Empowering Readers and Writers Through Drama: Narrative Theater

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The purpose of this article is to show how drama can be a powerful force in children's growth in reading and writing. But in no way are we implying that drama should be used mainly to initiate or improve these skills. Drama has its own place in children's lives and education. Beginning with early forms of play, drama functions at the center of language growth and learning (Moffett 1968; Britton 1982). Britton speaks of the value of play in the development of concepts and attitudes as "... the art of associating feelings with situations and allowing actions to spring from these feelings" (p. 26). Drama's powerful force in literacy arises from its potential to place learners in a variety of contexts—in situations which generate forms of thought, feeling, and language beyond those usually generated in typical classroom interactions.

Among the problems teachers of writing face is that of providing children a range of genuine purposes for writing and different audiences to receive their work. Concerns in reading relate to finding ways to challenge children to read widely, for a variety of increasingly valid purposes, in light of their own experiences and from different points-of-view. The overarching goal is that children should become competent, autonomous readers and writers, confident that they can use these skills to attain personal and social purposes.

The vast research in oral language shows clearly that language is learned through purposeful use and that the context of situation influences the nature of the talk produced at any one time. Since reading and writing are language, it is likely that they develop best when children have opportunity to use them in various situations which they perceive as meaningful. Drama techniques can provide many of these situations and thus influence the functions reading and writing serve.

Our intention here is to consider the educational value of a type of drama that focuses on texts—those produced by a reader, writer, or speaker, but particularly those typically found in the school environment. Children's days at school are filled with all sorts of texts—stories, songs, poems, directions, and a range of information materials. All must be dealt with in some way—read, listened to, performed, discussed, or sifted through for facts and illustrations.
to be used for other educational purposes, including one's own writing. Written texts dominate the school curriculum to such an extent that young children come to see them as an infallible fount of knowledge and truth. Yet, many are so abstract and complex or general and limited in treatment of topics that construing meaning from what is offered is often beyond the scope of the very learners for whom they are intended.

Strategies commonly used to interest children and improve their comprehension—group discussions, artistic extensions, or question-answer sessions—are inadequate to the task. To understand, to become truly literate, children must be able to "think from inside situations" (Heathcote 1980), and from there to make the links they can with other experience. Various forms of drama open possibilities for children to "think from inside situations."

Currently, scholars are forging a closer bond between reading and writing with comprehension and composition perceived as each incorporating aspects of the other (Squire 1983). Comprehension is viewed as a constructive process in which readers draw on their background of experience as they interact with a printed text to construct (compose) and reconstruct meaning.

The ability to produce and understand texts emerges during the second year of life in dialogues between children and caretakers. It is a continuing process in which children first learn to speak and listen collaboratively with adults in strings of discourse, and, in time, if conditions are right, to read and write—texts.

Development of speech is social; but language serves more than a communicative function: it is the chief means by which children interpret, organize and structure an internal system of meanings. Scholars from different disciplines aver that the basis for this inner organizing of human experience is narrative—the texts or stories we construe from the events of our lives (Hardy 1977; Langer 1951; Rosen & Rosen 1973). "Narrative is a human universal," Roland Barthes (Sontag 1983) claims, "... is international, interhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there like life itself" (p. 252).

For these reasons, we have chosen the term narrative theater to represent the process we describe. It signifies three important aspects of our work: (1) the exploration of texts and the stories likely embedded within them, (2) a learning process that involves the creation of drama contexts, and (3) the use of theater conventions. Particular features of the process are explained within the following description.

Overview of the Process

Our example comes from a class of nine- and ten-year-old children who were reading Jean Fritz's biography Where Do You Think You Are Going, Christopher Columbus? as a part of a focus on the discovery of America. The children lived in Columbus, Ohio, and were accustomed to yearly celebrations honoring the famous explorer. In discussion with their teacher, they agreed to work as if they were members of the "Columbus 1992 Society" who had the responsibility for setting up a museum for the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world. As they took on new roles as Society members, the children were gradually able to invent and develop ideas for the 1992 celebration from that perspective, of course influenced their purposes for reading about Columbus. The 1992 Society perspective allowed them to enter textual situations that demanded different kinds of thought, attitudes, depiction, interaction, and use of power. The frame specified a particular perspective, emotional relationship and responsibility toward the text—and each other (Goffman 1973; Heathcote 1984). While maintaining the frame, children shifted perspectives in their transactions with the text, but always in relation to their "responsibilities for the museum."

The museum drama lasted six weeks, but the description here is of one morning when children read Fritz' text from four different perspectives.

They began by searching for the decisions Columbus made along the way, thinking they might use them to suggest an organization as well as exhibits for the 1992 museum. For this task they perused the whole text. In the second perspective, what did Columbus look like? (which they needed to know for a museum wax figure), they concentrated on descriptions from pages 24 and 26 in Fritz's book, parts of which follow:

Yet if the sameness of the sea and the wind was scary, it was also scary to remember that they were in the Unknown, where anything might happen at any time. When a meteor with a long, branching tail of white fire streaked into the sea one night, they were terrified. Oh, it was a bad sign, the sailors cried. They should have stayed home.

And what did the captain-general, Christopher Columbus, say? "Adelante!" was what he said. It was all he ever said. When the sea turned into a meadow of green and yellow floating weeds, he said it. "Adelante!"—right through the weeds. When the wind dropped so that they could scarcely move, it was "Adelante!" again. When they had sailed beyond the point where Japan was supposed to be, he repeated, "Adelante!"

It was too much. Some of the sailors decided that they were being led to their death by a crazy man. Why, Columbus didn't even know enough to be afraid! He was actually enjoying this trip, talking about how soft the air was, how pleasant the mornings. At night he would stare at the sky for hours at a time as if he were reading a love story that he couldn't put down. More than once the sailors thought how easy it would be to push Columbus overboard some night when he was standing on deck "drunk with the stars."

Third, the children themselves became part of an exhibit as they joined the sailors on the Santa Maria and considered the thoughts and feelings of the crew. Fourth, in their roles as Society members, they wrote for the museum exhibits.

It is important to make distinctions between the kind of drama we are considering here and improvisation, creative dramatics, reader's theater, and
story drama. In narrative theater, the participants are “framed” with a particular perspective and responsibility toward a text, which affect their interactions with it. There is considerable discussion, often around only selected parts of the text; these may be rendered in various ways, but not necessarily in reading aloud as occurs in readers' theater. It differs from “Story Drama,” as defined by David Booth (1985) in respect to the role of the text. In the latter, a class reads the text and then invents a drama context which explores implications of the text. In narrative theater, however, the reading and discussion of a text, which may not be a story, takes place within the drama itself.

The unique contribution of classroom drama lies, not only in the way it can help children to learn new knowledge, but, as Gavin Bolton (1984) has noted, in its power to enable them to understand more deeply what they already know. Theater conventions offer ways of structuring situations that would not normally arise in the classroom and of directing children’s attention to aspects of those situations which they might not have considered in depth. Approaching Fritz’s biography with the responsibility for setting up a museum exhibit, for example, fosters close reading and paves the way for the children to bring to the text their personal knowledge of the facts of Columbus’ voyage, and of certain human attitudes—of obsession, dedication, and fear.

Description of Perspectives

**Perspective #1: What Decision Points Interest Us?**

For this task children needed to be able to consult the whole text at one time. For this purpose, we cut up two copies of the book, stuck them to computer paper and laid them out on the floor of the classroom; children then could literally walk around and pore over the pages, identifying bits, and talking about them with one or two others. Jean Fritz’ biography is a complex account of Columbus’ life. The story is filled with details, descriptions, and facts; but all are shaped by and help to form the strong third person narrative of his exploits.

As they scanned the text, some children discussed particular passages, others talked about their museum projects; some were especially attracted to the illustrations while others were drawn to aspects of language and specific words. They noted how often the word “Adelante” (“Forward”) was used and they talked about what it might have meant to Columbus at different times in the voyage.

In small groups the children shared the decision points they had found and decided to focus on the passage from page 26 quoted above. They considered the kind of man Columbus must have been and decided that this should be shown in a wax figure in the museum.

**Perspective #2: Building an Image of Columbus**

They wanted Columbus portrayed as he must have stood on the deck of the Santa Maria and asked a student teacher to become a model whose stance, gestures, and expressions they could change as they talked and consulted the text. Dorothy Heathcote (1980, p. 4) speaks of the value of the word implication in all learning. When brought into use in drama (or everyday living), its use “makes every ‘foreground’ experience immediately have a ‘background’ ” and enables learners to look behind facts to possible meanings.

As the children altered the positions and gestures of the model, they considered the implications of each one for the final museum model. There was considerable talk and some disagreement: Was he mad or simply determined? They searched the text for hints that might reveal more of Columbus’ thoughts as he stood on the deck. They decided that the model should be looking away from its viewers, representing their impression that Columbus was more concerned about finding the Indies than about the welfare of his crew.

Jean Fritz’ use of language makes inferencing easy for nine and ten year olds: “He didn’t believe he would find the way to the Indies by going west; he knew he would.” “He didn’t hope to bring back gold; he promised to bring it back.” (Italics added.) Some children noted these statements in an early reading of the text and later brought them to bear to bolster their claim that Columbus was determined.

In their model, the children had Columbus holding a telescope toward the sky, depicting Fritz’ words, “At night he would stare at the sky for hours at a time as if he were reading a love story that he couldn’t put down” (p. 26). At the same time, they had his “hand gripping the rail,” indicating that he was more than a dreamer. His proud upheld head, they felt, represented the often repeated word, “Adelante,” and its significance in the story. The children wanted to be truthful in their depiction, but felt some conflict between their traditional knowledge of Columbus and reference in the text to “this crazy determined man.”

A great value of this process comes from the way it slows down the reading process and draws attention to details, to specific bits of information, and to language use. The theater technique of molding a model focused the children’s interest and forced decisions which were reflected back to them within the drama frame. The movement between the text and their created image required that they be consistent in their interpretation of Fritz’ narration while also incorporating implications they had drawn from the text. At the same time each child was able to construct a personal image of Columbus,
clarifying thoughts about his relationships with his crew, his determination, and what it must mean to have a compelling dream.

Perspective #3: On Board the Santa Maria

Throughout the intense work on the model, everyone was asking the same question, "What was it like to be on board the Santa Maria at night?" "Could a museum exhibit show what it must have been like?" The children had to make a decision as responsible members of the Society. They decided to make themselves models of the crew and stand beside Columbus on the deck. Where people are positioned on stage is crucial in theater, so great care was given to where and how each person should stand. The text was read again, this time by the classroom teacher. Some of the 'Society members' imagined they were doing a job on the ship and mimed this; some just watched Columbus or the sea; all listened to the text and then talked for a few minutes with each other as members of the crew. They took their words from various parts of the text: "mad man," "drunk with the stars," "should have stayed home," and "Adelante."

While Jean Fritz gives a third person perspective on the tensions of that night, each child, through theater conventions, was able to transform that view into first person. Fritz wrote, "Some of the sailors decided that they were being led to their death by this 'crazy man.' For one child/crew member/Society member, it became a repeated echo, 'crazy man,' as she watched Columbus 'standing on deck drunk with stars.'

Perspective #4: Writing for the Columbus 1992 Museum Exhibit

With some decisions made about exhibits, it was time to do the background and explanatory writing, considered an important part of all good exhibits. Some children—Katie, for example, whose text follows—wrote immediately after Perspective #3; others—Mark and Charles—began then but returned to their writing over the next week. All wrote with exhibits in mind. Their texts were eventually read by 'visitors' to the museum that was created in the classroom.

Katie
Katie was considered a very reticent writer who was extremely slow and self-critical. The piece here, though brief, was the first she had written with any noticeable ease, in contrast to her usual composing of one-word-at-a-time with many scratchings out. She wrote with little correction this time and referred back to the text only to check the number of lives Columbus was risking.

Here I am on a ship risking more than 35 lives just to fulfill my dreams that I had since I was a kid and yet if we do make it to land will we make it back? Oh adelante!

What if someone crazier than I am pushes me off the rail into the water? Oh if only they would understand, then maybe, then . . . Oh adelante.

From Perspective #3: "Here I am on the Santa Maria," Katie, in role as Columbus, wrote from an insider's perspective of his obsession and doubt. She wrote with his voice, "Here I am on a ship risking more than 35 lives just to fulfill my dreams." She uses Columbus' refrain "Adelante" which had been interpreted in discussions as representing his strong intention to fulfill his lifelong dreams of discovering the Indies. But she juxtaposes this against "will we make it back?" having heard Jean Fritz' words, " . . . they sailed beyond the point where Japan was supposed to be." She goes "beyond the lines" of the text's third person description of Columbus as being a "crazy man" to presenting the same idea from Columbus' perspective, "What if someone crazier than I am pushes me off the rail into the water?" She moves into a plea for them to understand him and then truncates this with a repetition of "Adelante."

Mark
Mark's writing combines knowledge he had gained from researching shipbuilding in the fifteenth century with an "I am one of the crew" perspective. The frame of "writing for the museum" gave him both the confidence and voice needed to describe the complicated process of "scarring" for the imagined visitors to the 1992 Museum.

Scarring
It's complicated work men, she'll have to be watertight. If she's not that'll not only spoil the cargo, but take us flat to the bottom of the sea. That plan Christopher drew isn't too specific. I wouldn't be surprised if we sink, he's mad. He can not scar the keel properly let alone the rest of the ship. Scarring must be done skillfully. The stem of the keel is plenty strict but the shapes are all wrong. The first shape in the stem must be a rectangle with a slanted edge. The slant fits into a trapezoid that fits into a triangle. It has 5 edges. The last piece is very long it has five sides all these blocks form a curve. Smooth cuts and straight angles form the keel.
The boat'll sink I tell ya.

Mark's text shows some of the problems he confronted as he tried to share his knowledge of shipbuilding with his less-informed classmates and others, 'visitors to the museum.' He is writing for a distant audience external to the drama frame (future visitors) and at the same time, addressing a close internal audience: the shipmates in the drama. The direct address of the first four sentences and the last relate to the 'crew' and envelope the description of scarring. Here Mark attends primarily to his topic—with some difficulty. But in the last sentence "The boat will sink, I tell you," he turns toward the 'crew' audience again, linking back to the earlier, "she'll . . . take us flat to the bottom of the sea." The speaker in Mark's text is talking before the ship is even built but is already speaking mutinously, though for good reason: Co-
Lombus has not drawn up a “specific plan.” This note of distrust is consistent with the thoughts of the crew as described by Jean Fritz.

Charles Charles also had been working on a ship project—building a model of the Santa Maria. The project had aroused an interest in the names of parts of a ship and is reflected in his beginning, “The forecastle was pointing west,” and also in the specificity of “mizzen” sail he uses in writing a record of what he experienced in the drama context from Perspective #3. His mention of the reward refers to Fritz’s statement, “And to the first man who sighted land, he promised a silk doublet or jacket in addition to the royal reward” (p. 28). In the second paragraph, Charles deals with the inner thoughts of the man watching Columbus. He considers the dilemma they faced when they thought of throwing Columbus overboard: hanging or never returning to their families:

The forecastle was pointing west. The Santa Maria was skimming along at a tremendous pace, her captain Christopher Columbus was standing by the mizzen sail watching, waiting for signs of land. Sailors washed the deck, some just sukked and others scanned the horizon also in hope of sighting land because Columbus had declared a reward for the first man who sighted land.

When night fell Columbus watched the stars, men thought of mutiny, but if they did not return with this mad man everyone would be hung and if they did not go back to Spain after the crime what would happen to their family?

Implications

Obviously, the narrative theater provided children with different purposes for reading and writing that were valid within the chosen “frame.” They were engaging in literacy, as Scribner and Cole (1981) perceive it: “... not as simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (p. 236). They maintain that to become literate children must use reading and writing in activities that constitute their culture. Creating museums and careful reading and writing in pursuit of that end is an established practice in our society. Within that context children needed to use a complex set of linguistic skills in order to comprehend and compose various texts—that written by a distant author and those spoken and written by themselves. Their main attention was on the global task—representing the great explorer in the museum. Their discussion, reading, and writing, in part at least, functioned as tools helping them to fulfill their primary goal. Katie’s text, produced immediately following the dramatic, perhaps shows this relationship most clearly. With her mind on what she wanted to say, she lost some of her usual uncertainty and wrote with greater ease.

The narrative theater conventions (taking roles, modeling Columbus) allowed the children to examine details of the Fritz text and to “dwell within” particular aspects—an experience which, according to Michael Polanyi (1967), aids comprehension of the whole. “We comprehend an entity ... by relying on our awareness of its particulars for attending to its joint meaning ... It is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meanings” (p. 100). In role as Columbus, Katie writes of his particular thoughts and feelings; but what she writes reflects her tacit knowing of the whole—Columbus’ dreams in relation to the dangers of the voyage and the attitudes of his crew.

Comprehending and composing are intertwined in narrative theater. Reflection and language skills, basic to both processes, are built into the way participants become involved in actions that require reading and writing. The chosen frame prompts them to think—read and write—about what they are doing while they are doing it. They read the text, for example, as part of the drama activity. The experiences children have are affective as well as cognitive. Their reflections “in frame,” as Heathcote (1984) has noted, are the kind that not only foster the storing of knowledge but also the recalling of the power of feeling, and the memory of past feelings. Without these emotions in drama, she warns, “there is only burden left.”

What about empowerment? Some may see the techniques of narrative theater as too structured and restrictive of children’s self-initiated purposes and freedom to read and write. The process in operation reveals, however, that the focus of the frame sharpens perceptions and opens up opportunities to see and do things with greater depth and originality than generally occurs in learning situations. The interactions between the participants enlighten and deepen their transactions with the printed text and with those they produce themselves. When they experience several different interpretations of printed material, children begin to develop a feeling of personal power over it. This feeling extends to their own learning once they have assumed responsibility for it within the drama frame. Relationships in the classroom change—with more of the power and responsibility for learning activities shared among the participants, greater autonomy for individuals and groups develops.

References


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