Planning for Flexibility: 
the Phases of a Drama Structure

by Brian Edmiston

Dorothy Heathcote notes that, “Drama is human beings confronted by situations which change them because of what they must face in dealing with those challenges” (1984, p. 48). In drama you “put yourself into other people’s shoes and by using personal experience to help you to understand their point of view you may discover more than you knew when you started” (1984, p. 44).

Many creative drama teachers (myself included) who have attempted to teach in the way Heathcote does have often found it difficult to structure work so that such challenges would occur. Drama Structures, by Cecily O’Neill and Alan Lambert, was the first book with extended examples of lessons which had situations where such moments would likely arise. For example, “Haunted House” challenges students’ ideas on the supernatural and “The Way West” confronts their perceptions about “Cowboys and Indians.” For the first time teachers could examine as a “structure” the description of “the course of an introductory lesson on a particular topic with an actual class” (p. 30).

These structures are, however, not presented as recipes but, together with the commentaries on them, are a collection of possibilities which the teacher can draw on in the classroom. The authors stress that, “Throughout, the teacher will play a crucial part in guiding the work, pacing its growth and development and building on the pupils’ contributions.” O’Neill and Lambert (1983, p. 9) advise that, “If pupils are to grasp concepts, understand complex issues, solve problems and work creatively and cooperatively in drama, they will be helped by a clearly established context and a strong but flexible framework to support and extend the meaning of the work.”

In this article I will propose that it is useful to consider a drama structure as comprised of different phases. Each phase has a different aim and collectively the phases form the overall aim for a drama structure. I will illustrate by reference to three different sessions how, though the actual activities in which the participants were engaged varied widely, all three had the same four phases in the drama structure. I suggest that planning a drama structure in phases provides teachers with flexibility. Rather than being forced to follow a linear plan of activities we can plan alternative tasks which we can draw on as necessary so that we may be more flexible in achieving our aims for a session.¹

The Overall Aim of the Drama Structure

I had wanted for some time to work with students in drama on the topic of racism. I wanted to put students in situations within the drama where they were confronted with having to think about some of the implications of being treated in particular ways because of race. However, I did not want students to be put in a position where what they said in role might be taken as an actual racist remark.

I had been looking for a way of approaching such a sensitive issue less directly when I came across The Journey, a picture book by Sheila Hamanaka about the experience of Japanese-Americans who had been interned during World War II. I realized that this would be a way for non-Japanese-Americans to examine racism in a more protected way since there are obvious parallels to the Jewish holocaust, and to the oppression of all people. Added advantages of the Japanese-Americans’ story are that it is part of American history and also that, with the recent legislation which passed Congress authorizing reparations, there is

¹ In this article I will not consider how these aims may be chosen. This is dealt with in the context of response to literature in another article referenced below.

² I am indebted to Pat Enciso for introducing me to this book and discussing its potential for drama.
more of a sense of completion than with the racism between and among other ethnic groups.

When I read how Japanese-Americans in the “relocation camp” were asked to renounce their allegiance to the Japanese emperor and how those who were U.S. citizens (because they had been born in this country) were conscripted into the armed forces, I knew that I had the kernel of a dramatic encounter where students in role as internees could be faced with having to choose between being “American” or “Japanese” and would thereby perhaps reflect on some of the weavings between race, heritage, and nationality. Sheila Hamanaka writes,

In 1943, all prisoners in the camps over the age of seventeen were ordered to fill out Loyalty Questionnaires. Would they serve in combat wherever sent? they were asked. Old people and women worried they would be drafted. Also asked: Will you forswear allegiance to the Japanese emperor, Hirohito? ...263 were sentenced to prison for resisting the draft.

Over the past few months I have worked on the topic of the internment of Japanese-Americans with three different groups: fifth grade students, sixth grade students, and adults. My overall aim for each drama session was that the participants would be able to reflect upon some of the inherent racism of those historical events.

In each case the group was led to the same dramatic encounter where, in role as Japanese-Americans, they were required to publicly declare where their loyalties lay. In this article I briefly want to describe how this same moment was arrived at in different ways with each group. This illustrates how, in planning with the same aims, teachers can build in alternative strategies to a structure so that they are not restricted in having to follow a plan which has little flexibility.

**Phase 1: Establishing the Drama World**

With the three groups, I had the same initial aim: to establish some shared details and events of the Japanese-American cultural and internment experience so that the “world” of the drama could begin to be explored. This was the first phase of the drama structure; however, this was accomplished in different ways with each group.

Every drama, just like every play, exists in a “drama world” which is an imagined reality shared by the participants. This world has to be created by the group as a whole and the teacher must plan initial activities so that this will begin to happen.

By basing a drama structure on a piece of literature which is already known (for example a folktale) or which has been read to or by a class, the world of the book is already a shared reality, provided all the students were actively engaged in the reading. This world is already filled with people, places, objects, events, and possibilities which can immediately be used by the teacher in planning drama situations; these details are accepted (or will readily be agreed to) by all the students and will be drawn on by them in role. In contrast, though any drama which begins with the teacher asking “What shall we make up a play about?” is much more open-ended, it does mean that the teacher and students will have to create the drama world from scratch, and will initially mean that the teacher cannot plan in advance.

The sensitive and gifted teacher of the fifth grade students had already read and discussed *The Journey* with them before I came to work for a two hour drama session. Consequently I knew that the drama world was already potentially populated with people and filled with events. In beginning work with the students I needed to find out something of what they now knew about Japanese-Americans and to allow these details to be shared. After introductions, I initially asked the group to create (in tableau) “photographs from family albums” which illustrated both their Japanese heritage and their American heritage. The students drew on details from the book like the Buddhist religion of many Japanese and the way in which the immigrants adopted American practices, but they extended these details to provide moments of tension. As they shared the photographs and wondered what the people in them might be thinking, I could see that complexities of the drama world were already well-established because of their demonstrations of powerful moments. For example, they showed a baseball match where an old grandmother from Japan was disapproving of her grandchildren chewing gum; she

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3 None of the groups had any people of Asian heritage. The students were both approximately equally European American and African American. There were 25 fifth grade students and 22 sixth grade students. The adults were almost entirely European American. They were 60 participants in a workshop at the 1991 AATE conference in Washington D.C. which was led by Rives Collins of Northwestern University and myself.

4 The question of authenticity and accuracy in historical dramas is not addressed in this article. Others have written about this issue, in particular John Fines and Ray Verrier in their book *The Drama of History*. 
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was also thinking that they were losing their religious traditions.

With the sixth grade students I did not want to read and discuss the book which is much more suited to being shared in more than one session; I also wanted them to create the drama world together in role and to interact with the 20 teachers who were also part of the group. Using the information from the book, the teachers had made documents, for example, a diary entry describing life in the camp and a receipt for confiscated possessions. The students were in role as filmmakers who had been commissioned by Mr. Hirohito, a wealthy Japanese-American, to make a film about the Japanese-American experience. They examined these documents, which had been sent by Mr. Hirohito, to see what scenes for the film they suggested. As the students formed questions, I brought in the teachers in role as the people who owned the documents or knew the original owners or writers; they were survivors of the internment, or were survivors' friends and relatives. In the following session the sixth grade students created tableaux in a similar way to the fifth grade students, but here they were possible stills of scenes from the movie. Again the complexities of the drama world were clearly present in, for example, the scene where the children led the family in singing "America" on July 4th, but immediately after sang a Japanese song led by their grandparents.

With the adult group I began in a similar way to the work with the sixth grade students by asking them to agree that we were curators of the "Museum of American History" who had been left a bequest to establish a new wing dedicated to Japanese Americans. However, with the adults I was able to assume that they already had a substantial amount of prior knowledge about the Japanese-American internment. They did not have to read the book or the documents in order to build up a knowledge base. However, just as with the students, I planned that the adults would share some of the knowledge they had so that a shared imaginary reality would be established.

The students did this by creating and sharing the tableaux; the adults did this in discussion as they reacted to the news of the bequest and discussed what should be included in the new wing of the museum. All three groups, however, became engaged in the work and together created the primary people, events and details of the drama world.

Phase 2: Experiencing and Reflecting Upon Some of the Consequences of the Japanese-American Internment

The second phase of the drama structure was to experience and reflect upon some of the consequences of the internment. Dorothy Heathcote (1984, p. 101) stresses that "planning is always done from an inside experience rather than from an external tasks approach... I decide very clearly what the lesson should achieve." In all three drama sessions, I intended that what the participants would do would give them authentic experiences which they could reflect upon. As with all the phases of each drama session, the specific activities for each group were different but the underlying aim was the same.

The fifth grade students in role as FBI agents were briefed about the Presidential decree which required them to arrest the Japanese-Americans. Then in pairs, with one in role as an FBI agent and the other as a Japanese-American the arrests took place. In the "relocation centers" the internees recalled what happened to them and shared their inner thoughts. One said, "There must be some mistake, we are Americans." Another replied, "I don't want to be American if they treat us like this." The FBI agents advised the soldiers at the camp that, for example, "They need to accept the facts... this is not their country." Then the students shifted perspective to their future and spoke their thoughts as they looked back on their memory of those events. An FBI agent said, "I didn't realize it would be like this; I'm so sorry."

With the sixth grade students, where I had much more time, we were able to look at the consequences in more detail. Rather than looking at the arrest in one brief encounter, I was able to allow the students see this in more detail and complexity because they experienced it from different perspectives. For example, each student was able to invent specific possessions which they then had to dispose of before going to the camp;

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5 The sixth grade students were participants in a 1991 summer workshop program at the University of Chicago. The teachers were taking a summer institute course with me at Northwestern University. For four days we worked with the students for two hours each morning.

6 Those who have a copy of the handout from this session should realize that I departed from the original plan. I am describing the session which actually took place. The aims remained the same as in the original plan.
the students in role as Japanese-Americans shared these treasures as they showed friends around their homes. Later, the FBI agents were shown some of these when they came to their homes, but they had to tell them that all possessions had to be discarded. I was also able to follow their suggestions so that, for example, we looked at what it meant to have to leave a pet at the pound. In addition I was able to spend time on the perspective of other Americans. For example, the students were questioned by me in role as an "interrogator" who wanted to know what they knew which was suspicious and if they could guarantee that these "Japs" were not spies.

With the adult group I had very little time and needed to use a strategy which would allow the group to experience, reflect on, and share many aspects of the consequences of internment. Rather than using any naturalistic dramatic playing or myself in role, I asked them to represent the "mock-up" for a "sculpture garden" which the museum benefactor wanted included in order to depict moments which the Japanese-Americans would never forget. Their "statues" made references to the oppression but also put it in a wider context, and when the group added possible "commentary" on a museum "tape player," we heard some of the inner pain but also some other perspectives. There was a woman behind bars, a dream of flying free, and the birth of the new economically-powerful Japan.

This reflective activity was very demanding on the group and not one which either of the groups of students I worked with would have been able to handle with such delicacy and depth at such an early point in the work; they were able to do so much later. The students initially needed more physical activity and more exploration whereas the adults needed to think and could synthesize early on and without much movement. With all three groups, however, the same aim was achieved, and though the tasks were very different they were parallel ways of working on the same phase of the drama structure.

Phase 3: Experiencing and Reflecting Upon Implicit Racism

The third phase of the drama structure is its dramatic center. My aim was that the participants in each group would experience and reflect upon the implicit racism in a situation where a European-American asks Japanese-Americans to choose between being Japanese and being American.

It is important to note that the third phase could not have come first. The participants had to have already taken up the perspective of the Japanese-Americans and experienced some of the unavoidable consequences of living in 1941 on the West Coast. If they had not seen the events of the drama world through those eyes, the participants might have been immediately caught up in existing prejudices they might actually have towards Japan now without also realizing that the Japanese-Americans were human beings who were treated unfairly. Having already experienced and reflected upon some aspects of the oppression of Japanese-Americans the students were, however, ready to be pushed further in their thinking.

With the fifth grade students I went into role with them as internees. I told them that I had heard we would be let out of the camp if we signed a piece of paper and renounced our allegiance to Japan. There followed a heated and insightful discussion among the students. Their comments ranged from the boy who said, "I am proud to be Japanese, I will not say I am not Japanese just to get out of this place" to the girl who lamented, "I have to sign, my poor little baby and when she was born in the concentration camp she would die and if I sign I can never speak of my homeland again but my baby will live to tell the truth about the foolish Americans so it won't happen again."

By the time I worked with the sixth grade students I had added another encounter to this phase of the work which made it much more dramatic, and provided me with more flexibility in being able to press the students to reflect more deeply. I again told of the proposal to let us go free and in role I became part of the ensuing discussion. Then I switched roles and became the camp commander. I had had time with this group to work on the distinction between those who were not allowed to become U.S. citizens because they had been born in Japan and those who were U.S. citizens because they had been born in America. I called on those who were prepared to sign a renunciation of allegiance to Japan to step forward. I then asked their nationality. The first student said he was Japanese and was told to stand to one side. The next was American and on renouncing allegiance to Japan was welcomed into the U.S. military as a conscript and handed a rifle. Each student was then called forward and asked the same questions. There was some opposition during a very intense encounter but mostly the students publicly displayed a sullen resignation in role. It was only later in the last phase of the drama structure during a less public moment that the students spoke some of their feelings of outrage.

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With the adult group I used exactly the same structuring of this phase as with the sixth graders. This led to an electric encounter where there was much more suspicion and then outright hostility than with the students. They wanted to know what would happen to those who would not sign. The commander told them that they would be considered enemy aliens. Some came forward and were conscripted, but others then both refused to renounce their loyalty to Japan or declare their loyalty to the U.S., claiming that they should not be asked such a question. Some wanted to know if they would have to fight their families in Japan. The camp commander replied that if they were loyal U.S. citizens then surely they would willingly fight the enemies of the United States. He asked them if they could be loyal if they were Japanese, called for the reciting of the pledge of allegiance and praised those who had been conscripted for showing their loyalty. One participant was so incensed, that she shouted that the pledge was a lie because there was no “liberty and justice for all,” not for those who were Japanese. She marched forward, confronted the new conscripts, and asked them to kill her if they were so sure of what they were doing. At this point, as camp commander I ordered the conscripts to raise their weapons and cover her because she was a “dangerous enemy.”

Phase 4: Taking Wider Perspectives

The aim of the fourth phase of the drama structure was to allow the students to see the events of the drama from wider perspectives than those of the people directly involved at the time of World War II.

Immediately after the event described above, the adults were moved into reflecting on what had happened in the camp as if they were the posts in the barbed wire as the camp was being dismantled. Many sensitive comments were shared which, among other things, commented on the injustice of what had happened and on the equality of all people. Then to bring the drama full circle, the adults were put back in role as the museum curators by being asked what they thought of the tape they had just heard played. They then reflected again on what had just been said, but now from a present-day perspective.

The sixth grade students reflected on what had happened as the movie makers. I had used this perspective several times throughout the drama, but now they were able to look back on all the events with a more inclusive point of view. They considered why the movie should be made. The students dictated their thoughts to the adults and showed the conflicting responses they had to the complex events they had portrayed. They wanted the movie made because the truth had to be told though they recognized that many perspectives had to be shown.

Then the students concluded their work by depicting a mural which Mr. Hirohito was commissioned to be painted in Chicago. The mural would show what the Japanese-Americans wanted all Americans to know. The students took up poses and spoke the words which would be written at the bottom of the mural. The voices combined the feelings of anger and reconciliation, statements of the courage of the Japanese-Americans with reminders of their suffering. In the final comment one girl said that she spoke for “all the children” and called for “all this war and racism to stop.”

The fifth grade students concluded their work in a similar way. They depicted a sculpture with inscriptions which they spoke as they became the statues. One girl stated, “I’ve been in concentration camps, my sister’s died and my daughter’s gone away, but I know one thing after living through all I’ve gone through, you’ve got to be good to yourself and when doing that you can’t be bad to anyone else. You try to be the best person you can be and in doing that you don’t hurt anyone else.” Another said simply, “We’re all different and we should be proud of all our cultures.”

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined three different drama sessions. Though these sessions were of different lengths and conducted with both elementary students and adults, each drama had the same aims and was broadly divided into the same phases.

If, as drama teachers, we know what our aims are we will be able to plan activities to accomplish those aims. Morgan and Saxton (1987, p. 171) note that, “Teachers tend to plan through activities: ‘What are the students going to do?’ instead of considering first what needs to be explored and second what activity is most appropriate for the exploration.” The more strategies and activities we know the more choice we have in planning a drama structure.7

However, as I hope is clear from this article, the same aims can be achieved in many different ways and in different circumstances. Every group

7Morgan and Saxton's book Teaching Drama, and Structuring Drama Work by Jonathan Noelands both provide invaluable examples of strategies.
will have different needs and strengths. For example, some groups bring more prior knowledge and experience of a topic than others, younger groups need to be more physically active, and the teacher has more time in one case and less in another.

The teacher must also respond to what each group offers so that every drama structure will be different in practice with every group. However, if we hold on to our aims we will be able to assess the effectiveness of the strategies we employ and the tasks we set the students. In planning each phase of our drama structure we can plan alternative strategies from which we can choose as necessary. In our ongoing assessment we can then determine whether or not we have achieved our aim. If we have, then we can move on to the next phase of the session. If we have not, then we can reassess and change our aim or use another strategy. Dorothy Heathcote (1984, p. 102) had noted that "I use many strategies to keep in the same place while apparently moving forward." She reminds us that in drama we are less concerned with the direction of the developing plot than with the meaning for the students of the events. If we sense that the students can think with more depth about the meaning of whatever concerns them, then we can structure another event but with the same aim in mind. We can also stay in the same phase when a previous strategy has not been very successful and try another strategy. However, we can also do this if the students seem to be engaged and could consider this aspect of the work in more depth.

A drama structure which is planned and implemented in phases may lead to some very thoughtful work in which students may consider topics and issues in ways they may never do elsewhere. We owe it to our students to plan carefully and structure our work artfully. I know that the planning and structuring has been good when I read such insightful remarks as those recorded by one of the sixth grade students. She said, "This movie seemed so real in parts that it made me cry; how people were treated and what they had to give up, and then fighting in the army. Schools don't teach you how emotional it was for families and how people reacted ... Everyone should know about this. It shows behind the scenes of World War II. Some people might say it's too gory. People may not want to know the truth, but it is the truth."

References


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