledge in' versus gaining 'knowledge about' (188). It is this experiential power of drama that is developed through the teacher working in role. O'Neill and Lambert (1982) point out that 'the particular force of this teaching strategy lies in the qualities of immediacy and spontaneity which it can generate' (139). Whether a teacher walks, slides or dives into a drama 'in role', from this vantage point of possibility rather than certainty, he has the capacity to encourage greater expression, exploration and risk-taking. Neelands (1984) calls this device 'a particularly effective one for allowing the teacher to stand out of the children's way in order to give them a more direct view of the learning material through the lens of the dramatic context they are all involved in' (47).

The teacher, working in role, normalizes the power relationship traditionally in place in the classroom. In lieu of maintaining absolute control, drama contexts, conducted in roles of varying status, tend to reduce censorship and encourage authentic participation and greater risk-taking. The freedom and expanse of expression that results from a teacher's strategic yet embedded presence, (contributing new perspectives, developing issues, deeply questioning, probing, provoking, agitating, soothing and supporting) are essential for making learners available to embrace the ambiguity, complexity and paradox of humanity. This in turn evokes understanding and compassion and is the 'quality' education needed for an ever changing and often bewildering world.

Reluctance eleven years ago and still today

Eleven years ago, I interviewed high school drama teachers in my school board to learn about their drama programs. More specifically, my inquiry was to find out if and how they were employing the technique of teacher in role and whether or not they felt successful in their practice. My research disclosed that all ten drama teachers interviewed (which represented the full complement of department heads of arts/drama in my school board at the time, plus several additional drama teachers) were having difficulty implementing this strategy while most avoided it altogether. The research resulted in the formulation of three categories of response.

For the first category, many teachers felt 'ill-prepared' (see note 1) 'untrained' or 'unsuited' to implement teacher in role. On elaboration, many thought that it was 'a difficult strategy to make work'. Many, even those from theatre backgrounds, did not see themselves to be particularly 'good at it' or especially talented like Dorothy Heathcote. They felt that working in this mode required 'special instinctive gifts' or 'know how'- qualities that they felt they did not have. Conversely, many of those without theatre backgrounds felt lacking because they were 'not good enough actors', that doing role depended on actor training that they had not acquired.

A second category of feedback suggested that working in role 'distorted the role of teacher', making the teacher into a 'performer' or an overly 'dominant' or 'manipulative' agent in the drama work. The fear was that this would create opposite to desired results where students would become watchers and not participants. Teachers, who spoke to this point, preferred students to arrive at creative products 'on their own', without the 'interference' of teacher in role. Under this category, contradictory views also emerged where some teachers objected to the 'leveling' of relationship between student and teacher that process drama encouraged, feeling that both the teacher and student would not be ready for this 'changed relationship'. This alludes to a perceived fear that teacher authority would be undermined, ostensibly to occur when the teacher acts in role. All this was thought to create an impediment to learning.

The third and last category of comments, regarding teacher in role, reflected an overall confusion over the merit of this strategy. Teachers questioned its value, not seeing value to be fully evident or even understandable. This strategy was characterized by some as 'too trendy' or 'overdone', one that was 'pushed' in drama teacher training and 'overly focussed on process' instead of product. Teachers challenged its value mainly because it was 'not useful' in their classroom admitting, in some cases, that it was ineffective because it was 'not really getting off the ground'.

These comments, to be sure, voiced some strong objections and indicated teachers' experienced resistance to working in role. Resistance was due to either the perception that working in role was beyond their capability, or it was an altogether uneasy process because of the resultant ambiguity in the teacher-student relationship and/or the lack of clear direction that is elemental to this work. Furthermore, teachers had doubts about the overall value of the strategy, which may simply be a direct result of said perspectives.

Over eleven years have followed since my original research, years in which I have become increasingly involved in drama teacher training. I continue to observe teachers' struggle with this strategy and the tendency, among some, to avoid it in their practical assignments. As well, I continue to witness resistance that is often supported by a questioning of its merit. Similar comments that were voiced eleven years earlier still crop up for many teachers. Nevertheless, depth of feeling, understanding and enthusiasm ensues when a drama structure 'works' and touches the hearts of participants. For the most part, teachers enjoy and value the drama courses and feel a satisfaction and warmth that for them is added value that surpasses the experiences of other qualification courses. This is largely due to the human issues that are explored in dramatic contexts and in this exploration strong connections are made and vibrant communities of learners emerge. Instructors of this program are inspired and remain solidly committed to continue engaging classes in the heart and soul of drama - to 'invite participants into the imagined world and support them and protect them within it' (O'Neill, 1995:62).

What can be understood from the teachers' critique?

I will briefly address original and prevailing critiques and reservations over teacher in role in order to explore what may be at issue here and how this informs the educational process of drama teachers.

First of all, in addressing teachers' sense of being ill prepared or unsuited for the task, there is no doubt that doing process drama in role is not a territory for the faint hearted. Launching into the relative unknown and travelling a path where the end of the road is undiscovered is difficult for an individual, let alone for a teacher who has the responsibility of guiding a whole class. Add to this the scrutiny that follows a teacher, current pressures to *design down* (start lesson planning with the end in sight) and the outcomes and expectations orientation of current educational trends (see note 2 below).

Cecily O'Neill (1995) counsels that in drama work the 'essential qualities in a leader or teacher are the toleration of anxiety and ambiguity, as well as a willingness to take risks and court mystery, and the courage to confront disappointment and, on occasion, the possibility of failure' (65). Drama teaching is and always will be an area fraught with challenge, one in which teachers need to be supported by good training and preparation.

Feeling ill prepared or ill-suited for teaching in role is an issue for teacher training. While working from within process drama is a skill that can and must be modeled repeatedly, and in the multiplicity of its forms, it is one that does not come with a guarantee for each application. Teachers discover this first hand when they try a previously successful lesson on a new class, and are met with little that resembles the previous class' experience. While it is a necessity to have a host of possibilities on hand, such as those that are chronicled in Neelands' (1990, 2000) compendium of drama conventions, ultimately the teacher must be comfortable enough to think on her feet. The teacher needs to feel and think her way through a drama: improvise, know when to hold tight, make a turn, or let go, all the while knowing that this is a co-creative enterprise where the teacher herself could be rendered powerless in the course of the drama. Kathleen Gallagher (2000) assures that, 'drama teachers, as part of their craft, must know how to 'give up' power in role' (114).

Drama teachers need the support of a community of risk-takers. And this community begins, most likely, in the drama qualification class. Henry, an intermediate teacher who courageously completed his drama specialist's practicum in a kindergarten class, reflected afterwards with his colleagues on how he persevered amidst his fear of failure. His response was an anecdote about Artie Shaw's *problem* with the Glenn Miller Orchestra: They never made a mistake. And if you never make a mistake, you're not trying. You're not playing at the edge of your ability. Henry's reflective welcoming of risk, supported by his peers, provoked a sigh of relief from his colleagues.

Another stumbling block for some is the unsubstantiated yet worrisome concern over acting ability. Teacher working in role serves a unique pedagogical function. The teacher is neither a co-player in the drama, acting like another student, nor is she a performer who uses role to either command attention or entertain like an actor might do. O'Neill (1995) insists that 'the initial purpose of using role is emphatically not to give a display of acting, but invite participants to enter the fictional world' (61). The purpose of role for the teacher then is to support *student* role-playing, invite students to transform the dramatic action as they are moved and challenged to do and otherwise facilitate complex learning using the tools and entry points of dramatic art forms.

Another concern for teachers was that working in role distorted the more traditional role and function of teacher, forcing her into inappropriate, or at least uncomfortable, positions. These included the teacher becoming overly dominant and manipulative or turning into a performer (previously noted) that then consigned students to passivity. Conversely, teachers were uneasy about working in role because they could potentially lose their position of authority and control.

Apprehension that working in role predisposes a teacher to being either an overly dominant figure, or one that has lost authority and control, is a matter requiring some attention. In truth, either polarity can develop when a teacher works from within the drama in role. Yet the potential for this to happen is both a credit to the flexibility of the strategy as well as to the fact that the teacher is a co-creator of the drama with the students and is sharing power. However, the strategy still can be misused if a teacher chooses to always take on the role of a superior and thus maintain the power over model under a thinly veiled disguise of role. When working in role with the goal to assist students in feeling and thinking deeply, exploring the significance of events and challenging their assumptions, any tendency to be stuck in the extremes (of too much or loss of control) can be avoided by the flexibility afforded in this strategy.

Phil Taylor (2000) offers up the work of David Booth, through the eyes of the late Richard Courtney, as an example of teacher in role work that is strong, yet not overbearing, and focused on student

transformation rather than on teacher performance either as actor or teacher.

Because David slips in and out of role so smoothly he constantly surprises students. This keeps them alert and focused because they are never quite certain of what is coming next: as in life, they are walking on a tightrope trying to adjust to the future. (Richard Courtney, in Taylor, 2000:45)

Teacher authority, or loss of it, is what drama teachers find to be an issue, yet this is an issue for all teachers as well as for students, parents and the public at large. Working in role can find teachers in superior or inferior positions from time to time, with respect to their students, either because of the selected register of role chosen to be used (king, servant, co-worker, etc.) or because of the evolutionary process of the drama itself. In most cases, working in role is a democratizing agent where the teacher still maintains responsibility for the overall curriculum but shares the power with the students over how this will be explored in the direction the drama takes. Nevertheless, sharing power can be an uncomfortable and unaccustomed place to be with respect to any traditional understanding of the role of teachers in schools.

Certainly process drama work does upset the apple cart of traditional learning which is, fundamentally, a good result. With all the talk of reform have we significantly moved toward educational models that embrace complex and integrated learning, that are truly transformative and challenge and empower young people for life that resembles 'walking on a tightrope trying to adjust to the future'? Perhaps the locus for educational reform, where the transmissive, 'fill the empty vessel' approach to learning can be sufficiently dislodged, is *in* the drama classroom. The strengths of drama lie in both its conventions and approach that are at the gateway to pedagogical freedom. An additional advantage ironically is the fact that the arts are still sufficiently marginalized to be out of serious harm's way from intervention and meddling inflicted by educational agendas fused to economics and corporate needs. The problems that face society, such as who is in control, become problems for education, and are particularly focused in drama where the complexities of life are at the centre of the dramatic curriculum. Drama teachers need to be prepared to experience a new balance of power and this can happen by playing in this field to gain greater ease. For assistance, teachers need preparation, practice and support in handling the unexpected and they need to be freed from critical self-judgement that prevails because of a false belief that students should always be able to meet externally set expectations.

The third and last category of concern indicates that teachers questioned the value of the teacher in role strategy itself. It is safe to ascertain that, if teachers are burdened with feeling unskilled and inadequate using teacher in role, their functioning in this convention will be either limited or altogether avoided, which would counteract any potential value. In short, it is simply not used or is not useful in their classrooms. Teachers admitted to their attempts being unsatisfactory or even aborted due to their pulling back for various reasons or to their students' reluctance, unwillingness or lack of engagement. Avoidance, on the part of the teacher, may be due to the level of skill, will, or just not having the heart to proceed. Yet when this strategy is relegated to the sidelines of a drama program, as it most often is, particularly at the intermediate and high school levels where the emphasis is mainly on performance, there is insufficient evidence to truly assess its value. A substantive amount of practice is required to evaluate its impact upon teachers and students alike.

In the Part Three/Drama Specialist Course that I instruct, teachers are required to do a practicum assignment where they incorporate a drama structure with their *own* class of students that includes utilizing teacher in role. They are asked to videotape their work and bring it back to class where we can all analyse and give feedback on this demonstration of teaching. Many find this assignment to be daunting and admit their reluctance, particularly around being featured working in role. For some, it is their first attempt of using this strategy in a real classroom, which is qualitatively different from doing workshops with their educational peers. Yet, after all is said and done, the practicum assignment proves to be the highlight of learning for us all.

Reading about or even watching a drama lesson is not the same as participating in one. And similarly, participation is not the same as teaching. Teachers benefit from teaching, presenting their work, receiving feedback and also by viewing how their colleagues navigate the unpredictable waters of process drama. Here the process can be analysed while peers encourage, applaud and offer additional suggestions within a supportive and non-threatening environment. Teacher education remains a strong venue for learning to work in role and confirming its value in the practical sense.

Deconstructing a teacher's work, within the context of working with her own class, opens the door to

understanding how decisions are made in process (reflection in action) and what works well or may have been done differently in retrospect (reflection upon action). All examples of teachers' work, brought to the class courtesy of videotaping, serve as a springboard for discussion and learning.

Tremendous learning opportunities, if not exemplary lessons, issue forth from first attempts at working in role with one's class. Teachers are encouraged by the work of their peers in unique ways that differ from the guidance gained from viewing a 'pro'. First attempts at working in role have provoked deep thought, high emotion and quality endeavor from the students involved and a depth of engagement that rivals those witnessed in seasoned drama teacher's lessons made for the purpose of demonstrating outstanding work. Also, in viewing how teachers work in their classrooms, the teaching process is clearly evident and examinable. Not only does shared practicum experience attest to the fact that the teacher in role strategy is accessible and manageable, but the deconstruction of a teacher's sequencing of events and use of questioning and conventions assist others in knowing what leads to deep work.

In sharing their practicum, teachers also report how the drama work impacts on their class over time. Consistently, there are numerous reports of unprecedented improvement in students' writing and speaking skills as a result of the use of drama structures. In the course of their practicum work, teachers are becoming field researchers in their own classrooms, where they can speak with authority (and offer hard data) about what really works for student learning. With the arts continuously under threat, it is more essential than ever for teachers to take up the role of being researchers, not only for evaluative purposes but so to expand and explore the complex learning available in the aesthetic moment. Calling us to focus on 'knowing-in-action' Taylor draws our attention to drama teaching as an artistic process of meaning-making. He proposes that 'to ignore reflective practitioner design is to remain ignorant to the kind of artistic processes which are the lifeblood of our work. (27).

Returning to the question of value, drama, perhaps more pointedly than in any other subject area, cannot hide that, as a subject discipline and teaching methodology, it is not merely value-laden but value-saturated. Heathcote once again focuses the role of drama in education. 'She (Heathcote) sees drama as the means of rooting all the school curriculum back in a human context where it sprang from, so that knowledge is not an abstract, isolated subject-based discipline, but is based in human action, interaction, commitment and responsibility' (Bolton, 1998:177).

Working in role is a powerful device for facilitating drama work. Teacher education is the place for encouraging its development by providing opportunities for teachers to exercise this skill with their students, view their and other's work and thus analyse and reflect on teaching practice. Here risk-taking and confidence can grow and those who do this courageous and indispensable work of drama education can be encouraged.

Notes

1. All direct quotes are from teachers in the same school board and are taken from an unpublished paper entitled 'An Examination of Teacher in Role', December, 1990.
2. I am not suggesting that it is impossible to design down with drama curriculum expectations in mind (for example, focussing on students effectively learning to sustain role-playing). I am suggesting that the outcome based approach, which includes a new focus on standardized testing as a measuring stick, has made teachers more focussed on meeting external objectives and in turn this has been generally discouraging to giving attention to open exploratory work in drama.

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