Death, Desertion, and Despair: Responding to Intense Feelings About War

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Drama work can lead students to think deeply about a topic; at the same time, intense feelings will often arise as students imagine other people and the consequences of their actions—especially in explorations of a topic like war. Jon Sprunger, a Social Studies teacher at Worthington Kilbourne High School, used drama for the first time with the thirty-five students in his American Humanities class. In their work on World War One, he found that students not only thought deeply about what had happened in the war, but also that they had strong emotional reactions to the deadly consequences for troops on the Western Front.

If we want our students to engage authentically in drama then, like Jon, we must be prepared to accept the depth and range of students’ emotions as well as their thoughts. When students raise their voices or start to move it is understandable when teachers want to repress such actions. However, once we recognize that emotional responses are essential to take work beyond the superficial then we can learn to use and direct students’ energies in productive ways.

Planning for Using Drama

Jon’s students had been reading Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, had considered some of the causes of the war, the weaponry used, and the major battles. By team teaching with an English Literature colleague they have one hundred minute blocks of time daily which meant that when the students became deeply engaged in drama work they were able to continue for much longer than Jon had initially planned on using.
When he had previously taught this unit, Jon had been concerned that though the students had understood the facts, they had only superficially understood the concept: despite anything the officers did, after two to three years of war, a sense of hopelessness developed among the ordinary Allied troops along the Western Front. Jon felt his students knew about the horrid conditions in the French and Belgian trenches, the alarming death tolls and that as conditions worsened so did the morale of the troops. However, he noted that, "Students rarely seemed to accept that the soldiers’ despair could have led to mutinies, self-inflicted wounds, psychological breakdowns, and general apathy." Jon wondered if using drama could make a difference.

Jon planned on a short informative encounter between officers and ordinary soldiers. Students would research what happened and then at a meeting they would represent either the views of officers or of the soldiers. As each side stated their views; he wanted them to share with each other the many reasons why a sense of hopelessness existed. He also wondered "if they could devise a solution that would please both the soldiers and the officers." Jon discovered that the students became much more engaged than he had ever expected; an hour into the period they still didn’t want to stop. Further, students became emotionally involved in heated exchanges; what had previously been objective facts now began to acquire personal subjective meaning.

In preparation, all students read and took notes from at least one chapter in Eye-Deep in Hell by John Ellis. The ten students who were preparing to state the officers’ views read chapters which dealt more with a commander’s view of the war: the history of trench warfare, their strategic importance, and the organizational aspects of maintaining troops and planning offensives. Jon had clear goals. He noted that he wanted the students to “be able to competently explain the strategies used in World War One and be able to field questions asked by the soldiers.” The twenty-five students who explored the soldiers’ perspectives read more about the human aspects of war: the daily
routines, the weapons, the realities of battle, and the casualties. Jon wanted them "to be able to graphically and with emotion inform the officers about the hardships and difficulties they were wrestling with every day."

**Beginning the Drama Work**

On the day they were to meet as if they were World War One troops, Jon hung up signs around the school which the students said got them thinking before they came to class. They also intrigued students in other classes who wanted reports on what happened. The signs declared: "Attention common soldiers. What is the state of morale? You are required to meet with your commanding officers today at 11:30 in the Officers Tent." As they arrived at his room for their 11:30 class, the students passed a sign which said "Officers Tent" and as they entered they noticed that the room had been rearranged with seats for the officers in front facing the "common" soldiers.

Jon explained that he would take the role of a mediator who would ensure that the soldiers' grievances as well as the officers' positions could be heard. Once he had explained what would happen, the students spent ten minutes consulting their notes to prepare opening statements or questions. They also talked about how to interact; the soldiers said that they would stand and salute when the officers entered the tent.

Jon was very pleased with what happened:

It started out great with a number of very valid and well-worded questions. The first ten minutes were exactly as I'd planned. The questions asked by the soldiers were valid concerns based not only on the readings that had been assigned but several also referred back to *A Farewell to Arms* (which made my English colleague very happy). It took the students a while to adjust to being in role. They
were making statements and asking questions out of role such as ‘The soldiers’ job is to ...’ but after a few minutes they were saying ‘Your job is to ...’ Soon they rarely came out of role and began to refer to each other using their rank.

A Change in Intensity

After about fifteen minutes Jon was caught off guard. The exchange became much more passionate than he had expected. “Many of the soldiers became angry and frustrated with the answers being given by the officers. The officers became defensive which only escalated the frustration and anger of the soldiers. The soldiers began demanding that their questions be answered. I thought World War Two was about to break out in my classroom three weeks before I was ready to teach it!”

Jon had discovered how quickly opposing views can generate powerful and intense emotional exchanges. Jon wisely stopped the drama for a discussion about what had happened, how they felt, and to check that students did not feel angry with each other—they were only angry at the situation. He reminded them that it was O.K. for the officers not to have all the answers and that they should just be honest and sincere when speaking with each other.

The students all wanted to resume their meeting. With a class less able to maintain distance between the drama encounter and their actual relationships this would have been a time to shift perspective so that everyone would be in the same role. Any students’ feelings of being personally attacked would thereby be decreased. If they all took up soldiers’ perspectives then everyone would have grumbled together rather than attack each other; if they had all been officers then all would have shared reactions to the soldiers’ complaints. Jon could have joined them in a similar role or become the object of their frustration as a general responsible for planning attacks meeting the
soldiers or a mutinous soldier brought before the officers. The students would now all have directed their frustrations much more at his role rather than at each other.

As their meeting resumed, with officers and soldiers locked in conflicting views of the war, the sense of frustration soon returned; the students began to feel the depth of the First World War stalemate. No matter what the officers said, it became obvious that there was no possibility of reaching a resolution which would satisfy everyone. Eventually one soldier stated a profound realization: “This is ridiculous, you don’t have any answers! We are just going to continue fighting and dying in these awful conditions.”

At this moment, and in the sensitive reflection out of role which followed, Jon realized that the students had done much more than articulate the reasons for the desertions, mutinies, and despair which occurred in 1916 and 1917 — they had experienced some of the depths of frustration and the realization that there was no easy escape for ordinary soldiers. The students had also taught Jon that there really was no possible “solution” to the problem. The soldiers might be able to vent their anger, but military strategy required that attacks would continue and that the troops would continue to die. Apathy, depression, and suicide now also seemed much more plausible to the students than they had previously.

Jon was wise to allow the students to experience the intensity of this exchange even though he had not expected it. He had been surprised by the students’ depth of emotion and was concerned when there were times when everyone seemed to be talking heatedly at the same time — none of this was in his lesson plan. However, he intuitively realized that these moments were not only unavoidable but also desirable. The “turn towards anger, frustration, and negativity was a natural reaction to the problem that existed and which could not be solved.”

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Dealing With Emotional Intensity

As he reviewed his use of drama, Jon thought of other ways in which he could productively deal with the emotional intensity of the work. In a meeting, taking turns to speak from a podium would mean that all students would have a chance to be heard, including those who find it less easy to command the attention of the group.

As noted above, there are two important strategies which a teacher can use to protect students from feeling personally attacked when drama becomes emotionally intense:

• switching everyone to be in the same role; and

• using teacher in role as a focus for student opposition.

Equally important is changing activities so that students are able to transform intense feelings into something which can be looked at, talked about, and examined. Then the students will be able to reflect with the teacher about the meanings of these experiences as they distance themselves from the raw emotion experienced in the heat of exchanges. Ways of transforming experiences include:

• key concerns can be written down and shared with the whole group;

• small groups can plan responses and share ideas with the whole group;

• tableaux can be used to show the causes of their deep feelings, for example, as if they were people in photographs, in their memories, or in nightmares;

• documents like maps, official battle plans, or letters
can ground their feelings in specific events and the lives of people;

- students can change to a new role, for example newspaper reporters covering the war;

- they can interview each other in pairs;

- students can transform their feelings as they make diary entries, write letters, prepare official reports, draw plans, or make sketches.

It is not surprising that students begin to feel deeply in drama. They not only speak in role, they also imagine the views of others and experience their emotions. In studying topics like war, we want students to do more than learn the facts or feel exhilarated by the power of weapons; surely we also want students to balance feelings of people’s despair, and drama, the feelings which arise in response to reading about historical or fictional events can be examined as they are enacted and transformed into words and images. We need to be careful that their intense feelings are solidly grounded in the fictional world of the drama. Like Jon we must also be prepared for students to express their emotional responses.