Playing in Different Keys: Research Notes for Action Researchers and Reflective Drama Practitioners

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Introduction

How can I improve my drama teaching? Though we may not recognize it as such, this is a research question that could lead a teacher to conduct classroom-based or action research. Action research is qualitative inquiry through which teachers can research their own practice. They focus on 'some aspect of their practice in order to find out more about it, and eventually to act in ways they see as better or more effective' (Oberg and McCutcheon, 1987, p. 117). When we question an aspect of our practice, reflect on events from one day and subsequently change our plans for the next day, we are informally researching our teaching. Action research formalizes this process and enables us to become more systematic and rigorous in our analysis of our teaching. We become better teachers because we understand how our actions affect the classroom context. Reflection by practitioners is central to the process of conducting action research in the classroom. If we pay close attention to the 'road questions students ask they can provide us, as action researchers, with two keys upon which we can improvise with students. In our view, listening carefully to determine what puzzles students enables us to shape work around their concerns and explore ideas with them. In doing so, we can become more reflective and thus more competent drama practitioners.

The Classroom Context

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in 'inquiry-based' education where students work together on research projects (Short, Harste and Burke, 1996). Jeff Wilhelm's rural middle school classroom for 12- and 13-year-old students was organized along the principles of an inquiry-based curriculum. He frequently had his students work together on projects. He endorsed the principles of student-motivated cooperative thematic study where students pursued their questions. He encouraged students to regard teachers as one of many resources in the classroom rather than as the authority on all knowledge.
As students extended their studies, he mentored them as they gathered, analyzed, and presented their data. The students were conducting three-week team research projects, which were part of a unit on Civil Rights. When Brian Edmiston came into the school to work through drama with self-selected small groups of two to four students. Earlier in the year at different times, Brian and Jeff had led whole group sessions and the students were comfortable with using drama in the classroom. Over two days Brian led thirty students in seven different small groups in one or two forty minute process drama sessions. Each small group of two to four students had read books, and interviewed relatives as informants or watched videos about their topic. They then formulated questions which guided their reading, writing and talk about their particular topic. For example, four boys in what we refer to as the 'Hank Aaron group' were interested in the life of this African-American baseball star of the 1950s. One of their questions was 'How did Hank Aaron get to be so great at baseball?' They had collected and recorded all the information about him that they thought was relevant.

Each group had also begun to prepare for their final presentations which were to be shared with the whole class. Students used either computer hypermedia or videotapes of themselves for their presentations. Many had written first drafts of their scripts or presentations, but had indicated dissatisfaction with their questions, their findings, or with how they were framing and understanding their topic. For example, the Hank Aaron group had written scripts of scenes which they were planning to videotape. The scenes were to inform their classmates about what they considered important about Aaron’s life. However, three of the four boys in the Hank Aaron group said the scripts were 'boring'. The scripts were dismissed as reports of facts — for example, that Hank and his brother would hit balls off of baseball batting cages. So when Jeff told his classes that Brian was interested in working through drama to help them explore their topics in more depth, there was a host of volunteer groups.

In each drama session, the students were encouraged to continue to think and position themselves as researchers who were exploring questions. Jeff had helped each group agree on guiding questions for their research. On meeting each group, Brian identified and clarified a question which the group had been considering and which they were interested in exploring through drama. These become each group's initial research question for the drama session. Jeff later worked with each group as they re-thought their questions in preparation for their end-of-year presentations.

Knowing that initial research questions, Brian planned drama activities and agreed with each group on a beginning encounter. In the fictional context of the drama, the students adopted the position of various 'informants' — people who could provide significant information about the topic. For example, in the Hank Aaron group, the students adopted the perspectives of Hank Aaron, his family, and the baseball players in the Negro and Major Leagues. As the students participated in drama worlds they explored their questions from the
viewpoints of various additional informants as well as from the perspective of researchers.

**Teacher Play and Experimentation as Reflection-in-Action**

Schön (1987, pp. 68-79) argues that reflective practitioners recognize that they 'play games' within situations and 'experiment' as they reflect in action. He identifies three interrelated ways of playing and experimenting as we act: exploration, hypothesis testing and move testing. All three approaches provide us with ways in which we may elicit and clarify students' questions. Knowing which playful/experimental approach we use makes us more reflective.

- **Exploration.** When we are open to whatever consequences follow, then our actions probe and explore.
- **Hypothesis testing.** When we act assuming a particular 'best' way of viewing a situation, then we test out a hypothesis.
- **Move testing.** When we have an end in mind as we act, then we test different moves to achieve that end.

**Exploration**

We explore with students as we try to find out what questions interest them. Discussion and open-ended fictional encounters in drama can generate questions as we ask, What interests you? What questions do you have? or What were you wondering about when we imagined we were in that place? As such, exploration is not only a network of possible questions which a group might ask but it is also our safety-net as we work with students — we can always stop what we are doing and ask the students for their feedback. We also explore as we pay attention to the questions which seem to be raised for students as we and they interact in drama. We can share, then, our observations with the students or reflect and ask the students to share their thoughts. As we explore implications we enable students to move beyond their initial, and often limiting, questions.

In a brief discussion, the Hank Aaron group agreed that they wanted to explore the question, How did Hank Aaron get to be so great at baseball? Though their understanding of his 'greatness' changed during and after their two-sessions of drama, the group remained committed to exploring this question and many sub-questions over several weeks of work in the library, in class and at home. Their interactions led to more questions about why he was so 'great'. For example, the students wanted to explore what life was like for Hank Aaron in the locker-room, at home, and at practice. They wanted to know, What did Hank Aaron have to do off the ballfield to become great?
Hypothesis Testing

Extrapolating from students' core questions leads us to form a hypothesis about an implicit and tacitly agreed-upon view of the field they are researching. Our broad drama structuring can then be seen as a way of testing that hypothesis with the students. Schön (1987) notes that a hypothesis-testing experiment is like 'a game' with the situation in which the practitioner seeks to make the situation conform to his hypothesis but remains open to the possibility that it will not (p. 75). The hypothesis may or may not be confirmed in practice.

After initially talking with the Hank Aaron group, Brian (who was unfamiliar with Aaron's life and accomplishments) hypothesized that these boys, the story of Hank Aaron was one of individual struggle to become a skilled player. He began by having the students 'swing an imaginary baseball bat and asked them if they were Hank where might they be? One boy replied, 'Playing in the Negro League.' He talked to the boys and realized that they had not read or thought about race as a relevant factor in considering his 'greatness.' Brian's hypothesis of how the students viewed Hank Aaron's life needed to be substantially revised to include their blindness to race as an issue. This shift in perspective necessitated a change of plan so that attitudes to race could be examined, especially how Hank Aaron might have been regarded and treated by other players in his original Negro league team and in his new team when he first joined the Major League.

More Testing

Having identified a question in which the students are interested, we can experiment with different 'moves.' We cast, in effect, ask ourselves, Given this question, what activities, interactions and encounters do I think will have the desired effect of exploring this question? If we find that one move is not working we can try a different move though still with the same purpose of exploring the question in which the students seem interested. With the Hank Aaron group, at one point Brian wanted the students to reflect on the significance of Hank Aaron's first public appearance in the Major league. He asked the students to share their inner thoughts, but when one resisted and seemed embarrassed, he switched to have the students talk to each other in pairs.

As we make choices and structure a session we will explore and test hypotheses and moves, often at the same time. Knowing that we can explore, test a hypothesis or test a move gives us a better sense of our plans, our evaluations and, most importantly, a metacognitive awareness of our teaching.

Student Researcher and Informant Stances

If students are exploring questions through drama they will need to stop 'playing' with a question and think about what has been 'played'. As they interact,
the students will be constructing new understandings which may clarify some ideas yet problematize others. Our interventions can influence this process when we direct the students’ attention toward making or interpreting the fictitious world.

Another way to think about teacher intervention is to see it as facilitating shifts between students imagining they are informants and critiquing as researchers. The student stances of informant and researcher parallel the perspectives of participants in and spectators on the events of any drama session. As spectators, students reflect on and interpret their experiences in the drama. If, as they reflect on their experiences, the students consider how their research question is being explored and ‘answered’ then, we argue, they adopt a researcher stance.

The students will shift between the stances of researchers and informants as the drama progresses. They will often do so without our intervention when they slip in and out of role, interact as if they are other people, or talk as themselves. However, if we are aware of the significance of switching between these stances, we can intervene at one moment in order to restructure their interactions as various participants/informants and at another moment to ask for their interpretations as spectators/researchers.

An example from the end of the first Hank Aaron session illustrates how we can intervene when it ‘feels’ appropriate to enable the students to shift back and forth between being informants and researchers. All four boys were informants as they imagined and spoke the set of racist remarks Hank heard behind his back in the locker room. When Brian asked the boys how they thought Hank would have felt, they switched into researcher mode. One boy said that he would have wanted to hit them, another said he couldn’t because it would have made matters worse. A third boy, Mike, said he would have walked out and gone home. He wanted to represent Hank and they all returned to informant mode. Three repeated the racist slurs as Mike listened without expression and then made a move to leave. Brian stepped forward to whisper, ‘Do you want to be remembered as a quitter? How will you explain this to your grandchildren?’ He was asking the group to reflect as researchers on the meaning of such an action.

Different Research Modes

No matter what questions students are interested in exploring they will imagine that they are informants and reflect on their experiences as researchers. However, different student questions have different ‘ends-in-view’. Different questions suggest different ‘moves’ to test out with the students; different focus keys in which to improvise with them.

Educational researchers have a host of research modes for the exploration of different questions. To return to the metaphor of musical keys, working in each mode is like playing in a different key. Before the drama, groups were
in effect mostly playing in quantitative and empirical research keys. Their end-in-view was the objective accumulation of facts and information. They had not been playing in qualitative research keys. For example, the Hank Aaron group were mostly detached observers of the events of his life and they read books for factual information which they recorded in lists and notes. They were interested in the names of people he had played with, the number of home runs he had hit, and the different clubs he had played for. The moves which Jeff made, enabled the students to achieve their end-in-view. He helped them find books, locate information and record details.

By the time Brian came to work with the students, the Hank Aaron group, like most of the others, seemed to have largely exhausted this approach—they were ‘bored’ with it. However, it was clear that as well as being interested in quantitative information they were also interested in qualitative research keys.

In the next section we consider three broad modes of qualitative research: phenomenology, ethnography and action research. We do not intend this description to be more than a cursory introduction to these methods of conducting research. Nor do we wish to suggest that these research modes are hermetically sealed since, in practice, researchers in one primary mode will often draw on many others. (See Table 4.1.)

### Phenomenology

The Hank Aaron group’s research question concentrated on the life of an individual: How did Hank Aaron get to be so great at Baseball? Yet significantly they had not considered how Hank Aaron had experienced his world. After a few minutes of talking about their topic it became apparent to Brian that the students were interested in the particular experiences of Hank Aaron—their research question had a phenomenological undertone.

Phenomenologists describe and interpret the phenomena of personal lived
experiences. Phenomenology is the study of lived or existential meanings ... it attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday lives (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). They may research their own or other people's experiences. Though phenomenologists study people in social settings they are ultimately interested in people's unique, personal experiences and realities, and are thus interested in personal stories and interpretations in themselves. They ask a general interpretive question like, What are the lived experiences for particular people in particular contexts? The end-in-view is to understand and record the meanings which people make from their individual experiences in specific contexts.

Though drama experiences are imaginary, they can nevertheless be deeply felt personal lived experiences or phenomenological experiences for the students. Part of the compelling nature of drama is the potential for students' lived through experience. As Dorothy Heathcote (1984) notes, Drama is about filling the spaces between people with meaningful transactional experiences . . . Out of these we can build reflective processes' (p. 97). Sean and Chris stressed the importance for them of trying to appreciate people's feelings and life experiences. Sean said that drama was a good way to really get into it about what life was like and how it would feel.' Chris added that you have to feel it before you can help someone else feel it.' Phenomenologists agree. Talk about experiences and problems cannot substitute for the complex situated experience of people who are living through those problems. Rather than privileging any detached objective view as desirable, phenomenologists argue that the viewpoints of subjective experiences are essential if we want to record or find out how we and others experience everyday reality.

All moves in the first Hank Aaron drama session were guided by the end-in-view of enabling the students to find meaning in the imagined experiences of one individual, Hank Aaron, as he experienced contexts about which they had only read. Brian structured the work so that the students were able to experience the world of Hank Aaron from a variety of perspectives and to reflect as researchers on the meanings of his personal experiences. Aaron became the primary informant in his interactions with others: playing baseball as a child, reading late mail, in the locker room overhearing racist remarks, out in the ball park hitting a home run, talking to the manager of the Major League club, returning to his Negro League club, talking with his family and reacting to white players. All four students had the opportunity to represent Hank Aaron, two of whom took on roles with the four students as they created these contexts: a player, a relative, a manager, the voice of conscience, a narrator. Knowing that the students were asking a phenomenological question gave Brian a key in which to implicate. He foregrounded Aaron's possible multiple perspectives thus placing broader issues like institutionalized racism in the background.

After the drama work the students reviewed their drama experiences and realizations. In preparing their presentations, the students accepted their own
scenes which drew on and extended the drama work. In addition to their role as Hank Aaron, they imagined they were people who wrote hate mail, sports-writers, Negro League teammates, white minor league and Major League teammates, baseball fans, and his family. They revised their research questions and continued their research as they re-read material and altered their scripts. Interestingly, they began to ask themselves additional phenomenological questions: How would Hank's experience have been different if he were white? What was his experience as a black ballplayer in a profession dominated by whites? How did the hate mail they had read about affect Hank and his family?

Andy explained how his group changed their priorities and realized the importance of considering Aaron's inner experiences in order to find out 'what it was like for him'. He noted that, 'We realized that the most important things he had to put up with and get over were things like fighting through prejudice. If he couldn't do that then he could never be a great ballplayer. He did both and that's why he's great.'

**Ethnography**

If the students in the Hank Aaron drama had asked a question like, How did African-Americans in the 1950s cope with institutionalized racism in baseball? then Brian would have made quite different moves. If they had started from such a question Brian would have structured the work so that the students would have examined the interplay of racist structures with fans, players, school children and the game as a whole. He would not have concentrated on the experiences of one player. He would have made these moves because the students would have had an ethnographic end-in-view rather than a phenomenological end-in-view.

Ethnographers are not only participants in everyday events; they are also observers of their social worlds. Ethnographers interpret social realities as they 'participate, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, p. 2). As participant-observers they record what informants do and say, interpret what seems to be going on from multiple perspectives, and thereby over time construct their own understandings about social realities.

Ethnographers can research in complex cultural settings like Bali or in familiar cultural contexts like classrooms. They ask a general interpretive question like, What are the patterns of experience for these people in general? Ethnography is complementary to phenomenology. The ethnographer looks for commonalities whereas the phenomenologist looks for individual differences. Whereas the phenomenologist is interested in understanding a person's particular experiences, an ethnographer's end-in-view is understanding general and shared social and cultural realities.

Students are often just as confused about what is going on in the events...
described in books as any ethnographer might be in Bosnia. A 15-year-old trying to understand the behaviors of people in the world of Major League baseball as the racial barrier was broken, has tasks similar to those of an ethnographer trying to make sense of behaviors, relationships and attitudes in an unfamiliar culture.

Though students cannot actually do ethnographic research in societies from which they are separated by time and/or space, it is useful to use ethnography as a metaphor to explore how students can use drama to research imaginatively questions about other cultures or worlds which would otherwise be difficult or impossible for students to access. Like ethnographers, students in drama can explore and interpret imagined social contexts.

If the students want to explore as ethnographic question then the teacher’s moves will be guided by an end-in-view which concentrates on making sense across many interactions. One perspective will be insufficient, the students will need to experience from multiple points of view as they play in an ethnographic key and try to make sense of a social context. In successive drama contexts the students can depict the actions of various informants and like ethnographers they can interview them, observe them, overhear them. When they reflect as researchers they can try to generalize and look for commonalities of meaning and patterns of experience for the people in general.

For example, the Holocaust group asked the question, What was life like in the Nazi concentration camp? The students clearly wanted to know about general patterns of experience in the camps. They drew on and extended their understandings of the camps as they created the drama world. Brian’s moves were guided by an end-in-view of shared social meanings. He wanted the students to experience the camps from multiple perspectives and find meaning in their reflections on this most horrific reality. They imagined the experiences of inmates as they were examined on arrival, as they sorted through clothing and shoes, as they tried to convince a guard to let them escape. Brian took on the role of interrogator, organizer and fellow guard. The students also looked at the camps and the inmates from other perspectives: the Germans who lived near the camps, survivors of the Holocaust, and Nazi guards. Those outside the camp were interviewed as potential witnesses at the Nuremberg trials. They were asked what they saw and what they knew by Brian in role as an incredulous allied officer. The guards contemplated the roles and pointlessness of trying to hide someone and the survivors remembered what sustained them.

Like ethnographers, the students in reflection looked and listened for patterns across different people’s experiences and views of their world. For example, though at first Gora had wondered why people did not escape from the camps, through the drama’s work, he said he began to see a pattern of helplessness in the face of the expenses of the Holocaust. He began to realize that the Holocaust was so big. I knew it was bad, but not that bad. There were so many people. It was just so big and there was no escape.” Though he had created drama with only three others, in his imagination he had begun to see.
How many were killed in one day because they were weak, old, tired of... for just no reason... just how many there were and how Nazis were so in control they could make up fake little things and contests and jobs so that they could make them suffer and kill them.

He concluded that, "It was hard how it was like a game to kill and a game to stay alive." In attempting to make sense of the ongoing genocide and find a pattern, he used the metaphor of a game, a game which was deadly and dehumanizing in very different ways for both perpetrators and victims. Chris was making social meaning about the Holocaust which was deeply felt and with a breadth he had not previously demonstrated. However, it is important to stress that his views were not reated as definitive. They were ideas which opened up discussion and led to additional research about resistance to the Nazis.

**Action Research**

The first session with the Hank Aaron group was structured phenomenologically to focus on Hank's individual experiences, but by the second session the group's research question had taken an action research turn. During the first session the students had invented whispered racist remarks, hate mail, and veiled threats in the locker room. By the end of the session, Aaron (represented by Mike) had decided to quit and return to the Negro League, yet when Brian spoke as Aaron's conscience and asked if he wanted to be remembered as a quitter, Mike had paused unable to walk out as he had planned. At the beginning of the second session the boys wondered what else Aaron could have done in response to the racist attitudes he had experienced in the Major League. They decided that he could not have just walked out because what he did would make a difference for other African-Americans. The group's research question in effect had become: What could Hank Aaron have done in response to racism? Their end-in-view was now less concerned solely with the personal experiences of Hank Aaron and more with the choices he had in response to racism. They were now thinking like action researchers.

Action research is the third research mode we will consider metaphorically to classify students' questions. Playing in an action research key provides us with a different enc-in-view for the moves we make as we structure drama work. Action research is recursive and reflexive, with researchers examining and re-examining how changes in their actions change their situations. Over time, they proceed in an action research cycle — an ongoing spiral of steps: planning, taking action, observing and reflecting. They make time for all four steps. They plan what their actions will be, act, observe how these actions seem to change the context and relationships between people, and reflect in order to make sense of what is happening and how they might alter their actions.
Action researchers are, in a sense, hybrids between ethnographers and phenomenologists since they are interested, not only in the social reality of the culture of which they are a part, but also their own experiences as they take action in particular contexts. However, in addition they want to learn from their experiences in order to act more effectively in context to achieve whatever their aims may be. Action researchers' end-in-view is to consider how their actions change the context and effect the relationships between people. As they reflect they ask a general interpretive question like, What could I have done differently to achieve my goal?

When students reflect and wonder about what choices they have in a particular fictional context they are entering an action research mode. Now they are interested in the difference people can make in a situation. With this end-in-view we can structure for an action research-like cycle of action, observation, reflection and planning.

In the second Hank Aaron session there was an action research-like cycle. The students tried out several actions: explaining to his family that he could not quit, ignoring racist remarks refusing to fight back, returning to talk to his former players in the Negro League. They also reflected in the voices of his conscience, his family and Negro League players.

The group researching the Great Depression formed an action research-type question for their drama session: Why didn't the poor just get jobs? The gits were in effect saying that if they had lived in the 1930s they would have acted to find work. Brian's moves in the drama session were all guided by this question. Christine records both the moves which Brian made and how she was thinking about the choices people had when they became impoverished.

When we started I didn't understand how the all the people were so poor. I just thought they were lazy or something and that they should have tried harder to get a job, or should have moved where the jobs were. So then we tried it out in the drama and I couldn't get a job. Then I got one and somebody accepted less pay, and then only meals, but I had a family so I couldn't do that. And I moved, but I couldn't find work there either and in the end I lived in a cardboard box and I was really frustrated and angry. . . asking myself 'what could I do?'

We are not suggesting that the students reached some final realization through the drama work. The students explored and raised questions but these questions also focused their classroom investigations.

Conclusion

This chapter is like a written-down score which tries to capture insights developed during and after hours of improvised teaching. It is not a definitive record of how to teach. The templates discussed were not discovered in books
and then applied to teaching; the understandings were developed in action research and reflective drama practice.

We trust that readers will approach teaching and research in a similar spirit. We hope that you find the ideas we have outlined useful as you conduct your own action research and strive to become a more reflective practitioner. Mike’s insights about the power of drama have relevance for us as action research and reflective drama practitioners: Drama takes facts and asks how they might have been different or how the facts might do something to you or someone else and how all that would feel. That’s why I like drama. ’If we pay attention to our feelings and our imaginations we will look beyond the facts of our teaching situations to ask how we and the students experience them and how they could be different. In doing so, we will become action researchers and reflective drama practitioners.

References


