



The context of drama in education

Defining drama

Drama may be defined as ‘the dynamic embodiment of events involving human beings. It comprises a group of people agreeing to suspend their disbelief in order to be other than themselves in a fictional context. If they enact the events in front of others who accept the fiction, the drama becomes theatre.’¹

Drama and education: The background

Historically, drama and theatre have a long relationship with education and almost as long — and as equivocal — an association with conflict management and social control. There are dramatic elements in many ancient shamanistic rituals.² In ancient Greece, Aristotle observed and attempted to explain the effect of drama on an audience in terms of it benignly purging the excesses of dangerous emotions.³

Governments have used drama and theatre from ancient times to assist



in maintaining a stable and harmonious congruence of thought and social purpose. In Rome they gave the people 'bread and circuses', at the end of the Middle Ages 'morality plays' and in World War 2 they used film and called it 'propaganda'. In the 1920s Jacob Moreno and his associates founded the Psychodrama and Sociodrama movements — mixing the two heady ingredients of psychoanalysis and Viennese theatre. Both were predicated on the assumption that drama may be used to assist in the restoration of personal, psychological and social stability.⁴

Moreno's work has since been developed into a considerable clinical and educational practice in both psychiatry and adult training. Both of these fields however, until recent years have deliberately played down the dramatic roots.

In the case of psychodrama this has been in the interests of using role-play to provide highly focused and controllable therapeutic enactments. In adult training, the mainstream purpose has been the accurate representation and copying of procedural skills, rather than the exploration of unpredictable human behaviour.

Parallel with the rise of progressive and liberal education through the twentieth century has been the growth of explicitly educational uses of drama. From the turn of the twentieth century educators in Britain and America started to find in drama a pedagogy to accomplish the liberal progressive education which was attempting to centre the curriculum on the personal and social development of the child: 'giving children a rudimentary dramatic training in the belief that such a training has a benefit of its own'⁵.

In the years following the Second World War, this developed into the 'drama in education' movement, originating in the UK and its cousin 'creative dramatics' in the USA. These were both based on the active learning power of doing drama, rather than reception as an audience and both espoused improvisational methods to permit children to take part in drama not only as actors, but as playwrights and directors. Creative dramatics has taken as its centre the notion of putting on plays and encouraged children to see themselves particularly as imaginative actors.





Drama and theatre-in-education

The more influential movement worldwide has been drama in education, which has added to this a strong social and group orientation. It characterises the participants as collaborative learners, engaged in making drama simultaneously as playwrights, directors, actors and the only audience of their work.

At the centre of drama in education is group role-play and improvisation, derived from children's spontaneous extended dramatic play, where everyone participates in the adventure or story as characters, with no concept of an external audience. The teacher is often engaged in the dramatic context as a character herself, going along with the action or directing the development of the ongoing improvised drama from inside the drama — a technique known as 'teacher-in-role'.

In this kind of role-play, the participants sometimes become entirely absorbed in the dramatic context as characters, empathising with the situation and their role, making it up as they go along, in concert with the other members of the class or sub-group. A scene may include all members of the class; frequently the scene may be enacted by several groups simultaneously, or with all the students in pairs. Students rarely watch each other as audience or monitors.

More recently, a broader range of theatrical techniques, exercises and conventions have been added to this group-based empathic role-play, not least to provide the playwright/actor/directors with the opportunity of looking at and exploring the context with a measure of distance. This work is now most usually referred to as *process drama*.

The drama in education movement has established and developed both a philosophy and a distinct pedagogy based on this premise of the students being total participants in extended private dramatic play that has become internationally very influential. A number of stages in the movement's development over the last 50 years may be identified, usually associated with individual gifted practitioner-theorists, each of whose work was taken up by a generation of drama teachers intent on establishing drama and theatre in schools and community settings, with varying success world-wide.

In the 1950s Peter Slade focused attention on the significance of children's own dramatic play and allowing that to create the conditions for learning.





In the 1960s, Slade's associate Brian Way extended this idea into harnessing the dramatic instinct in a more organised way through the exercises of theatre, to provide a developmental progress for the individual. The philosophical drive came largely from Rousseau through Dewey and the 'progressive education' movement – crystallised in Richard Courtney's *Play Drama and Thought*.⁶ Theatre itself was downplayed in favour of children exploring drama in the private context of the classroom itself, with no external audience.

This became the dominant mode until the 1970s, when the next leap forward was provided equally by the inspiring pioneers and close colleagues, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton and a parallel movement within theatre, that of participatory theatre-in-education (TIE).

Rather than just concentrating on the individual's development per se, the whole social context of the learners and their dramawork became the focus of the work. The teachers set out to find techniques that utilised the power of drama to open up, explore and influence attitudes, 'a dynamic means of gaining new understanding' (Bolton's phrase)⁷ both of socio-political issues and of personal gestalt.

Issues-based classroom drama became the norm, strongly influenced by the theatrical and the educational ideas of Bertold Brecht and of the play-theorist Lev Vygotski. Using drama as a means of socialisation or social control was off the agenda, replaced by sceptical and assertive interrogation of the society and its mores, usually with an underlying intention of contributing towards changing those mores.

Personal developmental learning was seen as a product of the layering of experience, including play experience and all the social and cultural contexts of the learner. In the TIE teams that sprang up all over the UK in the 1970s and some of which still exist, an audience of school students – usually one class – was visited by a group of 'actor-teachers'. The actor-teachers engaged the class as active participants with a mixture of scripted theatre and improvised dramatic action. This action was sometimes integral – engaging the whole class as characters in the drama – and sometimes more peripheral. An example could be stopping the action to give the audience a task such as interviewing the characters to provide advice as to what should be done next. The overwhelming bulk of this work in the TIE team and drama class has been on subjects of social and political as well as personal import, investigating social issues such as injustice, particularly in the secondary school.





Theatre of the oppressed and theatre for development

Overall, then, the movement towards process drama as a learning device has consolidated its pedagogy and diversified its practice over the last two decades, establishing a strong foothold in the schools. This is especially so in English-speaking countries and some European ones such as Scandinavia.

In some developing countries, particularly in Africa, the movement has had a major influence on the equally fast-developing field of theatre for development. Extending the pedagogy into social therapy is being tried in some war-torn countries, such as Northern Ireland, Israel and the Balkans – with equivocal but promising results.⁸ Here drama is being used directly as a weapon of conflict resolution.

In the developing world, what has become known as theatre for development is widely used as a community educational tool. Various kinds of community theatre groups are used, often by governments or non-governmental international organisations like UNICEF, UNHCR and WHO.

Their job is to take social, medical or political messages to village communities, many of whom are illiterate and still have little access to television or radio, relying totally on direct communication. The message may be explaining the processes of democracy to post-Amin Ugandans more used to tribal power management;⁹ educating Kenyans in sanitation, to accompany the provision of sewage and sanitation units;¹⁰ countering myths and superstitions about HIV/AIDS in many places in Africa, Asia and South America;¹¹ or warning of the long-term environmental dangers of unrestricted logging of forests in India.¹²

Theatres for development specialists like PETA (The Philippines), Free Travelling Theatre (Kenya) and Maya Centre (Thailand) have had little difficulty in adding process drama to their repertoire of theatre practice. This has been partly because many of these communities are rediscovering dramatic traditions that already incorporate improvised drama forms, active audience participation and an awareness of the socially critical and educative function of theatre. While theatre is invariably popular among its audiences, it is not always so acceptable to the established power structures, nor is it intended to be.

Drama is only slowly taking root in schools in the developed world, not least because some education systems are concerned about its potential for





disruption, anarchy or the diverting of young minds from more ‘proper’ and ‘functional’ studies.

More spectacularly, the Indian environmental theatre for development program mentioned above nearly came to a sticky end when a logging company sent an armed squad to literally murder the theatre group. Their lives were saved by the protection of the entire village audience!

An equally influential worldwide movement of drama education: theatre of the oppressed has grown up contemporaneously with the drama in education movement – in some places until recently almost independently. The Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal founded this.

Directly inspired by Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,¹³ Boal set out to develop a community theatre practice that has become, in effect a pedagogy, whose original aim was to help the poor and disenfranchised to liberate themselves by revealing the nature and conquerability of those things that oppressed them. His most celebrated technique, forum theatre (not invented, but refined by him) used a company of actors to rehearse and re-enact on stage a story of oppression provided by the audience. They then invite the audience as ‘spect-actors’ to intervene and change the behaviour of the oppressed protagonist, in order to find the most effective method of dealing with the oppression.

In recent years, Boal has acknowledged the problems of only working at the community level and his theory and practice have concentrated more on the individual; on establishing a basis of workshop drama exercises to assist individuals to deal with their own ‘cops in the head’ that provide much of what oppresses them.

Like drama in education and TIE, theatre of the oppressed has been enthusiastically taken up both in Western school settings by teachers and by theatre for development groups in the developing world. There are signs too that all the movements are rediscovering their common ground. forum theatre and many other Boalian workshop techniques have been added to the corpus of process drama strategies and psychodrama is beginning to acknowledge its commonality with both movements.¹⁴

The increasing body of drama work being applied in many settings worldwide to the field of conflict handling, at levels from the geo-political to the school





classroom, draws from all three traditions.

However, conflict resolution does not sit easily with social critique. Official ambivalence to theatre is always present – it is part of the two-headed nature of drama and theatre not just to reflect and refract and celebrate society, but to interrogate it – to ask awkward question as well as providing happy endings.¹⁵

Third World governments and non-governmental agencies like UNESCO and WHO welcome the power of theatre to speak to the community and influence its attitudes, on AIDS and on the environment, but look nervously on its potential to stir up those communities into unrest. Many of the developing world's most distinguished playwrights and directors have spent time in gaol and exile – Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Rendra (Indonesia), Kuo Pao Kun (Singapore), Ngugi wa Thiongo (Kenya) and Vaclav Havel (then Czechoslovakia) – and the developed world too. Brendan Behan and Oscar Wilde in the UK, Paul Robeson and Arthur Miller in the USA and the actor in Australia who said the dreaded word in Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* are among the more celebrated of officialdom's theatrical victims.

Plato, a generation before Aristotle, warned of the potentially disruptive effects of poetry and drama. Governments and social controllers have been equally aware of the potential of drama to backfire or subvert that very congruence. ('It is a sin of the devil to draw men to wickedness' as one medieval cleric put it). Not only that, but it must be noted that drama may also be traduced into assisting the escalation and maintenance of conflict. Training for war is in no small measure carried out through dramatic simulation, enactment and the selective management of dramatic empathy. Governments spend billions on what they call 'military exercises' which are as much 'just pretend' as any five-year-olds playing doctors and nurses.

Drama and models

Like models in geography or anatomy, drama works as a holistic model to explore the interaction of all these aspects of personality and society, the cognitive and affective domain, the personal and the social need. Drama is in fact a very ancient and a very effective model of human behaviour and human relationships. Like the geographical model – the map or globe – it simplifies the contours of a conflict so that the important structural features can be seen as a whole, with the clutter of trees and details removed. Like the anatomical skeleton, it shows how that structure articulates and moves. More effectively





than either, it fleshes out the bones and makes the skeleton dance. If the 'skeleton' of human behaviour to be analysed is a relationship in conflict, it can take the model apart, reassemble it, fit new parts and animate them.

There is one further attribute of drama that neither the map or the skeleton can claim: it can both convey and play with the emotional content and the subjective meaning attached to the object. To the human beings who live there, what a geographer's map represents has deep and personal meanings, which are reduced on the map to a symbol that says 'house' or 'church' or 'field' and nothing more.

Similarly, the skeleton's skull says little about the brain inside it or the face and its expressions outside. Drama's deepest purposes are in animating the model, letting us see the structure of the conflict clearly, while acknowledging and retaining all the emotional and subjective factors that are what have shaped the map in the first place.

Role theory and drama

The psychodrama and drama in education movements have already laid much of the groundwork for drama's use in conflict handling. In preventing, mediating or resolving a conflict, the protagonists and mediators must understand the nature of the roles that are assigned and what may or may not be negotiable.

The centrality of role-play as a dramatic technique has naturally involved the close investigation of the nature of role and thus invoked the whole field of role-theory and the social construction of role in real life.

A repertoire of role-drama techniques has then been developed as part of the pedagogy to permit the examination of people's status and positions in the dramatic situation, the particular role or roles that they hold in that situation and the postures and behaviours they adopt in maintaining the role(s). This is in fact their very purpose.¹⁶

Though the function of drama is to simplify moments of life so that they can be comprehended on a stage or acting space, drama is actually more complex than real life in one way. That is in the way it engages three quite distinct contexts simultaneously; the real life context, the context of the performative event and the fictional dramatic context. The participants have three sets of





roles. Their interaction and overlay of these on each other, the invocation and suspension of each of them, are what provide the learning potential:

- 1 The participants in real life are, say, thirty 13 year olds living in New South Wales. Other aspects of their real life roles are that they each have a family that is not the same as the others and they are all at a particular school for the same general purposes. More detailed aspects of the setting are that they are all combining in a drama class, in a particular room, with a particular teacher. All participants have a relatively fixed relationship with each other in terms of status and a negotiable relationship in terms of respect, friendship, rapport etc. On a day-by-day basis the roles are fixed.
- 2 In the fictional context of the dramatic event in which they perform as actors, they take the roles of characters. How they play those roles will determine the nature and the narrative of the play. In this context the real life context is at least partially suspended, to allow the dramatic narrative to unfold – the teacher may become the one who needs help, or may be abused, without consequences in the real context.
- 3 In the performative event, the drama lesson, they have another set of roles: as playwrights, directors, actors and audience of the dramatic event they are engaged in creating together. Here they experiment in earnest with the very notion of role:
 - Techniques of role-reversal, of renegotiating aspects of the dramatic situation, of experimenting with different actions to improve or change the role, introducing new characters are all part of the playwright's devices.
 - Reshaping the audience point of view to provide more distance or more empathy, changing the physical parameters, accentuating the dramatic irony, or providing new internal insights are part of the director's repertoire.
 - Adopting a variety of postures, changing the energy level, responding in a range of ways, sometimes surprisingly, are all part of the actor's box of tricks.

Watching the action from inside or outside, deliberately changing one's point of view on the situation, sitting down in post-drama debriefing, discussion and reflection and even recreating the experience in another art form, of painting, poetry and song, or writing, are all part of the audience's repertoire.





Player and audience

Drama centrally depends on an emotion equally central to conflict resolution — *empathy*: the ability to identify not only cognitively but affectively with others — to ‘step into others’ shoes’ to some degree and temporarily see the world from an alien viewpoint.

Drama actually works through the simultaneous operation of both empathy and distance. The ‘dual affect’,¹⁷ whereby the participant ‘weeps in play as a patient, but revels as the player’ permits both emotional identification and closeness to the conflict and dispassionate awareness of the elements of that conflict, as many writers on drama have pointed out.

Concomitant with this, drama permits the point-of-view (and the accompanying emotional orientation) to be changed or switched — within the conflict event itself; from protagonist to antagonist; from the centre of the conflict event to the edge; the supporting character/s and interested onlookers or chorus; to outside the conflict event: the onlookers or audience.

It is necessary here to clarify what ‘audience’ in dramatic role-play means. This may be, but need not be, AN audience. A role-play may take the following forms — the first two of which are not strictly role-play at all, though they are often miscalled that:

External audience

- It may involve two participants reproducing a scripted conversation or action, in front of an audience of fellows or assessors who are watching to see if the actors are reproducing the script and its procedures correctly.
- It may involve participants or professional actors in enacting a prepared script in front of an audience of participants, who then have to complete a task such as assigning responsibility or finding a solution to the conflict.
- It may be as the above but with the actors improvising from an outline scenario which may or may not have a prescribed outcome, rather than a script.

In all the above forms, which are particularly common in the use of role-play in vocational training, the audience and the actors are clearly distinguished, with the focus of the activity on providing an accurate imitation or representation to the audience, either as learners, or as assessors. The actors have to



concentrate their efforts on making the action visible and clear.

However, one of the major contributions of the drama in education movement is to identify that significant learning occurs through the experience of the improvised dramatic action, the role-play itself. For this, the concentration needs to be on what is happening in the dramatic context.

In its simplest form, experiential role-play, the actors should be empathising so completely with their characters that the action proceeds spontaneously, authentic to the situation. If the learning is occurring in the action itself, an external audience is unnecessary, in fact becomes an encumbrance.

The action may not be clear to those outside the action – especially in an intense and secret discussion, for instance. Moreover, if the actors are aware of the audience it distracts their concentration from being immersed in the situation and leads to self-consciousness.

Furthermore, if they then try to play to the audience, to make the situation clear to them, it distracts from their own authentic enactment (it takes a very skilled and experienced actor simultaneously to empathise with and project a character). So a number of role-play forms have evolved with a different concept of audience entirely.

No external audience

- Whole-group role-play, where all the learners are involved in a situation as different characters, sometimes with the teacher too (as teacher-in-role). Periodically, or at the end, the action will be stopped (or break down) for the participants to reflect on what they have experienced, to discuss, debrief or negotiate the next phase of action. This reflection is the audience function delayed, observing retrospectively and critically what they themselves have been through.
- Simultaneous role-play in pairs or groups permit a large class or group to engage in, and experience together, situations only involving a few people – such as scenes of manifest conflict in families or work situations. At the end, the participants report back, discuss and compare their experiences – again the retrospective audience reflection.



Intermediary audience

- In either of the above forms, some participants may be withheld, as ‘monitors’ of the action. They will be briefed to observe the role-play, unobtrusively and note particularities to be fed back to the participants in the reflection. Sometimes participants will take it in turns to be monitors and role-players. This is a kind of ‘intermediate’ audience, neither wholly inside nor outside.
- A variation of this is where the ‘monitor’ is briefed to observe the action and then intervene at a particular point, to provide a new character and thus a new dramatic ingredient or constraint.
- Experiential role-play is not the only stock-in-trade of the drama teacher. Other forms of improvisation and dramatic conventions, that give the actors more distance from the situation even as they participate, are also used. Some of these move back towards an external audience ‘Dramatic reconstruction’ is a common convention, where the actors are given information on a situation and then asked to reconstruct it – specifically as actors – and as accurately as they can. The reconstruction is then used as a basis for reflective discussion and further experiment.
- Participants may be asked to act out a situation to an audience of other participants – a scene they have prepared, or one that they have already role-played experientially. The actors remain in their roles while the audience then become active participants and interview the characters, finding out more about them or giving them advice.
- Only one step further and the audience may be invited to intervene in the action itself – and this turns the audience into Boal’s ‘spect-actors’ and the role-play effectually into ‘forum theatre’.

Following from the above, a drama incorporates both audience and actor within its essential structure – embodying the roles and points-of-view of the participant and the observer. More significantly, although in modern Western theatre the actor and audience are usually kept as distinct roles for different people, in some forms of traditional theatre and contemporary process drama, these two positions can be exchanged and interchanged. This is significantly true of the two major movements in drama education: drama in education chooses to talk of ‘participants’ rather than actors and audience and theatre of the oppressed has coined the term ‘spect-actor’.



Sub-text and metaphor in drama

Drama works through exploring and making manifest *sub-text*. In real life the sub-texts of interactions and relationships are always implicit (that's what *sub-text* means) – the relative status of the participants, their motivations, attitudes, emotional orientations to each other and the latent and incipient conflicts which those engender. In drama, the sub-texts drive and control the action.

The condensation of time, place and action enables the cause and effect of these sub-texts to be made explicit, or to resonate with the real lives of the participants. In other words, we can perceive those things that for various reasons lie unspoken or cannot be said.

An important element of this is that particularly in conflict scenarios, the text and the sub-text may directly contradict each other as sets of motives conflict. Drama permits these contradictions to be made visible. More than that, through the operation of dramatic irony, the contradiction can be highlighted for examination coolly and for the interpolation of humour and distance to illuminate the emotional heat.

Drama is always at least one remove from real life. Some forms can remain quite close to real experience and quite personal and direct, while others generalise the experience into indirect, more metaphorical and universally recognised experience (at least within the shared culture or cultures of the participants.)

Similarly, the relationship between various forms of drama and theatre in terms of the interaction between exploring and experiencing a dramatic situation on the one hand, fixing it in a reproduceable form for communication or performance can be mapped. For those familiar with some of the terminology of drama pedagogy and theatre the following diagram may be helpful.

The dramatic contract

Before any dramatic event can happen, the participants must agree to abide by the basic *contract* of drama, which is that they will share the willing suspension of their disbelief in order to enter together the fictional world of the drama. Put simply, if all the participants do not accept the fiction, then the fictional world



cannot be created. Drama can only happen voluntarily, at the will of all the participants.

This is important for another reason, that drama provides a ‘safe space’— where the participants agree that whatever happens in the fictional and real life contexts will remain distinct. The fictional conflicts that the characters have will not be translated back into the participants’ real lives (and conversely, that the tensions and affections of real life will be suspended in the interest of keeping the fiction authentic). Drama is above all an ensemble art form, depending on participants playing their part to create a unified whole.

This means that the contract must be prepared for, the space and the event made special. In a conventional theatre this is easy. The building and all the design features are designed to help the audience and actors know and follow their roles, everyone’s motivation is congruent and nobody is there unwillingly.

In a classroom, training or counselling group, the messages may be entirely different. The building is designed for something entirely different and members of the group may have resistance to the idea of using drama, they may not like or trust each other or the environment.

Therefore, preconditions have to be established. Participants have to be helped to establish and accept the contract. There must be trust that the other participants will honour the rules of the context of the dramatic event and of the fictional context. An ensemble must be created. Sometimes these rules need to be spelt out and agreed explicitly.

Often, dramatic games and exercises are used, firstly as ‘ice-breakers’, then more specifically to develop trust and concentration, or to focus on the particular theme of the drama work to be undertaken. This is akin to the preconditions for conflict mediation. Before any progress can be made, the antagonists must at least agree on the need to have the mediation and on the establishment of the equivalent safe space — the mediation context mirroring drama’s context of the dramatic event.



Artistic functions and artistry

Within any dramatic event, whatever the genre of drama, participants are there to fulfil one of four basic functions:

- playwright (also improviser or dramaturge) – to create and structure the fiction, invent the situation, characters and storyline
- director (also leader, teacher, narrator) – to manage the context of the event and the fictional context
- actor (participant, role-player) – to play out the characters in the fictional context
- audience (also spectator, critic) – to watch and listen, receive, observe, respond and reflect on the dramatic action.

In traditional Western theatre these functions are carried out by separate individuals throughout the event – the audience does not get on stage and act, or direct the actors.

In some forms of traditional theatre, the relationship is more fluid. In some African village drama participants may sit and watch their friends acting out one of the stories of Anansi the Spider, but join in with song, dance, improvised action or suggested ideas. Or they may take over themselves, to perform another story.¹⁸

In processual theatre forms, such as TIE and forum theatre, the relationship is fluid too. Most processual of all, in process drama the participants may take on all of the functions, sometimes simultaneously. For example, in experiential role-play, a teacher may enter the action unexpectedly as teacher-in-role to provide a new ingredient; alternatively, a participant may – in character – say or do something to move the plot forward, or change its direction. Both are operating as playwright as well as actor.

This points to another demand of drama – the development of artistic skills among the participants. Both of the above interventions entail complex artistic management skills.

- The teacher or participant must time the intervention appropriately to his or her reading of the developing action (and often this kind of intervention will be in response to that artist having read the action as lacking something or needing a boost in dramatic tension).



- The intervention needs to be made at the appropriate energy level to create an awareness among the other participants of what is happening, without stopping the action.
- In order to do this, the intervener's need to be very clear and operate at the level of both text and sub-text. Textually, within the fictional context the 'character' is appearing and intervening in a way that can be seen to be in character and something that the other characters can relate to and take their cue from.

Sub-textually and simultaneously, the intervention needs to remind the other participants of the context of the event, that the player is intervening for a purpose to which s/he wants the other players to respond, which they will understand and which they are likely to be willing to accede to.

These are subtle artistic skills – students who demonstrate them consistently in drama classes, or children in dramatic play, are known as 'master-dramatists'. Not all participants in drama have these skills, particularly in common school or community group contexts.

Just as there are pre-conditions for the very dramatic event to occur at all, the necessary artistic background and support must be provided, or the drama will either disintegrate or remain on the most superficial level, in terms of useful learning a poor experience. Learning and artistry are closely and proportionally related.

The phases of drama

Preparation

As part of ensuring that the contract is established and the functions distinct and agreed upon, time and care must be devoted to preparing and focusing the participants. An appropriate mood and readiness must be established. In a conventional theatre this is assisted by the physical location and surroundings – for audience the design of the theatre and the rituals of attendance, for the actors the set, costumes and make-up.

In other settings the location may actively work against the operation of drama – in the classroom, the clinic or the street, which were all designed for



something entirely different. The implication of this is that a preparation phase is necessary. Even in a theatre, the actors need a warm-up, both physical and psychological, while the opera audience at least needs an overture. In the various forms of role-play and processual drama, the participants need focusing and sometimes to warm-up into an appropriate mood and physical readiness.

Enrolment

If, in addition, they are being asked to take role, even if this is just a generalised shift of viewpoint ('this has happened to you — how do you react?') it is crucial that they are enabled to focus intellectually and emotionally so that they can operate and respond appropriately. Particularly if they are asked to adopt a realistic, personalised or complex role where they will be expected to empathise and respond as a specific character perhaps very alien to their own disposition, it is crucial that time, space and appropriate preparation be allowed for this enrolment process. This often takes the form of concentration exercises, preliminary improvisation, in-role writing, and artwork or physical tasks.

Dramatic action and tension

The space needs to be made as congruent as possible with the fictitious situation. In a personalised role-play, it is difficult for participants to respond appropriately as, say adults in a crisis interview, if there is an external, amused audience, or they are being asked to sit at desks or on the floor. Appropriate time must be made for the action in order to fully establish concentration and dramatic tension. Dramatic tension, essential to the effective operation of any drama, will only occur if the characters' goals and purposes are strong, their tasks are clear and the action is delayed by appropriate constraints. This is crucial.

There are basic skills necessary for participants in any form of drama, including

- the ability to make and accept the contract and the functions appropriate to the genre
- the ability to sustain and take responsibility for shaping dramatic action appropriately
- the ability both to respond and to interact sensitively and appropriately as an actor.



Reflection

Drama generates its own meanings, most of which are not, or not fully propositional. They cannot be reduced to simplistic resolutions and assumptions or written down as exam answers. However, it is possible and in some cases necessary, to reflect upon the meanings, i.e. those personal to each participant and those shared by the group. This important phase, sometimes known as 'debriefing', always happens spontaneously. Following a conventional play, audience and actors (usually separately) chatter energetically and gradually formulate their considered responses. The same may be seen following an intent process or improvised drama. In the case of inexperienced participants, particularly in role-play exercises, this reflective process may need to be carefully structured and even to begin within the dramatic fiction itself. If there is a teaching, counselling or clinical component, this is particularly crucial, to make explicit the nature of the experience just shared and what useful knowledge may be derived from it.

Limitations and constraints

Drama and theatre entail a number of limitations and constraints which spring from the nature of the art form itself and must be borne in mind when contemplating using drama in the arena of conflict management.

Fiction

Drama is fictional and voluntary. Even if dealing with 'real-life' events, the dramatist or participant group selects from and adapts those events to construct and manipulate the dramatic narrative AT WILL. The drama can only happen at the conscious will and intellectual and emotional commitment of all the participants.

For instance, where the conditions for either empathy or distance are not present, the depiction and exploration of conflict through drama become either impossible or spurious. An Israeli drama adviser describes in a drama project to assist reconciliation between Jews and Arabs a Jewish girl whose brother was a victim of Arab terrorism and who was unable to take part at all because to empathise with an Arab would be to her a personal betrayal.



Young people enmeshed in the complexities of real conflict in Northern Ireland are proving similarly unable or unwilling to accept the way dramatic fiction plays with what for them is their truth.¹⁹

Protection and exposure

For the actor/participant in drama, there is a dialectic between protection and exposure, exploration and communication. On the one hand, the dramatic fiction permits the freedom to explore an unknown landscape, emotional or ideological, without consequences. This may involve the participant in exploring his/her own personal experience, but protected from embarrassing or wounding disclosure ('this is not me, it's only the character').

On the other hand, the presence of an audience imposes the need to perform, to make actions recognisable to communicate them to others, which to a degree means fixing or typing them. It takes a skilled actor, with time for rehearsal, to marry these conflicting demands authentically.

To ask inexperienced participants, for example in a role-play, to take on a new situation, often with little enrolment or preparation and act it out immediately, or with a few minutes preparation for an audience, is asking for unauthentic emotion and superficial understanding of the dynamics, as well as inept performance.

An audience of colleagues may in fact be more exposing than strangers, disposed to laugh at the depiction rather than scrutinise the behaviour depicted. It is important in all processual dramatic genres, such as role-play, to decide whether

- 1 the purpose is spontaneous exploration, in which case there should normally be no external audience that will interfere with the concentration — at most a video-camera or a couple of briefed monitors
- 2 the purpose is communication through performance — in which case time should be scheduled for rehearsal and fixing. In forum theatre, for instance, the 'spect-actors' are invited to participate, but not until rehearsed actors have enacted the problematic situation.



Questions not answers

Although the drive of dramatic tension is towards complete resolution of conflict, very rarely in adult drama is the happy ending either complete or believable. The primary job of the dramatist is to problematise, to raise the questions that a particular situation or group of characters can generate.

The art of the dramatist is in making the conflict as hard as possible to resolve. The meanings that emerge from the drama, even after appropriate reflection, are never fully explicit. They are an inextricably interwoven framework of intellectual and emotional understanding, indirect and non-discursive. They cannot be told, but they can and do resonate with the participant's real life experience.

They are therefore very difficult to convey to others, even other participants, especially in words. All drama itself can do in the field of conflict mediation is to provide a range of alternatives and to make visible other ways of looking at the conflict, other possible avenues to explore.

Unpredictability

As we have seen, throughout history drama has been viewed ambivalently by those who make or manage social systems and their values. This is because, though it may be realistic, drama is not linear. Beyond what in dramatic terms is the infantile desire for simple resolutions and the triumph of the morally impeccable hero over pure evil, drama's meanings are provisional and ambiguous.

The heroes we sympathise with, from Hamlet to Mickey Mouse, are flawed or just a little demonic – that's what makes them recognisably human. The more problematic the character's motivations and actions, the more we can exercise that dual affect of empathy and distance, emotion and thought. These resonate with the real life experience and understanding of the participants in ways that can be apprehended but not fully comprehended or explicated.

This makes drama very suitable for setting up difficult and wayward challenges in say, training situations where the client is being trained to deal with the vagaries of real life conflict, such as counselling or police work. Drama is a quite unsuitable vehicle for linear processes, for wherever 'standard procedures' or 'correct procedures' are needed in real-life.



Impermanence and transience

Drama is a lived event, experienced in the moment and only partially recaptured afterwards through reflection or replay. This makes any dramatic action, or behaviour observed within a drama, very hard to analyse cognitively or use systematically.

Observation and reportage, or use of video or tape-recording, can help recapture the moment, but only through a transformation which must be recognised as such. In particular, written dramatic text – script or transcript – is extremely unreliable, because it can only deal with the verbal text (and perhaps a few of the grosser non-verbal actions, embodied in annotations or stage directions) and not reveal the interplay of language, action and gesture, text and sub-text.





Endnotes

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- 3 Aristotle (c. 330 BC), *The Poetics*, variously published.
- 4 Nolte, J. 2000, 'Psychodrama' in O'Toole, J. & Lepp, M. (eds), *Drama, Adults and Learning*, Playlab Publications, Brisbane.
- 5 quoted in Bolton, G. 1984, *Drama as Education*, p. 18, Longmans, London.
- 6 Courtney, R. 1968, *Play, Drama and Thought*, Cassell, London.
- 7 Bolton, G. 1979, *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education*, p. 112, Longmans, London.
- 8 see O'Toole, J. & Donelan, K. op. cit.
- 9 Mangeni, P. 1996, *A Theatrical Alternative for Child Survival*, in O'Toole, J. & Donelan, K. op. cit. p. 77.
- 10 Nyangore, V. 2000, *Listen to your Mothers*, in O'Toole, J. & Lepp, M. op. cit. p. 77.
- 11 The most famous of many examples is the work of Dramaide in South Africa: see Dalrymple, L. 1996, *The Dramaide Project*, in O'Toole, J. & Donelan, K. op. cit. p. 33.
- 12 Pattanaik, S. 2000, *Messengers on Bicycles*, in O'Toole, J. & Lepp, M. op. cit. p. 85.
- 13 Freire, P. 1972, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, London.
- 14 see inter alia Nolte, op. cit. & Landy, R. 1990, 'The Concept of Role in Drama Therapy', *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 17, Pergamon, London.
- 15 see inter alia O'Toole, J. 1995, *The Rude Charms of Drama*, NADIE Publications, Brisbane.
- 16 The improvisation techniques of Keith Johnstone in exploring and revealing status and power in human relations has been highly influential: see Johnstone, K. 1989, c. 1981, *Impro: improvisation and the theatre*, Methuen Drama, London.
- 17 Vygotski, L. 1933, 'Play and its role in the development of the child', in Bruner, J. et al. 1974, *Play: a Reader*, p. 548, Penguin, London.
- 18 Qoopane, F. 1990, *Traditional African Village Performance*, unpublished MA Thesis, University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.
19. Schonmann, S. 1996, *The Drama and Theatre Class Battlefield* and Fyfe, H. 1996, *Drama in the Context of a Divided Society* in O'Toole, J. & Donelan, K. op. cit. pp. 61–76.

