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## Drama to Enrich and Centre Children's Written Language

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In this paper I intend to point to some theoretical links first, describe briefly what particular activity in a process drama I find so valuable, then give examples of the power this approach has in enabling all children to grow in the classroom. I suggest the very valuable role the drama performs in furnishing children with the *desire* and the *need* to write in many different written English language forms.

The essence of what I am saying today is congruent with humanistic researchers such as Jerome Bruner who emphasise that personal narrative is a powerful vehicle for children's learning. The particular drama approach I explain today is one powerful way to allow children to tell their own life narratives. From the strength of their own standing place, their own families, their own cultural experiences they work within the teacher provided framework to build a community and through this they *create a shared class narrative*. In telling our lives, (for the teacher is joining with the children), we use our memories to plan for possible futures, (Wall, 1990). Bruner as long ago as fifteen years, determined our teaching task was to "create in the young an appreciation that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (Bruner, 1986). Full class role in process drama does that.

Bruner, known initially as an educational psychologist, has moved into a broader field where he is a philosophical commentator of breadth and depth and the work relevant to this drama approach is his investigation into told narrative. He recorded adults telling their lives and observed that as they completed their narration they were filled

with an impulse to *change* their lives; he discovered that these adults created an inner map for their future by telling their stories from the past (Bruner, 1994).

Narrative in children's work has been studied for a long time. Both *The Tidy House* from Carol Steedman, and *At the Very Edge of the Forest* from Carol Fox delineated what two researchers found about children telling and writing their *own* stories. Steedman's work, retaining its relevance nearly twenty years after its publication, was a report on nine-year-old girls involved in social writing. Together they created imaginary lives. As they investigated possibilities for the future in some ways these girls challenged and subverted the male dominated lower socio-economic restrictions on women's lives; in some ways they sought out and identified different possibilities for their own lives to be. Fox was concerned to record the effect of written children's literature on children's oral story telling and shows the rich literary oral language incorporating aspects of story. This stream is not fashionable, but it persists, and for instance, Anne Haas Dyson has produced a noticeable body of work on the social role of children's writing (see, for example, Dyson, 1994, Fox, 1993 and Steedman, 1982).

Anne Haas Dyson began by listening to and encouraging social talk and writing in the classroom, and moved toward a nexus where the language from children's world outside the classroom becomes wholly integrated with their writing in school. Her presentation in Adelaide in 1999 showed a writing group of children managing an imaginary baseball team which travelled all over the United States. Issues of training, fitness, payment, the emotional well being of the players, plane travel, physical geography, advertising and negotiating contracts were some of the items children were dealing with - all of course in a richly imagined field and all becoming part of their written programme. The key to this field was that the children brought the impetus to write from their own inner lives.

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There is also an affinity with the more theoretical and influential Russian linguist M.M. Bakhtin, who was most active academically in the 1930s and 1940s but whose work has only been accessible to English speaking scholars since about 1980 (Bakhtin, 1981). In Bakhtin's work on language in the novel he explicated the many different threads which make up a novel, but argued how effectively this myriad of threads is woven into one language item - the novel itself. Dyson sees Bakhtin's work as informing her research and classroom practice and I join her in this position. Bakhtin proposes that every language site shares this characteristic of an immensely complex input of many different forms of language - what he would call heteroglossia - but also that each language *site* has its own life. Despite the complexity of any language site each can be a self-perpetuating unique occurrence. The way in which this language community becomes an homologate or self-reinforcing entity has direct classroom application. If we use drama where the whole class, including the teacher, is in role we can create a language community in our classrooms that is not dissimilar to Bakhtin's deconstruction of a novel. This becomes possible not solely when teachers have a lively empowering active language programme - reading, talking, thinking, presenting, writing. It is realised more strongly when each child is able to raise his/her own voice working on their own topic in a shared activity, when the child is able to determine the individual place from where they speak. Within the framework of each drama children's linguistic expertise, no matter how varied, their cultural expertise, curriculum knowledge, emotional knowledge and understanding, and their practical knowledge of how the world works all come into play. It is evident that narrative theory and cultural studies are relevant, but I move now to what we can observe happening.

I would like to explain that I speak here of one activity in the stream of process drama. It is that of a full class role for teachers and children who, together, develop a shared story around a created community unique to that classroom where drama

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techniques - such as hot seating, freeze frame, voices on the wall - are used episodically to develop a fuller understanding of the community and ourselves (O'Neill, 1995, Neelands, 1990). The teacher provides the drama frame (usually based on the curriculum), the distance in framing and the specific drama techniques. In the primary and first scenario we create a community where everyone is an adult, everyone has a job, and we begin by sitting around a large rug with a collection of smooth grey stones. I introduce if the class is new to this. "I am Ms Anna Peachy and I am a lawyer with three teenagers who attend the local high school. I live here (putting my stone down on the rug) near the sea on a hill at the back of this large bush area." In turn each child states their name, their occupation, their family and living arrangements and occupation. This child choice of role is crucial - it is the single element that allows each child genuine control. This statement of persona, family, occupation is the first session. *Every* child (and 90% of adults) chooses a role that they can genuinely imagine themselves in, and it is here in the child's choice of role that the connection to home worlds and inner beliefs is maintained.

Within the community children choose what suits them – one child has a father in the Waitangi ceremony and his son is an expert on waka - ceremonial canoes which were made in some numbers for the 1990 centenary celebrations. He drew designs, wrote instructions, prepared vocabulary lists in *both languages*, introduced class members to some of the preparation carvers had to do before carving and was the resident expert on waka. Later in the same drama he became a camera-man paired up with the most academic child in the class room and together they conducted interviews in the community on how they were going to evacuate the town since a volcano was predicted to explode. Each child's actions and decisions are considered seriously by the others - *and not brought to the teacher*. "It's no use asking her, she never knows what to do!" was said of me (in role I was a dopey secretary) in the middle of the session where the town was being evacuated. Later that year, I had been postponing a

new drama, and arrived in class late one day to find the children had set up the room and were in the middle of a drama of their own choice. Security guards were at the door, a boardroom table with four people at each end and an attentive audience were “solving the wharf problem”. There had been a strike and the “bosses” representatives and the “workers” representatives (both groups mixed gender) were negotiating a solution. I was told, “You can be a secretary or something”. The class did not need me.

In the second session we transfer the community to a very large blank piece of paper which becomes our wall map to be filled and referred to. From the moment we are half way around the class in the initial session there is silent excitement. The drama dominates class and playground conversations for the next three weeks. Children add to the visualised community on the wall - drawing in roads, dams, rivers, hospitals, harbour facilities and schools. They design notices and write budgets for their businesses, they compile real writing items about “their” lives. I might introduce tension (always in role, not as teacher) by informing the community that our water supply is becoming contaminated, or that a storm warning means we will have to evacuate the town. As children resolve such crises they may develop oral arguments, present written reports, table instructions, draw on past history, but *they* solve the problem in the community, not the teacher (Holt, 1994).

Because we talk about honouring narrative as a tool for children’s learning one may assume that we are talking about children telling stories but it is more accurate to think of the process as children living their lives, considering future possibilities of lives, in the classroom, in an imagined framework. In the following section I am giving you real examples of what happened in classrooms, of children’s words, of children’s reflections on what this community drama is.

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The following examples come from some work I did with classes which were not my own. The new entrant room of five year olds (15 children) had been working on the story of the Pied Piper - not my choice: I see it as mass kidnapping! We had completed several centre-ing activities such as drawing the vicious rats and the children in this session were trying to persuade the Mayor - a college student in a big coat - to pay the Pied Piper. The class teacher immediately raised her eyebrows as three children who had *not previously participated in class discussion* took a major part in this activity. I noted the words of two of them.

A Samoan boy who had not spoken in the class except to agree with everyone by smiling, nodding, and doing spoke strongly for the *first time* in class. He moved into an adult role (not common for five year olds) and said clearly, "You must give my children back! I am Samoa. We have a big family; we are different. I must have *all* the family. I need my children. Give them back." The second child I quote was a five year old New Zealand born Gujarati speaking child. She had not spoken English to the teacher – although she did use English in the playground and in groups. She said; "You must pay. Give back the money. If you say you will pay you must pay. You have to pay. You must be honest." These were two very powerful outbursts and were possible only because the children concerned spoke from their *turangawaewae*, their own standing place, which they were able to bring into school because the drama framework was an invitation to be themselves. The Samoan boy was talking about the role of family in his Pacific society, explaining cultural difference – that is, in his eyes, families have a stronger role in Samoan society than they did in New Zealand society. The Gujarati girl spoke from the world of commerce - she played in, ate, and helped in the shop as did all her brothers and cousins. The commercial world, which operates by verbal contracts, was her world. Her conviction enabled her to use complex English structures. These two language examples indicate the extent to which children of diverse backgrounds draw on their own life expertise and integrate

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home and school learning when the framework enables “centred” choices. What Dorothy Heathcote calls the Mantle of the Expert can be passed to children by the teacher and in this situation where children choose their own role they also choose which expertise they are utilising.

Two further examples follow. A year later I took a community drama with the teacher of G. and 23 other six-year-olds. G. made her house in the community, “all concrete ... concrete walls, concrete floor, concrete roof”. When I (in role) weakly questioned whether there were flowers outside she said firmly, “No it’s all concrete, the garden.” When I saw her later in the week she ran up in the playground and explained she had to have a concrete house because “Concrete doesn’t burn, Ms Holt.” There had been a fire when she was upstairs above the shop. No-one was hurt, but G. had decided she could protect herself (and her children) by having fireproof material. In the same drama D., who had revolving family members caring for him and his four sisters, made a house “with big walls all around the garden with only one door and only one key and only the children have the key”. In the house, captured forever, were all the family carers - both his parents, his three grandparents and an aunt - and the children would let themselves in and out each day while the adults would be eternally at home. A week later when the class had had two more sessions adding community facilities and planning social lives (and voluntarily written many items related to the drama) D. told me he was going to let the adults out “one at a time to do the shopping”. These examples illustrate the ease with which children consider patterns in their lives.

From my own class I quote first a ten-year-old who chose to write about the ongoing drama. After a college visit where students and children were in role, she wrote: “We had the college students today. They are not very good at drama. The trouble is they think it is play-acting not hard thinking.” Further examples of this reflective stance

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include: “In drama you learn things as quick as two seconds can pass because you do all the work instead of the teacher telling you about it”, and “Drama is a concentrating study”, Children are routinely reflective about their learning in this drama activity.

The ongoing debate about the writing forms to be taught to children has settled into a genre or form based curriculum where there is very little time for the writing children feel they want, indeed *must*, do. In this approach there is little room for child choice of topic and form, and the child’s intrinsic motivation can easily be eliminated. In drama children demand and learn with ease forms such as TV interview scripts, timetables for workers, a recipe for a “Delicious Pink Cake”, a business plan for a private pilot, letters of many sorts, a report on an oil-rig accident, a family welfare report, submissions to the Council, a press release from the Prime Minister, scientific documents estimating the number of trees needed in Newmarket to replace oxygen, scientific sketches and descriptions of sea birds, and designs for buildings. Any particular form could be taught and each child chooses what form they wish to employ. As I wrote in 1994, I did not ever begin by deciding that drama was to be a stimulus for children’s written language, that the classroom writing would revolve around drama. Rather this aspect was something the children forced on me. The forms of written language going on in the classroom in and out of the language time (and a great deal at home) were those the children determined they *needed* in the drama world. Every child in my Year 4 to Year 6 class knew about writing and reading reports, they were adept at interviewing, they could construct the sort of professional report with abbreviations that a social worker might write. Specialised writing of many forms was the norm.

I suggest the drama framework can be adapted to the model of teaching genre/form espoused by Martin and Rothery involving experience, example, modelling, joint



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construction and individual writing. The experience comes from the drama, and all the other elements are integrated in the normal class programme. The children's *life narrative* does not necessarily surface as a *narrative genre*. As can be seen from the above examples a great variety of forms are demanded by the participants.

In drama the participants set their own challenges. To gain true learning we need to value the children's real life experience and by providing a drama framework the teacher does just this. In allowing children's learning to be driven by their personal need to write we are not negating or devaluing formal skills and development in written language – they are essential in the drama frame. Bruner asserts that we need to “create in the young an appreciation that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other.” (Bruner, 1986). The drama process using full class role with children *choosing their own role* is a learning process available for teachers which ensures that children (and teachers) “construct new meanings” and explore “many worlds”.

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