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How to Use Process Drama as a Tool to Enhance Comprehension and Promote Social Justice

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Abstract

Process drama provides opportunities for deep levels of comprehension when teachers scaffold students to make profound connections and to develop sincere empathy for the issues they will be exploring. This paper examines the support necessary for teachers embarking on process drama, including an essential "how to" guide. The author shares personal experiences with process drama, relying on the theory of figured worlds, and how we all depend upon our imaginations to learn and grow into civically-minded human beings. Many specific teaching ideas are shared for hands-on techniques to use in the classroom.

Introduction

Harste reminds us that "curriculum [is] a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be" (Harste & Carey, 1999, as cited in Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 24). As educators, the environments and discourses we create in our classrooms set the tone for students' future identities as adult citizens. In contemplating the theme of "the edge," I was reminded of how torn many of us feel in our test-laden culture, making sincere efforts to infuse more aspects of critical literacy into our classrooms, while still responding to the needs of mandated curriculum. In addition, many teachers understandably feel vulnerable or even on "the edge" when embarking on meaningful, inspiring activities surrounding critical literacy because these tasks feel risky and complex. While we want to sculpt transformational curricula that

empower students to demand social justice and experience compassion, many of us are just trying to get through the day.

When examining most of the literacy research done today, many studies focus only on basic literacy, not thoughtful literacy (Allington, 2009). "In other words, most studies use word lists, tests of subskill knowledge, or assessment of low-level comprehension found on traditional standardized tests with their multiple-choice items. We only have a handful of studies that have evaluated interventions against student attainment of the new, higher-order literacy standards" (Allington, 2009, p. 14). Constructing meaning is the goal of comprehension, yet comprehension is a complex process, and it is not necessarily a natural process for many students (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Teachers need to explicitly model comprehension strategies for students. In order to access higher-order literacy standards for comprehension, we need students to not just monitor and enhance their understandings, but also acquire and actively use knowledge, and most importantly, develop insight (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 14). Process drama is one way to foster this type of complex comprehension.

Process drama provides opportunities for rich, inferential comprehension when teachers scaffold students to make connections, ask powerful questions, and to develop sincere empathy for the issues they will be exploring. In doing so, students are empowered by newfound layers of compassion and understanding of people and issues. "Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible" (Greene, 1995, p. 3).

"Process drama is a complex dramatic encounter. Like other theatre events, it evokes an immediate dramatic world bounded in space and time, a world that depends on the consensus of all those present for its existence. Process drama proceeds without a script, its outcome is unpredictable, it lacks

a separate audience, and the experience is impossible to replicate exactly" (O'Neill, 1995, p. xiii). Process drama is a way to engage and immerse students (and teachers) into playing roles as characters in a story with a central theme. As a fellow educator, I simply define process drama as a form of what we traditionally refer to as improvisation, mixed with a Socratic Dialogue (e.g. Murphy & Katula, 2003) approach. Essentially, process drama is role-playing in an improvisational manner, with no scripts and no audience, often using literature as a springboard. One of the many reasons I like process drama is because it is an improvisation with a distinct purpose, which often yields richer insights and levels of empathy for the participants.

Until last year, I had never experienced process drama, and I was amazed at how richly it affected my experience of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. By immersing myself into the process drama and embracing my assigned character's toil, I was emotionally invested, felt tremendous empathy, and connected deeply to both my reading and acting. During my first episode of process drama, I did not even speak. Our leader provided us with music and descriptive instructions to pantomime working night and day for a demanding king. As I shrugged off my initial feelings of silliness at acting in front of my peers, I was surprised at how immediately and intensely I connected with my character's anguish. I was stirred and my emotions were raw. I appreciated how the participants were not even required to speak at first, alleviating a lot of pressure. The exhaustion and injustice our characters faced was a common human experience to which any of us could relate.

After this first episode, our leader asked us to join him by sitting in a circle on the rug to reflect on our first scene. We were so emotionally moved by the experience, the reflection was easy, and the words flowed. I was shocked and moved by

how psychologically invested I had become in the character, and how profoundly I connected to the book. I could not wait to read more, merely based on the experience of one scene of a process drama. I experimented with my role and the actions my character undertook, and I solved problems within the imagined world. By responding imaginatively and dramatically, I generated a new text and was infinitely more invested in subsequent reading and writing. I was transformed, and so was my literary experience.

By participating in process drama, I experienced how it is an effective tool for classroom management, comprehension, and reflection. Above all else, process drama provides students with a vocabulary to articulate complex feelings, and a space to voice any challenges or issues surrounding any literary text. As a classroom management tool, teachers are truly the facilitators, exercising control over the action of the drama, while still allowing students the freedom to explore. At any point, teachers may freeze the drama and reflect upon the choices that students have made.

Built-in reflection periods are points when teachers may challenge students' choices. By asking layered questions, students are challenged to make in-depth connections, and to make thoughtful inferences. Furthermore, in order to engage in the process drama in the first place, demands that students stretch their thinking in order to empathize with the roles they will be playing, serving to both foster comprehension and to promote social justice. As teachers and students unravel the central theme of a literary text, they are able to establish a process drama that will empower students to constantly make choices that will affect the outcome of the drama. These choices evoke some of, if not all, the same feelings that the characters from the literary text are feeling, in turn building sincere empathy. Further process drama techniques such as

journaling, reflecting, acting, movement and music allow for differentiation, enabling every student to learn at his/her own level.

Sincere, higher-level comprehension goes beyond literal understanding and involves the reader's interaction with the text or an issue. Students must extend their thinking beyond a superficial grasp of a concept. Since process drama is often civically-minded, it is a powerful combination when coupled with the deep comprehension, all resulting in social action as curriculum. In this paper, I will explore the support necessary for teachers embarking on process drama. In addition, I will provide a theoretical grounding that enhances our views of the powers of utilizing process drama in the ways it expands our imaginations, and an essential "how to" guide to process drama. Last, I will share loads of teaching ideas, so that readers walk away from this article with lots of specific hands-on techniques to use in their classrooms.

Support necessary for teachers

Teachers deserve the support necessary so that they may bring themselves into the classrooms as creative beings while they build classroom communities that provide a space for students' voices to be creative (O'Neill, 2006). As Dewey said, "It is not enough to have a map in hand; we need to have made the journey" as quoted in (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 155). In order to teach students how to do something, teachers need to be doing it themselves. For teachers to create classrooms as spaces where students engage critically, participate in imaginative endeavors such as process drama, and adopt social action as part of their processes of thinking, we the educators need to be involved in active communities inside and outside of school that explore techniques such as process drama. In the same ways actors are coached to "get

into character," participants of process drama delve so deeply into character that they can develop rich levels of empathy that they may not have otherwise experienced. Students and teachers alike need to be challenged to bring texts alive in their own minds (O'Neill, 2006, p. ix).

Educators are consistently reminded of the enormity of our responsibilities to our students, especially in the ways we aspire to mold citizens who value complex levels of justice and equality. As teachers, we all bring different strengths to our work, and we all take risks in our roles. Process drama can feel risky, and it demands that we shed our fears of appearing "silly" when we act in character. Of course, some teachers are naturally drawn to this work, and others are not. Process drama in the classroom requires time, energy, effort, and humble reflection (Murray, 2006, p. 144). Engaging in this type of work calls for an open mind and an open heart (Woodcock, Lassonde, & Rutten, 2004). Process drama requires a willingness to participate, and the participation requires the ability to communicate (the language with which to do so), the strength to take risks, and a tolerance for ambiguities (Saxton & Miller, 2006).

When engaged in process drama, it is common for discussions to be raised about the struggles that characters face, which include notions of injustice, inequality, and prejudice. Teachers are encouraged to negotiate the issues in an open, reflective manner (Schneider, 2006). Teachers need the language and comfort level necessary for such intense, sometimes difficult conversations. Several suggestions will be provided in the body of this paper. In the end, process drama is a meaningful way to build vocabulary so that all participants feel empowered to express what it is they would like to say.

Theoretical Grounding

In this section, I provide a foundation from which to see and understand the underpinnings of process drama, and the intricate ways it supports our teaching goals. First, I explain the theory of figured worlds, and how we all rely upon our imaginations to learn and grow into autonomous human beings. Second, I touch upon common frustrations we experience as teachers, such as supporting students to produce their own meaningful texts, or to connect to texts or to generate background knowledge. Last, I provide a how-to guide to process drama.

"As students work inside a story using what they know and who they are, their experiences can transform them into who they could be and what they could know" (Saxton & Miller, 2006, p. 31). Through such modes as drama, students and teachers create a space to explore a sense of history, self, and imagination. Students cannot be limited to reading and writing, and instead need other ways of communicating ideas and illustrating their growing knowledge (Medina, 2006).

Drama is a pathway to externalize our literary interpretations, bringing them into a pubic forum (Cordova, 2006). This experience can feel both vulnerable and liberating. Process drama empowers students to mediate between figured worlds, locating themselves so that freedom can occur. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) define figured worlds as socially and culturally constructed realms of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to particular acts, and certain outcomes are valued over others (p. 52). Worlds are populated by agents who engage in a range of meaningful acts or changes of state, and are moved by a specific set of forces. These collective "as if" worlds are sociohistoric, contrived interpretations or imaginations that mediate behavior and inform participants' outlooks. One's ability to sense the

figured world becomes embodied over time, through continual engagement (pp. 52-53).

Figured worlds are historical phenomena, into which we are recruited or which we enter and are developed through the works of their participants. Figured worlds are not things or objects; they are social encounters in which participants' positions matter. Figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced, and they depend upon interaction and intersubjectivity for perpetuation. Last, "figured worlds distribute 'us,' not only by relating actors to landscapes of action (as personae) and spreading our senses of self across many different fields of activity, but also by giving the landscape human voice and tone" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41).

Students need to generate their own texts through drawing, writing, movement, drama, and film. By generating their own texts, students are provided with opportunities to allow their imagined worlds and their school worlds co-exist and co-create (O'Neill, 2006). Adolescents should not simply be thought of as consumers of culture but also as producers of it as well. Production theorists uphold that power and privilege are awarded to some groups and not to others, as the result of capitalism and patriarchy, and that there is a potential for change inherent in the practice of production (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 32). Cultural production is one avenue through which marginalized populations either empower themselves, or unknowingly perpetuate traditional subordination. When adolescents produce their own literacies pertaining to issues they uncovered via process drama, be it in the form of a blog, report, or any sort of imaginative school assignment, they are the empowered authors (e.g. Woodcock, 2010).

A common frustration many teachers share is when students experience trouble making connections to texts, or

when the students' background knowledge does not appear to support their literary experiences. As educators, we know how important it is to access and draw on students' background knowledge in more diverse ways by responding to literature in a more multi-modal fashion (Crumpler, 2006). Yet, this is easier said than done. However frustrating it may be, we need not lament when students do not have the background knowledge seemingly required to make connections to issues and themes. Instead, we can provide rich context and/or a brief hook at the beginning of a lesson to foster connections. Using process drama as a response to literature provides students with opportunities to view each character's experiences from multiple perspectives, developing a more sophisticated sense of morality (Cordova, 2006, p. 130).

A "how-to" guide for process drama. It is helpful to have a list of the basic tasks in establishing a process drama. Just as with anything else in life, though, one has to experience process drama in order to fully understand it. If provided the opportunity, I recommend that teachers interested in process drama see a skilled leader of process drama in action. That said, I still offer my best suggestions to simply try process drama.

First, select an effective pre-text. A pre-text acts as a springboard for students and teacher to plunge into an imagined world, and the details of this world can gradually emerge as the participants contribute to the development of the scene (O'Neill, 1995, p. 1). A pre-text can be a book, but it can also be an idea, an object, or an image. An effective pre-text will lend itself easily to role development and plot structure to occur.

Second, decide on roles for the leader and the participants. One key to officiating process drama is to masterfully frame participants in roles based on the selected

pre-text. The teacher/leader must challenge perspectives and presumptions and maintain the flow (Murray, 2006). Many teachers appreciate process drama for the ways it is active and collaborative. When immersed in process drama, students are empowered to think in complex and creative ways about the topic at hand. Participants can control significant aspects of what takes place, simultaneously experiencing it and organizing it. Students are scaffolded to evaluate what is happening, and then make connections with other texts and experiences.

As teachers, it is our job to invite students to enter the fictional world, and then we must also be in character and play a role. As a full participant, teacher drama leaders can establish the atmosphere, model appropriate behaviors, move the action forward, and challenge the participants from within (O'Neill, 1995, p. 61). "Teacher in role operates to focus the attention of the participants, harness their feelings of ambivalence and vulnerability, unite them in contemplation, and engage them in action" (p. 126).

Third, sequence the scenic units or episodes. Process drama is often built up from a series of episodes or scenic units and this structure allows the gradual articulation of a complex dramatic world, which can then be extended and elaborated (O'Neill, 1995, p. xvi). Once the "stage is set" with a pre-text, the teacher will then lead the students through a series of episodes that provide students with occasions to undertake tasks, make decisions, solve puzzles, discover injustice, and explore imagined scenes and feelings.

Fourth, determine the boundaries of the episodes and their purpose in the process. To ensure the success of episodes, teachers can ask themselves if they hit on the essentials of any good story: human subjects, a distinct setting, a temporal dimension (spatial boundaries), and action (O'Neill, 1995, p.

47). Essentially ask yourself: what is this episode, what is its purpose, and what am I asking of the students?

Last, select the mode of activity for each episode (O'Neill, 1995, p. 131). Some basic ideas for episodes may include dreams, rituals such as family dinners, and even music/dance. Between episodes, teachers can place students in small groups, or remain in whole group to ask questions and reflect on what just occurred. During built-in reflection periods, students may be scaffolded to articulate both explicit and implicit connections with their own lives and the protection provided by the imagined context. Since performance is not the intended outcome of this work, there is very little pressure, and students often feel a sense of freedom, especially once they are used to it.

Teaching Ideas

As a teacher and teacher educator, I am dedicated to sharing teaching ideas that inspire and empower us to try out challenging pedagogies in the classroom. In this section, I provide several hands-on strategies for implementing and enhancing process drama in the classroom. Any new practice can feel unsettling. A teacher in role is able to model appropriate behaviors and language and becomes a part of the imagined world (O'Neill, 1995).

Participating in process drama can feel vulnerable, so it is advisable for teachers to model practices first, and then provide gradual, safe experiences for students before springboarding into a full, large-scale process drama. Once teachers have modeled the techniques involved in process drama, one approach may be to provide students with small group opportunities to "practice" process drama before being immersed in a larger group setting. One example is to select three characters and then place students in groups of three

(Cordova, 2006). Assign each student a role to play. After everyone has had an opportunity to play one or more of the three roles in their small groups, then the entire class can come back to whole group. Teachers can then select three students to play the three roles while the rest of the class is the audience. It can be even more engaging for the audience to also take on a collective role, such as the jury or citizens in a courtroom scene.

Another idea is to place students in small groups and have them read a chapter at a time. Assign each group a character through which to identify. Following each chapter, each small group can discuss the chapter from the viewpoint of the character and respond to the events in role/character in a journal. In the journals, students continue to assume the identity of the character from the book and write from that person's viewpoint. The journals become a place for students to record thoughts, feelings, and reactions with the potential to develop deep empathy for another's perspectives. When utilizing this method, educators such as Kelley (2006) have found that students grow from making low-level connections to rich, emotional understandings of characters.

Teachers can also use visual media, such as a compelling photograph, as a text to be read and interpreted (Long, 2006). Teachers can present students with a gripping photograph and then engage students in arts-based activism by questioning, reflecting, actively listening, and dramatizing in response to the photograph. When this is done in conjunction with traditional fiction and nonfiction narratives from a specific time in history, then the visual literacy and dramatizations become pathways for students to use their imaginations to become some of the characters they have met along the way. As a supplemental activity, teachers can ask students to create character maps to organize their thoughts, thus creating a

springboard for further understandings, interpretations, as well as visual stimuli to unearth potential connections, perspectives, or conflicts (e.g. Long, 2006, p. 98).

Teachers can integrate process drama as a meaningful part of a cohesive unit of study. For example, Schneider (2006) shares how one teacher thoughtfully wove process drama into a unit studying immigration. In this classroom, students read literature, shared their own family stories of immigration, and then brought their immigrant characters alive by embodying them through such focused literacy tasks as diary entries, interview questionnaires, and biographies. "The students visually transformed their classroom by creating a replica of the Statue of Liberty and converted their reading loft to an immigrant ship" (Schneider, 2006, p. 110). Through these creative pathways, students were empowered to become the immigrants they were studying, by additionally constructing family histories, applying for passports, writing letters to their homeland, and completing a photo essay of their experiences using tableaux. They keys to success in this classroom were the ways in which the teacher modeled each of the processes for her students, and the ways in which she also remained in character herself as she participated in the roles. A unit such as this is a "project of possibility" that teaches students to make choices, think critically, and believe they can make a difference in the world (Schneider, 2006, p. 116).

In order to scaffold comprehension when immersed in process drama, O'Neill (1995) offers the following strategies. Together, students and teachers can analyze the situations before them. Next, they can infer the past from which the current scene has sprung. Then, students can explore the relationships between acts and their consequences, or acts and their variations. Last, students can develop expectations and

track them to see if the expectations/predictions were fulfilled or denied.

The following is a listing of other strategies that may spark ideas to complement process drama in the classroom:

- Teachers can engage students to enter texts in multiple ways: talk to a character, ask who is not in a story, ask whose story it is, ask who acts and who is acted upon, ask who speaks and who is silenced, and ask what is valued and how that value is determined (Crumpler, 2006, p. 11).
- Write down questions and ideas that come to mind while reading, which can later serve as a springboard to discussion. Using process drama can provide occasions to explore tensions, ideologies, or moments within a text and also move outside the text's boundaries to imagine the characters' lives in the future (Medina, 2006).
- Identify structural devices to literally set the stage for students to enter the imagined worlds of characters. For example, Kelley (2006) provides the following two models for Christopher Paul Curtis' *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963*: an inquiry in the form of a trial and a ritual in the form of a family dinner.
- Writing a letter to a character can be a powerful vehicle through which to summarize details, process information, and support an opinion. Writing letters is a venue to reveal thinking as well as synthesize, analyze, and evaluate thinking (Kelley, 2006).
- Student-produced texts, such as journals, letters, etc. can be anchor texts when immersed in a process drama to facilitate points made when in character (Kelley, 2006). This can also be seen as a sophisticated use of intertextuality, which promotes critical thinking.

Conclusions

"Drama is an art form that generates and embodies significant meanings and raises significant questions. Every dramatic act is an act of discovery and our acknowledgement of our humanity and community, first in the drama world and then in the real world" (O'Neill, 1995, p. 152).

As teachers, we often feel on "the edge" when it comes to the political nature of educational reform, and our test-laden culture. While there is no denying that there are some troubling issues in our current educational system, students and teachers need to be part of the solutions. We can use what we learn from the arts to construct theories about our moral worlds (Cordova, 2006, p. 124). When we provide students with occasions to theorize and become critical thinkers, and to challenge the status quo, we all develop strategies to deconstruct power relations and imagine new ways of relating to one another in and outside of the classroom (p. 124). Through process drama, with its multiple forms of expression, we make meaning of not just a text, but also our entire world (p. 137). The imagination that is ignited via arts such as process drama is the work necessary to instill positive change (O'Neill, 1995, p. 152). We need to be able to imagine things differently in order to then articulate our thoughts and bring about any change.

Embarking on process drama can feel complex and overwhelming, yet its benefits outweigh the hiccups along the way. As teachers who employ process drama, we need support because we must tolerate anxiety and ambiguity. We model for students how to confront disappointment and how to negotiate both success and failure (O'Neill, 1995, p. 65). "In process drama, the outcome of the journey is the journey itself. The experience is its own destination" (p. 67).

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S.T.A.R Students Thinking and Reflecting

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Abstract

Journal Writing is far from a new concept in any classroom. However, with the notion of balancing non-fiction and literary texts comes a certain responsibility for teachers to provide opportunities for students to comprehend rigorous content and to communicate their ideas effectively through writing. Whether it is defining a word in context, making a hypothesis, listing causes and effects of a war or making a prediction, students need to be challenged by a teacher who can facilitate higher-level thinking through proper questioning. A cross-curricular journal is a tool to make that happen.

S.T.A.R Students Thinking and Reflecting

With an emphasis being placed on literacy across all content areas, it is timely to push the limits and cultivate active writers who are confident, engaged and looking at reading and writing with a positive attitude. With the Common Core Learning Standards and new mandates among us, our number one goal for our students is college and career-readiness. As educators, we are all accountable for student achievement, and what we do in our classroom ultimately affects one another. By bringing cutting edge practices to the forefront, we are raising the bar for our students and challenging ourselves to unite as teachers and take risks.

Looking at data in an effort to inform instruction has peaked my interest for over 15 years. In conducting item analyses following state testing, it has always been eye-opening