# Dialogue and Drama: The Transformation of Events, Ideas, and Teachers

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> Dialogue is a moment when humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make it and remake it. (Shor and Friere 1987, p. 98.)

If we are to establish in our classrooms dialogue which is truly creative and reflective, we must consider the context in which this dialogue is embedded, its content, and the kinds of relationships which will make it live.

Of the many teaching strategies which are likely to promote dialogue, the approach which has the greatest potential and yet is the least often used is drama in education—where teacher and students co-create fictional roles and contexts, in order to explore and reflect on some issue, concept, relationship, or event. This kind of drama is a complex, many-faceted process, a shared learning experience. The process has little in common with the kind of 'creative dramatics' which may focus on individual pantomimes, skills training, the re-enactment of a story, or the presentation of an improvised play. Since dialogue is at the heart of every dramatic encounter, whether in theater or in the classroom, drama in education has enormous potential for the teacher.

Many commentators have emphasized the importance of drama in providing opportunities for language use. Edmiston, Enciso and King, (1987) see drama functioning at the center of language growth and learning. Patrick Verriour (1985) values dramatic contexts because they give children the means to take control of their own thinking and language. Richard Courtney (1982) demonstrates that dramatic play is a basic activity for the learning of language at all ages.

All language learning occurs within an interaction of one kind or another. Goleman (1986) points out that our discourse is already social, already in dialogue. Growth lies in becoming a more knowing participant in the social dialogue which constitutes all discourse.

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**Dialogue in a Drama Context**

Recently, I worked with a class of kindergarten and grade one children who had been reading a number of books about school, including "That Dreadful Day" by James Stephenson (1985). This picture book deals with the fears children have about first going to school. I set up the drama in role as principal of the school, and the children became my staff. We had to consider how to induct new children into the life of school. Together, we considered the problems that might arise, the fears the new children might have, the ways in which we could alleviate anxiety or confusion. The children shared feelings and memories of *their* first days at school, and we talked of ways in which things might have been made easier for them. One boy explained that he was frightened and behaved badly on his first day, because he was afraid that his mother would never return to fetch him.

There were several other adults in the room, including the class teacher, an aide and a student teacher. They became the new children. The children, in the roles of 'teachers,' and I observed these 'new children' carefully. We interpreted from their expressions and gestures what they might be feeling and thinking, and what problem, we, as the staff, might face in dealing with them. Then each 'child' was given a group of 'teachers' who would take responsibility for her. The 'teachers' spent a great deal of time and effort explaining school life to the 'children,' introducing them to classroom materials and practices, explaining rules, telling stories, reading to them, and helping them to feel comfortable with school. Afterwards, as 'principal' and 'staff,' we reflected on the experience. Some valuable and very practical ideas were offered for dealing with new children, and listed on sheets of paper so that the students' thinking was made visible to them. We also listened to the 'children' as they described what their first day at school had been like.

In this classroom event some of the key concepts of drama in education were in operation. Children worked in what Dorothy Heathcote (Johnson and O'Neill 1984) has called "Mantle of the Expert." This "denotes that moment when the teacher deliberately reverses the usual teacher/pupil relationship and bestows expertise on the children." (Havell 1987, p. 174) They were in role as responsible adults, with knowledge and ability. I worked as 'teacher-in-role'—the school principal—with the task of supporting, extending, and challenging the children from within the work. Dialogue, both in the imaginary situation, and with reference to the children's real lives, was indeed the cornerstone of the activity. There were real tasks to be done—explaining, persuading, justifying, instructing, reading, sharing stories, showing consideration for others. The dialogue in which we were engaged allowed the students to see themselves as people with competencies, as people able to teach as well as to learn, and it encouraged them to make explicit their understandings about school, its purposes, and their relationship to it.

## Theater Metaphors and Classroom Encounters

When students and teachers are engaged in an authentic dialogue, they recreate themselves as listeners and speakers in a new classroom script. It is not surprising that the vocabulary of drama and theater has been borrowed by educators who are committed to dialogue and the kinds of tranformations it creates in the social context of the classroom. For example, Nancy R. King (1986) draws a useful analogy between the curriculum as an event and different kinds of theater experiences. Peter McLaren (1986) calls teaching "essentially improvised drama" (p. 114). Madeleine R. Grumet (1978) highlights content when she notes that both theater and curriculum draw the attention of those in attendence to the forms that are their social, cultural, and historical inheritance. Ira Shor (Shor and Friere 1987) seems to sum up these positions when he says "The syllabus is as much a script as it is a curriculum. The classroom is a stage for performance as much as it is a moment of education." (p. 116)

Theater metaphors illuminate an idea of teaching which is essentially dialogic, and therefore dynamic, democratic, social, demystifying, and open to change. The puzzling thing is that teachers who are interested in exploring the possibilities of dialogue as a powerful force for teaching and learning so rarely seem to go beyond mere metaphor and *use* the drama process itself in their classroom. Even teachers with a belief in the importance of story and literature are likely to neglect or overlook the usefulness and significance of dramatic activities.

Drama and theater are built on a sequence of episodes for opposing voices. We are familiar with Barbara Hardy's (1977) claim that narrative is a primary act of mind. The dramatizing power of the human mind is equally basic. The voices in our own mind, our skill in representing the actions and speech of others, our ability to see the other side of things, to create opposing opinions, to be able to anticipate answers to the questions we ask, are all built on our power to dramatize, to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. As Harold Rosen (1980) puts it, "The imagination can dramatize for our purposes the explorations of our minds" (p. 162). He has described dramatic behavior as ordinary, pervasive, and universal. For him, it is not an optional extra grafted on to human activity but a common human resource, intrisic to everyday social behavior, and perhaps even more fundamental than poetry and fiction. "The dramatic is always lurking below the surface of the flow of interaction" (p. 161).

Drama in education offers teachers the opportunity to negotiate the content of the work, alter the relationship between teacher and students, and transform the social structure of the classroom.

## Curricular Events and Theatrical Events

If we examine the ways in which the vocabulary of theater has been employed to elucidate the classroom encounter, we may clarify the nature of

the drama event, how it can assist in establishing a shared context for learning, and the function of the teacher within the experience. Nancy R. King (1986) believes that the importance of the social context of the classroom and the personal contexts of individual participants in determining the meaning of classroom events cannot be overemphasized. Like Grumet (1978), she sees the curriculum as an event with many similarities to the theatrical event. Both are staged, bounded in space and time, and take place in special buildings set aside for the purpose. The essence of the classroom event cannot be captured in a lesson plan or a curriculum guide. A drama is not merely the script or the staging and neither is the curriculum a set of strategies or an instructional manual. Curricular events may be likened to grand opera when they are elaborately staged and based on cultural themes which are well known, recurrent and revered. On some occasions, however, curricular content is improvised in response to contributions, either welcome or unsolicited, from the learners. At such times, the curriculum resembles another form of dramatic event—street theater. Curricular events resemble street theater to the extent that they must be accomplished with sufficient daring and dazzle to hold the attention of people who are on their way elsewhere or who are thinking about other things (p. 36).

King recognizes an essential difference between theater and the curricular event in that the latter should have no spectators. An effective curriculum requires the active participation of all those present, and to establish dialogue will be the most positive way of achieving this kind of "co-creation" of the curriculum. A curricular event of the "grand opera" type is unlikely to demand much more than passive reception by the students. It is the "street-theater" kind of curriculum event which will require an ability on the part of the person staging the event, the teacher, to arrest attention, to improvise, to invite response, to build on the contributions of those present. Dialogue is implicit in such an event.

King assumes that the spectator in theater is necessarily passive. But where the theater event has grasped the minds and imaginations of the spectator, their passivity will mask an intense inner activity. For Peter Brook (1986) the ideal theater situation is where the audience feels the same compulsive necessity as the theater artists. Brook proposes the use of a valuable French word, *assistance*, in outlining the function of the kind of audience he hopes for in the theater. In French "I watch a play" translates as "J'assiste à une pièce." In English this is the word used to define the function of the congregation at a religious ceremony—the congregation *assists* at the ritual, it participates, it takes action. In a curricular event in which the students felt the same compulsive necessity as their teachers, the attitudes and activities of everyone in the classroom might be summed up in this notion of *assistance*.

The purposes and practices of theater and rituals are closely linked. Peter McLaren (1986) notes that ritual is not mere routine or habit. Rituals, like

theater, do more than display symbolic meanings, but also instrumentally bring states of affairs into being. Ritual and theater do not merely reflect—they articulate. Although many educators have drawn parallels between schooling and ritual, McLaren points out that the potential of ritual as an explanatory concept in classroom analysis has not been realized. Although ritual relates to classroom instruction, teacher performance, student-teacher interactions, motivation, and indoctrination, it may be that as a concept it is still insufficiently defined to be of use to teachers. It lacks the dynamic, dialogic connotations which make theater metaphors so useful in analyzing the classroom encounter.

## The Content of the Classroom Dialogue

How will teachers and students create the "new script" which authentic dialogue requires? Grumet (1978) writes of wrenching "the forms of the curriculum from their habitations in dead and distant worlds, distilling from the names, the dates, the proofs, the texts what is essential in the particular content to our own experience." Dialogue has been described by Friere as "the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and reknowing the object of study" (p. 100). Dialogic inquiry is situated in the culture, language, politics, and themes of the students. However, this kind of inquiry does not merely exploit or endorse the given but seeks to transcend it. Study is situated inside the subjectivity of the students in such a way as to detach students from that very subjectivity into more advanced reflection (Shor and Friere 1987). Inner reflective activity is fed by dialogue which takes place in context. In my earlier example, the children were released by the dialogue embedded within the drama into new understandings about school and their place in it.

Reflection and distance—both key concepts in education and in theater—are crucial elements in achieving a sense of judgment and a grasp of alternatives. As Heathcote puts it, "If you cannot increase reflective power in people you might as well not teach, because reflection is the only thing that in the long run changes anybody." (p. 104)

Friere (Shor and Friere 1987) makes clear that a true dialogue is always an inquiry. There is an implied challenge, a refusal to accept the given which makes the process of dialogue and inquiry an emancipatory one. We step back from the situation in order to see it more clearly, and to judge it.

The drama process operates in a similar way. It may be that it is really this kind of challenge and the possibility of emancipation implied in the process which prevents some teachers from using drama, rather than the fears about 'losing control' which are so often expressed by teachers. It may be more worrying for teachers to lose control of the ideas in the classroom than to lose control of children's behavior. But if teachers want to engage in genuine dialogue with their students they must be prepared for

responses which are unpredictable, challenging, and transformative. The task for the teacher is to set up concrete situations out of the "forms of the curriculum" which invite the engaged, yet critical actions of the students. Drama, which is built on these kinds of situations, will be the greatest help in achieving this goal. The children involved earlier in 'teaching' were clearly dealing with the "forms of the curriculum."

**Student Themes and Motivation**

An educational dialogue with the power to transform the curriculum into a spontaneous, dynamic event will inevitably be based on themes essential to the students. For Peter McLaren, (1988) a pedagogy which elicits dynamic forms of participation will positively resonate with "the dreams, desires, voices and utopian longings" (p. 168) of the students. Drama is one of the few areas of the curriculum which is built on these dreams and voices. It works on the premise that the material which students themselves bring to the work is valid. Indeed drama could not operate without including this kind of material. What would have taken place in the 'school' drama I described earlier if the children had been unable to bring their own ideas to the work? Even when the teacher has launched the work at a point which seems very distant from the student's needs and interests, the spontaneous, negotiated, and permeable quality of drama will allow those meanings to emerge.

When I inquired what they would like to do a drama about, a group of eighth grade students in Australia said they didn't care so long as it wasn't about real life. (Apparently they had recently been engaged in a long and intense investigation of the lives of disabled people.) I asked them if Outer Space would be sufficiently far from real life and they agreed that it would. I began a piece of drama in which the group were astronauts. In role as Head of the Space Center, I explained that one of our spaceships had not returned from a previous mission to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. We had lost all contact with the ship. Aboard that ship were some of their relatives and friends. I asked the astronauts to volunteer for a rescue mission to the planet where the lost ship had been headed. They agreed to undertake the voyage. When the rescue mission arrived on the planet, I contacted the spaceship in role as an official from the planet, and asked them to take off again immediately. I assured them that their comrades were perfectly happy and did not want to return to earth. The students insisted on meeting the members of the previous expedition, so I asked the two drama teachers present to take on the role of survivors of the first spaceship. The students interrogated them about their new life on the planet, and urged them to return to earth. They assured their rescuers that they were perfectly happy and did not wish to return home. Suddenly, a girl who had been rather uninvolved up to this point in the work stepped forward. "But

Father," she said, speaking directly to one of the teachers, "I've promised the family that I'll bring you home." The 'father' shook his head. Immediately the meanings which were being negotiated had a direct connection with the students' real lives, their anxieties, their understandings of loss, their fears and nightmares.

Drama can be a powerful antidote to the kind of alienation many students feel in the school situation, where everything *they* bring to the educational encounter is ignored or rejected. Authentic dialogue and drama can both be effective weapons against alienation.

Where student interest is seen as valid, the result is a high degree of motivation. According to Ira Shor, the dominant curriculum treats motivation as outside the action of study. "Tests, discipline, rewards, punishment, the promise of future jobs, are considered the motivating devices, alienated from the act of learning now" (p. 5). Motivation is seen as a force that can be manipulated externally, rather than as something which grows from the experience of the students, as they live inside and outside the classroom. In Heathcote's view, this kind of curriculum is not authentic. The tasks set are not "real." In all her work she has celebrated the power of an apparently 'unreal' activity, drama, to authenticate the curriculum. "When we reflect on our world . . . . we are inexorably led eventually to real events, because drama always must deal with the affairs of people" (p. 149).

## The Teacher as Artist

To overcome the "destructive arts of passive education" (Shor and Friere 1987, p. 116), not only must the script of the traditional classroom be changed, but the function of the teacher must be rearticulated. If we conceive of the curriculum event as resembling theater, what is the role of the teacher? Is the teacher to be seen as producer, stage manager, director, playwright, designer, performer, or a combination of all of these? Ira Shor suggests that teachers can consider themselves dramatists when they rewrite the routine classroom scripts and reinvent liberating ones. Certainly the drama teacher will function frequently as director. Morgan and Saxton (1988) suggest that when the teacher takes on a role, as I did in both the 'school' and the 'spaceship' dramas, he or she will be working as performer, director, and playwright, but from *inside* the work. The notion of teacher as performer is a complex one. Peter McLaren (1986) pointed out the dangers of the teacher operating as performer, or, as he defines it, "teacher-as-entertainer." But this is emphatically *not* the function of the teacher-in-role. The teacher-as-entertainer may engage the students, but they remain a passive audience of isolated and unreflective spectators. When students remain isolated viewers of the action, they are being entertained.

The entertainer will not be the most effective model for the teacher, but a number of educators have usefully compared the teacher to the artist. Art

has been defined as a process in which skills are employed to discover ends through action (Eisner 1985). In crafts, on the other hand, skills are employed to arrive at preconceived ends. Shor regards the necessary 'problematizing' of the material for study, "the uncovering of key themes and access points to consciousness and then recomposing them into an unsettling critical investigation," (p. 115) as an artistic process. Friere (Shor and Friere 1987) agrees that education is simultaneously a political and an aesthetic act. Education is an artistic event when it is an act of knowing.

"Teachers who function artistically in the classroom . . . provide a climate that welcomes exploration and risk-taking." (Eisner 1985, p. 118) The teacher/artist requires flexibility, ingenuity, personal creativity, and an ability to exploit opportunities as they occur. To carry out the kind of teaching which is transformative and dialogic, the teacher as artist will also need curiosity, the ability to focus critical reflection, the strength to cope with uneasiness, uncertainty, and unpredictability, and considerable tolerance of ambiguity. "It is in the areas of ambiguity that transformation takes place" (Burke 1969, p. xix). In drama, where teachers operate within the process as 'co-artists' with the children, they are accustomed to working in this kind of open possibility. In the 'spaceship' drama, I could not have anticipated the personal resonance which the work acquired, but the structure of the work allowed these meanings to emerge.

Like any artist, the drama teacher must be prepared to work with processes that "proceed in steps and stages, each of them representing an interim result that cannot be connected with the final solution" (Ehrenzweig 1980, p. 47). Their aesthetic function is heightened when they take on a role in the drama—"the most subtle strategy available to a teacher" (Bolton 1984, p. 135).

## Teacher-in-Role and Liminal Servant

The teacher working in role is *not* acting. This strategy, which has transformed drama teaching in Britain and Canada, has been much discussed and often misunderstood. Rosenberg (1987) mentions it with a total lack of understanding of its educational and dramatic function. "Assuming a character different from yourself may appeal to you if you have a flair for the dramatic or find it convenient to hide for a time behind another identity" (p. 37). The notion that it is appropriate for teachers to indulge their desire to act, or to wish to hide in another identity is an odd one, but fairly typical of the misunderstandings which Heathcote, in particular, has had to face.

When a teacher works in role it is an act of conscious self-presentation, but one which invites the watchers—the students—to respond actively, to join in, to oppose or transform what is happening. The teacher-in-role unites the students, trades on their feelings of ambivalence and vulnerability and focuses their attention. They have permission to stare, to use Heathcote's

phrase. "As teacher-in-role, her aim was to switch on the watcher in the participant" (Havell 1987, p. 173) But the teacher-in-role is never merely an entertainer. As Beckerman (1972) puts it, something is happening, something which at first unites the group in contemplation and then engages them in action. As in the theater, the group in a drama lesson is caught up in a complex pattern of expectation and response. There is the beginning of what has been described as 'an audience mind,' which is affirmed in appropriate response and commitment to what is being presented. The students begin to read the 'performance' of the teacher-in-role, searching for clues about the fictional world which is being born before their eyes, their relationship to the teacher's role, their own role function, and the power they possess within it. "By taking a role the teacher is in a position to support, challenge and clarify the pupils' responses as the drama progresses" (Havell 1987, p. 173). Students are challenged to make sense of what they see, to become aware of their own responses, and to use these responses as an impetus to action. Choice and responsibility grow from action and awareness from the reflection. As in the two drama lessons outlined earlier, dialogue is at the heart of the encounter with the role, and response is implicit in the situation.

## The Concept of Liminality

The function of this strategy is very close to Peter McLaren's (1986) fascinating and provocative definition of the teacher as liminal servant. Liminality has the connotation of a threshold, a state which is 'betwixt and between.' This is the origin of the word. Liminality, he explains, is a term that refers to a social state in which participants are stripped of their usual status and authority. It is a process of separation and transition. Victor Turner (1969), from whom McLaren borrowed the concept of liminality, writes: "If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs" (p. 167).

This is close to Heathcote's description of drama as a no-penalty zone, "which allows us to stand back and see what it is we are experiencing at any moment . . . so that contemplation in flux is possible" (p. 192). This notion includes the elements of transition, withdrawal, and scrutinization which are contained in the concept of liminality.

For Heathcote, the factors implied in setting up drama include isolation, particularization, distortion, and forming. "Drama must show change . . . it freezes a problem in time, and you examine the problem as the people go through a process of change" (p. 115). Drama for Heathcote is essentially a process of transition, of transformation. Withdrawal from the burden of reality allows one the freedom to contemplate, to speculate, to construct

alternatives. There are changes in time, space, and perspective. Liminality, as well as the element of separation, includes that of status reversal. So does drama, as in the example of the children becoming 'teachers.'

Heathcote most often uses teacher-in-role to negotiate an exchange of power with her students. The strategy she calls "Mantle of the Expert" is also designed to achieve this. It "denotes that moment when the teacher deliberately reverses the usual teacher/pupil relationship and bestows expertise on the children" (Havell 1987, p. 174). Drama provides Heathcote with a fictional context for authentic teaching. "We have the paradox that art could be a vehicle for changing the work of school to make reality-useable outcomes" (p. 192).

**Characteristics of the Liminal Servant**

Much of what McLaren (1988) says about the teacher as liminal servant seems to apply directly to the drama teacher, and particularly to the teacher working in role. I have listed some of the characteristics he regards as necessary for the teacher as liminal servant below on the left. Heathcote's list of tasks for the authentic teacher is on the right:

| *Characteristics* | *Tasks* |
|---|---|
| Teaching is a social construction. | Encouraging student interaction and decision-making. |
| There is an added vitality in the forms of instruction. | Learning to present problems differently to students. |
| There is a stress on the "as if" quality of learning. | Establishing a context for learning. |
| A "felt context" is established for the subject matter. | Taking more risks with materials. |
| Aesthetic truth is prized as much as objective truth. | Imagining and carrying out a greater variety of tasks. |
| Liminal servants do not see themselves as instructors or transmitters of knowledge, but allow students to embody or 'incarnate' knowledge. | Giving constant attention to detail. |
| They are prepared to become a student of the pupils needs and desires. | Engineering a greater variety of reflective techniques. |
| They teach to discover their own meanings and not merely to share available answers. | Working with focus and significance to harness students needs. |
| They cast off authority as speakers so that the students can claim some authority of their own. | Tolerating ambiguity. |
| | Devising fruitful encounters between self, students, ideas, knowledge, and skills. |
| | Engendering productive tension. |
| | Giving power to students. |
| | Working to bring schools and society together. |
| (pp. 170–175) | (pp. 179–186) |

McLaren sees the teacher as liminal servant engaging in a pedagogical surrealism which attacks the familiar and disturbs commonplace perspectives. This 'defamiliarization' which McLaren proposes as a function of teaching and learning is identical to Brecht's 'alienation effect,' and Shkolovsky's (Lemon & Reis 1965) view of the techniques of art "to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." To disturb commonplace perceptions is central to Heathcote's work. Her use of "frame" and "mantle of the expert" are both strategies to bring about new perspectives. Bolton (1984) describes her work as "prismatic." He shows how it challenges the simplicity of context, and allows for a state of mind which is both reflective and engaged.

The teacher-in-role would seem to be an exemplar of McLaren's teacher as liminal servant. Working in role, the teacher can lead the group into the imagined world of drama, a place of separation, transition, and transformation, where the rules of the classroom are in suspension. In this fictional world, students can alter their status, engage in inquiry and explore alternatives. The teacher-in-role does not merely elicit responses from students, but can challenge, model, support, exploit tensions, and shape the experience from within so that it develops transformative power. "One cannot endow people with commitment to a point of view, but often by placing them in the response position they begin to hold a point of view, because they can see it has power" (Johnson and O'Neill 1984, p. 164).

Heathcote has been criticized for using what appears to be a very 'theatrical' and manipulative strategy, but all teachers will have educational intentions, destinations, as well as competencies and responsibilities. She writes: "Teachers do not have a mandate to teach without reflective processes and responsible outcomes" (p. 198). All education, even liberating education, is directive, as Friere makes clear (Shor and Friere 1987).

The use of drama and teaching-in-role can transform the classroom into a place where something happens, where there is authentic dialogue between teacher and students. I have tried to show that one of the qualities of drama which allows these changes to take place is its liminality. As Heathcote puts it "the child enters the zone of circumstance permitted by the drama situation, and in shaping the circumstance's future, the child's future is shaped, ready to be available in the real society" (p. 198).

McLaren (1986) suggests that it is improvident of the curriculum planner not to consider the drama teacher as an invaluable aid in shaping learning potential in the classroom. He goes so far as to suggest that spontaneous drama and creative arts should form the nub of the multidisciplinary curriculum.

Drama in education, structured so that there is an event, with content weighted by the needs and interests of the students, and led by a teacher who has the qualities of a liminal servant, reaches its ends through di-

alogue. It is a collective activity, built on imaginative transformation, negotiation, speculation, and interpretation. Drama in education is a model for authentic classroom dialogue.

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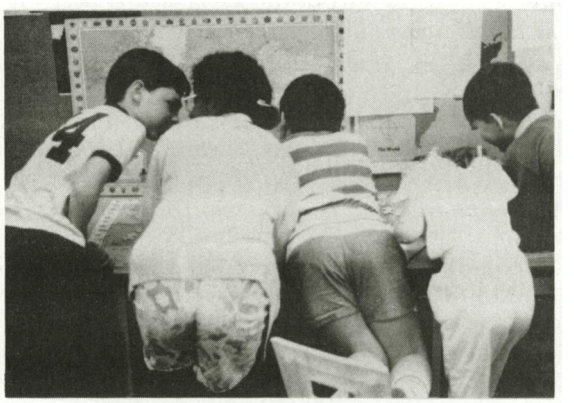

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NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Research in the Teaching of English*. In December 1990, the term of the present editors will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than *November 3, 1989*. Letters should be accompanied by (1) the applicant's vita; (2) one sample of published writing; (3) a brief proposal suggesting future directions of the journal; and (4) a letter from the applicant's home institution indicating the probable extent of support. Do not send books, monographs or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee.

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