

WHAT IS “DRAMA” IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT?

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Abstract

‘Drama is creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding together, in imaginative contexts and situations. It is not about performance, but exploration. And the teacher in drama becomes a learner among learners, a participant, and a guide, who lends expertise to the students’. So writes Jeffrey Wilhelm in the introduction to *Imagining to Learn: Inquiry, Ethics, and Integration through Drama*, a fascinating and enthusiastic book coauthored with Brian Edmiston. In this book they present their experiences as teachers, their analyses, and their research in an attempt to make drama an attractive and realistic methodology for teachers. The goal is to make drama a more integral part of teaching and learning in classrooms at all levels of education.

Introduction

In the specific case of drama, schools most often include drama as an extracurricular activity (e.g., the creation of a drama club or the production of a play after school hours). Schools have generally not understood or accepted the value of drama as a central part of curriculum and pedagogy, leading to the proliferation of drama “specialists” and programs that bring guest artists into schools. Where drama enters classrooms, it is usually through these outside “specialists” and “guests,” reinforcing the notion that drama is something different from the work of teachers. Wilhelm and Edmiston work to change this mentality in *Imagining to Learn*, providing compelling evidence that drama, when used as a teaching methodology, can have a powerful impact on student learning. In each chapter, the authors tackle a different aspect of how drama can be an integral part of a school curriculum. In chapter one, “Exploring Castles: Authentic Teaching and Learning through Drama,” Wilhelm and Edmiston carefully articulate their understanding of what drama is. They then demonstrate how using drama leads to “authentic teaching and learning” by presenting a classroom example from a unit they did with sixth

graders in Maine on castles. Students and teachers made discoveries together, rather than the teacher telling the students what they must know: We did not just study history — the students' (and the teachers') questions about the past were examined and explored in rich integrated contexts that connected the past with the present. . . . This all became possible through the use of drama. Not the performance of plays or the acting out of stories, but the sort of drama in which students together imagine in order to learn. Students imagined that they were the sort of people who cared about castles — historians, archaeologists, preservationists — and for four days they saw the world through other eyes and wondered about the sorts of questions such professionals ask. As they wondered, they inquired, read, wrote, argued, thought, moved, and dramatized their ideas. The authors here make a distinction between “education” and “instruction.” Drama encouraged and allowed these students to learn within the context of the history they were studying and to deepen their understanding of the history well beyond what they might have gotten from solely reading a textbook. Through drama, students became a part of the learning process rather than mere observers or inactive receptacles of the rich experience of learning; in this way, their learning was deeper, more sustained, and infinitely more complex. Each of the other chapters combines analysis and experience to highlight the different ways in which teachers and students can use drama as a teaching and learning methodology. Chapter two, “Drama and Reading: Experiencing and Learning from Text,” extends the work in the history classroom to reading and the language arts. Chapter three, “Ethical Imagination: Choosing an Ethical Self in Drama,” explores how teachers and learners can use drama to understand who we are in an ethical sense, “uncovering the moral complexities of situations” (p. 59) by moving beyond talk about hypotheticals into action through role-playing. The integration of drama into specific curricula to achieve a set of learning objectives is the focus of chapter four, “Drama and Curriculum: It Takes Two to Integrate.” The authors examine drama as research in chapter five, “Drama as Inquiry: Students and Teachers as Coresearchers,” making the argument that “drama as inquiry” leads to a more complex way of looking at research questions, the creation of innovative methodologies, and the ability to read and analyze data from multiple perspectives.

Finally, in chapter six, “Drama Across the Curriculum,” Wilhelm and Edmiston describe how drama can be used throughout various subject areas — for example, in the teaching of science, second languages, and literacy — in which students “develop a critical literacy,” a way of making meaning of the world by learning “to look inward to define the self; to imagine and enter the selfhood and perspectives of others; and . . . to look outward to critically read and converse with the world, open always to change and transformation and to working toward these transformations” (p. 149). *Imagining to Learn* is an important book for teachers and teacher educators, particularly those who work in elementary and middle schools. The ideas are accessible, the examples cogent, and the analysis innovative. In a field that desperately needs more research and more writing, Wilhelm and Edmiston have made a valuable contribution. The authors assert that “action is inherent in drama” (p. 126); indeed, what they advocate is a teaching and learning process that is active and action-filled. Their work is dynamic and creative, and will help teachers and students create new, more complex, and enriching kinds of learning experiences in their classrooms. Drama, as the authors use it, enables students to see what they are reading and learning, create mental models and coherent networks of thought, and apply and play out possibilities and consequences. The authors show how elementary and middle school teachers can use drama as a method of assessment; *IMAGINING TO LEARN* is the most readable of the five books I have read on process drama. Wilhelm and Edmiston write with personality, which seems to be rare in the field. I found seventeen drama strategies scattered through the book. Having these strategies close at hand makes it easier to guide the students as they take off with a topic. The chapter on using drama for inquiry was intriguing. It makes me want to teach my next class as an investigation, using drama strategies plus other comprehension strategies. Brain toys are fun! *Imagining to Learn* is an important book...The ideas are accessible, the examples cogent, and the analysis innovative. In *Imagining to Learn*, Jeffrey Wilhelm and Brian Edmiston demonstrate how drama taps into the imagination to create powerful learning contexts. *Imagining to Learn* moves drama into the mainstream of elementary and middle school teaching, learning, and curriculum. It is filled with examples of *how teachers and students together can create contexts that tap into students' energies, abilities, and*

questions-contexts where students can discover a reason to read, a need to think, and a community that cares about their ideas. Readers will discover new methodologies and techniques that are rarely used in our education. They will also become familiar with drama as a method of performance-based assessment and ways to engage in research with students. The book shows how to adapt these methods into a flexible set of strategies to help students read with better comprehension, learn sophisticated and abstract content, explore values, and forge new understandings. Drama, as Wilhelm and Edmiston use it, enables students to "see" what they are reading and learning, create mental models and coherent networks of thought, apply and play out possibilities and consequences in a field of safety. The stories in this book demonstrate that drama can be easily introduced to students and successfully used by both beginning and experienced teachers. Unlike other books on educational drama, *Educational Drama and Language Arts* focus on its effects. It is the first comprehensive overview of the major research in the field, offering illuminating descriptions of classroom drama in action. In this book, Betty Jane Wagner summarizes recent research on drama in education and creative drama, featuring studies that show drama's effect on thinking, oral language, reading, and writing. Most of the studies answer the broad question, "Does classroom drama actually teach anything?" Wagner presents the best studies in both the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms which require further in-depth studies in this field according to my opinion. Teacher educators need a handy resource for drama and research evidence to support their advocacy of drama in all levels of education in order to forge the creativity of even the most unmotivated students. It is also a user-friendly overview for doctoral students and others who are jumping into the icy waters of research on drama. Indeed, teachers of all subjects will find this book an insightful guide for teaching and reflecting on their practice by taking into account several important issues handled by teachers as: 1. A Theoretical Framework for Educational Drama; 2. Language Power through Working in Role as suggested by D. Booth; 3. Reflection and Cognition; 4. Repositioning Views/Reviewing Positions: Forming Complex Understandings in Dialogue as suggested by B. Edmiston & J. Wilhelm; 5. Linking Writing, Drama, and the Development of Community in an Urban Classroom as suggested by A. Dyson; 6. Story Recall, Reader

Response, and Comprehension; 7. Research Paradigms and the Future; 8. Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Creative Drama as suggested by F. Conard; 9. Reflective Practitioner Research as suggested by P. Taylor; 10. Action Research and the Future, etc.

Now more than ever, there is a need to understand and respect diversity in our classrooms—especially in our drama and theatre work where it is so easy for students and teachers to act out unconscious biases. We need to reassess our own ways of viewing the world and become more acutely attuned to the complex identities of our young participants/students and patrons. For this reason, making Sense of Drama is based on the belief that drama has an important part to play in helping teachers move toward a unified curriculum that has relevance and purpose for young people of all ages. It will give teachers from all subject areas the confidence to explore the possibilities of drama in the classroom.

Considerations regarding studying play texts through drama

The Doll's House in this instance will form the context for the research. *Kenneth Tyan* years ago suggested that for a situation to be dramatic "it must involve persons being on their way to, or in, or emerging from, a state of desperation" And *Dame Edith Evans* thinking as an actress, who must demonstrate that "state of desperation", saw play texts as presenting her with "a great sea, beset by currents, from which gradually she must build firm land". These lands emerge first as small islands, which gradually become more and more attached to each other, (tenuously at first) until by the time of performance, hopefully, a coherent landscape has arisen from the gift words left by the author, which the actor guides the audience through. Teachers use the literary texts as a means of building visual imagination so necessary in studying theatre texts. The dilemma we share as teachers is to find beguiling, efficient ways of crystallizing the particular elements and stages of "desperate circumstances" and of perceiving the landscape as coherent territory grown from the printed text. This involves us in awakening in our students: A. The recognition that drama landscapes are based not upon narrative (the literary form) but of exploring and defining bondings which enmesh the roles in the play, in webs, some of which will be of their own making. Plays develop in

episodes. B. The landscapes will be finally expressed and communicated through the laws of theatre. The seen, the indicated but not necessarily visible to the eye; the heard, and the telling silences during encounters; the moving and the still expressions through the actions of events. To lift flat text from paper requires flexible visual imagination which people who can read adequately do not necessarily develop. C. Theatre exploits other arts – design of garments, settings and furnishing, movement patterns, time, colour, sound/silence and light, shadow and dark. This is the complex landscape brought to crisp expressive form, and becomes meaning to those who expect to find life enhancing confirmation of what it means to be human as they are audience to the playwright’s message(s). The Doll’s house surely is splendid worth our study in learning to learn about textual study. The people who inhabit The Doll’s House circle need to be considered in relation to the culture Ibsen has indicated to us and which can readily be studied from relevant archive materials. She used Nora for exploration of ‘The Doll’s House, but all other characters could be likewise tracked. The tasks assigned to students would create understanding and *realization of Knowledge* of the play. Nora negotiates at these levels: Kin, her place in the Social Strata, political and social laws and cultural demands because of her place in the social hierarchy. *Stage 1.* Select Nora’ image to use throughout her journey tracking. Look at every episode examining Nora’s participation in the episode. The first tracking will look for Kin evidence: children, father. Helmer is included in her Kin track. Scrutinize every episode for Nora’s concern regarding children, father’s memory and influence. Continue this Kin Line throughout the episodes. When the Kin line is complete, you will have *raised questions for yourselves*, which can only be answered by considering all the other bonding layers and your life understanding so far as we may know them. *Stage 2.* Every member of a group can scrutinize the shared out episodes to save time. In her examples, she has written “Why?” regarding her abrupt need that her children were removed from playing. Students may wish to write a different interrogation statement beside the small quotation: e.g. “what caused her to flirt with him regarding stockings”? etc. o four colours were needed for Nora’s tracks and five lines to be drawn of Nora’s life above and in parallel with Ibsen’s text in episodes to reveal a full Kin tracking. *Stage 3.* It is worth mentioning that Attraction – interest – concern

– has to be won minute by minute by the teacher’s energizing skills. The teacher needed to have sought explanations, understanding regarding the tracks about the persons’ motives, models, attitudes, beliefs so as to enable the representatives to **REALISE THEIR KNOWLEDGE** as they support/explain/seek understanding.

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