

Feature article

## “INTRINSICALLY PURPOSEFUL, FLEXIBLE AND DYNAMIC”

*This article was first published by Drama Australia in the 2000 edition of the Australian Drama Education Magazine. It is reprinted here with permission from Christine Comans, Director of Publications for Drama Australia.*

### Literacy and drama

The suggestion that “all teachers are teachers of literacy” is a claim most of us accept, but just what we see ourselves doing may vary considerably. As technology continues to change the ways humans communicate, and as research makes us more aware of how we make meaning, definitions of literacy have broadened, and so have the ways that it is taught. Literacy was taught in the 1800s in Australia, “but out of moralizing textbooks and more as a means of teaching discipline and subordination than as a source of power” (Davey & Miller: 1988). In the 1940s, at the beginnings of mass education, literacy learning was largely aimed at promoting a workforce able to deal with the new complexities of working life. Literacy was understood to be mastery of the mechanical skills of reading and writing, and literacy learning meant applying phonics to specially constructed basal texts.

By the 1970s, however, meaning-making was understood as much more complex than decoding (or “barking at print”) and the functional view of literacy prevailed. Learning to read and write had to be useful in real-life tasks, so teaching needed to be based on the students’ own writing and upon real, communicative literature. Since the early 1990s, definitions of literacy have stressed its social embedment. Sociocultural theorists refute the view that learning to read and write can be reduced to mastering generalised skills; rather, they assert, reading and writing emerge from particular social contexts. Allan

Luke (1993:4) says literacy refers to “Social practices that are put to work in institutions such as the family and community, school and workplace according to stated and unstated rules. It is shaped and used in institutional sites and events...its possession and use are part and parcel of what makes these occasions...what they are”. As social contexts change, literacy practices change too. Writing and sending an e-mail to a friend involves quite different tasks from those involved in answering an advertisement for a job, or word-processing a report for the science teacher, or composing a letter of protest when SOCOG doesn’t give you a seat at the Olympics!

Teaching based on the sociocultural model also takes into account the fact that literacy learning itself is not neutral. The ideology of the text, of the teacher and of the education system affects what is learned. Effective literacy teaching, according to this model, requires that students critique and analyse a wide variety of texts, interrogating the sender’s intentions. Especially in multicultural Australia, it is recognised as important to take into account the different cultural backgrounds of our

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students. Visual literacy, or the ability to deconstruct images used to communicate in film or TV or magazines, is also important. Becoming literate in all these texts is gaining what Bourdieu called “social capital” and has to do with the distribution of knowledge and power.

What understanding of literacy, then, is current in Australian educational systems? There are some contradictions implied in the 1991 policy document of the Department of Education, Employment and Training. On the one hand, literacy is described there as:

the ability to read and use written information, and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society....Literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop through an individual’s lifetime.

Here the concepts of multiple literacies and critical thinking are accepted and the need for the sociocultural approach implied. However, later on, the policy statement links illiteracy and unemployment. It stresses that literacy is needed to assist in Australia’s economic development, but seems to suggest that it can be learned as a decontextualised set of skills. As we move further into the new millennium we are confronted by contradictory theories and different suggested directions. At the same time, as we realise the importance of local contexts, the impact of global forces is felt. Never before has the emergence of the reflective practitioner been so important in the teaching profession. Any initial training we have had is rapidly superseded by new concerns; education truly needs to be a life-long process, not only for students but for teachers too. We need continually to interrogate our own practice, and ensure that we do still have the development of each student as the centre of our concern. We need continually to update our own understanding of what needs to be learned, and how to teach it. Nowhere is this more important than in literacy teaching.

And where does drama fit in all this? If we accept the argument that ALL teachers are teachers of literacy, what special ability do drama teaching and learning bring to the task? LoBianco and Freebody (1997) have detailed seven main pedagogical approaches to the development of effective literacy skills, and several of these are well reflected in good drama teaching. For example, the authors identify using the students’ own experiences or using literature as effective. Most of us have harnessed real-life contexts for our drama work. We use enactments of the stories that students tell, and these often lead to reading and writing in

role. From nursery rhymes and fairy tales to superheroes and film plots, many existing narratives are explored in drama classes. Great practitioners like Cecily O’Neill have used myth as a pre-text for a drama class (e.g. those by Haseman and O’Toole or Burton) and important drama textbooks explore ways that a teacher can work with established texts.

Drama is especially effective in promoting critical literacy. This concept comes from the sociocultural approach and represents the highest order of meaning-making. Critical literacy goes well beyond decoding the print; students are encouraged to apply their understandings of their own social contexts and to detect how the writer manipulates them towards a particular position. In establishing a strong personal connection between the student and the text, critical literacy can make students highly motivated, and motivation is crucial for success in learning how to read and write. One way drama promotes critical literacy is by exploring texts from different perspectives. For example, a K-6 teacher might explore the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty”, not from the perspective of the tale-teller, but from the soldiers’ point of view, or from Humpty’s own imagination; older students might explore it for the political metaphor.

In order to change the perspective, students need to apply understandings from their own lived experiences. Kathleen Warren describes exploring the fairy story Cinderella by having students enact roles of people cleaning the palace after the ball. It is easy to imagine extending her drama with a written proclamation from the palace, which the children as experts help the teacher (in role as a less literate person) to read. As the drama gives rise to the need, letters could be written in role to complain to the prince about the state of the ballroom.

Whatever the level of learning, K-12 or adult learning, drama lessons need to be carefully planned. This involves three inter-related tasks: choosing the content of the lesson and the stimulus to evoke it; choosing the roles to be adopted; and structuring the drama tasks. The choice of stimulus may depend on the students’ background knowledge of language or culture and their particular interests. Especially with difficult texts, information may need to be fed into the drama, perhaps by the teacher in role, or students may like time to pool their ideas so they can maximise their social understanding. The initial steps of the lesson edge students into the drama world. They become imaginatively engaged, and are positioned to use their own lived experiences. To lure students into

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drama, Heathcote used apparent musings such as: “I wonder what made the early sailors set out to sea, when they didn’t really even know whether or not the earth was flat?” Their imaginations caught, students often began by literacy tasks such as writing the contracts that would sign them on for the ship’s inaugural journey.

Cecily O’Neill uses pre-texts – stimuli which imply a strong context and characters, and plant clues for the creation of an enticing drama world. Teachers can choose and set up significant moments implied in the pre-text around which students create their drama. They can slow the process with different techniques and structures encouraging analysis and reflection. For example, students can begin with a story’s ending, and work backwards, exploring why it happened. Focus can be shifted from what happened to why or how it happened. At different points in the drama, students can be led to read and write – in role as a character, or out of role reflecting upon their own experience. Depending upon the drama task, different genres of writing can be adopted. For example, in a class exploring science through drama, students combined science tests (such as fingerprint comparisons) and re-enactment of possible murder scenarios. Eventually they wrote a forensic report for the coroner’s court based on their discoveries.

One important way of developing critical literacy is by using an established text. In 1996 in NADIE’s Phoenix Text project, primary teachers from each state began their drama teaching with the same text, van Allsburg’s *The Mystery of Harris Burdick* and these were reported in the NADIE Monograph. In Victoria, Tiina Moore started with a picture from the book showing a girl in shadows, lying in bed. Her arm has dropped from holding a book, out of which a vine is growing. The picture is sub-titled “MR. LINDEN’S LIBRARY *He had warned her about the book. Now it was too late.*” Deconstructing this picture, her class then built an original story in their chosen genre (the supernatural), based on one student’s suggestion that “Tess” (as they named the character in the bed) has somehow entered the book. In order to develop the story, the class drew upon their knowledge of pop culture, using jargon from “The X Files”, describing Tess as in a state of “forever sleep”. As teacher in role, Moore facilitated them into expert roles: doctors trying to suspend their scientific disbelief in the paranormal and bring Tess back to life and out of the book. As in all good teaching, the drama evolved within a structure set in place by the teacher, but filled out in unexpected ways by the students. Tiina Moore described her intentions for the lessons.

“My own practice is rooted in drama for literacy whereby narrative becomes the basis for speculation about the story outcomes and for embedding drama skills and structure. Form and content are intertwined in improvisational work in order that children first have something to say and secondly have choices as to how best to say it...I wanted

every student to feel he/sh the story and I wanted the experience to be a strong and memorable end to their primary years. I foresaw a synthesising of many learned drama structures and forms within what I hoped would be a good story”.

To help the class create their own story from their exploration of the visual text, Moore used a range of drama strategies: for example, mantle of the expert, chant, thought tracking, hot-seating and writing in role. They reflected in journals, and wrote in and out of role. As is the case with many drama lessons, the pressure of time meant that Tiina had to end more abruptly than she wished. As a final task she asked students to write in role addressing the story’s ending and was pleasantly surprised by the responses:

“In several instances students who were very self-conscious and seemingly minimally involved...had written poignantly in role. It is always worth checking shifts in understanding in more ways than simply through teacher observation. Insights often come out of discussions...allotted significance by the luxury of time”.

A second way of developing critical literacy is to use the students’ own experiences. One way useful to establish role distance and yet encourage students to apply their real-life understanding is to use “squibs”, the little fillers in newspapers which give the dry bones of a story which may be given more fully in the next day’s paper. Because these come out of our culture, they will be relevant. It is best to find reasonably ambiguous stories, where gaps are present or possible, and which have the potential to link with the students’ experience. One that I have used is “The Baby on the Train”, which taps into the fact that many Sydney students come to school by train.

*On Friday 20<sup>th</sup> August at 5:30pm a group of school children found an eighteen-month old baby, apparently abandoned on the train between Maintown and Greystanes. The baby was in good health, apparently well cared for. They took the baby to the stationmaster, who handed it to the police.*

Using this fragment the class explores the text and creates an original story. What makes this pretext palatable for use with young students is the possibility of a happy ending and the fact that it is the children, not adults, who save the baby. Students are lured into drama by the teacher in role, as a representative of the Transport Ministry, conducting a “Train Summit Inquiry” into problems encountered by city commuters. The students can choose roles – e.g. guards, passengers, stationmasters – for this activity. In the course of the summit the teacher elicits a real description of peak hour trains from several points of view. Who is likely to be on board? Which groups of children might be on an evening peak hour train? How safe is it?

The teacher reads the squib, and the pretext is launched. Which questions occur to you? What are the gaps in this story? What don't we know? In groups of four the students are asked to prepare role-plays set back in time one year, when the baby was 6 months old. Each group can decide its own family circumstances but they are given a built-in tension – to choose a moment which is happy but which contains the seeds of a future problem. The baby is to be present in each role-play as a bundle in a blanket. Each group shares its presentation; the spectators are asked to identify the seeds of the future problem buried in each role-play.

Then, six months later, the problem has escalated and each baby is a year old. Groups discuss the problems, and elect representatives who are simultaneously hot-seated as a panel on a TV show discussing childcare: its joys and difficulties. They may choose to talk about their difficulties or, reveal them in subtext, through voice or body language.

Out of role, the class can discuss which one of the emerging stories they now want to pursue in drama. They can improvise different versions of how that baby came to be abandoned, and writing tasks of different genres can be implemented: a newspaper story for the next day; instructions to railway employees on how to deal with lost children; a diary entry by the child's mother; a narrative of the child's future life.

In conclusion, drama is a very important way to ensure that each of our students develops to the best of his or her abilities. One most important way it does this is by facilitating literacy learning that is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic.

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