



Drama: Ways into critical literacy in the early childhood years

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This paper argues that drama is a critical pedagogy which facilitates a questioning perspective towards texts and the social practices of which they are part. Building on examples from preschool and early school years, the paper explores how drama is uniquely placed to realise the aims of critical literacy because it focuses on making meaning, on the exploration of multiple perspectives and on tensions between different beliefs or world views.

Drama as pedagogy (a teaching/learning methodology)

Views about what drama is differ among members of educational communities so an explanation of what is meant here by 'drama' is needed. The kind of drama discussed here is also called 'process drama' (O'Neill 1995) or 'drama in education' (Bolton 1979) and this defines its central quality of being a process, rather than product oriented, though of course it is possible to end up with a very impressive product. It is not about the performance of scripted plays but about largely improvised, fictional contexts in which students are guided to explore the kinds of situations faced by people in real life, within a distanced and safe environment. Content across the curriculum is available to exploration through process drama, as is knowledge about the discipline of drama itself. Its teaching and learning potential lies in the role-taking and exploration of particular moments within the drama framework and in the guided reflection that occurs outside of the drama itself.

Although this kind of drama has been promoted and disseminated since its beginnings in Dorothy Heathcote's work in the 1960s, there are still very few preschool or primary school teachers who use it regularly (Mackay 2001, Warren 1998). Teachers have differing ideas about what drama is and many feel that they have insufficient knowledge about how to use it in the classroom. One recent study showed a tendency for teachers to equate drama with theatre or scripted plays because their own experience of drama had been of this kind (Mackay 2001). With drama a part of the recently released Creative Arts syllabus in NSW (Board of Studies NSW 2000) it is timely to reconfirm its value in the curriculum and explore links with another curriculum initiative, the promotion of critical literacy.

195

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This paper focuses on the role of drama as pedagogy, a teaching and learning methodology, and explores its potential as a critical pedagogy which has strong, natural connections to the aims of critical literacy. Similarities between the key characteristics of drama and of critical literacy are highlighted. Examples of drama lessons with preschool and early school students form the basis of an exploration of ways in which drama can realise the aims of critical literacy if early childhood teachers adopt a critical stance.

How does drama promote learning?

Rationales for the use of educational or process drama highlight the unique power of drama to tap into children's intrinsic motivations and to involve the emotions for lasting and memorable learning. Many practitioners have written about the learning potential in using process drama (Bolton 1979, Cusworth & Simons 1997, Morgan & Saxton 1987, O'Neill 1995, Warren 1999). Some of the principal ways in which drama promotes learning are:

- It enables children to use and reflect upon what they know and through this assists them to make their own knowledge conscious. Heathcote (cited in Warren 1999) says children are often barely conscious of what they know or understand and drama promotes awareness and ownership of knowledge.
- It draws upon children's current knowledge, interests, understanding and language and offers opportunities to extend these into the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1977) through associated activities and research.
- It involves the emotions which make situations and ideas memorable and assists in lasting learning. From the early establishment of drama as a teaching/learning method theorists have claimed that it is because drama is *felt* that it is so effective, that it promotes 'the deepest kind of change that can take place ... at the level of subjective meaning' (Bolton 1979, p. 31).
- It allows exploration and problem solving in safe, supported and motivated situations where children are more likely to take risks and 'have a go' without the threat of real-life consequences (Cusworth & Simons 1997).

It works from a premise of shared power between students and teacher, allowing students to see their ideas respected and used to further the drama. This promotes students' engagement, ensuring that drama remains an enjoyable and desired activity.

What can students learn through drama?

The learning that can be promoted through drama defies curriculum boundaries. Through doing drama students can learn about drama itself, as a discipline, as well as learn about the content being dealt with. Some of the most common learning areas documented in the literature and demonstrated in drama lessons are the following:

- *cognitive*: language—creating and using spoken, written, visual and multimodal texts in a range of contexts and for different audiences; concept development across all curriculum areas (e.g. science, social science, history) including the discipline of drama as a content area; problem solving; decision-making and research skills.
- *physical*: e.g. spatial awareness, strength, agility, balance.
- *social/cultural/emotional*: co-operation; collaboration; confidence; empathy; tolerance; problem solving; beliefs and values (e.g. about gender, ethnicity, class).
- *creative/imaginative*: the expression of ideas and understanding others' representations of ideas; the expression and understanding of emotions.

Drama as a critical pedagogy

The field of drama in education has been and is still being explored extensively in its theoretical and practical dimensions, and drama's connection to critical literacy is one aspect of this exploration (see, for example, Hertzberg & Ewing, 1998). The approach taken in this paper is to link the key elements of drama commonly identified in the literature (e.g. Board of Studies 2000, Cusworth & Simons 1997, Morgan & Saxton 1987, Warren 1999) to key characteristics of critical literacy. The five key elements of drama to be considered here are those of:

- role
- tension
- focus
- symbol and
- reflection/disengagement (Cusworth & Simons 1997).

The identification of key characteristics of critical approaches to literacy is also an evolving concern. In this paper, the four key characteristics of critical literacy practices identified by Knobel and Healy (1998) are used to inform the following description of drama as a critical pedagogy. The characteristics of critical practice identified by Knobel and Healy are:

1. *Critical questioning*: It is about encouraging students to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and

social practices that advantage particular social groups over others (Gilbert & Taylor cited in Knobel & Healy 1998).

2. *Language as social practice*: It is underpinned by the belief that language—and the way we use language to read, write, view, speak and listen—cannot be separated from the cultural and social practices of which it is part and therefore language is never neutral or value-free.
3. *Analysis*: It is about analysing and evaluating all texts to uncover how they promote certain versions or representations of reality. Doing this 'involves analysing relationships between language, social groups, social practices and power' (Knobel & Healy 1998, p. 4).
4. *Social justice and change*: It is about *transforming* taken-for-granted social and language practices or assumptions for the common good. The development of socially aware and active citizens is an aim of critical literacy. It is about social change (Knobel & Healy 1998, pp. 2-4).

How, then, does the use of process drama as a teaching/learning methodology encompass the above characteristics of critical literacy practice? The following description of each of the key elements of drama (role, tension, focus, symbol, reflection/disengagement) explains how drama practice provides a range of productive starting points for critical literacy.

Role: In process drama students and teacher enact the roles of other people within jointly-negotiated, fictional contexts. Without the adoption of roles there is no drama. Taking on a role requires that participants step into another person's shoes and begin to understand the world from this person's perspective. In role one can experience how others might think, feel and act in response to a particular situation. The adoption of single or multiple perspectives through role is a first step towards conscious awareness of another point of view or set of beliefs. It also enables the role-taker to consciously reflect on her/his own real-life beliefs in contrast to the assumed ones. With appropriate teacher guidance the use of role provides concrete contexts for the investigation and comparison of characters' motivations, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours (language and action) and relationships with others (power).

Tension: Drama employs many of the same elements as theatre, including narrative structures which rely on some form of tension, or problem situation, to drive the drama. Without a problem there is little need to talk, think or act. Unresolved conflict provides the excitement which

engages the learners both intellectually and emotionally and motivates them to become involved in the drama activity (Morgan & Saxton 1987). The tension around which effective classroom drama experiences revolve is created by differing beliefs or perspectives on the problem at hand. Dramatic moments are often played and replayed to explore alternative ways of dealing with an issue, creating opportunities for explicit discussion and enactment of the relationships between beliefs, language and social action.

Focus: Process drama is planned by a teacher who has educational goals, or outcomes, to pursue and therefore each drama experience will have two kinds of focus. The teacher plans engaging experiences, using drama strategies, around a concept or theme under study encompassing both a dramatic focus (the fictional situation/problem) and a teaching/learning focus (the curriculum content e.g. popular children's games). The teacher guides students towards the educational goals from within the drama, as teacher-in-role, and through discussion and reflection outside of the dramatic episodes. Some examples of specific drama strategies and content used with students in the first years of school are discussed later in the paper, with ideas for extending the work into more critical practices.

Symbol: Symbols are used in drama to represent shared meanings being developed by the group or meanings recognised within social groups and cultures. While classroom drama does not require the use of props and costumes, it is strengthened through the use of relevant symbols, such as an empty bowl to represent hunger. Discussion about the choice and meaning of symbols provides opportunities for reflection on their social and cultural embeddedness, with even young children being able to identify meanings and social practices associated with symbols e.g. a red heart or yellow chicken. Investigating symbols can lead to questions and understandings about the social constructedness of their meanings and to research into the origins of symbols associated with the social groups to which students belong (Knobel 1998, p. 103).

Reflection and disengagement: In order to maximise opportunities for learning through drama, time for reflection and disengagement is considered essential. Planned questions and activities encourage students to focus on aspects of the drama experience and to make learning conscious by, for example, comparing their own lives/beliefs with those enacted, researching issues that arose within the drama or planning experiences to extend the dramatic exploration. The possibilities for questioning, challenging and planning alternative courses of action make this component of process drama lessons an obvious site for developing critical practices.

Drama's unique contribution to critical literacy

The general links between drama and critical practices outlined above show the potential of drama as a critical pedagogy. However, the unique contribution that drama can make towards the development of critical literacy is that, in drama, students use both language and action, experiencing language as social practice first-hand and having opportunities to replay and reflect upon the relationships between language and social practices. Unlike other classroom experiences where meanings are made through language only, effective process drama requires language to be used in a much wider set of cultural and social situations, often accompanied by action. Further, in order to engage drama participants, the social/cultural situations are built around a point of tension between opposing attitudes or beliefs. These components of drama open up unique possibilities for students to become personally committed to examining both the language and the social practices associated with a range of perspectives on and beliefs about the issues at the centre of the drama.

Of course, the use of process drama will not automatically lead to critical practices without the teacher's commitment to such practices. Relevant questions and reflective activities need to be framed within a critical discourse. Knobel (1998, p. 94) warns that simply adopting different character perspectives does not constitute a critical approach. Students can be guided towards understanding that all texts, whether spoken, written, visual or multimodal, are not neutral or value-free but are constructed by people who have particular world views, values and beliefs and who therefore represent reality (use language and act) in different ways. Using drama teachers can promote critical literacy by constructing activities that explore different versions of an event and ask questions about the effects of different times, places and cultures on such events. Critical strategies that have been suggested for use with texts are also applicable to drama. For example, Green (2000) outlines the following strategies used to assist students in adopting a critical stance towards texts:

- Comparing different versions of the same story.
- Retelling known stories from a different point of view.
- Using teacher questions to frame the discourse.
- Teacher and students jointly constructing texts.

Guiding questions to promote critical reflection on texts have been provided by many writers, including questions appropriate for use with children in the preschool and early school years (e.g. O'Brien & Comber 2000, p. 156). Many of these questions can be adapted for use in drama contexts by focussing on characters, their motivations and actions.

Questions such as those proposed below are already an integral part of creating improvisations within process drama:

- How should this character behave? Or, how is the character behaving? What can we tell from the character's language? Why is the character behaving/speaking in this way? How does she/he feel (what's her/his attitude) about the situation?
- What other behaviour/attitude could the character have? How would her/his behaviour and language change?
- What kind of relationship do the characters have between them? Does any character have more power than any other? What kind of power do they have?
- What does the character want to happen? Why does she/he want this to happen? How would this outcome affect the character? How would it affect other participants in the drama? What else could happen instead and how would this affect all the participants?

In drama contexts, the above questions can be used to inform alternative enactments around a situation, with follow-up reflection and comparisons with similar real life or literature-based situations. The interrogation of a character's worldview, values and beliefs can be achieved through drama strategies which bring the lives, motivations and language of others to life for young students.

Through drama to critical literacy in early childhood education

The point has often been made that it is never too early to promote critical literacy awareness (e.g. O'Brien & Comber 2000, p. 157) and the examples drawn upon in the following section illustrate the potential of process drama strategies to provide ways into critical literacy in preschools and the first years of school. The drama lessons outlined are taken from my own work with young children and work done collaboratively with teacher education students. While the original lessons created opportunities for students' literacy development through talking, listening, acting, reading and writing, they stopped short of taking an overtly critical perspective. Using the lesson outlines as starting points, I have offered suggestions for extending them towards a critical awareness of texts (spoken, written, visual and multimodal) and social practice.

The development and resolution of a complete narrative or the devising of alternative endings for a narrative are common outcomes for process drama with young students. This kind of drama experience is highly suited to young children because it involves them directly in creating the narrative, from the invention of its characters, context and

complications to its successful resolution. The teacher guides the drama by planning for maximum student input within a structure of drama strategies that will facilitate a satisfying result for all. The teacher plans for the use of guiding questions and strategies to build the narrative. This can include planning the beginning situation, roles and a problem (complication), selecting and facilitating the workable episodes for enactment. The following drama lessons are built around this principle of achieving a satisfying narrative structure within which students make decisions and solve problems while also meeting other educational objectives. The lessons are organised according to the focus material.

1. Popular culture: Superheroes (preschoolers)

In a series of drama experiences with preschool children around the theme of 'Superheroes', activities drew upon what children knew about particular superheroes, e.g. what powers they had, how they dressed and what kinds of things they did to help people. The drama sessions were designed to enable the children to use their knowledge to create their own narratives involving superheroes, within structures provided by the teacher but also requiring them to meet challenges and enact solutions along the way. One drama experience proceeded as follows:

- The children create a superhero: through the teacher's guiding questions and with a teacher-education student to take on the role, the children dress and name the superhero.
- Problem narrated by the teacher: a train has come off its tracks and people are stranded.
- The children build the track (from long, wooden blocks) in preparation for the drama. Teacher gains agreement for an imaginary train and children sit inside train boundary as passengers and sing a train song.
- Enact derailment after planning how and stressing safety rules.
- The superhero attempts several times to reposition the train but fails and asks children's help.
- The children disembark and enact, with teacher guidance, coordinated effort to right the train. After several attempts children succeed and are thanked by the superhero.
- Everybody gets back onto train and complete journey with a train song.

Extending into critical literacy

1. Through questions for reflection on drama: Did the superhero solve the problem alone? Could one person solve such a problem? How was problem solved? Can children recall superhero stories they have seen, heard or been read that were similar to their story? If so, in what ways?

2. View, read or retell other superhero stories and compare problems and how they are solved. Children may note the prevalence of physical fighting to resolve disagreements in some superhero stories. Discuss other ways of conflict resolution and relate to preschool context.

3. Have children identify a range of superheroes and powers each has. Teacher, using children's input, plans further drama experiences around these.

Through enacting, discussing and creating their own versions of superhero scenarios, children may begin to recognise similar patterns in the portrayals of superheroes in other media, such as books, comics, television, videos and electronic games. This is a first step towards seeing themselves as authors of texts and recognising the often formulaic construction of texts by others.

2. Popular culture: Pokemon (Kindergarten)

This lesson was planned and implemented with a Kindergarten class whose teacher had identified 'Toys' as the current class topic. The lesson was taught by a student-teacher, with the support of two others, and was based on the electronic game, Pokemon. One intention was to legitimise this popular cultural pastime whose existence and associated artefacts are often not appreciated by schools. Another was to empower the Kindergarten students by recognising their expertise and knowledge of a phenomenon not understood by many adults and allowing them to demonstrate it. The teacher's role, reflecting the reality, was that of one who doesn't know. Specifically, the teacher would take the role of a young woman, called Belinda, whose much younger niece had challenged her to a Pokemon battle. Belinda's problem, providing the tension in the drama, was her lack of knowledge about the Pokemon characters and their various powers. She asked for the Kindergarten students' help to learn about the game in preparation for the match with her niece. The drama lesson was organised so that the students, working in three groups, undertook to teach 'Belinda' about three different Pokemon. They would verbally describe each one as well as show 'Belinda', through enactment, the behaviours each engaged in.

As expected, all of the Kindergarten students were totally engaged by the drama (although some were not familiar with Pokemon) and used both spoken language and enactment to coach the teacher in the necessary knowledge. The student-teachers also scribed their descriptions of the powers of the three specific Pokemon and these large written texts were used as reminders during presentations to 'Belinda'. For example, one group of Kindergarten students had chosen to explain the Pokemon called Jigglypuff and constructed the following list of attributes with a student-teacher:

JIGGLYPUFF

- ✓ sings them to sleep
- ✓ scribbles on their faces when angry
- ✓ crosses her arms when angry
- ✓ has a blown up face
- ✓ sings in a microphone 'Jigglypuff'
- ✓ double slaps

After successfully imparting their expertise to 'Belinda', the Kindergarten students were thanked and the drama ended there. The reflection focussed on other favourite toys and what made particular toys enjoyable. While the lesson created opportunities for literacy development through talking, listening, acting and reading, it did not have a critical perspective. Some of the many possibilities for building on this starting point are offered below. In moving them towards a critical awareness of the Pokemon game and characters, the intention is not to discourage students from involvement and enjoyment of the game. It is instead a way of both validating and building on students' home experiences and interests while fulfilling some of the educational aims of critical literacy.

Extending into critical literacy

1. Investigation of Pokemon characters' names: The name Pokemon itself is a contraction of the words Pocket Monsters and many of the Pokemon characters have names which play with parts of words or complete words. Most names relate to characters' attributes and are formed by combining contractions or by constructing compound words. Jigglypuff, for example, looks like a puffed-up 'ball of fluff' (Barbo 1999, p. 49) and Bellossom, whose name is obviously derived from the word 'blossom', is a Flower Pokemon who has petals and attacks using 'sweet scent', 'stun spore' and 'petal dance' (Barbo 2001, p. 39). Tracing the morphemic origins of a selection of Pokemon names focuses on the human construction of these names and opens the way for students to emulate some of the naming patterns (e.g. artificially stretching out the sounds in a word, as in *bellossom*) to create new names for Pokemon or for a new game. (This could also prove a productive pathway into specialist knowledge about topics such as flower parts as the information on Bellossom suggests.)

2. Based on the examination of Pokemon names, students could invent new names and new characters for the Pokemon game with specific powers and behaviours. Scaffolded by the teacher, this could be done orally first, recorded in writing and drawings and presented dramatically through enactment of behaviours.

The transformation and active production of texts in these ways is one of the aims of critical literacy (Knobel 1998, p. 95). Students can

become aware of the constructedness of all texts as they deconstruct aspects of the Pokemon game and reconstruct their own versions.

3. Using literature: interrogating characters (preschool or early school)

Children's literature is a rich source of ideas for exploration through drama and, with sensitivity to the cultural beliefs of groups represented among the students, stories, poems and rhymes from different cultures can be used. Warren (1999) documents several drama experiences based around traditional fairy tales and nursery rhymes that she has implemented with children from two years of age. Once stories or rhymes have been introduced to children through telling or reading they can provide characters and themes for exploration in drama.

One drama strategy, sometimes called 'hot-seating', involves interviewing a character from a story or rhyme and asking her/him questions. Characters to be interviewed can be those in the known story or peripheral characters who might be mentioned or not but who would have an interest in the events of the story. With young children it is advisable for the teacher to take on the role of the character being interviewed because it requires some skill to maintain the role and to answer with consistency and with implication. Successful hot-seating or interviewing requires a focus and the preparation of relevant questions. For example, if interviewing the mother of the three little pigs, the focus might be on trying to find out how she felt about the pigs leaving home. If interviewing one of the little pigs the focus might be on why he wanted to leave home at such a young age. In any case, part of the preparation of questions for the interview is to speculate on the possible reasons for a particular event or motivations for actions. Some examples of interviewing characters from a story will illustrate the potential of this drama strategy in relation to critical literacy.

The story of Cinderella contains a number of themes that can be explored through interviewing characters related to the story. The specific focus chosen will depend upon which major theme is to be focussed on: rags to riches transformations; sibling rivalry and stepfamilies; patriarchal and stratified societies; gender inequality; royalty; wealth and poverty; etc. If several characters are interviewed then it is possible to compare their preoccupations and their perspective on the world. To strengthen the drama framework, the children also require plausible roles, for example, as palace officials who are investigating the mystery woman who disappeared at midnight. This gives them a reason to be interviewing everybody connected with the ball. A more general role for the children would be as reporters for the local newspaper or for a television report. Possible characters for interviewing might be:

1. One of the stepsisters. The teacher negotiates a focus for the interview (What would we want to ask her? Children are often interested

in fairness and may want to know why Cinderella is treated so badly) and an attitude for the role (What will she be like? e.g. arrogant, kind, jealous, sympathetic?).

2. A servant who waited on guests at the ball. Possibilities for the servant's attitude would be discussed with the children. She/he might be tired and resentful or honoured to be present at the ball. Alternative attitudes can be demonstrated by the teacher in role following suggestions by the children concerning language and demeanour appropriate to the attitude.
3. A royal visitor from a neighbouring country. Interviewing such a character might afford opportunities to find out about children's perceptions of the accoutrements of wealth. This could later be compared with the lives described by characters like the servant, e.g. Cinderella herself, a coachman or a seamstress who sewed the fine dresses of the ball guests.
4. A character from another version of the Cinderella story e.g. Princess Smartypants (Cole 1986) or Prince Cinders (Cole 1987) by Babette Cole. After reading these versions of the story to children, the characters of Smartypants or Prince Cinders could be interviewed and compared with that of Cinderella.

Through the kinds of drama activities suggested in the examples above the early childhood teacher can begin to develop students' awareness of the ideologies embedded in stories and of the beliefs of particular characters within them. Because drama provides a means for students to manipulate these texts and others, such as popular games or superhero scripts, it encourages understandings about the human authorship of texts. In drama activities students learn through constructing their own meanings that all texts are constructed and therefore open to questioning and to change. By taking on roles students try out alternative perspectives first-hand, using language and action, making these differing perspectives uniquely available for examination and challenge. Because drama revolves around points of tension between beliefs or perspectives it provides teachers and students with opportunities to identify and reflect on a range of differing views and the ways in which they are manifest both in text and in social practice.

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