



Process drama

1. Introduction

The most important thing to grasp about process drama is that it is not a play, nor theatre, nor a skit or a sketch. All of those have actors and an audience. Process drama only has players. There is no separate audience to sit and watch. It is much more like an adventure game where the players all participate actively throughout. They take part as the characters in the dramatic situation that is being explored and they work together as playwrights negotiating and building the drama.

Sometimes they role-play the characters realistically, living through the characters' tasks and actions, feeling their emotions, frustration and joys. This is really the centre of process drama. Sometimes they work at a distance like playwrights and designers, constructing and exploring theatrical images and symbols of the drama, or reconstructing scenes more like actors. In some process dramas, the players keep the same roles throughout; in others they may undertake a variety of characters and tasks. In most process dramas the leader or teacher takes part. This is known as teacher-in-role. In all process drama, the participants have some say in what happens in the process.



Structuring process drama is therefore more than just getting people to act out a story. For one thing, telling the story – ‘what happened’ – is less important than exploring the significance of what happened. Participants can decide to go back in time to find out why it happened, or explore its effect on the characters or other people, just as interestingly as moving forward to find out what happened next.

For another thing, all the group or class have to be kept continuously involved and on task exploring the dramatic situation. The whole class in pairs can play out a scene of conflict involving two people simultaneously. After all, there is nobody watching and the important part is experiencing how those characters feel and behave.

The important thing is to remember the key stages that apply to all drama:

Preparation and enrolment

The players need to feel interested in and emotionally involved with the situation and the characters. This often entails exercises to give the players the character’s viewpoint or a strong empathic identification.

Experiencing dramatic action

Telling or exploring part of the dramatic story at first hand. To keep the players involved and interested, dramatic tension must be created – a question that must be answered; a task that has to be completed; a resolution we are striving for.

Reflection

Creating some distance so that the participants can scrutinise the action to find meaning and significance. This may be discussion or de-briefing, but it may start within the action, by creating a self-conscious theatrical image of some kind, or by pausing in the drama to negotiate the next phase – ‘I don’t think she’d have done that ... let’s see what would happen if she ...’.

As process drama is a complex dramatic genre it may be helpful for teachers unfamiliar with it to read and use an example first and then to just try the key strategies that are recommended for the students to limit themselves to.



2. Implementation

Establishing a pre-text

The first step in creating a process drama is to find what is called a pre-text.¹ This could be something that leads to a dramatic context or a situation involving people that the group agrees poses some interesting questions. The pre-text may suggest the present, the past or the future.

For *Cooling Conflicts* that is likely to be, or entail, one of three types of conflict:

Latent

How might this escalate? How can it be stopped?

Emerging

What is happening to these people? Can anyone intervene yet?

Manifest

How did this happen? What will happen if it is left unchecked? How can it be de-escalated?

Fleshing out the dramatic situation involves asking five establishing questions, the five Ws:

- 1 **What's happening?**
- 2 **Who are involved?**
- 3 **When?**
- 4 **Where?**
- 5 **What's at stake?**²





Starting the dramatic action

The next step the group or the teacher must take is to decide on a key question to explore and a point of entry into the drama that will begin to shed some light on that key question. The key question is what will be problematic enough to last through the whole drama and may never be resolved, even at the end. Having decided on the key question, the next question is invariably ‘What if...?’ – and the drama is under way.

This process may take the form of setting up a dramatic scene, giving an introductory narrative, creating a theatrical image or engaging in a dramatic exercise. The example uses all these forms. If it is a dramatic scene, it may be with the whole group if a crowd scene forms part of exploring the key question. If the scene just involves a family, the students might be broken into groups to improvise a key moment of crisis simultaneously.

Focusing the action

Choosing exactly where to start the drama and then where to go from there are issues that often perplex beginners. It’s all very well having a situation and a question, but exactly what point do we start at to catch the students’ interest and to focus on the essentials of the conflict. Two different things, sometimes. The notion of framing the action, like a camera, which both frames and focuses, is helpful in providing limiting choices, both at the start and ongoing. If one considers each scene as a kind of snapshot of part of the conflict, the play can represent three different scenic viewpoints:

- **Close-up** — Investigating the conflict from the inside, experiencing the points of view of the protagonists themselves embroiled in the manifest conflict.
- **On the edge** — Seeing the conflict from the point of view of those closely affected, or from a different time. Exploring the brewing conflict rather than the actual confrontation, or projecting forward to examine the likely consequences.
- **From a distance** — Exploring the situation from afar. Investigating the conditions of latent conflict, of stereotyped attitudes or assumptions that would eventually lead to the flashpoint, or exploring the consequences in terms of those others affected by it perhaps years later.



Enrolling the players

At some point in a process drama the players are going to be role-playing a character – or possibly at different times, different characters – realistically. They will be exploring what it felt like to be this character in this conflict situation, enacting how the character behaved and why.

It is important to ensure that they have enough information and enough emotional orientation or empathy to be able to identify with the character – to allow them to act authentically and instinctively.

This often entails further preliminary exercise work to give the characters the information and empathy. It may be able to be quite superficial. Just to give a generic point of view and a purpose for the character's involvement in the scene may be enough, say for a news reporter, a police officer, or an interested neighbour. Sometimes it may need to be much deeper and fleshed out with background information – a confused and unhappy parent, say, or an embittered teacher.

Hardest of all is to enrol as a 'villain' – somebody who is behaving badly, say a vicious racist or drug trafficker. Before any authenticity in the scene (and thus in the dramatic exploration) is possible, it is necessary to help the player to find that character's integrity, in fact to at least partly understand and empathise.

All of these three kinds of enrolment take progressively longer to achieve and cannot be hurried – and it is not uncommon for the enrolment phase to take most of a drama in terms of time.

In naturalistic role-play, with a few exceptions (see below, audience), it is very important not to have an audience. It takes complete concentration to identify sufficiently with a character both in point of view and empathy to believe in and behave as that person. This must be unselfconscious and it is very hard indeed in front of an audience, especially for beginners in drama. The natural tendency is to display or exhibit the externals of the character – to communicate to the audience, rather than just contributing to the action in the moment (which is what the character would be doing in real life). To do both is a task for an experienced and trained actor.

For this reason too, the players need to be helped to engage unselfconsciously. Since in a way, all the players are still audience of each other, it usually takes a



few moments for them to warm into the scene and immerse themselves in the action. It helps too if the context is carefully set and the space they are working in is at least minimally congruent with where the scene is set.

Even if there are 15 interviews between a parent and a counsellor, for instance, going on in the same room simultaneously, the players should have chairs to sit on (in real life, those two characters wouldn't sit on the floor) and be given a few moments to compose themselves. They could even be given a starting line: 'Start with "Hello. I'm your son's social worker"'

Developing the action and tension

From this point all process dramas will progress somewhat differently, according to how the leader and/or the participants have decided to structure the main action. Scenes of conflict, exploring background and consequences of escalation or de-escalation may be role-played naturalistically.

Players may keep the same roles and play scenes with new demands or constraints. They may switch roles, as new characters emerge in the conflict. They may sometimes very usefully reverse roles, to find out what it is like having the antagonist's point of view, set of interests and rights and position of status and power.

There must always be a question driving the action, keeping the players interested and involved, feeling dramatic tension. This involves creating many *constraints*, to make it harder for the characters. Although resolution of conflict is always a key purpose for the characters themselves, the drama is more interesting the more problematic it is and the harder the dilemma or conflict is to solve. Not only more interesting, but it will lead to more depth of understanding. There is no satisfaction in solving a simple conflict, or blaming an easy villain. If all characters have their integrity, and the clashes of interest, rights and power are really substantial, both the drama and the understanding of the demands and difficulties of conflict handling will be deepened.

An important aspect of all drama is the need for variation and change of pace and energy in the drama. That is why serious plays often use comic relief and vary the speed of the action, the emotional intensity and the point of view for the audience. The same applies to process drama and an unchanging succession of emotional confrontations will not lead to good drama or much understanding. As the German playwright Bertold Brecht insisted, the



participants (or audience, in his case) need to keep their intellect involved if they are to really understand the patterns of interests, rights and power underlying conflict and to see through the stereotypes and assumptions that underlie instinctive action. Empathy alone, particularly for one single character, hero or victim, is not enough.

This is where theatre practices and the use of distancing conventions, comes in. To look at a heavily emotional situation dispassionately, to engage the intellect to begin to decide who is really at fault, or how a conflict arose and how it can be de-escalated, it is useful to interrupt the flow of naturalistic role-play with techniques that freeze the action and create an image or series of images. This is so the participants, out of character, can scrutinise its elements.

For instance, to recreate the conflict as a wordless dance or symbolic movement sequence. Or a set of sculptures or frozen images that can be re-moulded to express participants' differing understanding, given sets of words to speak that crystallise how the character feels at a key moment (in the convention called thought-tracking), playing with time and taking a time jump. Here, just as much as in the naturalistic role-play scenes, the words 'What if ...' become richly productive.

Theatre conventions too can help distort the dramatic situation or moment in some way to help the players see the illogical aspects of the behaviour. Finding the absurd and provoking laughter is an important distancing device that also gives the participants a welcome relief from tension. Playing with the conflict situation or joking about it does not automatically imply disrespect.

Showing and demonstrating — monitoring

At this point it is worth re-examining the notion of audience. Although there are no outsiders to be entertained or communicated with, the players themselves are, in a way, an audience with interest in their own drama and interests in discovering the significance of the action they are exploring.

They are indeed an audience when examining a theatrical image or freeze-frame constructed by other players. It may be illuminating to deliberately ask students to construct a piece of action specifically to be re-arranged, or re-enacted, or re-constructed by themselves or others. It even becomes possible with naturalistic role-play, once it has happened unselfconsciously, for it to be



replayed as a demonstration or to provide insights and comparisons for other players.

A further extension of the idea of audience that can be used sparingly in role-play is that of a 'monitor'.

One characteristic of empathic role-play that can become a problem is that often players get so carried away in living out the moment, especially if the scene entails anger and frustration, that they lose track of (a) some of the details: the exact language they are using for instance, or the non-verbal signals and (b) the overview: the patterns of turn-taking or interruption, of twisting arguments and falling back on assumptions (just as in a real argument).

For this it is sometimes very valuable to have an outside eye to observe and monitor the scene. A single unobtrusive observer is much less daunting or off-putting than a mass audience and protagonists, after an initial slightly self-conscious few moments, quickly tend to become immersed in the scene.

The monitor can provide significant feedback, both to the protagonists after they have played out the scene and in discussion with the whole group, comparing their own objective observations with each other's and with the subjective reactions of the protagonists. This is a valuable reflective tool.

Negotiating, renegotiating and reflecting

A process drama is not a smooth continuous flow of drama like a play. The players in a process drama, though deeply immersed at times, are also very conscious of the whole process, since at the end of each scene the drama stops and the players often change modes from empathic actor to playwright or designer.

This gives them the opportunity also to stop and discuss or reflect on the action so far and even to be involved in deciding exactly how the drama is constructed or managed. What would increase the tension? What new strategy might help to resolve the conflict? They may for instance decide that the next scene will have a particular outcome or ending in advance, so that the interest in the scene is in exploring how this outcome happens.

If the conflict situation is really complex and the group leader confident in the group's involvement, members may choose to take a new tack previously



unthought-of: 'What if, instead of ...?' This is the first part of the reflective process. The participants are constantly taking stock of the dramatic situation, both in order to monitor how the conflict is escalating or de-escalating and to help construct the action itself, showing their developing understanding not only of the principles of the drama, but of the structures of the conflict itself. Each throws light on the other, reflexively.

The participants actually have a lot of power within the drama itself, also, to change, adapt and shape the action. Since each scene in a process drama is being improvised, player intervention constantly happens internally, by the characters behaving in a particular way to extend or change the action. There is some artistic skill to this, that students will develop as they become familiar with the form, though some students, known as 'master-dramatists', have a natural instinctive ability and the leader can often rely on their instinct or advice.

At the end of the drama, time should always be made for some kind of retrospective reflection. If the drama has been intense and enjoyable, this will begin quite naturally, in the babble of excited chatter that breaks out (and is to be encouraged rather than stemmed): 'What about when ...?' 'Yeah and then I ...' As well as shared reflection, there is a place for personal, often written reflection – a journal entry, or some in-role writing, or a carefully focused question to address, or for the student to suggest in the calm after the storm how resolution might have been better achieved.

3. Key techniques

Whole class role-play

A crowd scene, where something happens that affects everybody – an incident in a street, a schoolyard or a party, for instance. Set it up carefully and make sure everybody knows what his or her part in the scene will be.

Simultaneous pairs or small group role-play

For a family scene or an argument between two people, the teacher gets everybody improvising it at the same time in groups. Make sure each group is clearly separate from each other and that they have enough personal background to play the characters. Ensure they feel and can believe



comfortably in the characters, that they are clear about the beginning of the scene and in general terms what will happen.

Teacher-in-role

Teachers can take part as characters themselves. They can help to control what happens in a crowd scene, for instance, or find a way that will make the drama more tense and exciting – to come in with an unexpected message. When there are several teachers-in-role, small group role-play can be used with one teacher taking part in each group.

When using teacher-in-role, especially in the ‘hot-seat’ (see below) make it very clear to the group the moment when you stop being the teacher and start to play characters. It is a good idea to have a simple prop like a bag or a clipboard or wear something like a scarf, while teacher is in the role.

Hot-seat

This is where players have a need to question or interrogate a character, to find out information, ascertain why the character behaved in a certain way, or to offer the character advice. This is a good opportunity for the teacher-in-role, but it can be one of the characters being played by a group member being hot-seated. The teacher might combine hot-seating with multiple role (see below). If the teacher is intending to have a scene where a character is hot-seated, make sure the characters asking the questions have a good reason for asking them – a real need to know something, or a desire to help.

Multiple role

This is where several players or the entire group agree to operate as one person. Teachers must emphasise that everybody’s contribution must be consistent and not contradict what anybody has said, nor be unbelievable. It can be used as a warm-up, with everybody in the circle with a teacher in the middle.

The teacher starts by asking somebody to give a fictional name, e.g. ‘Patrick’, then in turn questions everybody in the circle, calling them ‘Patrick’ and asking them leading questions such as ‘where were you when the trouble started, Patrick?’



It can also be used extensively within the drama. This is a very useful technique to use in combination with hot-seat so that all the group have the opportunity, say, to be a 'joint' police officer, journalist or social worker and all obtain the important information. Together they can also be usefully combined with small-group role-play, where the key characters in a conflict scene, for instance, are simultaneously interviewed by an investigator played by a group using multiple role.

Role-circle

Where the entire group take a different role as somebody connected with the conflict, who knows a bit about it (neighbours, family, friends, local tradespeople, and workmates) to share. A teacher asks the questions but does not lead the answers. The rules about consistency are the same as for multiple role. This is a good technique to use at the beginning of a drama to give the entire group the chance to make input into the situation.

Teacher narrative

In order to introduce a scene or a time-jump, the teacher can tell a story while the group listens, perhaps describing what happened between the last scene and the one you want them to play next, or setting a particular atmosphere. The teacher should try to tell the story as spell-bindingly as possible.

Performance re-enactment

After the students have role-played a scene as in real life, it can sometimes be useful to ask groups to demonstrate in performance to the whole class what happened in their role-play. A good quick way is to ask them to enact something that captures the essence of the scene in no more than twenty seconds.

Time jump

Between scenes the teacher can time-jump, taking the characters backwards to explore how this situation arose, for example, from the manifest conflict to a scene where it was brewing or latent. Or they can jump the action forwards, perhaps hours or days, to see what would happen if... or maybe years, to look at the long-term consequences.



Freeze-frame (tableau)

Where the group or sub-groups create a physical image to illustrate a particularly important moment in the drama that the class can look at, compare and discuss. A brief time-jump is a way of extending this. 'What was happening thirty seconds before ... and thirty seconds after'.

Thought-tracking

Where characters playing roles can be frozen and asked by the teachers to express what is going through their mind at a particular moment, now, or in the future. This can usefully be combined with freeze-frames, or it can be done in a circle.

Dramatic reconstruction

If a particular key moment has some mystery about it or the stories of different characters contradict each other, teachers can stop role-playing and ask the group to become actors in a docu-drama. They are set the task of accurately re-constructing that key moment from the information they have been given. If two or more sub-groups each have to reconstruct the moment, this gives good comparison for discussion.

Symbolic re-enactment or freeze-frame

This is quite an advanced technique for confident process drama players. Instead of presenting a performance enactment or freeze-frame naturally, it can be exciting to ask the students to do it symbolically, for example through movement, or with a drum beat, or only using key words and different physical levels, to depict for instance, the power relationships.



4. Process drama example

The 'Leaving Home' Drama

Pre-text:

She's Leaving Home, The Beatles.

Time requirement:

At least one and a half hours, preferably two. This may be broken up into two or three sessions. Appropriate places to break are following Step 4 or 5, and if necessary Step 8.

Space requirement:

A normal classroom with the desks and chairs moveable. This drama requires careful and quite complex organisation of the students into three different groupings (A, B and C, with A and C groups both consisting of four students, differently organised) so the teacher should be aware of how to manage this in advance.

Step 1: Introduction – manifest conflict

Play the song and give handout of lyrics, *She's Leaving Home*, by Lennon and McCartney. Ask the students to identify and agree in advance **only** which cultural and socio-economic group they think the family belongs to, and to give names to the family and the man from the motor trade.

Step 2: Establishing information (role circle)

The class sits or stands in a circle. The teacher introduces the information that news is out that [Daughter] has inexplicably left home. Each in turn round the circle identifies him/herself as a local community member – neighbour, more distant family member, local community – and volunteers some speculation as to what may have happened and why. Nobody may actually contradict any material given as information, but may modify it.



Teacher's side coaching: keep in mind the song lyrics and think about the different people who might know the [...]s.

The teacher may choose to take a role him/herself to provoke, deepen or control the discussion, or act in 'shadow role' as a nameless investigator.

Step 3a: Latent conflict (small group role-play). Students into groups of four (A groups)

Students are to briefly discuss then improvise a scene of **latent conflict** which happened before [Daughter] left home. The scene must not have any actual conflict, but underlying tensions should be clear. The question is – **What factors led to the manifest conflict?** The scene must include [Father, Mother and Daughter] and the students can decide who the fourth person is.

The actors playing parents **must** have some understanding of why the parents act in whatever way they do. This is to be run to a problematic conclusion – no final resolution. The students should run these as naturalistically as possible.

Step 3b (if time): class sharing (performance role-play)

All groups watch a key 20 seconds re-enacted, from each of the other role-plays, that encapsulates the situation.

The groups may need a few moments to select and rehearse the key segment.

Step 4: Away from naturalism (symbolic re-enactment)

Each group is to take their scene and re-work it into a 20 second non-naturalistic presentation that encapsulates the essence of the roots of this conflict – it may incorporate percussion, movement, mime, song, ritual, tableaux, chorus, mask etc.

It is helpful to have a table set up with props that might be used – e.g. masks, bongos, cloth, set of keys, child's toy, envelope, photograph frame etc.

These scenes are all viewed, with the audience's attention concentrated on the attitudes and emotions symbolically displayed by family members.



Step 5: Letter-writing 1 (non-dramatic activity)

Individually each student is given a piece of paper, and writes the letter that [Daughter] left (the letter referred to in the song), adding in as appropriate what they now 'know' from their group improvisations.

Side coaching: there are clues in the lyrics – read them again and add what has emerged in your group scenes.

Following this, the students are brought together into a circle, with eyes closed and if touched on the shoulder they read their letter aloud.

Step 6: Parental discussion (multiple role)

The Parents discuss their family crisis. Why did this happen? Whose fault was it? What are they going to do?

The students are divided into two large groups (B groups – if the class is mixed, a group of boys and one of girls). One group is asked, jointly, to take the role of [Father] and one of [Mother]. The students will speak in turn just one or two sentences, in the first person as their group's character, alternating the groups.

They can use some of the material from the letters, but they should not be given more than a few moments to prepare for it – the trick for them will be to steer round incompatibilities, and advance the discussion.

The conversation must reach a decision on what is to be done.

Step 7: Into the future (freeze frames + thought-tracking)

The students are divided into new groups of four (C groups), incorporating students from different A groups. Each is given a different time-frame in [Daughter]'s future life: 2 days, 2 weeks, 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, 3 years and asked to come up with a freeze frame, that encapsulates where she is at that point in time following her leaving home. In this time, there is no successful contact with home. The use of a sentence for each frozen character – thought-tracking – to make the freeze-frame clear.

These are viewed in chronological order, with students being asked to look at metaphorical resonances of the presentations – are there metaphors working?



Step 8: Group letter-writing (non-dramatic activity)

Five years after she left, something happens to make [Daughter] get in contact with her parents again. This is the first time since she left. Each group 2 now jointly writes a second letter, based on the scenario they have envisaged.

Step 9: The parents again (small-group role-play – role reversal)

The students re-assemble as group 1. Each of these groups is given one of the group letters (Letter 2) just written. Again as the parents, with two other people, they role-play their reactions to reading the letter.

Step 10: Outcomes (freeze-frame and thought-tracking)

When they have explored the likely reactions, they are to form a tableau of what the outcome of the letter is.

Does [Daughter] go home or not? What is the response of each participant? One group at a time, the teacher reads out the letter, and the others view the tableau.

From their position in the line, each character in the tableau says one sentence summing up what they are feeling or would say.

Step 11: Reflection

Once again, in a circle, students listen to the song.
General reflective discussion.

Endnotes

- 1 This useful word was adopted and defined by Irish process drama teacher Cecily O'Neill, who has written one of the most informative books on the genre: 1995, *Drama Worlds*, Heinemann, Portsmouth NH.
- 2 The five Ws were first used by the British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote and are used widely – often with slight variations (like this version). Wagner, B. J. 1975, *Dorothy Heathcote: drama as a learning medium*, Heinemann, London.