PROCESS, DIALOGUE AND PERFORMANCE:
THE DRAMATIC ART OF ENGLISH TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on quite a simple premise with massive possibilities: that a contemporary classroom, and above all an English classroom, is a public performance space, where dialogue happens. And drama is the art of performance, of making dialogical performance text.

Drama can be a springboard for:
- the living process of developing oracy, the forgotten basic, and maximising students’ purposeful talk
- engaging deeply and critically with narrative and literature
- making accessible difficult and unfamiliar texts, including the dramatic texts of other eras.

These are explored in this chapter. Drama’s uses are broader than that, as you will discover in following chapters, which demonstrate its application in areas such as critical literacy, ICT and TESOL, besides those components of drama that have a natural home within English. Using drama effectively turns the classroom into an aesthetic space, providing teachers with a liberating pedagogy that is genuinely enabling for the students, giving them contextualised opportunities for oracy and multiliteracies, and power in negotiating their learning. This chapter gives some simple starting points for introducing drama into the teaching as well as the content of the English classroom, and some pointers towards developing more advanced and sophisticated uses of dramatic processes and pedagogy.

OVERCOMING THE RESTRICTIONS OF THE CLASSROOM

All teaching is an art—and not just a craft. It actually demands artistic skills and knowledge of quite a high order—what Eisner (1991:86ff) calls connoisseurship. Drama skills are the most important of all. The classroom is a public stage where a narrative of learning is to be enacted, so dramatic tension and focus are crucial. Children and students are all acting in this public performance space, and all should be equally engaged in the dialogue. Teachers are the key performers—but not the stars—they must have some of the skills and range of an actor to command and shift focus, engage the students in the dialogue, inspire them with the story of what is to be learned and, above all, model and embody their language learning.

Language itself—verbal, and also vocal and gestural language—is not only the primary instrument of human communication but also the prime medium of drama. Out of performed dialogue, new understanding emerges that is cognitive and embodied, personal and social, emotional and sensory and kinaesthetic; understanding that we can call ‘learning’. This has always been theatre’s job. It is also the job of the English teacher.
English syllabuses today point out the crucial importance not only of literacy but also that long-forgotten basic, oracy:

In English, students learn to speak, listen to, read, view, write and shape texts to make meaning with purpose, effect and confidence in a wide range of contexts. They learn how language use varies according to context, purpose, audience, and content, and they develop their abilities to use this knowledge. Students develop their ability to use language to talk about language and to reflect on and critique its use (Queensland Studies Authority 2002: 1).

But do they?

As the UK National Oracy Project Scott 1991, A81–A83 verified, by the time children come to school they have already mastered the basics of oracy, and are proud of their ability to communicate with language. They have learned to speak and listen to language:

- by copying and social interaction, learning it from everybody around, especially parents, but also peers and playmates, television, the people they see and meet and their surroundings
- through play, particularly dramatic play
- through all the senses—brain, body and emotions all working together
- through scaffolding on what is already known, exploring and testing, trial and error, taking risks: learning by getting it wrong first, so you can get it right next time
- through creative and imaginative leaps, playing with juxtaposition, and humour.

Then we put them for half their waking lives in a place called a school, where we:

- replace parents, playmates, television and the world round them with a small number of people more or less the same age and an adult called 'the teacher' in a single room with specialised equipment and closed doors called 'the classroom'
- usually leave play outside in the playground
- restrict language, social interaction and movement, and focus on the brain
- replace exploring with a limited range of new knowledge called the curriculum, replace trial and error with right answers, and the excitement of risk and penalty-free failure with caution and penalties for failing
- often discourage creative leaps, imagination and jokes.

Even for the caring and interactive teacher, a secondary school inevitably provides a very narrow range of contexts, with the children spending most of their days with the same groups of people, from familiar social contexts and to familiar status patterns, doing much the same range of tasks every day. Far from encouraging language development, this restrictiveness can actively inhibit it. Add to that some common hangovers from the nineteenth century, especially in secondary schooling: the pursuit of a quiet class; silent, individual and competitive work; the privileging of writing over talking; and the very fact that reading and writing are
commonly called basics, and speaking and listening are not. These all compound the potential
disembowelment of this vital capacity. Is it a wonder that by the time they are eight those
five-year-old linguists 'have worked out tor themselves the low status of talk as a means of
learning', as the UK Oracy Project puts it. And it only gets worse.

How can drama turn this round? By mutual agreement known variously as 'the voluntary
suspension of disbelief'; 'an agreement to pretend'; 'building a fictional world' or 'the magic if'.

The classroom reality can be transcended by being suspended, replaced with an infinitely
broad range of fictional contexts that operate as living experiential models of human behaviour.
Teachers across the whole curriculum use working models, where chemical reactions, the
human body, geographical contours or linguistic patterns can be studied up close, tried out and
sometimes experimented with to see what happens when you alter elements or structures.

Drama's just the same, and our dramatic models go one step further: they live and breathe.
They can provide purpose, permission and challenge for the students to use and experiment
with language genres, registers and interactions from contexts beyond the classroom and
beyond their own experience: full of the chemistry of real life, but without the consequences.

There is no need for an external audience; for most of the time the students will be just
this other person in this other situation. When an audience is needed, the dramatic action can be halted to enable all
kinds of distanced theatrical techniques to be used among the group of learners themselves
for reflection or for deepening the learning.

Using process drama effectively does actually provide teachers with two massive peda-
gogical advantages. The first advantage is almost unique to this form of teaching: drama can
actually suspend the real power and status relationships to allow exploration of alternatives—
not only student to student, but even student to teacher. Using the process conventions of
'teacher-in-role' and 'mantle of the expert' (see the Glossary and the explanations below), the
students can actively be the ones who know and make decisions, and help and command; the
teacher can have the liberating pleasure of finding him- or herself as the figure who needs
help, the mere messenger, the one who does not know, the provocateur. The other massive
and enabling advantage is that the students can take a major role in negotiating the content of
their curriculum, and structuring its management in the learning setting.

What is on the face of it the simplest form of this is called process drama, where the teacher
and students all agree to step into the same fictional world, and find out what it is like to be the
people in that world, the 'characters' of the drama, by enacting them. We use various forms
of role-taking to experience their emotions, deal with their dilemmas and conflicts, and try
to reach their goals. The English teacher, through first-hand experience, can learn to manage
and utilise students' language. This seems simple in theory, but is in fact quite a sophisticated
teaching technique, particularly because it runs counter to the normal expectations of what
happens in a school—the classroom context—in terms of what people do, the unusual use
of the space and the management of time.
WHAT IS PROCESS DRAMA?

The first essential to grasp about process drama is that it is descended directly not from theatre, but from children's dramatic play (though as we shall see theatre is a very close relative, and some children's play can become highly theatrical: 'Look at me—I'm Superman!'). As a context, a classroom is pretty limiting. Drama allows us to add fictional contexts—to change the classroom into a church, a bar, a public meeting, a medieval castle or into a series of interviews, family discussions, service encounters, prison cells or any context we like, anywhere or when. This then allows us to take on any of the roles appropriate to that context: to model, practise, develop, scrutinise and reflect on the language functions, genres and registers that occur in context. We can take risks and experiment, because unlike in real contexts we can change, fine-tune or even renegotiate the model, alter the outcomes and explore possible consequences without any repercussions, because when we stop the drama, we walk out of that context. All the time we are fully experiencing the language, cognitively, viscerally and emotionally, 'as if' in real life. It is the most natural form of learning in the world. Because we have all practised it as young children, deep down we all still have the skills of suspending disbelief, of managing fictional contexts and creating dramatic tensions, which we can tap into and relearn. However, to make our play work without the tears and frustration that do accompany children's play, it takes skilful management of the elements of dramatic art by the teacher, who is at the same time a director, co-playwright and even co-player.

The essential ingredients are:

1. A context in which the participants can believe and a 'hook' to engage their interest. Creating this context entails making the agreement to pretend, and building enough belief to make the encounters authentic. The context will consist of a fictional but realistic dramatic situation where people engage in language encounters that give the opportunity for appropriate and focused language practice.

2. Dramatic tension providing all the characters with a clear reason for taking part in the encounter, and some kind of dramatic constraint that makes the task difficult. The situation needs to be problematic for the characters in the dramatic context (the fictional situation) to get the participants engaged and keep them interested—things to find out and achieve urgently (the tension of the task), conflicts to be managed or resolved (tension of conflict), awkward choices to make (tension of dilemma) and missing information to be collected and mysteries to be unravelled (tensions of mystery and secrecy).

3. A structure that permits the development both of empathy (stepping into the shoes of another and really feeling what it is like to be in them) and of distance (being able to reflect on the experience, deconstruct it and make the learning explicit). This entails having access to a range of techniques, both of naturalistic role-play (for empathic experience) and of more theatrical techniques (for the distanced deconstruction and analysis).
First we will look at some of the contexts for drama use that can be driven by simple forms of tension, then we will briefly glimpse how you can set up those structures.

**Drama for Oracy**

A fairly common categorisation of the functions of language, originally expounded by Wells and Nicholls (1985), and modified and simplified for teaching purposes by Haseman and O’Toole (1990), defines language as happening in one of five modes, in terms of its function or purpose: argumentational (negotiating), experiential (expressing feeling), expositional (informing or being informed), hypothetical (imagining) and operational (controlling or being controlled). Of course, in any interchange there are invariably more than one of these functions going on at a time, but only one is the surface text: the others are all subtext, expressed in nonverbal language, the pauses and the vocal and gestural paralanguage. Drama allows the subtexts to be noticed, examined and acknowledged. Here are a few of the more obvious of the myriad dramatic contexts easily explored in the classroom, driven by the oral experience but also leading to a whole range of written genres, where the passion and engagement of the drama ensure motivated writing. Most of the books explored in the English classroom, the current affairs topics discussed or the themes into which units are structured can provide the stimulus and starting point, as will be shown later.

**Language of negotiating**

The language of negotiating is a good place to explore with the students the notion of subtext, in this case a subtext of feeling.

With the students working in pairs, A or A’s best friend did something terrible at school today, something that you do not want to talk about or admit to. B, who is A’s parent, can see that A is upset, and is determined to find out why—but was not born yesterday.

Two very profitable and easily set-up fields of negotiation are those of family and friends, and of service encounters. Simple role-play scenarios that could even be played sitting down between neighbours might include a number of forms of negotiation practice—oral and written:
An example for family: Negotiating with your parents a special sleepover with your best friend when your parents want you to attend Granddad's sixty-eighth birthday ("but it's not a special one, mum"). Then writing a really nice letter to Granddad explaining why you are not at the party. Next explaining to your best friend why you want to leave, because Granddad was taken ill at the party and you need to see him, and last, persuading your friend's parent to lend you a taxi fare so that you can go to the hospital by yourself.

An example for service encounters: If you can move the desks or tables, turn the classroom into a hotel lobby, with the central tension that the lobby is being redecorated. Students take roles as hotel staff, customers and builders, each with different functions, levels of experience, purposes and goals that might come into conflict. This gives opportunities to take part in roles of different status and power, motives and interests, and types of ritual language, all to be revealed and criticised, and also gives practice in a wide range of genres of negotiation. This may be followed by writing letters of complaint to management, or sets of procedures to mollify ruffled customers.

Language of feeling

Patriotism and religious loyalty are usually expressed entirely in the language of feeling, which gives countless opportunities for:

- Private encounters: the mental hospital registrar discusses with a nurse her request to wear a niqab (a Muslim full-face veil) where patient's inability to read her facial expression could cause problems.
- Semi-public meetings: the matter is brought to a staff meeting.
- Public meetings: the patient's support group holds a protest meeting.

Language of informing

The dramatic possibilities of exploring the language of information come from the contrasts between information, misinformation and disinformation, shown in the factors that can interfere between the informer and the receiver.

- Lack of background: try explaining how an electric light works to a villager from before the industrial revolution, who has slipped through a time warp and has neither seen a light in a bottle before, nor heard of electricity.

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Language of imagining

In a way, in one very important sense, every time your students enter into dramatic fiction, whether into private role-play or as an actor presenting, they are engaging in the language of imagination. They are saying 'what if?', making hypotheses concrete and turning into realistic experience a possible reality, past, present or future—as we have shown, creating models that are realistic cognitively and emotionally. To explore the specific language characteristics of the language of imagining is like creating a play within a play—having characters themselves saying 'what if?'

Whatever other functions of language are being explored, the function of imagining is always present, not usually as the subtext, but on the contrary, as the infrastructure for the whole languaging exercise.

Language of controlling

It is often quite a good idea to start exploring this function not just by looking at problems of power and control, but also by exploring how power and status can and usually do operate quite acceptably as means of social control.

You might even start with greetings, seeing how different status relationships can be very swiftly established in a few words or a gesture. Next, ask the students to set up then reflect on, common situations from their own family, school and community life, where there are quite distinct disparities in power and well-understood sets of signals and protocols that mostly work.
This is where drama can come to the teacher's aid as a very important protective device. Obviously a classroom is the single location common to all where power and control are key dimensions of the language, so it is tempting to analyse the very classroom you are in. This is not a good idea as a rule, in case it puts people into potentially invidious positions, by unwittingly revealing power dissonances that could cause friction or leave students (or you!) exposed.

Setting up a fictional classroom to analyse can be a lot of fun, particularly if the teacher takes the role not of the teacher but of the source of tension.

From there it is a natural step to move to looking at more problematic contexts featuring the language of control or being controlled.

Situations of verbal bullying are among the most fruitful contexts for identifying and critically comparing how people use the language of control, since, by definition, bullying is a repeated misuse of an imbalance of power, and there are usually three distinct roles in a bullying situation: the bully or bullies, the bullied and the bystanders.

Here, even more than in the classroom context above, drama comes into its own, as it is important to use fiction rather than reality, since in every classroom and every student's (and teacher's) life there are sensitivities to do with bullying that are no business of the English classroom. On the other hand, this very familiarity with bullying as an experience common to all provides countless fictional situations that everybody can relate to and make authentic. This is now so well established that there are many resources and schemes in books and on the internet demonstrating various forms of process drama techniques for use in exploring bullying (for example, O'Toole et al., 2005; Macbeth & Fine, 1996).

**PROCESS DRAMA, STORYTELLING AND LITERATURE**

As stories make great pre-texts for drama, drama is potentially a great way to engage students and to help them find deep meaning in literary texts. There are a couple of extra concepts that need to be stressed, however, to make the most productive teaching link between literature and drama: **indirectness** and **analogies**.

**Indirectness**
Obliqueness: action whose direction is not immediately obvious.

**Analogies**
A strategy by which a fictional situation is selected and enacted without addressing the subject directly.
Acting a story out in the classroom is by no means the best way to 'bring a text to life', either in terms of the setting or the narrative. Think about it: an author or storyteller conjures up, and peoples through words, the situation, the setting and the unfolding pattern of events that is the narrative, enough for the readers to imagine them all and colour them with their own experience. Though by acting it out, a teacher and students can make the story concrete, what else do they have in a classroom full of chairs and precious little else redolent of that setting to evoke it? There is certainly plenty of evidence, from Sutton-Smith (1976) onward, that in the play of very young children, acting out sequences of story in order to establish understanding of narrative and of appropriate kinds of language is very important. More recently, several of the research studies quoted in Betty Jane Wagner’s Educational Drama and Language Arts: What Research Shows (1998: especially 36–8) reinforce that evidence. For example, Margaret Benson’s 1990 study concludes from a study of four- and five-year-olds that dramatic play facilitates storytelling by developing narrative plotting. However, cognitive sequencing of plot elements is a very small component even of narrative, and is no guarantee of bringing any text or story to life. The relevance to that of acting out, especially by older children, is questioned by the ambivalence of the author’s own research findings (O’Toole, 1977:146–58) and more recent work on the play of children by writers such as Holly Griffin (1990) and Julie Dunn (2002). This research has identified in the spontaneous play of children, beside narrative sequence, many levels of text and subtext, communication and meta-communication that are really more important. Wagner, her co-authors and the other researchers mentioned above are also expert drama teachers, who would never be content with merely asking the students to act out a story. Any imaginative English teacher has the rich opportunity to add to and shape the dramatic play to explore much more deeply some of those texts and subtexts. Working through drama gives the opportunity to dig downwards, deeper, into motivation, character, conflict, tension, dilemmas and ethical questions—in other words, the factors that impel the narrative.
Bethlehem is a range of adventures that they can decide on as a class to give the presents to the baby Jesus (then work out how to hide them from Herod’s guards, so as not to give the game away).

That approach actually focuses on the meaning of giving presents at Christmas, takes the children inside the story and provides them with the power and control over it.

The story is quite rich enough to mine at secondary level, too. How about exploring the story from Herod’s point of view (a fine opportunity for teacher-in-role as provocateur—see below)? He rules over a very volatile and superstitious country, where he’s successfully avoided Roman invasion and occupation by keeping the peace for over twenty years… and now some quite influential strangers let him know that all this might be in jeopardy, because of some new extremist plot, involving a baby boy born to be king. What else could he do but try and remove the threat?

When working from a familiar or overfamiliar text such as the Nativity, approaching it obliquely enables the participants to find a necessary freshness. Working obliquely applies even more to unknown, alien and linguistically difficult novels, poetry texts, and dramas such as those of Shakespeare and Greek tragedy. Find a way in that is a hook. If it’s a Shakespeare play, whatever you do, don’t start by reading it, especially starting at Act I, scene i, which is merely the moment the playwright chose to introduce the story visually to a late-sixteenth-century audience using the reference points they shared. Let yourself be playful, in order to find the contemporary hook for the students. This is the best way to take you to the wonderful world of analogy. Take Macbeth as an example:

The students are enrolled as pairs of New York journalists from a range of publications chasing an exciting assignment from the newspaper’s stringer in Bismarck, Texas. The following email has landed on the editor’s desk, and each pair of journalists is assigned to track down and scoop the story, taking with them whatever point of view or emphasis is appropriate to the paper they have chosen.

Thursday 36 October 2006
BISMARCK, Texas

Dear Ed,

Thought you might like to see this grab from our local paper. Could be worth a story.

CATTLE OWNER IN MULTIPLE SLAYING
Celebr rancher Dunk King... victim of after-party bloodbath

Best,
S.B & M Hagg
North News Agency
Arriving at the ranch gates, the newshounds can talk to cow hand (Lenny Ross (teacher-in-role with a chance to do a really bad Texas accent), who is shocked and baffled, but gives them the info about the residents. There is hard ranch hand Big Mac, and Mrs Mac, Banksie, Dunk's kids Mol and Donnie, Duffy Fife who found the bodies of Dunk and his bodyguards, who are the presumed killers—slaughtered by Mac in revenge. That's the way we do things here. Then there were three strange-looking women seen outside town. The journalists get enough information to write and send in their first news flash to their editors.

The class turns into the inquest, where the journalists interview some of the characters (students briefed in advance), then hear a taped 'radio interview' with Lennie Ross (now fixed): 'Things have been strangely borne ... who cannot want the thought how monstrous it was for Mac and Donnie to kill their gracious father—damned fact!' That Texas accent actually helps turn the students' ears to one of the hardest and longest speeches in the play. So, too, does getting somebody to tape record Mrs Mac's ravings after her nervous breakdown preceding this with the doctor dictating his case notes as a psychopath with an equally bad Viennoise accent. 'They seem her rise from her bed, take paper and pen ... and all she who in a most fast sleep, makes sense of the mad scene for the hungry newshounds.

By the time they've solved the whodunit the students will be ready to dive into the text—not of Act I scene 1, but of Duffy's discovery: 'O horror, horror, horror! They can then work their way through the text both ways to answer their own questions—Why did it happen? Who were the three strange women? Did he get away with it?—with a will. If you can, let them explore some scenes on their feet, with book in hand, bringing the text to life—a useful strategy is to give the student in groups a short but key scene, with the demand that with every sentence there must be one relevant movement (not necessarily by the speaker).

With an appropriate analogy, process drama can take the students into all of Shakespeare's plays, or any other literature in English. There's a skill in finding the best analogy, but it just starts with asking yourself the question: why should the students read this? What does it have to say to them? If you can't answer that, you shouldn't be using that text, or you will need to do your own preliminary work to find your own hook into the play.
CLASSROOM DRAMA STRUCTURES

Process drama comes in all sizes, and, as with any experience worth having, the more complex and extended the experience, the richer it is. It also gives opportunities for writing. A five-minute role-play exercise can neatly encompass the practice and contextualised understanding of a particular linguistic register or type of language encounter.

Simple pairs or small-group role-taking

With the class separated in twos, every pair working simultaneously:

A is a school-leaver who has seen television recruiting ads and really wants to join the army. B is an anxious parent A, how do you attempt to persuade B?

Thousands of simple problematic scenes like this can provide lively expositional or illustrative episodes in classes. Either could be enriched by creating a more complex encounter that demands other levels of subtext, just by adding another character or two.

C is an elder sibling who is a passionate pacifist. D, A’s other parent, thinks the army would be an ideal career but does not want to seem disloyal.

It is generally not a good idea to conduct this kind of role-play with just one pair or group role-playing while the others watch, at least early in a drama-based language lesson, though it is fairly common practice, and may seem sensible for the teacher to keep full control of the encounter. For one thing, this does not give all students the opportunity to experience the encounter, maximising the language practice. For another, it seriously affects the authenticity—the role-players are on show, which some will fear or resist, and others will act up to; moreover, the watchers are often more amused by their friends acting than focused on the language they are using.

Extending the dramatic structure

The situation above—or any simple role-play of that kind—could be enriched as a language learning experience by extending and problematising it into a series of encounters that explore the implications of the situation much more deeply.
A public meeting might have been arranged by the IS9 at the request of the army recruitment office for a returned soldier to talk to local young people about army career. (With the teacher and a class volunteer, one in the chair and one as the returned soldier.) At the public meeting, the soldier turns out not to offer the simple advice expected by the IS9 organizers, but to problematize the whole situation by offering very ambivalent views about, and possibly graphic images illustrating, a military career.

**Teacher-in-role**

This option calls on the teacher to take part in the drama, from which position you can actually control the lesson and the flow of the meeting much better than from being an outsider. Although of the two roles suggested you may be inclined to prefer the Chair, as more fitting your out-of-role high status and your function as teacher and class controller, the role of the returned soldier would give you far greater scope to control and deepen the range of interaction, thinking and language use. Paradoxically, as you reduce your status, you give yourself more power, because in that role you can throw in a reaction that is unexpected, or make it tougher for the characters (by challenging the students, demanding that they take greater power and responsibility in the situation, which in turn demands a higher order of thinking and language skills).

Becoming the teacher-in-role also gives you the chance to model the appropriate genres and registers of language, vocabulary and syntax. You don't need to be an accomplished actor—you just need to be well prepared and step with conviction into the character's shoes, seeing things through that other's eyes. You can take a number of positions relevant to the drama, putting pressure on the students to use sophisticated language. For example, you might become someone with the information, but who is reluctant or unable to deliver it coherently; perhaps the person who needs information, or help, or the messenger who throws in a bombshell but takes no responsibility ('I'm sorry, it's not my decision ... I could ask if you like'). You might become the provocateur, who takes a position diametrically opposed to that of the characters in the fiction (or the students themselves). As when learning to swim, once you have taken the plunge it is liberating and invigorating, and allows you to cede the majority of the talk to the students, where it belongs.

**Changing the focus, raising the stakes**

Sometimes, though not necessarily, accompanying the teacher-in-role technique, and certainly complementary to it, is the technique known as the mantle of the expert: students take on the roles of those who know, or have expertise, or can be expected to carry out investigations, such as scientists, archaeologists, detectives and journalists. It may be enough to ask the students to
take a particular role-stance, as above, of family members quizzing the returned soldier about whom they already have deep background knowledge. For other situations, they may need to "earn" their expertise by undertaking tasks within the drama, or by background research.

Re-organised with new roles into four "film production crews", make a documentary based on the returned soldier's experiences.

Students would work with quite a new focus, outside the original dramatic event, and on multiple levels, transforming and reflecting on the material of the drama in a new way while getting to grips with the demands of the specific technical jobs required to create a documentary.

Alternatively, a contextual shift, either geographically or through a time jump, backward or forward, could be a very revealing way of refocusing the action and exploring the nature of the issue by changing the context itself.

- Backward time jump: Ask the students to re-enact the opening role-play, but set it in 1915 or 1939.
- Geographical shift: Suppose that the original family discussion is taking place not in Australia, but in Baghdad in 2006? (How adventurous a teacher are you? This might be enough of a change of pace, but think of the further possibilities.) Suppose the recruitment that A is looking for is not into the official army, but into an extreme nationalist insurgent militia, and instead of being a returned soldier the guest of the public meeting is an active member of one of those insurgent groups.

This might not be a wise choice for a teacher inexperienced in drama to set up in a class including Iraqi refugees, or fugitives from war zones. Drama can provide protection, but it can also expose raw nerves, and teachers venturing into this territory do need to have mastered the skills of managing process drama. For the experienced and brave teacher, it's a great opportunity to take on that provocateur role, but it needs setting up carefully. Almost certainly the students in their real lives will be united in their condemnation of 'terrorists', and it would be easy for even a well-briefed teacher-in-role who is not an accomplished actor to lose control and generate a 'yahoo' reaction. That is where all the students are vociferously and unthinkingly united against the common enemy (which, as it is the teacher underneath the role, can give an added dimension of licensed rudeness under the shelter of the role-play). The trick is to set the role up so that it forces the students to rethink their easily held positions:
The guest at the public meeting is not a terrorist insurgent, but the mother of one, whose daughter has been trained for a suicide mission. She grieves for her child, but she knows that peace and stability will not return until the invaders have gone, and she knows her child will take her place as a martyr.

Distancing and reflective techniques

By now, the drama is moving into emotionally challenging territory, and it is all 'experiential'—experienced at a first-hand level of stepping into others' shoes (except for the 'documentary film-makers' for whom the focusing of the dramatic frame provided a measure of distance and therefore protection).

The simplest method of distancing is in fact to refocus the drama away from the hot centre of the issue to where the students can review it with some detachment, and a complete change of perspective. A time jump forward can achieve this.

Back in the original family group, imagine that A was given permission to join up, and now, three years later, is being welcomed home after his or her first tour of active duty. What stories does A bring back? How have attitudes changed, hardened or mellowed in the light of them?

A time jump of fifty years would be interesting, with A telling stories of his or her adventures to two grandchildren (but still in the presence of the sceptical sibling C) and pondering with them how that momentous decision to enlist changed A's life.

There are lots of opportunities for motivated writing, some of which can still be in role.

An interview for the local paper with the recently returned soldier.

The old soldier (or sibling or grandchildren) starts the soldier's memoir with the story of that fateful discussion as a teenager, and tries to analyse what prompted the desire to enlist.

THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES AND CONVENTIONS

Up to now, all the suggested changes have been basically within the same genre of first-person, experiential, 'living-through' role-play, with no external audience—students generate
language spontaneously in response to the empathy of the moment. We have earlier discouraged the unproductive use of self-conscious acting in an unengaged audience in this process drama context. When used deliberately for distancing and/or reflection, it can be very productive, however, and is often necessary. At this point, we can begin to use techniques of theatre, or the actor’s rehearsal, or even games. The following are only a few of hundreds. Most of these need planning, a mix of discussion and improvisation, and sometimes even scripting and rehearsing. That time will jump forward, for instance, could vividly create and encapsulate the soldier’s adventures through a series of ‘photographs’ (the student groups creating freeze-frames or tableaux that depict crucial moments in the soldier’s career). Tableaux can be made more vivid by thought tracking (whereby each character speaks what is in his or her head at the moment of freezing) or frozen effigy, whereby students present a group dramatic ‘picture’ give the audience time to take in the picture, then gradually bring the moment to life, showing what followed or what led up to that moment. It is possible to change to these theatrical explorations even in the most experiential of living-through dramas, providing valuable variety and contrast. Find out about other similar distancing techniques, such as alter ego, conscience alley and gossip mill.

Process drama techniques can themselves be used to ‘value add’ to other forms of drama pedagogy. A kind of halfway house to process drama is the theatrical technique known as forum theatre, which starts not from an experiential role-play but from a group preparing and acting out an improvised scene or scenes, ending in direct confrontation or dilemma; the audience of ‘spect-actors’ is invited to intervene in the scene to try to resolve the issue.

CHECKING THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

There are plenty of books on process drama, or drama-in-education as it is sometimes called, to help you, Ackroyd, 2000; Bowell & Heap, 2004; Caswath & Simons, 1997; Morgan & Saxton, 2006; O’Toole & Dunn, 2002; and even some good website exemplars, such as Queensland Studies Authority, 2002. You will need to ensure that you are teaching with sufficient attention to the art form of drama. As we proposed at the beginning of this chapter, and as the research clearly shows, the better the drama, the better the learning. You may not have had any drama training yourself. Twenty years ago we devised the ‘Dramawise’ categorisation of drama itself for a quite different purpose; to update Aristotle and identify the elements of drama:

Freeze frame

Within a freeze-frame, sometimes also called a tableau, a character is shown at a moment of particular poignancy or moment of dilemma. This can be enacted in a play or incorporated into a technic known as ‘frozen photograph’ for intervention by an affected third audience member.

Thought tracking

A technique in which a character’s thoughts are expressed by the actor and fed back to the actor by the audience, often shown in a Student led, tableau depicting the character’s thoughts.

Frozen effigy

A group technique in which each member of the group prepares an improvised scene or scenes, and then gradually brings it to life, showing what followed or what led up to that moment. It is possible to change to these theatrical explorations even in the most experiential of living-through dramas, providing valuable variety and contrast. Find out about other similar distancing techniques, such as alter ego, conscience alley and gossip mill.

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Gossip mill
A dramatic method during which students stand mill, together in a space, and, on a signal from the teacher, stop and instantly share one piece of information or gossip with one other person. This sequence is repeated a number of times.

Forum theatre
A technique of participatory theatre, made popular by Augusto Boal, the Brazilian founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, whereby actors create a scene depicting oppression or conflict. Members of the audience are invited to step into the scene at any point and intervene as ‘spect-actors’, taking the role of one of the characters, to try to resolve the situation of oppression or conflict by the use of some alternative behaviour.

Dramatic form. It is now rather dated and simplistic, but as a classroom checklist for process drama, it is invaluable. Process drama (or any dramatic work in the theatre, in any genre) will work if all the elements of dramatic form are in place:

☐ The context—has the situation been clearly set up? Have the students had sufficient time to build belief, to enrol themselves or understand the perspective of their characters in the situation?

☐ The time scale and tempo—are they appropriate? It’s tempting to try to rush drama, which actually works better the slower you take it, and the students will learn much more and, in the finish, faster.

☐ The focus—are we clearly working inside the dramatic situation, or on the edge, or outside? We’ve seen how important that is, both for the learning and for protection of distance.

☐ Dramatic tension—is the class still really engaged with and gripped by the unfinished business, the unanswered questions?

☐ The place and the space—are real life and the fiction congruent? Are we trying to have a press conference with the characters sitting on the classroom floor?

☐ The language and the movement—is the language we are speaking in appropriate genre and register? Is there sufficient opportunity to physicalise the situation and the gesture?

☐ The mood and the dramatic symbols—are these adding to the significance of the situation or the moment, or not?

If any of these are not properly attended to, little significant meaning will emerge. If a drama seems to be wilting, or going off the rails, which element needs a bit more care and effort from the teacher?

It will have dawned on the reader by now that mastery of all these techniques, and even basic familiarity with them, takes time and some effort. Is the effort worth the candle? It is. As I said at the beginning: as a good teacher, you need to develop some dramatic skills of your own; as a good English teacher, you must understand drama itself. You will make mistakes, get lost and muddled, and many of the scenes you painstakingly set up will flop. But, providing you have a genuine relationship of trust with your students, they will be disposed to be helpful, and forgiving. It’s in their interest, because drama is a motivating and fun way to learn English, and they get to do most of the talking.

Ackroyd, J. (2000). *Literacy Alive!: Drama Projects for Literacy Learning*, London: Hodder & Stoughton. This is a thoroughly practical handbook, well grounded in theory, that shows what grand opportunities for literacy learning can be provided by drama.


Queensland Studies Authority (2002). *Years 1–10 Arts Syllabus Sourcebook Modules*, <qsa.qld.edu.au/yr1to10/kla/arts/modules.html>, 26 November 2006. Meticulously planned, backgrounded and extended examples of drama work, much of it based on process drama; although directed at the drama syllabus, there is much here for English teachers at both the primary and secondary level.