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A piece of the action: Drama games with a difference

If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

Isaac Newton

The goal of developing creative thinkers has become part of the 21st century political and educational rhetoric. While some would still think about creativity as an exceptional individual's isolated breakthrough, it has long been recognised, as Newton's quote acknowledges, that inventors achieve by building on each other's insights and understandings rather than by working alone. Recently, through awards such as the Nobel prize, new attention has been focused on collaborative creativity, the result of groups working together to invent or develop significant contributions to fields as different as Astrophysics and Medicine. At the Academy awards it is usual for Oscar winners to acknowledge that their creativity was dependent upon the large team of collaborators needed to complete an outstanding film.

Alongside the focus on creativity and its importance for 21st century learning, there is a growing body of research and scholarly writing that connects it with quality arts (or 'arts-rich', a term commonly used in the United States), processes and experiences in schools and in the community more broadly. See, for example, the writings of Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin, 2015; Fleming, Gibson and Anderson, 2016; Ewing, 2010, Catterall, 2009, Bamford, 2006; Deasy, 2002 and Fiske, 1999. There is no doubt that embedding the Arts more centrally across the school curriculum could be transformative and lead to educational and social reform. This book focuses on two art forms, educational drama and literary texts in the primary classroom. A large

research base confirms the impact that drama can have on language learning and the development of critical literacies alongside understanding, empathy and compassion (some Australian case study examples include: Ewing & Saunders, 2016; Saunders, 2015; Dunn & Stinson, 2012; Ewing, 2006; O'Mara, 2004; Hertzberg, 2000).

As an essentially collaborative enterprise, educational drama engenders a creative ambience. The teacher can more quickly scaffold the development of complex ideas, attitudes and actions. Building on Vygotskian theory (1978) a collaborative zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be developed in the classroom (Ewing, 2015; Moll & Whitmore, 1993) providing opportunities for a group of students to stretch their imaginations and creative potential. When we add to this mix the creativity and aesthetics of quality literary texts, students can indeed stand on the shoulders of giants to develop their understandings of their worlds and of those around them. We have chosen in this book to particularly foreground the use of educational drama in the development of English and literacy skills from Foundation to Year 6 given their importance for student's life chances but these ideas can easily be adapted for early childhood and secondary contexts. We strongly assert that the same benefits result from the integration of drama across the curriculum and in each curriculum area.

When teachers talk about what drama means to them, a range of understandings often emerges, usually arising out of their own past experiences. Some responses emphasise 'acting' or 'reading a play' or 'putting on a performance for an audience'. For others the classroom drama experience begins and ends with playing fun games, 'charades' or 'skits'. While all these associations reflect aspects of educational drama, they do not capture its essence. We aim to do that in this chapter, focusing on the use of drama in primary and middle school English and literacy classrooms. We also consider the links between creativity and drama.

Defining educational and process drama

Drama is an art form, a *method* of teaching and learning and a *body of knowledge* in its own right. Essentially it is about **enactment**: Using the body aesthetically in time and space to explore events, characters, issues, questions, perspectives or ideas.

Process drama

One of the most important forms of educational drama is process drama. The term 'process drama' usefully distinguishes the particular kind of complex improvised dramatic event from that designed to generate or culminate in a theatrical performance. As Cecily O'Neill (1995, p. xvi) defines its purpose – process drama establishes an imagined world, a 'dramatic elsewhere' created by the participants as they discover, articulate, and sustain fictional roles and situations. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show children enjoying dressing up for dramatic play.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2

Young children are inherently imaginative and move into creative dramatic play from an early age. They love to dress up as their favourite characters.



Students develop their understanding of this imagined world through the same meaning-making processes that they use in everyday life: They interpret body language and voice qualities; read emotions; explore subtexts; respond to what they think other people want; manipulate symbols; and use particular values to make a decision, choose from alternative actions and evaluate the consequences of that choice. They do so in an imagined world that they create together. Groups of students collaborate in-role to express and explore ideas. There is no outside audience and no intention to communicate beyond the participants themselves. So, although the participants in process drama work in-role, their acting ability is not usually important: All that is needed is that the participants willingly suspend their disbelief. Sometimes, of course, either a formal or informal performance will emerge from the activities but this is not always the case. Nor is it necessary.

In process drama, the participants are generally viewed as social beings. The objective is to pursue an understanding of the society they live in. The teacher's role is to facilitate this pursuit, creating a space where 'radical tolerance' is the goal. Rather than a form of tolerance that simply allows us to 'put up with' the existence of multiple forms of life and worldviews, radical tolerance aims at a mutual recognition and co-understanding (Mayerfeld Bell & Gardiner, 1998, p. 6). In our increasingly globalised community, it is our contention that developing mutual respect for and deep understanding of each other should be central at every level of education.

Drama across the curriculum

While drama is one of the art forms mandated in *The Australian Curriculum: The Arts* (ACARA, 2013), drama can deepen understanding in all curriculum areas. For example, drama devices can be used to investigate the effects of war on a society (History). Improvisation can facilitate the use of conversational language for new speakers of English (TESOL). Role-play can be used to develop an understanding of numbers or ratios (Mathematics). Positioning bodies in space can help develop an understanding of the solar system, or of a chemical reaction (Science).

One of the most fruitful learning areas for drama is when combined with quality literature. For example, 'hot-seating' (sometimes called questioning-in-role) can be used to explore a student's understanding of a particular literary character's motives or perspectives. Keeping a journal in-role as a minor character can assist students to see an event from a vantage point that

is different from the narrator's. Through making a map or a diagram for the drama, students can be led to more critical interrogation of the text.

Drama has many different faces in the classroom. Sometimes students develop and perform prepared scripts in front of others. Sometimes the teacher joins with the group to improvise in-role. Sometimes students work in pairs or small groups, preparing and then sharing their improvisations or depictions with the whole class. Sometimes they remain very still – thinking, planning or reflecting. At other times, they might draw or write in-role, or visit the library to undertake research relevant to their role. No matter what face of drama is assumed, planning is an essential component for effective drama lessons in the classroom.

Planning drama lessons

To ensure a good drama lesson, planning needs to include several important elements of the art form of drama including role, focus, tension, space, time and symbol. Each of these elements is introduced here.

Role

As Atticus tells Scout in Lee's (1960) *To kill a mockingbird*, none of us can ever really understand another person until we have had the opportunity to 'climb into his skin and walk around in it'. If the essence of educational drama is enactment, the way to enactment is to step in imagination into another person's shoes. By taking this step, students learn to assume roles that are both similar to and different from those of their real lives, temporarily adopting another person's perspective. They use their bodies to explore the consequences of thinking in this way, committed to maintaining their stance whilst other members of the class, in different roles, interact with them.

It is important that the teacher is also prepared to take on a role within a fictional event. The teacher may first need to demonstrate to the class how that is done – moving in and out of role so that the students can see that sometimes the teacher is pretending to be, say, the Wicked Witch or an advertising executive, and sometimes stepping out of role and speaking to them as the teacher. Students may also need to try walking around the room, coming in and out of role, so that they can understand the differences between the character and themselves.

Although many children and adults now spend lots of time in virtual worlds, some personalities can accept fiction and pretence more readily than others. There is a whole range of reasons for this. For instance, some people prefer staying anchored in the 'real' world and find it quite frightening, difficult or embarrassing to move into a fictional world. Thus, when introducing drama, the teacher may need to spend some time allowing students to learn that adopting a role is non-threatening, and that what happens in the drama should have no consequences outside it. The next section discusses the different aspects of role further.

a Moving into role

One of the most important concepts of drama for the teacher to convey and model is *protection into role*. This does not mean avoiding emotion – it means structuring the work so that students are able to explore their emotions safely. The roles adopted in drama should be different from those in our own and students' lives. If a distance is established between the students' reality and fiction, they are saved from confusing the fictional world with distressing elements of reality. Before starting the drama proper, some time can be spent establishing a fictional context or background. For example, the characters' ages can be moved up or down several years and a fictional background created. Students can name and draw the setting. If the drama involves a school, it can be placed in a different part of the country so that the students are not obviously talking about their actual environment. If the material is 'hot' (i.e. potentially threatening), such as the Big Bad Wolf threatening the pigs, then using detached, more contemplative techniques like tableaux may be preferable to plunging into real-time improvisation. The children in Figure 1.1 are each taking on a role.

b Improvising

Drama can be seen as a form of game playing, and students need to understand the rules of a game before they can participate. One of the rules for working in-role is improvising – not everything is planned, and thinking on one's feet is important. The essence of improvisation is spontaneity. In everyday life, much of what we do is fairly predictable – we catch the same bus, socialise with the same people and our friends can often predict how we will think on some topic. When confronted by unexpected events, however, we are forced to act immediately and spontaneously, drawing on our intuition, imagination and perhaps our past experiences of similar events in order to solve or manage a problem.



Figure 1.3
Two students
from Bellevue
Primary School
in-role

To improvise successfully with other characters, students have to respond to ‘offers’ of action – statements with embedded suggestions of context or character that can be taken up or rejected. They need to be able to pick up and elaborate on contextual cues, some of which can be very subtle. For example, if one student says: ‘Oh, Humpty Dumpty, you look a bit broken up there – what’s happened to you?’ ‘Humpty Dumpty’ has to be able to recognise the allusion to the nursery rhyme and quickly give an appropriate response (e.g. ‘I fell off the wall’).

Depending on students’ background knowledge of culture or stories, they may need to have a class discussion and pooling of ideas before improvising so they are able to explore emotions safely. If a distance is established between the students’ reality and the fiction, they are saved from confusing the fictional world with distressing elements of their lived reality. If, however, the students have sufficient background information and are confident using improvisation, they may enjoy making an abrupt leap into the drama world.

c Making an offer

Working in-role is a collaborative exercise in which participants build a composite picture of the imagined world, negotiating its reality as the

characters interact. Drama depends on students being able to accept each other's 'offers' at least in part. Although any participant's line of dialogue or action (an 'offer') may be rejected, a particularly solid rejection may block the drama. For example, if the offer: 'How come you're wearing a green dress?' is met with a response like 'It's not green, it's red', that could finish the drama. The students may need to be taught how to accept an offer, or how to disagree without blocking – for example the response could be: 'Oh, do you think this is green? Through my sunglasses it looks red!' It is also possible to accept part of the offer and adjust some of the details, as in: 'No, take those green-coloured glasses off – they're affecting your sight!'

d Levels of role

Different levels of role are used in educational drama, and it is important for students to have some understanding of them. Five levels of role have been distinguished by Morgan and Saxton (1987) and they are summarised below.

- 1** *Dramatic playing* – Children start dramatic play spontaneously from an early age to make sense of their world. They put themselves into a make-believe situation. For example, Early-Years students on an imaginary trip to Old Macdonald's farm are not required to be anybody but themselves; they just have to accept the fiction.
- 2** *Mantle of the expert* – Students speak as if they are the experts, 'the ones who know' – perhaps as architects who have designed a new building or as archaeologists who have just dug up an ancient dinosaur bone. This level is explored further in Chapter 4.
- 3** *Role-playing* – Students adopt someone else's point of view. At this level, they will not need to speak with an accent, or hobble with a crooked stick, or try to make their bodies look other than they naturally are. The focus is internal – they take on the attitude of somebody else, speaking and behaving as they believe such a person would speak and behave. They may, for example, take the position of a logger or a conservationist in a discussion about forest management.
- 4** *Characterising* – Students begin to represent an individual lifestyle. For example, they may characterise an old woman. This differs from role-playing an old woman. In characterising, students begin to adopt signs (e.g. articles of clothing or ways of speaking or moving) that signal they are exploring some of the different possibilities of representing a role. So, while characterising is appropriate for prepared drama, like readers' theatre, it may be the wrong level for a real-time improvisation.

- 5 *Acting* – Students move from classroom exploration to performing before an audience. They need to give considerable thought to things like costume, make-up, symbolic objects, accent and inflection, movement, or use of space. The emphasis here shifts from enjoying an experience for oneself to creating an experience for the spectator.

e Building roles

Roles are built around three important aspects: *function*, *status* and *attitude*. Each role has a *function* in creating the totality of the drama. Questions can be asked to help students think about a role, such as:

- What is the character trying to achieve?
- How does s/he assist or hinder the others?

Sometimes roles have only a simple function. If, for example, the class is exploring 'the fish-netter on the Great Barrier Reef', his or her home life may not be relevant; all that is important is his or her impact on the reef. In an issues-based drama, students do not need to go much deeper than a simple role function. (This might change as the drama goes on. For instance, the fish-netter might have a change of *attitude* about what is happening on the reef.)

At other times, *status* is important in role development, particularly when the teacher is also in-role. In such cases, questions like these may need to be considered:

- How much power does the character have compared with the other people in the performance?
- Who is the leader?
- Is s/he in danger of being overthrown in this group, or is s/he beyond challenge?

Knowing a character's power will affect choices of vocabulary, posture, gesture and tone of voice. It will also contribute to each character's *attitude* (or emotional position) towards the events being considered in the drama. Questions such as the following will help students to concentrate on attitude as a way of developing a role:

- What actions are suggested by the attitude?
- What actions will demonstrate it?

For example, when publicly commenting on a contentious issue, a student in-role as a radio commentator will make different choices from someone in-role as the Prime Minister.

Sometimes, of course, external actions may not correspond with internal attitude. For example, the bad fairy, presenting herself as a kindly old lady in *Sleeping Beauty* seems to be offering Beauty a new skill when she shows her how to work the spindle but is really trying to kill her. Such a contradiction between appearance and reality is an opportunity to explore *subtext* or below surface meaning. Before students are able to use subtext successfully, it will be valuable for the teacher to take on and model roles in which there is a clear contradiction between attitude and action. After that, it might be helpful to explore subtextual tension with a drama game that asks students to try saying 'Yes' when they do mean *yes*, 'Yes' when they mean *maybe*, and finally 'Yes' when they actually mean *no*. Students can then be asked what differences in body language and voice they observe.

f Managing and modelling roles

Once students begin to present another person's point of view, the problem of stereotyping emerges. In real life how do we know what other people would do or think? Gavin Bolton (1988) has talked about two ways of acting in real life: modelling and managing. Both are explained here:

Modelling involves basing behaviour on past experience and observation — imitating how our parents, our peers, movie stars etc have behaved in similar situations.

Managing, however focuses on solving a problem triggered by an uncommon circumstance. For example, a traveller in a foreign country often has to face new and challenging situations, and an unfamiliar language. The traveller cannot use her or his habitual behaviour, because it may be inappropriate, even offensive. Instead the traveller has to manage the situation — decide how to respond, adapt, invent.

The style of drama introduced by Dorothy Heathcote in Britain in the 1960s combined managing and modelling. One example is provided in the 1974 videotape *Building Belief*, a role-play about early American colonists. In the early stages of the lesson, students used modelling — building up their roles using their knowledge of historical characters (such as the Pilgrims) until they felt comfortable. Then, in role as the oldest citizen, Martha Sharp, Heathcote allowed the colonists to divide the land among themselves while she pretended to sleep. When she 'awoke' they were issued with a challenge that they had to deal with in a managing mode: waking up Martha Sharpe angrily demanded that they explain why they had not given her any land.

When the children responded that she had not asked them for any land, she complained that she should not have needed to ask. They were then forced into a managing mode, satisfying the needs of the elderly woman.

Focus

Although role can be seen as an essential element of drama, good drama only emerges when the work is focused, centring around a worthwhile educational goal. When drama fails, it is often because it has no form or tries to cover too much. All of the great plays have a central focus – a worthwhile theme to which all the events contribute. *The merchant of Venice*, for example, looks at issues of justice and equity; *The crucible* examines what can happen when fear overtakes rationality; *Pygmalion* explores the notions of class, language and appearance. The teacher needs to decide what the focus will be and how drama can help the students explore this central issue.

For example, the focus can combine an aspect of life that the students know from their own experience with a new or an unknown factor. For example, students might explore a nervous or dithery bushranger rather than enact a stereotype based on their limited knowledge about bushrangers from films or books. If the focus is on a nervous bushranger, they can bring to the drama a second dimension – one that they have experienced themselves. Their enactments are enriched, and so are the questions that might be explored. For example:

- Do I trust my friends?
- Am I a brave person?

This 'second dimension' of a character is very important for focusing drama work. Bolton, who coined the term, also refers to it as the 'adjective' of the role – the students play not astronauts but *first-time* astronauts.

Tension

Drama examines the processes of living, which usually involve competing drives or forces. A continuing state of tension occurs when conflict is unresolved – and drama is created. Tension produces the excitement, or the 'edge', that engages learners both intellectually and emotionally, and motivates them to become involved in the drama activity. Usually once the tension is resolved the drama is over.

Lesson planning for drama therefore needs to identify possible sources of tension and maintain them. Time and space are two considerations in planning for tension. In a simple sense, tension can be maintained by postponing the resolution. The teacher can build in one or more constraints to serve this purpose. For example, slowing down the time frame in which students are operating can be considered: they could become astronauts in space, weightless and only able to walk in very slow motion. With running away made impossible, students need to work out a different plan for escaping the space monsters. Thus the lesson has a built-in tension – a constraint that is going to delay the resolution of reaching the safety of the spaceship. More suggestions are provided in the section below.

Alternatively, the action might be constrained by space so that the students have to crawl on hands and knees through a tunnel. This kind of constraint will set up a different kind of tension. In a role-play where characters are arguing, the constraint could be provided in the instructions to the students in-role – for example: ‘I want her to know that you’re angry but you’re not allowed to put it into words; you can’t actually say “I’m very angry with you”’. The students have to try less direct, more ambiguous, methods of communication. Similarly the use of violence can be constrained by suggesting that no guns were used in establishing the drama world.

Space

Many places have special significance for people who have lived or spent time there. Terms like ‘home’ may conjure up a specific house or town or country. Wesley Enoch, Queensland Theatre’s Artistic Director, has run several important workshops for teachers exploring the various associations connected with home, leading the participants to an understanding of the Aboriginal concept of ‘country’. Much of Nadia Wheatley’s writing (for example: *Five times dizzy* and *Dancing in the Anzac Deli*, 2012; *My place*, 1988; *The house that was Eureka*, 2015) grows from her deep knowledge and understanding of specific places that characterise Sydney’s inner west. Often we begin a drama unit by asking participants to explore the space. At first this might be simply moving around using height, or nearness to the floor, or degrees of closeness to other characters to express relationships.

For example:

- The contrasting appearances of the *Werewolf Knight* (Wagner & Roennfeldt, 1995) can be explored by two students standing closely as Feolf and a werewolf but back-to-back.

- Students exploring a controversial opinion can be asked to place themselves in the room on a continuum according to whether or not they agree with the character holding that idea – very close for supporters, or at a distance for opponents.
- Before beginning a role-play students can be asked to draw maps or diagrams (for example, of a shopping mall or a medieval village – wherever the story is set – so that they share a spatial understanding of the site of their drama.
- The class forms parallel lines, as in 'Conscience Alley', to represent a character's conscience, and this can be used as the location from which individuals in-role can advise the protagonist about what they should or should not do about a dilemma or issue (see p. 000).

Time

A crucial element of narrative structure and drama is how time is used in the telling of the story. Consider the following examples of flashback and the relativity of time, using the element of time to create tension alongside the use of space in the classroom.

Flashback

Using flashback delays a dash towards describing what happened and focuses on a slower exploration of why it was so. This technique is often encountered in film or on stage where a character begins in old age and the story flashes back to earlier/different times. Consider the aged Salieri in Schaeffer's play *Amadeus* and the riveting opening word: 'Assassin!!' emerging from darkness. The drama then flashes back to reveal why he was believed to have murdered Mozart. There are many literary examples of flashback that could be explored in the classroom. Some examples include:

- *Granpa* (Burningham, 1984) where a young child imagines new adventures as her grandfather shares his own past
- *The violin man* (Thompson, 2003), the story of an elderly musician who recalls the joy of his daughter's dancing dreams when he begins to play his violin; or
- Shaun Tan's (2013) *Rules of Summer* a series of artworks that recall a boy's learning with his brother the previous summer.

The relativity of time

As a child, exciting events like Christmas or birthdays seem to take forever to arrive and then seem to fly past. Many books and plays explore the relativity of time. *Where the wild things are* (Sendak, 1963) exploits this concept in both the picture book and the film. Max sails off to the land of the wild things and seems to be there forever but returns before his supper gets cold. In the drama classroom students can mime the critical events in the story and play with the pace. For example they could speed up Max's time with the wild things and then slow the action down. Similarly the forest and journey could be represented quickly or very slowly. Alternatively the teacher could split the class and have the mother's activities (cooking the dinner, setting the table, plating it up, washing the dishes etc) represented alongside Max's journey.

Symbol

Symbolism is the use of one thing to represent another. Drama usually works best if its meaning applies at several levels. For instance, a drama developed about the convict era might also represent a timeless conflict between justice and loyalty. To reinforce such general symbols, objects or events are often used repeatedly in the drama so that they accumulate meaning and emotional connotations. Thus, in a drama about runaways, the family photograph that the girl constantly carries can eventually stand alone to represent her longing for home.

An object (or a word or movement) may begin by having one stereotypical meaning. To deepen the meaning you can give students an opportunity to think about what an object might symbolise for individual characters. For example, an old-fashioned oil lamp placed in the centre of the class circle may symbolise warmth and hope for some students, but for others it may signify something quite different – silence and solitude perhaps. At the end of the drama session, however, the lamp may come to have a shared meaning for the whole group, such as hope.

Reflection and disengagement

Because students use process drama to learn about other people and themselves, it is important that each student has a chance to articulate what they have learned, and to compare their experiences with those of others in the group. It is also important that they spend time disengaging from their

roles, especially if their strong emotions have been aroused. The teacher may need to encourage them to talk in a distanced way about the roles that they have been playing in order to help them make a clear distinction between fiction and reality. They might focus on the techniques that they used, or answer questions like: 'When you were being the werewolf, what did you think about the magician?' This will help students to take a 'step back' from the role.

With students in earlier years, this 'step back' could be quite literal: when first introduced to drama they can trace around their feet and cut out a cardboard replica. Later, or at any time, they can then take an actual step back from the character or spin around to signal they have re-entered reality. Another technique involves setting up a narrow space with chairs pushed together so that students have to travel through to get into and out of the drama world.

To conclude this section on reflection it is helpful to quote Miller and Saxton's (2005, p. 6) summative comments on its importance:

Reflection *on* and *in* thought and action offers models for a dialogic classroom where all voices are heard and all (including the teacher) are seen as co-learners. In the construction and concretization of thought, the negotiation of power can be felt, expressed and mediated. These skills are not outcomes in drama, they are the *means by which we make our art* and that is why drama is such a valuable methodology. (p.6).

Careful reflection enables powerful learning.

In Chapter 2 we consider the use of drama games as more than just fun fill-in or transitional activities.