‘A HEAD TALLER’

Developing a Humanising Curriculum Through Drama

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Reaching Out: Ethical Spaces and Drama

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I asked a colleague, who is very experienced in giving addresses to conferences, for advice about what to be sure to include - 'Begin with a joke,' he stressed. So, here is my joke. A Jewish person who was visiting Northern Ireland was stopped on a back street in Belfast and asked by a sour-faced man, 'Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?' Undaunted, he responded with a smile, 'I'm Jewish.' The man paused for a moment, narrowed his eyes and asked, 'Are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?'

I envision this talk as a tree reaching out to all listeners whether you regard yourself as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or whatever. The trunk of the tree is my main topic: Ethical Spaces and Drama; the leaves are the practical examples I will give. The roots of this talk lie in my theoretical views of the classroom, learning, the self, and how we view others. Though I will not use these four roots to organise the talk, I will make references to them throughout.

![Figure 1](image-url) Ethical spaces and drama
I am going to talk about the ideal classroom which nurtures ‘ethical spaces’ and contrast these with other types of classrooms which create ‘immoral spaces’ or ‘amoral spaces.’ I use the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ interchangeably, not to refer to the following of predetermined moral rules, but on the contrary to refer to social spaces in which students and teachers may each encounter, examine, and recreate their unique ethical stances in the world.

**Ethical Spaces**

What metaphors would you use to describe the ideal classroom? An artist’s studio? A mountaineering team? An archaeological dig? How about a family? That is the metaphor Tracey Bigler-McCarthty actually uses in conversations with the six- and seven-year-old children in her combined age classroom. In her classroom Tracey strives to create ethical spaces where discovering how to share and resolve disputes amicably is integral to the children’s learning. She would agree with Nel Noddings (1984), who argues that ‘caring’ is ‘our basic reality’ and that teachers ought to promote the formation of an ‘ethical self’ which is ‘born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself.’ Respect is the ‘4th R’ in her classroom. The children learn about the ethics of caring from their first days with her; together they agree on how to convert the principle of mutual respect into their classroom expectations. Along with the children who are in their second year in the classroom, she models how they work together, think about the consequences of their actions for others, resolve problems through listening, create the sort of ideal family they want, and learn that love is at the core of their community. They are all learning to be ethical because, as Peter Singer (1991) says, ‘Anyone who thinks about what he or she ought to do is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in ethics.’ Their classroom community does not split into opposing sides as they think about how to act over issues like teasing or hurt feelings. Rather, Tracey assumes that they are all on the same ‘side’ of principles which guide how we ‘ought’ to act and lie at the heart of their interactions: principles like sharing, concern, decency, equity, and fairness.

Daily life in Tracey’s classroom pivots on a fulcrum of empathy. It is assumed that children should try to see the world within and beyond the classroom from other people’s points of view as well as their own. However, an ethic of care connects the world beyond school to the life of the classroom. As Tracey says, ‘Why should we expect children to care about people in places like the rainforest if they haven’t learned to care for each other?’

In drama contexts, the children learned what it means to reach out and care for each other in more challenging circumstances than they would ever hopefully have to encounter in daily life. For example, people placed their own lives in danger as they worked together to rescue their fellow aircraft designers from an aircraft in danger of exploding. They also all gathered together to hold hands, bury the dead, and care for their families. The circles of care which had been nurtured over time were, in fictional contexts, extended beyond their immediate
group. When they designed aircraft they took care to avoid damaging the trees through which they needed to land. When they were lost in the Amazonian rainforest they wondered how native people would treat them and how they should interact with them.

The theme of this conference, 'A Head Taller,' is for me an ethical image of drama's potential to create contexts in which morally, in Vygotsky's (1978) words, 'it is as if a child is a head taller than himself.' One of drama's largely unrealised potentials is fostering the ethical self - the wise self which reaches out, connects us to others, and gives us moral guidance for our actions.
Immoral Spaces

The social spaces of schools and other cultural institutions are not automatically ethical - a morality of care has to be nurtured and created by everyone in a community out of a spirit of good-will. Having grown up in the splintered community of Northern Ireland I know only too well about the destruction of tentative ethical spaces and how easily 'immoral spaces' can be created out of a spirit of ill-will. In a society where nearly all people position themselves and others - even Jews - as on either the Protestant or the Catholic 'side,' people tend to see that 'our' views are balanced against 'their' views on a fulcrum of irreconcilable differences. The hatred which creates polarised positions can easily descend into dismissal and then demonization of the different religious, social, and cultural views and actions of those 'others' who are 'not us.'

When anarchic circumstances are allowed to petrify such hateful attitudes, then ears, hearts, and fists shut tight as yelling and even killing consumes mobs of self-righteous or vengeful people intent on proclaiming their selfhood in acts of monstrous and inhuman destruction. The pictures of the funerals following the recent murder of two police officers in Lurgan leave me asking what teachers in classrooms can do to understand the causes and circumstances of such inhumanity.

Figure 3 Immoral space
Lest we demonize the demonizers, Daniel Goldhagen (1996) reminds us that it was ‘ordinary’ Germans who enacted the Holocaust and became ‘Hitler’s willing executioners.’ Fascism, hatred, and butchery are not Irish, German, or Bosnian phenomena. Their roots lie in all societies. Given particular historical, sociocultural, and political contexts, the racist divisions which feed genocide can tragically split any society where fascism is culturally bred, socially condened, and officially supported. Given the pervasive face of evil, I begin to wonder how the contexts we create in classrooms with children may interconnect with the creation or rejection of such inhumanity.

No classroom teacher that I have ever known would support hateful ideals or condone racism. Yet, when we inadvertently promote ‘us against them’ attitudes, or allow the treatment of other people as objects to go unchallenged, then I believe we fertilize the roots of intolerance - divisive roots which support the growth of spaces of immorality. Instead, I believe, we must promote a spirit of good-will, tolerance, and celebration of difference.

Seamus Heaney (1995), in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech said that poets are ‘hunters and gatherers of values.’ I think teachers are too. We are ‘hunters’ of values at times when we seek out ethical dilemmas, take moral stands, and clarify our values. Yet we are also ‘gatherers’ of values in the day-to-day classroom interactions which always have ethical dimensions.

Another teacher, Mary McCarthy, recently realised the ethical significance of an apparently inconsequential action on her part. A child picked up a penny from the floor, and asked Mary what to do with it. Usually she kept lost items safe and would spend unclaimed money on class treats. On this occasion, however, without thinking she light heartedly said ‘Finders keepers; losers weepers’ and the child pocketed the penny. It was only after later reflection on the ethical dimensions of this action and the effect on any silent child witnesses that she recognized the modelling affect of an action like this and the potential damage to the ethic of care which she was working to promote in her classroom.

In contrast, the ethical dimensions of small actions can suddenly become apparent, especially in drama contexts. Mary recognised this when the children in her class insisted that the name of their fictional air travel company - ‘Safe Travel’ - would have to be altered. They had realised that despite their safety measures they could still crash and agreed that customers would be misled by the name. Their ethical decision to change the name might seem insignificant, yet it was one of the many moral gestures in the gathering of values like honesty and decency which not only guided their travel company enterprise but were also principles by which the children had begun to live.

**Amoral Spaces**

Some teachers believe that rather than deal with honest questions from children about such worrying issues as war, hatred, or death, it is better to shield them from such concerns. They regard children as too young or too vulnerable to think about, or even ask, questions which from an adult point of view they consider too troubling.
Such teachers create what I call an ‘amoral space’ in their classrooms. There is a superficial ‘unity’ about the classroom where differences are minimized and the ‘sides’ to issues remain unbalanced and unexamined in any depth. There may be apparent intense ‘intellectual’ activity but the classroom is also characterised by an emotional detachment from issues in and out of the classroom.

I was recently in a reception classroom which was bright and filled with children's work. However, there was a uniformity to the work which was clearly guided by a well-meaning adult hand. Against one wall were trays of seeds with an unanswered question written by an adult on a now faded note ‘How high do you think the seeds will grow?’ One boy left his teacher-assigned work to join me by the tray which had been labelled by the teacher. ‘Did you plant all the seeds in your tray?’ I asked him. He gave me a look as if I had asked him if he were the Head teacher. ‘Naw,’ he responded, ‘Miss Greenley did.’ I looked across to the teacher's desk where Miss Greenley, cool and detached, was monitoring the children's behaviour. The boy caught her eye and returned to his assigned table. Clearly, talking about seeds was not appropriate at that moment. But more worrying, though plants grew at the back of the room the children were not wondering together about them, asking significant questions, or connecting plants to their lives. The children were certainly not asking social questions about the medical uses of plants or ethical questions about the death of plants as food.

**AMORAL SPACE**

- - -

**US**

**EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT**

What side are you on?
- there are no sides

What are you prepared to do about it?
- don't ask such questions

Figure 4 Amoral space 63
'Learning' in this classroom seemed almost entirely factual and assumed to happen as a result of a series of teacher-directed activities. The values which were hunted and gathered in this classroom were teacher-centred and overprotective. This teacher did not seem to understand the critical need for meaningful dialogue about content and the necessity of constructing relational understandings between children's authentic questions, their prior knowledge, and the many different perspectives they could adopt about any topic. Nor was there any evidence that the teacher considered a layered approach to content which would value and open up the sociocultural and ethical dimensions of topics.

Teacher responsibilities

If we accept the ideal of the classroom as a space which is ethical, rather than immoral or amoral, then what are our responsibilities as teachers? Robert Fried (1995) has argued that, 'Students need us, not because we have all the answers, but because we can help them discover the right questions.' Regardless of the content of classroom inquiries, if we look beneath the facts we will discover questions which are worth pursuing with students of any age - questions which will not only lead to new understandings but also to deeper questions beyond the ones we might initially think were the 'right' ones. And at the core of all contexts we can discover ethical questions - questions about the choices which face people and questions about how we would act if we were in similar positions.

CONTEXTS ARE .............

![Diagram of contexts]

- 'What did they do?'
- 'How did they feel?'
- 'How did they interact?'
- 'Who had power and authority?'
- 'How was it different in that time?'
- 'What shared views did they have?'
- 'What choices did they have?'

TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK

Figure 5  Layers of context

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An amoral space begins to form in the classroom when students become emotionally detached and do not ask questions which show an empathy with others’ situations and points of view. An immoral space begins to form when students do not question their own positions, begin to blame or objectify others, and start to regard themselves as morally superior.

We can move toward an ethical space by creating fictional experiences with students in which they may begin to see others as people who are different but also very similar to themselves. Other people will be seen as having more or less power, social status, or opportunities, yet from an ethical stance it is critical that they are seen as human beings. Further, other people must be seen as enmeshed in social relationships and practices which tend to both promote and resist the creation of ethical and unethical stances. In the classroom we can become hunters of values as we uncover ethical dilemmas which faced those people, present the students with some of their difficult and limited choices, and discover how we might have acted.

When I worked with some thirteen-year-old boys who were researching the Mafia and Al Capone, they seemed to be wavering between an amoral and an immoral position. They could not understand how anyone could have been caught up in the mob to the extent that they would have become killers who had willingly taken part in the St. Valentine’s Day massacre. They also said that they would never have joined the Mafia and their dismissive tone implied that anyone who did so must have been morally weak. As Noah said, ‘It doesn’t make sense. I think they just made themselves all this trouble.’

I asked the boys if they wanted to think about these questions by imagining that they were people who lived at the time of Al Capone. They were eager to act out the shootings and showed me a superficial tableau of the massacre. Then I asked them to imagine that they were recent immigrants to the United States in the 1920’s selling something on the street - they decided on fruit from a cart. I entered, turned over their cart, feigned apologies, and said that what they needed was ‘protection’. Within minutes they were running a fruit and vegetable shop and as part of their rent agreed to some ‘things’ being stored in the basement. When I arrived as the police wanting explanations about the illegal alcohol found on the premises and later as a mobster, wanting to know what they had said to the cops and whether or not they still deserved protection, the boys realised that they were caught between the law and their loyalty to their new ‘family’ - what Pat, one boy, recognised as a ‘family of hate’. They reluctantly chose to accept more protection, fake identities, and ‘promotion’ running a larger store. When they tried to refuse to be ‘in’ on the next job, on St. Valentine’s Day, they found themselves in another ethical dilemma - risk the lives of their families or pick up a machine gun and join the mob. Again, they enacted and showed a tableau of the massacre but this time the people in the Mafia were portrayed with sensitivity and they no longer saw themselves as morally superior. An ethical space had been created with the boys in which many questions had been raised including questions which none of us had anticipated. The ‘trouble’ the Mafia members were in was no longer simplistically seen as solely of their
own making rather their choices were seen as embedded in more complex sociocultural dimensions. As Chris said, 'How could I have thought that it would be easy?'. The boys returned to their research ready to explore some of the previously unconsidered experiential, social, political, historical, cultural, and ethical dimensions of their topic.

Vygotsky (1978) realised that 'What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow ... the only good learning is in advance of development.' In working with these boys, I was able to assist them to learn things they seemed incapable of learning alone. In particular, they began to ask and explore more challenging questions. Further, we created contexts in which the boys' experiences began to transcend an 'us against them' mentality so that instead they began to balance the views of 'us' against those of 'more of us.' In other words, though we all morally disagreed with the actions of people caught up in the Mafia in the 1920's, the boys had not dismissed the mobsters' humanity but were trying to understand why they may have acted in the ways they did.

The Ethical Self

In drama we can shape facets of an ethical self. In drama, students can discover new voices and points of view they had not previously considered. These different views are critical, not only for understanding other times or places, but also for shaping the ethical dimensions of the self. Bakhtin (Morson and Emerson, 1990) views the self as a 'conversation, often a struggle, of discrepant voices with each other' and drama can enliven and problematize that conversation which is highly ethical when we contextualise our empathetic struggles over how we ought to act toward others in particular situations - actual or fictional. I believe that we owe it to the children in our care to assist them as they explore questions and 'voices' they discover are important to them. It is also our responsibility to help children to ask more difficult questions and pay attention to the voices of people whom they may have only superficially considered.

Recently, some eleven-year-old children in Molly Hinkle's classroom, encountered 'voices' of race, class, and gender as they struggled with how they would have acted at the time of the Titanic disaster. They became fascinated with moments of separation and represented them in drawings like this one (see Figure 6). The students became obsessed with the intermingling of death, despair, bravery, and hope. Some of the 'discrepant conversations' the children had were in response to questions like these: What do you say when you say good-bye for the last time? Who will you put in the lifeboats? Who will you leave behind? Why are there no people of colour on board? Should women and children go first? Why did most of the poor people drown? Who will the owners reach out to? What was your recurring nightmare? What kept you going?

Dorothy Heathcote (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984) has stressed that it is in dealing with the 'messes' we are in that we are changed 'because of what we must face in dealing with those challenges. 'The ethical spaces we create in our
classrooms are paradoxically the very spaces in which, through drama, we can encounter, and deal with, not only the joys of our humanity, but also the horrors of our inhumanity. In drama, our ethical self can be burnished and transformed in the empathetic fires of the depths as well as the heights of our humanity.

When we face trials in fictional contexts within the classroom we can discover that we may face them together. The image of hands reaching out across time, space, and cultures is for me an image of the ethical self which touches others. It reminds me of more of Seamus Heaney’s words from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech when he recounted a dark moment in the recent history of inhumanity. In 1976 a minibus full of Ulster workers was stopped by a gang of men with guns in their hands and hatred in their hearts. The workers were made to line up beside the bus. A gun was waved in front of them: ‘Any Catholics among you step out here.’ The lone Catholic man did not move when his hand was gripped by his fellow Protestant worker in a signal that said we are in hell, but we are here together. The story does not have a just ending. After hesitating, he stepped forward, only to see all his friends butchered by the masked executioners.
Yet Heaney finds hope in his belief that 'the birth of the future we desire is surely in the contraction which that terrified Catholic felt on the roadside when another hand gripped his hand'. Like the caring hands on the Titanic, the image of hands reaching out across a chasm sustains a moral imperative which cannot be overpowered despite any surrounding horror: my actions are connected with the fate of other people.

Peter Senge (1990) believes that 'Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human.' The power to hate and kill is as much at the heart of our humanity as is the power to love and nurture. I believe that authentic education has an ethical dimension which necessitates that children explore the full gamut of our human potential and try to understand what it is that motivates people to do evil as well as good deeds. Senge (1990) continues: 'Through learning we recreate ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we reperceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life.' This could be a description of the education of a strong ethical self.

Seamus Heaney concluded his Nobel speech by talking of the power of poetry. He could equally be talking of the potential power of drama to nurture our ethical selves as he celebrates, 'the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they too are an earnest of our veritable human being.'

References

Notes

1. With the exception of the reception teacher whose name is a pseudonym and who works in Essex, I have used teachers' actual names and described classrooms in central Ohio, USA.

2. The classroom teacher was Jeffrey Wilhelm and the classroom was in rural Wisconsin, USA. The students' names are pseudonyms. For more details, see Wilhelm, J. & Edmiston, B. (in press). Imagining to Learn: Inquiry, Ethics and integration through Drama. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

3. This comment was made in another context following the work on the Holocaust.