Drama, Language and Social Context: a response to Andy Kempe

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In the world of drama and theatre education, the idea of ‘making the familiar seem strange’ is embedded in ways of doing things in studios and classrooms. As concept and practice, a main source for this approach of ‘making strange’ is Brecht’s idea and technique of the verfremdungseffekt, usually translated as the alienation- or A-effect. Brecht’s overriding concern in adopting this as a technique and practice was to make drama on stage explicitly representative of the social interests of the audience, not to become absorbed in the world of the play to the exclusion of history and social context, but to connect the action of the play to wider social contexts and the interests of social actors (Brecht, 1964; Franks & Jones, 1999). The intention was to promote reflection and evaluation; that is conscious and reasoned dialogue and thought. The ability to centre ourselves is important, within drama, reflecting on drama and in directing a researcher’s gaze towards the field of drama education. There are, of course, many such vantage points within the fields of philosophy (including and especially aesthetics), psychology, anthropology and so forth, from which we may achieve a distanced viewpoint, looking at our own practice in the role of observers and researchers.

Andy Kempe, in his piece ‘The Role of Drama in the Teaching of Speaking and Listening as the Basis for Social Capital’ (RIDE 8.1, Spring 2003, pp. 65–78) takes a view of drama education situating the main part of his analysis in the fields of sociology and linguistics, and in the overlapping area of the sociology of language. As, arguably, the most apparently social of all cultural modes and forms of making meaning, the sociological perspective would seem to be particularly germane to the investigation of drama education, gazing at learning in, through and about drama. The sociological view on drama is not new and, in the UK, the work of Raymond Williams especially has promoted a social, cultural and historical view of drama (see e.g. 1974/83). But (as a survey of papers in this journal will testify) a sociological stance on drama education is still in the early process of development. And language remains central to much dramatic activity (even after Artaud and the rise of physical theatre). Again, inside drama education, detailed and rigorous analysis of linguistic structure is not so common. This is to welcome Kempe’s thoughtful and thought-provoking contribution which looks at drama and schooling from these perspectives. Whether our views on
drama coincide with these approaches, the explicitness of developed frameworks from sociology and linguistics allows scope for the development of rigorous and detailed frameworks for description and analysis. In the nascent field of research in drama education, we need such explicitness and rigour.

In this response, I do not want to retrace the detail of Kempe's argument. He does it well and there is perhaps little to add to what, from my perspective, amounts to a strong argument for the consideration of language, particularly spoken language, as material and medium of social capital. On this view, language is seen as a resource to which we have differentiated access, and that may constrain or add value to our ability to forge relations in a variety of social situations and across the social spectrum. The world of drama would seem to offer the opportunity for students to experiment with and enhance their ability and confidence to operate, satisfying different demands and expectations of performance in social interaction. Instead, Kempe's article has provoked in me a line of thought about theoretical and methodological issues. So I want to engage at the conceptual or theoretical level, considering the application of frameworks and the scope or limitations that they may impose if they are used as descriptive and analytical tools, and to look at ways that different approaches, doing different jobs, might be seen to be compatible and complementary—or otherwise. There are three main areas here: the sociology of culture, the patterning and production of language, and last, the implications for learning.

To use the term 'social capital' is to invoke and evoke a sense of ways in which the material of social and cultural life is an available resource which is, as many resources are, subject to economies of distribution and use. Social value is ascribed to and derived from any individual's or social group's ability to use these social and cultural resources in everyday life. But there are social and cultural limitations on the use and distribution of the 'symbolic goods' such as spoken language, and these limitations are enforced and policed mainly through social institutions such as the family and schooling. Bourdieu's, as you will have discerned, is a Marxian perspective on human relations. Following Gramsci, Bourdieu works to understand, from a sociological point of view, how, if there are inequalities in the distribution of power and resources, social order is maintained.

I want to look briefly at Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* that Kempe refers to in his paper. This concept operates at a social level and encompassing a view of the patterning of human behaviour and action in everyday life. The regularities of this patterning derives from social positioning within the social order. This is to say that patterns of dress, deportment, movement and gait, speech and gesture, the signifying and significant habits of everyday life, although to some extent individual and idiosyncratic, are seen as socially determined and conditioned. Accent and dialect can be seen, for example, to arise out of one's social and economical as well as geographical position.

If *habitus* represents the concept of patterning at a social level, at an individual level Bourdieu (1991) writes about bodily *hexis*. This, conceptually, is roughly equivalent to the term 'body language'. Bourdieu's analysis of word production, for example, focuses not just on words but on the modes and qualities of production of voice, including the relative positioning of the head in relation to torso, the muscular work of larynx, tongue and mouth and so forth. This postural and muscular work produces qualities of voice that are often a constituent part of what we may describe as accent but go beyond it.
For Bourdieu, the socially organised body is central and human organisation, communication and culture are seen to be physically populated.

The material, instrument and sign of drama is the speaking, acting, thinking, feeling person—physical presence and co-presence are defining features. The notions of *habitus* and bodily *hexis* allow a view of voice production and posture, at least in part, as social construction, rather than as exclusively naturalised features of a bio-genetic being. Seen in this way, the sociological view is worth pursuing for what, Bourdieu in particular, might lend not just to researchers but also to practitioners of drama education.

On the other hand, although Bourdieu's work offers a sophisticated view of the positioning of persons within social and cultural structures, there is less scope in accounting for the ways in which people make choices (however constrained) to position themselves. This point is about agency. In many ways, drama may be used to examine and comment on social forces at work on groups and individuals, but a main message of improvised and textual drama is the plasticity and mutability of human action. So there is a kind of (perhaps productive) tension between, on the one hand, a structural sociological view of human relations and, on the other, and the motivated and agentive qualities of drama. In drama, as Kempe suggests in his paper, there are ways of exploring the potentials, possibilities and permutations of human action, verbal and otherwise, through role and character.

From the 'high vantage-point' of structural views of society, I want to turn now to a narrower focus on language. This is in part a methodological point, but as always, there are theoretical dimensions here. It's good and useful to see a clear taxonomy for the definition, description and analysis of language. The socio-linguistic frame and, within this, an approach to discourse analysis adopted by Kempe is an appropriate tool for defining, describing and analysing spoken language. But I want, for the sake of discussion, to worry at this a little bit, because this frame of analysis works for description and analysis of verbal language as far as it goes, but perhaps we might go further. We know that this kind of structural linguistic approach derives much from de Saussure, whose promise was famously to study the 'life of signs'. What followed from his work was, in the main, not a concern with the full range of signs, but a rather narrower focus on language and the development of modern linguistics. Up until relatively recent times, linguistics tended to study texts abstracted (and sometimes invented) from the flow of everyday social life. As a development of more traditional linguistics, discourse analysis studies spoken and written word as it is actually used (e.g. see Coulthard, 1986), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) gives a social and critical edge to linguistic analysis (e.g. see Fairclough, 1989).

Good and useful though the linguistic focus is, the relatively narrow focus on word, however, tends to marginalise communicative systems that accompany word. We find terms such as 'paralinguistics' emerging to encompass and describe prosody, gesture, face, gaze and relative position. The presence of fully realised persons is reduced, rather like Mouth in Beckett's *Not I*, to a narrow-beamed focus on the mouth and word. Bourdieu himself, in discussing language and *habitus* refers to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle (1991, p. 40) who proposed first, that the signs (not just verbal language) made by humans only arise between socially organised persons—that is, fully present and co-present beings. Second, socially organised people are always different
from each other. A main difference is in terms of social positioning and inequalities of power. For Bakhtin and his circle, signs, in this case language, always express much about social relations and interlocutors’ relative positioning in the social order. Language is therefore always ideological (Bakhtin, 1986; Voloshinov, 1973). Third, signs, pre-eminently language, are always produced with a consciousness of others as actual or potential respondents. Here we have consciousness of audience locked into the production of speech and this must be particularly useful in looking at the production of speech in both improvised and scripted drama. Last Bakhtin writes about how verbal language is organised into relatively stable genres that he calls ‘speech genres’. These genres relate to particular social locations and are valorised differentially dependant on the social position of the communicator and the groups within which they move. Under this definition, it is possible to view so-called ‘standard’ varieties of national languages, such as Standard English as referred to in the National Curriculum of the England, as particular powerful and highly valorised speech genres. One can see, perhaps, even in this reduced account, how the Bakhtinian perspective might complement and be compatible with the sociological view of Bourdieu and others.

The Bakhtinian view tends more towards the social and the semiotic in which the linguistic is situated in relation to other modes. If the focus is mainly on the study of verbal language, the social functional view of language developed by Halliday and others (e.g. see Halliday, 1978) might be useful in analysis of how language is deeply implicated in the arrangement, production and reproduction of social relations. From Hallidayan systemic functional grammar (SFG) has emerged an approach to semiotics that looks at the ways in which we produce and orchestrate signs in various modes to produce meaning. So, for example, speech is accompanied by gesture, posture, gaze, and relative positioning in particular settings, both social and geographical. The emerging field of multimodal semiotics looks at the ways that signs and modes of sign making are articulated to make meaning in social settings (see Jewitt & Kress, 2003). There is a way here, perhaps, of running a view of social context that includes macro-structures as well as keeping in vision the micro-production of particular patterns of speech in particular social contexts.

Last I want to turn to learning, to consider it briefly and to make two points—the first is a point of detail to which is attached a query, the second is of a more general nature. I very much appreciate that Kempe deals with some learning theory, albeit briefly, and makes pertinent reference to the work of both Vygotsky and Bruner. What Bourdieu does not deal with is how the external world of signifying action and behaviour is internalised and becomes like second nature. What are the processes and patterns of this? One of the places to go here, again with compatibility and complementarity in mind, are the social, cultural and historical accounts of learning associated with Vygotsky and associated writers, and we may count Bruner amongst these associates. But there is a question here, and it is a small point, but I wonder whether Kempe’s interpretation of ‘written speech’ as ‘composed to suit certain audiences though not actually written down’ is quite right? The term ‘written speech’ is used in contra-discrimination to ‘oral speech’ in the context of a child’s development—‘Through oral speech, the child has achieved a rather high level of abstraction with respect to the object world. With written speech he is presented with a new task. He must abstract from the sensual
aspect of speech itself. He must move to abstracted speech, to speech that uses representations of the words rather than the words themselves’ (1987, p. 202). I may well be wrong about this, but from my point of view, Vygotsky is referring to the different conceptual demands and formations of speaking and writing. This is part of a wider argument about the development of higher mental processes in relation to spoken and written language. It is germane to Kempe’s article in terms of the ways that we learn to develop conceptual awareness of the linguistic expectations that may pertain to particular social situations and arrangements. This leads me to the second and more substantive point—Vygotsky’s work is particularly powerful in exploring the relation between the social and cultural world in its historical setting and the development of mind in the individual and group. He explores the area of the patterns and processes of learning, how the external cultural world relates to the internal world of mind. Kempe invites us to look two ways towards different domains: first, from the individual social and dramatic actor towards the broad social structures and back; second, from the individual’s position in the social order and their expression of this through language, towards the internal and particular patterns and processes of learning. As it stands in Kempe’s paper, the second domain is perhaps just glanced at, but it’s a useful start and promises the possibility of more fruitful research.

References

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What’s My Position? Role, Frame, and Positioning When Using Process Drama

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The terms ‘role’, and to a lesser extent ‘frame’, are ubiquitous in the literature on the use of drama for educational purposes that has been described as ‘process drama’. In
this article I show the significance of additionally considering how teacher and students ‘position’ one another when they use drama.

I favour the phrase ‘using drama’ over ‘doing drama’ when stressing the educational uses of drama. Teacher and students are not immersed in an imagined world that is separated from the everyday world but rather they interpret their imagined experiences for meaning to connect with their everyday lives and thereby develop more understanding about a facet of life.

Discussion of role and frame in the literature tends to be restricted to each participant’s role and frame in an imagined situation. This article stresses that we must remember to pay attention to role, frame, and position in both the everyday world of the classroom as well as in any imagined world that is created.

Role

When participants in drama activities imagine that they are other people then they take on ‘roles’. However, people also have their social roles in their everyday lives that exist in parallel with any imagined roles (Goffman, 1974). In a recent 1-day workshop that I conducted with pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, artists, and other professionals, everyone took on the role of astronauts on a space station. As the leader of the workshop, I shifted back and forth between my social roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘professor’ in the everyday world of the classroom and my imagined role of ‘astronaut’. Similarly, the workshop participants shifted back and forth between their social roles and their imagined roles as we negotiated activities, experienced them, and interpreted them.

Drama practitioners often talk about being ‘in role’ or ‘out of role’. However, from a sociological sense we are always ‘in role’. We change roles as we interact with different people in different situations that can include activities in the imagined worlds of theatre, play, and drama.

More significant than whether or not we are in role is whether or not participants assume that activities are happening solely in the everyday world. We may take on an imagined role, but we actually don’t need fictional roles to create drama; what we must imagine is that we are elsewhere, in an imagined world. We can begin to use drama when we start to create, experience, and interpret an imaginary world in addition to the everyday world of the classroom.

The Imagined and Everyday Worlds of Drama

Drama takes place in two worlds simultaneously. In the theatre, the audience sits in the everyday world watching an imagined world that the actors, director, and technical managers create for them. In process drama, there is no external audience to the work, so that teacher and students are the equivalent not only of theatre actors, directors, and technicians but also of a theatre audience (O’Neill, 1995). In process drama, participants use their social and cultural imagination to create a shared imagined world. The imagined world does not replace the everyday classroom world, but rather begins to be created alongside the everyday world. Teacher and students interact in both worlds
simultaneously and as necessary they move back and forth between them at will (Heathcote, 1975).

Whereas the everyday world is a ‘single’ reality, a drama world always has a ‘doubled’ reality because we experience it happening in both imagined and everyday space–times simultaneously. We can think of the everyday as the world of ‘what is’. A drama world begins to exist when we additionally consider ‘what if …?’ for example, what if we were astronauts? We can describe the everyday as IS whereas drama occurs in IS + IF.

One reason why the doubled reality of drama is so significant is that the social and cultural meanings that we make in one space–time affect the meanings in the other. On the one hand, for example, negotiations in the IS can determine the ‘rules’ in the IF. Movement in the imagined astronauts’ world was controlled by the agreement that the astronauts were weightless and that they could be slowly jet-propelled. On the other hand, interactions in the IS + IF affect the classroom community that continues to develop through all classroom activities whether imagined or everyday. For example, when the participants in pairs imagined that they were working together to examine the spaceship for possible damage, they were collaborating.

Frame

We make sense of the world by interpreting situations through various perspectives or sociocultural ‘frames’ (Goffman, 1974). The ‘everyday world of the classroom’ is a
multi-faceted dynamic social and cultural space–time with multiple possible frameworks that teacher and students could use to interpret the world. The ‘imagined worlds’ that we create when we use drama are also space–times where students and teachers can use and explore frames normally unavailable to them everyday.

Frames Develop in Communities of Practice

People share frameworks with other people who regard themselves as members of various ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998).

Participants walk into our classrooms with existing everyday social roles and everyday frames. As they interpret events (whether in an imagined world or the everyday world), participants do so from the IS perspectives that come from their social and cultural identities or frames of reference. So do I as the teacher.

For example, as a member of the community of teachers I identify with colleagues across time and space. I identify with those who see teachers more as guides to ask questions than as providers of answers, more as co-learners in dialogue with children than as instructors giving information, and more as viewing the classroom as a space for collaborative activities than for individual accomplishments.

The social activities that occur in every classroom space over time create the discourses of a classroom community that can be considered a local culture with shared frames of reference. The students in a classroom over time create certain shared expectations and assumptions that frame how they interpret events. Actual astronauts in a space station do the same thing. However, astronauts on a space station frame activities and events from a professional and personal viewpoint that gives them very different power and authority from what most students or teachers on earth would have viewing the same events.

Social activities in imagined worlds create community and a shared frame just as everyday activities do. Activities that are collaborative practices to achieve shared goals, build a feeling of commonality and a history of shared accomplishments whether or not participants identify them as IS or IS + IF activities. For example, pretending to space walk, put on spacesuits, and explore the outside of the spaceship in teams for possible problems were the activities that began to create a community of astronauts. As a whole group we identified urgent problems: the oxygen supplies were lower than expected, tiles on the exterior of the fuselage were damaged, and the radio antenna was damaged. The participants worked together in small groups to develop plans, write notes, and present their ideas to the whole group. The group as a whole and in small groups repeatedly negotiated and agreed on imagined shared events. At a later time people could have explored, for example, how to divide up the remaining oxygen fairly, how to support one another, and how to execute a rescue mission. All these activities, whether or not they were fictional, were building community and the beginnings of a shared frame of trust, safety, collaboration, respect, and democracy.

The local culture of the classroom exists alongside and draws on the discourses of participants’ other local peer cultures, for example related to sports, popular music, or other shared interests as well as their broader cultural identities like those related to professions, race, class, gender, and national origin. Students draw on their own social
and cultural IS frames as they contribute to classroom activities including those that create the imagined IS + IF worlds of drama. For example, in our space drama work participants tapped into their own knowledge from communities as diverse as those of math teachers, amateur radio operators, and Americans who had witnessed the destruction of the Columbia space shuttle.

**Framing to Share Power and Authority**

One of the core reasons why as a teacher I use drama is because when we create an imagined world, we can imagine that we frame events differently so that our power and authority relationships are changed.

A long-term aim of mine as a teacher is as much as possible to share power and authority with students. I want students to have more opportunities to use words and deeds to act appropriately but in ways that are often not sanctioned in classrooms. Additionally I hope that students’ sense of their personal and shared authority will become more secure and more extended while at the same time more aware of others’ authority. I want a culture to develop that is more egalitarian than most students expect walking into the room.

We can use drama to assist us to build a classroom community that values everyone’s developing authority through changing the power dynamics and our sense of our relative authority. IS + IF activities affect the power relationships in the IS. Thus, for example, we imagined that we were astronauts who had the power to walk in space, to collaboratively use tools to repair a spaceship, and the authority to request assistance from the space centre on earth. In doing so, participants actually moved, collaborated, and exercised more authority than they would have done sitting and talking with me leading a discussion.

Imagined activities, in conjunction with ongoing everyday activities, develop frames within imagined worlds that students can use to make sense of events in their everyday lives in and out of school. Imagining that they are astronauts, students can experience and develop a frame of competence, professionalism, and team-work that they can bring to other practices in and out of the classroom. We had only begun to create the sorts of frames that, for example, prolonged work using the Mantle of the Expert approach can develop (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995).

**The Power and Authority of the Teacher Frame**

As leader of the workshop I framed activities for myself simultaneously from the viewpoint of a fellow astronaut in the imagined world and from the viewpoint of the teacher in the everyday world. Whereas some of the participants could get ‘lost’ in their imagined role and frame, if I wanted to make educational teaching decisions I could never afford to focus only on the IF. I was always aware of being in IS + IF. As I interacted with the participants, whether or not I pretended to be an astronaut, my interventions and questions were always guided by my ‘teacher frame’.

When drama activities explore conflict we need to recognise the potential social and cultural effects. I immediately shifted us from IS + IF to IS, out of the imaginary world
and into dialogue in the everyday classroom world, when I recognised a potential
problem for our emerging community. One of the participants, thinking that he was
being helpful, began to invent a history for the space station by blaming one of the other
groups for not doing their job in checking oxygen supplies. We reflected on this possible
direction for the work. I worried that with a group that had only been together for not
much over an hour that feelings of negativity might undermine our budding sense of
trust and emotional safety. I asked if they felt that the group knew one another well
enough to move into exploring feelings of being blamed. They were in clear agreement
that they were not, including the person who had made the suggestion. Instead we
focused on how we could draw on one another’s strengths to plan our escape if we had
to abandon ship. I am certainly not suggesting that we should avoid social or cultural
conflict in drama work. However, I want to emphasise that we need to be aware of
consequences in the everyday classroom world for activities in the imagined world and
vice versa.

Positioning

In every interaction people position one another (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). Not
only do we adopt roles in social situations and use cultural frames to interpret events
we also use our power to position ourselves relative to others as having more, less, or
equal authority to act and interpret events. We do this both in the everyday world of
the classroom and in any imagined worlds we create when we use drama (Edmiston,
2000). We all have the power to act, using words and deeds, to do many things from
dancing to shouting. We all have authority because of who we are, what we know, and
what we can do. Positioning determines whose power and whose authority dominates,
is silenced, or gets shared in a group.

The captain of an actual spaceship along with the other astronauts have the power
to walk in space and talk to mission control as well as authority in terms of evaluating
what could be dangerous activities to do in space. Some astronauts, including the
captain, will be accepted as having more authority than others, for example, because of
their knowledge of and ability with using specialised technical equipment. However, in
addition to any authority because of prior experience, because of his rank the captain
has more authority to command others or to insist that everyone’s ideas are heard.

Teacher Positioning

As a teacher I use my power and authority to position students as I structure and shape
activities. My teacher authority is always available to me whether or not I tell students
that I am in or out of role and whether or not we interact in the everyday world of the
classroom or the imagined world of the drama. For example, talking as if I am on a
spaceship I can insist that people listen to one another without formally taking on the
role of an officer. I signal my use of teacher authority by how I position the students.
I position myself with higher authority every time I give information, pause one activity,
or negotiate with the students a change in focus or content of activities, for example,
from a space walk to an examination of the fuselage for possible damage. However, I
can also position myself with lower authority, for example when I said that I did not know how to test for an oxygen leak allowing a student to share her suggestions for remedial actions. Most often I position myself with broadly equal authority. Every time I wonder what ‘we’ should do, or what something means to ‘us’ I position the whole group (including myself) as facing problems together where everyone’s power and authority can be valued. Every time I support a dissenting voice, or amplify an idea, I position the group to listen and dialogue to reach agreement about any new actions to be taken.

I am always on a continuum between using my power and authority over a group to using my power and authority with the group, between oppositional and parallel positioning. I may impose silence and stillness or use the energy of the group through a noisy active game, I may give directions or request ideas, I may ask questions or provide answers. One particular way of positioning is not better than another; positionings have to be evaluated over time. The question that I repeatedly ask myself is this: how effectively do our positions promote dialogue and develop community?

Repositioning Students

When the workshop participant began to blame others he seemed to be positioning himself as having more authority to evaluate activities to the extent that he could identify the cause of the problem of depleted oxygen. He had not changed role but he had shifted his IF position. There was no-one in role as a captain on our spaceship. All activities had been collaborative until that moment. I had observed that the participant had positioned others with broadly equal power and authority until with this interjection he elevated his authority relative to others. He probably felt that because he was talking in role his words were not to be taken seriously. However, as I watched the group that he singled out, I observed a stiffening in body language, a hardening of jaws and eyes, and defensive muttering. His comment seemed to be in danger of being seen as monologue to be resisted rather than an opening into productive dialogue. I intuited that they might not want to feel blamed even in play. They seemed to be positioning themselves as not to blame and positioning the speaker as not to be heard. Whereas I wanted to be open to possible new directions for the drama work, I could not allow one person to impose a particular direction unless all were in agreement.

It was because of their positioning of one another in the imagined world and my concern that we were about to move into confrontational monologue that I repositioned the students by shifting to dialogue in the everyday world. I asked them to reflect on what had just happened in the imagined world. I had to be sure before we continued that there was an IS agreement for a new tone and focus in the IS + IF world. To dialogue I positioned all members of the group with equal authority in the IS.

Positioning for Dialogue

Dialogue is not all agreement; on the contrary dialogue over time can create a dance of positioning and repositioning between and among teacher and students that ranges along the continuum between oppositional and parallel positions. Dialogue in imagined
worlds is more likely to range into more intensive oppositional positions and still remain productive. However if we do not want to undermine community overall dialogue in the IS needs to feel supportive and collaborative especially if there is intense oppositional IS + IF exchanges.

Toward the end of the workshop participants and I delved into controversial issues related to race and gender. I used the picture book Talkin’ About Bessie, written by Nikki Grimes, which explores the early twentieth century life of Elizabeth Coleman, the first African American female to fly. Participants represented several events narrated in the text, including one where people inside and outside a stadium were waiting for her to perform aerobatics but actually witnessed her crash.

Each participant chose a role from the text (or suggested by the text) and first voiced a response to Bessie Coleman’s immanent arrival. People framed the event differently ranging from an African American male journalist who was proud of her determination to a white female housewife who realised that her husband would not allow her to learn to fly. All spoke as if sharing their thoughts as they listened to the sound of her airplane. I set up the activity so that people could listen to one another but not respond. As the group listened they repeatedly were being positioned each time a person spoke.

One African American teacher’s actions were particularly provocative and chilling. They focused us on a core theme from the book—the racism that Bessie Coleman had to struggle against all her life. She framed herself as if she were a white, racist man with hands on hips speaking in a cocky, confident, condescending voice. Her IS + IF actions positioned the group. ‘I knew it, I knew it. No negro woman could fly’, she said at the sound of the crash. ‘She should have been in my house cleaning my boots.’ The implications were clear—the man positioned himself as believing himself superior by positioning Bessie as worthy only to be a servant and dismissing how she had found power and authority as a black female pilot.

I wanted the group to have the opportunity to dialogue so I asked the teacher if she would mind repeating her words and movement as others listened again. ‘If you could have spoken to this man’, I said, ‘what would you have wanted him to hear?’ I suggested that they could choose to respond from a position that was different from the one they personally would have adopted. Responses ranged along the continuum from those who agreed with the man’s position to those who strongly opposed it.

‘Yea, she’s got no business gettin’ above herself.’
‘What have you done with your life?’
‘Just because you’re white doesn’t make you better.

To extend and deepen the dialogue I asked participants to consider alternative positions. Would it have made a difference if the speaker had been white or black? What consequences were possible for a speaker whose words or deeds were noticed by someone who had the power to act on their hate? We began to talk about racism, lynching, and white privilege. We concluded by wondering who had ‘opened doors’ in Bessie’s life and if in our lives we had intentionally opened a door for someone with less power and authority than each of us had.
Conclusion

Participants do more than take on roles and adopt frames in process drama. As teacher and students interact in both the everyday world and in imagined worlds they position one another. If we are aware of how people use words and deeds to position others then we are better able to promote honest and respectful dialogue and the creation of a classroom community that is an emotionally safe space in which drama can be used to examine significant and serious topics.

References


