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"Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads"[1]: Reading and Drama in Education

Reading and drama are closely linked in the learning process. They interact with each other to develop the same personal resources in the child, building links between print and experience, dream and reality, and self and other (McInnes, 1983). Teaching must be concerned with promoting thinking/feeling strengths in students whether they are interacting with print or people. The pressure and the authenticity of the dramatic moment can help children create new knowledge and make different and necessary connections.

Education is the process of helping humans find essential meanings in life, and this search for meaning links reading and drama. These meanings accrue by living through actual and symbolic experiences, both in life and in role. Finding meaning and developing thought/feeling/language potential are bound up with the child's attempts to make sense of life's situations by being involved in them and by drawing inferences from them (Donaldson, 1978).

Reading, Drama, and Learning

As an act of learning, reading is basically a private experience and drama generally a shared one. When children read, they understand what the words say to them, translate the experience being read about into their own context, and conjure up feelings, attitudes, and ideas concerning everything from the author's values to their own life situations. They react and respond personally, free from outside intervention, to enter as deeply as they decide into this new world of meaning.

The interactive, participating model of the drama experience helps children grow in a different way, moving them forward toward new, collective understanding. This does not mean, however, that drama is just an activity to be used after reading a story, as a check of comprehension, or as a means of motivating children to read a particular selection. It may assist in these goals, but it is, on its own, a powerful medium for helping children make learning happen.

Children who have rich experience in storying bring a sense of expectation to print. Because they know that meanings are not fixed but rather reflective of the reader's background and the familiarity with what is being read, they can explore print, take charge of finding meaning, and rework hidden concepts until understanding happens. The ability to handle reading in this way is the hallmark of a good reader. Since drama encourages children not to be satisfied with immediate, simplistic solutions but to keep exploring, peeling away the layers that cloud the meaning, it can help develop the "what if" element that must be brought to print if true reading is to occur.

Children's ability to make sense of the messages that flood them is often beyond their ability or willingness to communicate their understanding of those messages. A teacher may know that a child gets something from a story while not knowing exactly *what* the child perceives. Children learn to read through personal relationships and the process

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of reading becomes an extension of these relationships. They relate to stories in terms of their own identity, just as who they are determines their response to their family, friends, and environment.

By responding to other people's cues and by having them respond to theirs, children begin to establish their own identity, always adapting, retelling, and reshaping possibilities. As they explore through conversation and role play, they learn to risk and to express—necessary experiences which can lead to literacy. They learn about life through their own storying and through the stories of others, creating their own unique narrative.

Through the use of externalized representations, such as drama, children's perceptions are altered and expanded. As they grow in their skills, they expand their ideas and their ability to express those ideas. The better their ability to manipulate the art form, the more effective their own learning and communication.

Children are active, self-directed learners outside the classroom. We must foster these same qualities in school situations, helping children to develop techniques and skills for exploring a wider range of interests.

Story and Narrative

Some teachers think drama, by its very nature, is determined or predetermined by plot, that it is action bound, driven by the sequential actions of the plot rather than the inner dynamics of the drama situation. Bolton (1984) presents another view:

> Shakespeare understood that plots are not in themselves what drama is about; they are merely the retrospective link between situations. It is in retrospect that a play tells a story. As it unfolds, the audience is identifying with the occurring situation. (p. 38)

But neither is story about plot. White (1981) maintains that attempting to define narrative takes us to the very nature of culture and humanity. He quotes Roland Barthes: "Narrative is simply there, like life itself, international, transhistorical, transcultural. . . . (It) is a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted. Here no one speaks . . . . The events seem to tell themselves" (p. 3).

Story is a basic way of organizing human experiences, a framework for learning. "Story is a primary act of mind," writes Hardy (1977) in *The Cool Web*. "Narrative, like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experiences, but as this primary act of mind transferred to art from life" (p. 21). What concerns Hardy are the qualities fictional narrative shares with the inner and outer storytelling that play a major role in a child's sleeping and waking life. Storying is our constant attempt at exchanging identities and remaking the past, a mode of looking back to go forward:

> For we dream in narrative
> Daydream in narrative,
> Remember, anticipate, hope, despair,
> Believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize,
> Construct, gossip, learn, hate and love
> By narrative. In order to really live,
> We make up stories about ourselves
> And others, about the personal, as well as
> The social, past and future. (p. 22)

While adults differentiate their thoughts with specialized kinds of discourse (e.g., narrative, generalization, and theory), children must make narrative do for all (Moffett & Wagner, 1984). Children speak almost entirely through stories, real or invented, and they comprehend what others say through story. They speak and read about characters, events, and settings, all of which are filled with symbolic meanings.

The drama/narrative continuum builds meanings for all of us. The link between "my" story and "his" story is described by Chukovsky (1963):

> As if there were a basic difference between the fairy tale that a child made up himself and one that was created for him by imaginative folk or by a good writer!. . . It makes no difference whether or not the child is offered fairy tales for, if he is not, he becomes his own Anderson, Grimm, Ershov. Moreover, all his playing is a dramatization of a fairy tale which he creates on the spot, animating, according to his fancy, all objects—converting any stool into a train, into a house, into an airplane, or into a camel. (p. 118)

Search for Meaning

Reading fiction, like watching television, is not something one does by oneself, but is a transaction involving the storyteller and the listener (Inglis, 1976). Reading comprehension is the ability to search for meanings and to think about what one has read. Children's understandings will be determined by

their own personal knowledge, gleaned from their actual and vicarious experiences, and from the particular social and cultural contexts that surround their lives. Teachers can enhance comprehension by using techniques calling for maximum participation of all children (e.g., drama), by inviting a wide variety of responses, and by giving children various art forms with which to respond. "We must stretch his powers of making sense of what he reads, that *relates* to the world he really lives in, has talked about, and continues to talk about" (Britton, 1970, p. 164).

Through drama, teachers help children acquire the means to more fully understand what they have experienced. Students need to interact with both the author's thoughts and their own thoughts in order to bring about true learning. The teacher must constantly help the students go back and forth between the stories and the students' improvised responses (Fines & Verrier, 1974). Children learn that to translate print into meaning, they must view print as a code to be cracked, and that to make sense of the story requires the application of their own experiences (Wagner, 1976). Teachers can draw on the vast resources of the story to stimulate and enrich students' search for meaning in drama. Groups can test and clarify the implications of the text collectively, so that each person can see the differences among various perceptions and interpretations and then make decisions about his/her own response (Moffett & Wagner, 1984).

Dialogue for meaning is the heart of drama. As individuals role play they enter into a dialogue, affecting and modifying the actions and behaviors of others, and exploring the symbols they are using so that they may understand the meaning with which they are concerned. Each participant evokes and responds, creating and sharing experiences in the expressive act of drama. In communicating perceptions and attitudes through drama, children add to the shared experience of those with whom they dialogue (McGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1977).

When reading a story, the dynamic of the narrative is what drives the child on. Often, in school, we stress the ability to analyze after reading a story, rather than the skill of making meaning happen while in the interactive mode of reading. Teachers of reading will have to develop structures to help children work inside the print mode as they experience the words; similarly, teachers working with drama will have to find ways of promoting learning as the drama is happening, not just during reflection time after the experiencing.

Drama and Story

In both drama and narrative the context is fictional, but the responses are real. The garden, as described by the poet Marianne Moore (1935, p. 37), may be filled with imaginary dangers and delights never witnessed on earth by anyone, but what the visitor to that garden feels must be real, as real as the warts on the toad. The emotion may be a "modified version of the same emotion felt in an actual event, but it can be equally or even more intense" (Bolton, 1984, p. 139). Although the child is in a make-believe situation in story and drama, the real world continues to exist, and the learning that occurs for that child lies in this negotiation of meanings—symbolic and actual—taking place in both modes.

Drama helps children journey inside the story garden, so that they can reconstruct the symbols, images, and narrative sequence "in action," thus reexamining the story's ideas, experimenting with them, learning to "play" with the narrative, and in reflection, coming to an understanding of both the story's possibilities and the art form used to create it (Neelands, 1984). In drama, the mutual, symbolic collaboration of ideas, undetermined by plot, allows children to pause in a fictional present, linger on an image, or move forward, backward, and sideways, in an attempt to make meaning happen. Time can be altered and ideas juxtaposed. If a narrative is being used as the source of a drama, the children can identify with and clarify what is happening both in the book, in the drama, and in their own lives. Learning is integrated as they engage with the symbolic art forms of both modes.

If narrative and drama give form to thought and feeling, can we make use of one to build the other? Do I risk diminishing one if I include the other at the same time in my teaching? Can we use drama to clarify and strengthen the reading of story, and can we use story to stimulate or enlighten the drama work?

Drama draws a large part of its content from story. Participating in drama situations from stories is an effective and appropriate means of providing the active involvement and experience that being a mature reader seems to require. In order to develop thinking/languaging/feeling abilities in children, we must place learning activities in a meaningful, embedded context. Drama in education is a whole representation of thought, providing whole meanings for each student (Courtney, 1980). An individual develops a feeling for story as much through kinetic activity and association as through more intellec-

tualized approaches, and drama seems to be the most promising vehicle at hand to allow such direct enjoyment (Duke, 1975). Drama helps children make their thinking visible (Wagner, 1983).

By choosing situations from stories, teachers can give students the power of literature, with all its encompassing levels of meanings, as a beginning point for dramatic activity. The vast resources of the story—its situations, characters, relationships, atmosphere, and concepts—can be utilized to stimulate and enrich students' exploration in drama. "In this interchange between drama and story, the child is brought into direct contact with a wide range of shared cultural symbols" (McGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1977, p. 154).

Those of us who were avid readers in childhood entered readily into that private world created between ourselves and the text. Our response was effortless and we had little need to analyze it. As teachers, our attempts to develop in our students that special relationship with the text are often frustrating. We wish both to engender response where it is lacking and to deepen response where it exists. At the same time, we hope that students will retain a comprehension of the characters, events, and issues we have covered. Yet we are constantly faced with the fact that such retention is impossible without a genuine, personal response from the reader. We search for teaching methods which externalize the interior world of the readers and allow us to bring the text into a closer relationship with them.

How do we engage children in the life blood of the story? When children read or listen to a story, they create personal images in their minds. In drama, they help build a group image. How will they go about these tasks? Will they improvise within the story, stand on the story's shoulders, or build on the story by designing new contexts, finding analogies and patterns, or placing it alongside others (Rosen, 1984)?

Story Drama

Since story dramatization traditionally implies a sequential approach, I suggest the term *story drama* to be used in its place. Story drama occurs when the teacher uses the issues, themes, characters, mood, conflict, or spirit of the story as a beginning for dramatic exploration. The students draw from within themselves ideas, feelings, and conclusions based on the story. Drama involves people in some kind of struggle or problem; the action in story drama develops as the participants solve or work through the dilemma symbolized in the story.

Replaying the story through a literal enactment of the plot has occasional value, as for example in clarifying sequence, but the teacher is not limited to story plot (Ward, 1957). What is important is not the process of enactment but the exploration of the meanings of the story—the themes, concepts, and issues. Stories may be the inspiration for the planning, says Heathcote (cited in Wagner, 1976), but "it is not stories the students re-enact; they simply live through some events as best they may, using what they already understand to 'inform' the situation, and give them a hold on it. And this, in turn, leads them to need further information, gleaned through the 'living-through' " (p. 65).

Story drama frees the teacher and students from the pressure of acting out the whole story or remembering a script. The teacher is primarily a questioner who awakens the students to what they *wonder* about the story. The questions are designed to focus their knowledge of the story on new areas (Davies, 1983). Thus drama may occupy only a few minutes of the teaching schedule and can complement other teaching methods to emphasize particular aspects of the text.

Because students are allowed to bring what they know to the drama, it engages their imaginations and they inevitably move closer to the text. In this sense, the drama may even explore the text at one-remove, or, as Dorothy Heathcote often does, through an analogy which unlocks internal comprehension. Because of the brain's ability to use metaphor, the pattern of one set of images can be used to organize quite a different set. The images from one story can be used as images for related and yet different meaning. Story drama opens the door to an endless number of curriculum linkages.

Dramatic Moments: An Elaboration

Dramatic moments are often built around issues rather than scenes from a story, as my work with a group of 10-year-olds illustrates. We were working with *The Dancing Tigers* (Hoban, 1982) a complex picture book that uses the folktale idiom to deal with the problem of modern society's encroachment on nature. In the story, the Rajah disturbs jungle life by bringing taped music along on a tiger safari, and in revenge, the tigers dance the Rajah to death. How this occurs is unclear in the book. When I asked the children how he had died, they were unable to tell me. They had not been able to make sense of this crucial element of the story.

Using drama as a tool for unlocking meaning, I went into role as the Rajah's son who had returned from America to discover the reason for his father's death. The children in role as the trackers and servants gave me various explanations about his death, conjectured from their own knowledge, but unrelated to the story. Eventually, two students volunteered the information that the Rajah had been danced to death. I, in role, angrily rejected their responses, claiming that I no longer accepted such superstitious beliefs since I had been educated in America. It was now up to the students to prove the truth of the story to me, since I had ordered them all locked up until they disclosed the real reasons for his death. The son then left the room, and I, as teacher, worked with the students in groups as they set about planning to help the son understand what had happened on that safari.

When we returned to role, the children demanded the opportunity to prove that the father had indeed died from the dancing tigers. They asked the son to accompany them on a similar safari, with music, and when this had been agreed to and the ensuing drama had begun, everyone was sitting with me in the circle. Then two boys, as tigers, began the Dance of the Silence that is Partner to the Violence. As we watched, I was suddenly taken by both arms and told politely to leave the tigers or I would meet my father's fate. The children had understood the concept of the tale; by teaching me, they had unraveled the threads of information and come to grips with an experience outside their own frame of reference. They had made sense of the story by reliving it through drama. Thus, an elaboration of the story led to a more thorough examination of one of the story events. As the children took on the roles of the servants, they brought to the drama not only all they knew about the story situation but also all they knew about being questioned by authority, and all they knew about innocence and truth.

Designing an Elaboration

In designing an elaboration, the teacher must bring pressure on a story event to reveal its deeper meaning. The pressure begins at a level which allows children to apply their own knowledge. They need to interact with the story in order to bring about meaning. The roles and the situation must be embedded into the lives of the children. "The teacher must search for a possible starting point that is relevant to the children's experience, relevant to the spirit of the story, and a vehicle for confrontation through language" (Rosen & Rosen, 1973, p. 212). The teacher works through the elaboration in any of the following ways:

1. in preparatory discussions by helping students analyze the story or challenging their thinking about it;
2. in a drama setting of "people in a place with a problem to solve" (e.g., servants meeting in a hall to answer the questions of the Rajah's son);
3. by providing a structure for responses within the drama setting such as dividing students into pairs or subgroups with tasks (writing a petition to the Rajah's son or inventing a good explanation to satisfy him);
4. by taking a pivotal role within the drama itself (e.g., the Rajah's son);
5. by taking a neutral role which allows the teacher to question or elicit responses within the drama (e.g., the prince's scribe who comes to record the answers to his questions); or
6. by helping the children take charge of the drama (e.g., they must help keep the tigers safe from outside elements).

As in any other teaching task, much of the planning can be done in advance. Children will accept the teacher in a number of roles even within the same lesson. The role may be used so sparingly that any teacher can feel comfortable with it. The power of the teacher in role is the magic of story drama because it enables the teacher to accompany the children into the metaphoric world of the story (Stabler, 1978). The intersection of their private worlds and imaginings with the world of the story produces a power for comprehension and response.

During the drama children share the inner world they enter into when reading the story, and this externalized fantasy is elaborated and enriched by a group experience. A resonant relationship is set up between the individual responses of the students and the text; i.e., the teacher and students interact with the text in ever-widening ways. The story becomes significant and remains with the child until needed or wanted.

Summary

In Walsh's (1978) novel, *A Chance Child,* Creep, an abused child, takes a river journey backward into 19th century England, where children are made to work in the mines, and where they are treated as harshly as he is in his present world. On seeing a pathetic, ill-used young girl leading a huge white horse, Creep exclaims:

> "Them's horses. And they're bigger'n what I'd of thought." He closed his eyes to remember the rag book, with colored pictures half worn off the cloth, which had supplied him with this information from the depths of memory. "But they don't bite," he told himself sagely. (p. 26)

Can we give children more than faded, rag-book memories with which to cope with the ordinary and the fabulous experiences of life? Can we somehow find stories for children to read and listen to that support, encourage, and facilitate making sense of so much that seems nonsensical, incongruous, or unfair? Can we find strategies, such as drama, that help children bring more meaning to the seemingly incomprehensible print they are forced to deal with daily in their school lives?

> I suppose the teacher is the journey-maker. But I think it's a journey of learning access to knowledge and responsibility for the access. It would be wonderful if today's teachers could distinguish between just giving stored knowledge to kids and helping them take on the responsibility of tapping that stored knowledge and discover the ways to do it. (Heathcote, 1983, p. 699)

Helping real children to explore imaginary gardens in dreams, drama, and life must be the mandate of those of us involved in creating learning situations for children—private and shared journeys in imaginary gardens, with real toads.

Note

1. The phrase "imaginary gardens with real toads" is taken from the poem entitled "Poetry" in Moore, 1935, p. 37.

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