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Educational Drama and Theatre

Paradigms for Understanding and Engagement

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Abstract

This article, based on an *International Week 2016* presentation given at Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, provides an overview of a number of prominent forms of educational drama and theatre. It also discusses the reasons for and merits of integrating educational drama and theatre into academic curricula. The description of some of the commonly used educational drama and theatre paradigms—which have been shown to be beneficial, and that can be readily integrated into classes in a variety of curricular areas, such as language arts, foreign language, science, social studies, and history—is intended to pique the interest of teachers and administrators, and inspire educators to further investigate the paradigms and benefits of integrating educational drama and theatre into academic programming.

Keywords:
Educational Drama
Educational Theatre
Creative Drama
Child Drama
Readers Theatre
Arts Integration

1 Introduction

This article is based on an *International Week 2016* presentation given at Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich. It provides an overview of a number of educational drama and theatre methods, the reasons for integrating educational drama and theatre into academic curricula, and the benefits of doing so. This overview, designed to introduce educators, who are not drama or theatre specialists, to the paradigms and merits of educational drama and theatre, describes a variety of educational drama and theatre forms that can be integrated into academic curricula.

2 Why Integrate Educational Drama and Theatre into Academic Curricula?

In recent years, an intensified interest in improving the rigor of literacy and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education, and the associated increase in the allocation of otherwise limited resources to these disciplines, negatively affect the availability of resources, such as class time and funding, that educational systems allocate to the arts (DICE Consortium, 2010a, 2010b; Weltsek, Duffy, & Carney, 2014). This lack of resources can reduce or eliminate the availability of educational theatre and drama for children and adolescents in primary and secondary school (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). This is particularly problematic because educational drama and theatre have been shown to have a positive effect on a variety of educational outcomes (Conard, 1992; DICE Consortium, 2010a, 2010b; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Lee, Patall, Cawthon, & Steingut, 2015; Mages, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Wagner, 1998; Weltsek, et al., 2014), including language and literacy development, interpersonal and intercultural competence, creativity, critical thinking, motivation, and attitudes toward academics. Moreover, the documented evidence of the benefits associated with drama and theatre in educational contexts prompted a consortium of European researchers and educators to recommend that *"all children should have regular access to educational theatre and drama in their schooling, mandated throughout the national curriculum, and taught by well-trained theatre and drama specialists"* (DICE

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Consortium, 2010a, p. 8). Yet, the economic climate and current foci in education make this recommendation difficult to realize.

In an era that venerates literacy and STEM education, and the concomitant standardized tests that measure literacy and STEM outcomes, educators, who are aware of the potential benefits educational drama and theatre can have for their students, need to find innovative ways to ensure their students have access to these art forms. One way to ensure children and adolescents are able to participate in educational drama and theatre is to integrate drama and theatre into other curricular areas (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). When educators, who are not drama or theatre specialists, first consider integrating educational drama and theatre into academic curricula, they may envision attempting to produce a fully-staged play, complete with sets, props, and costumes. Although some teachers may have the resources needed to produce such a play, others may find the prospect of undertaking such an endeavor quite daunting. In addition, educators, who are not drama or theatre specialists, may be unaware of the myriad of educational drama and theatre paradigms that can be more easily integrated into existing curricula. Thus, this article describes some of the commonly used educational drama and theatre paradigms that have been shown to be beneficial, and that can be readily integrated into classes in a variety of curricular areas, such as language arts, foreign language, science, social studies, and history.

3 Drama and Theatre Continuum

Although the terms drama and theatre are sometimes used as synonyms, educational drama and theatre researchers and practitioners often distinguish between these two dramatic forms. Davis and Behm (1987) describe drama and theatre on a continuum, with *"drama in its natural state"* (e.g., children pretend play, in which children become a character to enact a story or scenario) on one end and theatre on the other. Davis and Behm (1987) explain that the:

"…spectrum of activities involving children and the drama/theatre is established on the classic definitions of drama (a thing done) and theatre (to gaze on). The natural dramatic propensities of children, located at the far left on the continuum, are seen to be the bases of, and to infuse, all the forms of drama and theatre." (p. 261)

The members of the DICE Consortium (2010a) expand on this definition, noting that the work of educational drama and theatre practitioners

"functions along a continuum, with process at one end, moving on through exploring, sharing, crafting, presenting, and assessing, toward performance at the other. The fundamental difference between the two ends of the spectrum is the difference between process and product." (p. 16)

Kelin (2009) concurs, describing drama as *"participant-focused"* and theatre as *"audience-focused"* (p. 61). He explains, *"In a drama process, participants are encouraged to explore, create, experiment, and discover. It is a process in which they may be using or developing the skills of a performer, but aren't necessarily skilled actors"* (p. 61). In contrast, in "theatre" actors use the performance skills they have learned and honed to present a polished performance to an audience. Way (1967) further elaborates the distinction between theatre and drama, noting *"'theatre' is largely concerned with* communication *between actors and an audience; 'drama' is largely concerned with* experience *by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience"* (pp. 2-3).

4 Educational Drama and Theatre Paradigms

The field of educational drama and theatre is composed of a variety of paradigms. The number of distinct paradigms, and permutations of paradigms, is quite vast, and a comprehensive inventory of all paradigms and their variations is too extensive to catalog within the scope of this article. Hence, this article focuses on some of the more prominent forms of educational drama and theatre, including creative drama, drama in education, theatre in education, readers theatre, and theatre. It is also worth noting that not all scholars, researchers, and practitioners agree about the correct terminology or definitions associated with each paradigm. For example, a

wide variety of terms have been used to describe what in this article is referred to as *creative drama* (for a review, see Mages, 2008), including terms such as creative dramatics (Cullinan, Jaggar, & Strickland, 1974; Strickland, 1973), dramatic play (Galda, 1984; Smilansky, 1968), fantasy play (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977; Smith, Dalgleish, & Herzmark, 1981; Smith & Syddall, 1978), imaginative play (Davis & Behm, 1978, 1987), pretend play (Fein, 1981; Harris, 2000; Nicolopoulou, 2002), and sociodramatic play (Saltz, et al., 1977; Saltz & Johnson, 1974; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Smith, et al., 1981; Smith & Syddall, 1978; Warash & Workman, 1993; Wolf, 1985).

Although there are characteristics that are distinct to each paradigm, there are also commonalities. Educational drama and theatre specialists working in a variety of paradigms frequently begin a session with warm-up activities, such as physical or vocal exercises, designed to help participants feel less self-conscious or inhibited. Engaging in creative movement exercises, pantomime, singing musical scales or familiar tunes, or precisely articulating tongue twisters are some of the activities that practitioners can use to prepare students to participate in drama and theatre work, as well as to foster physical and vocal expressivity. Similarly, theatre games (Boal, 2002; Booth, 1986; Johnstone, 1981; Spolin, 1963, 1986) are often employed in a variety of paradigms to increase the quality of the interactions among participants and help participants become focused and engaged in the work. Although many educational drama and theatre paradigms may be enacted using some of the same, or similar, techniques and strategies, there are features of each paradigm which make it distinctive.

4.1 Creative Drama

Davis and Behm (1978, 1987) define *creative drama* as *"an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form…in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experience"*[1] (1987, p. 262). McCaslin (1996) explicitly notes that in creative drama the *"dialogue is created by the players"* (p. 7), the *"lines are not written down or memorized. With each playing, the story becomes more detailed and better organized, but it remains extemporaneous and is at no time designed for an audience"* (p. 7). She emphasizes, *"No matter how many times the story is played, it is for the purpose of deepening understanding and strengthening the performers rather than perfecting a product"* (p. 7).

Importantly, research indicates that participating in creative drama can foster language and literacy development (Conard, 1992; DICE Consortium, 2010a, 2010b; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Lee, et al., 2015; Mages, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Wagner, 1998; Weltsek, et al., 2014). Moreover, creative drama can successfully be used with all age groups, from very young children to adults. The research on creative drama has been conducted using a variety of drama strategies (for a review, see Mages, 2008), including thematic dramas (in which participants enact a theme, such as exploring the rainforest, a trip into outer space, or a visit to a local landmark), story dramas (in which participants enact set stories, such as folk tales, myths, or stories from books), and Paley-style dramas, based on the storytelling/story-acting curriculum developed by Vivian Gussin Paley (e.g., Paley, 1981, 1990, 1992), (in which individual participants write a story that is then enacted by their peers).

4.2 Drama in Education

According to McCaslin (1996), *drama in education* (DIE) denotes *"the use of drama as a means of teaching other subject areas"* (p. 12). She explains that *"the teacher brings in source materials and guides the study and may even play a role in the enactment,"* to inspire children's imaginations and help them *"project themselves into a dramatic moment of the topic at hand (e.g., a mine disaster, a strike, a gold rush, and election, etc.)"* (p. 12).

One popular form of form of DIE is known as *process drama*. The development of this form of DIE is often associated with the work of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton (Bolton, 2003; Bolton & Heathcote, 1999; Heathcote, 1984; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Wagner, 1979). Kao and O'Neill (1998) explicate that the term *process drama*

"refers to drama activities that aim to go beyond short-term, teacher-dominated exercises. Instead, the drama is extended over time and is built up from the ideas, negotiations, and responses of all the participants in order to foster social, intellectual, and linguistic development" (p. x).

The members of the DICE Consortium (2010b), in their resource for educators, note that process drama *"focuses on collaborative investigation and problem-solving in an imaginary world. Process dramas use 'pretexts' (photographs, newspaper articles, music, artefacts, etc….) to frame the investigation and raise questions for the students"* (p. 203). O'Neil and Lambert (1982) also describe the unique characteristics of this form:

"Process drama, like improvisation, proceeds without a written script but includes important episodes that will be composed and rehearsed rather than improvised. The essential difference between process drama and improvisation is that, as the term suggests, process drama *is not limited to single, brief exercises or scenes. Instead, like any conventional theatre event, it is built up from a series of episodes or units….The episodic structure of process drama allows the gradual articulation of a complex dramatic world and enables it to be extended and elaborated."* (p. xvi)

In a book focusing on process drama for second language acquisition, Kao and O'Neill (1998) assert, *"Drama activities can be designed and structured in the classroom in order to promote insights into subject matter, motivate research and the pursuit of knowledge, and facilitate the development of language"* (p. ix). The flexibility of the process-drama form makes it particularly well-suited for teachers who are looking for methods to deepen student understanding of and interest in complex issues, concepts, and topics. Moreover, there are numerous resources available that provide detailed explanations of ways to structure process dramas to promote learning and understanding in a variety of subject areas (Bowell & Heap, 2001; DICE Consortium, 2010a; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; O'Neill, 1995; O'Neill & Lambert, 1982).

4.3 Theatre in Education

Theatre in education (TIE) is dissimilar from the paradigms discussed earlier in that it is usually facilitated by professional actor-teachers. Conceived as an attempt to bring the techniques of theatre into the classroom, in the service of specific educational objectives" (O'Toole, 1976, p. vii), TIE *"differs from traditional children's theatre in its use of curricular material or social problems as themes. Performed by professional companies of actor-teachers, it represents thought provoking content to young audiences for educational purposes rather than entertainment"* (McCaslin, 1996, p. 12).

The members of the DICE Consortium (2010b) detail the goals and structure of TIE:

"Its primary aim is to use theatre and drama to create a wide range of learning opportunities across the whole curriculum. Most TIE programmes comprise performance and participatory/interactive elements. Actor-teachers (so called because they use the skills of the actor while thinking as a teacher at one and the same time) engage the pupils directly in parts of the play, or tasks and activities extending from it. Often the TIE programme involves preparation work and follow-up (usually drama) activities developed as a part of the whole experience." (p. 205)

As noted, TIE usually involves professional actor-teachers who are specifically trained to develop, facilitate, and perform in dynamic theatre-based programming. Thus, classroom teachers or school administrators interested in this from of educational theatre may want to pursue partnerships with local companies that specialize in TIE. The DICE Consortium's (2010b) report provides a number of examples of successful TIE partnerships and programs.

4.4 Readers Theatre

Readers theatre, unlike the educational drama and theatre forms previously described in this article, requires the use of written scripts. As the name *readers* theatre implies, participants are not required to memorize their lines, but, instead, are required to read the script aloud and interpret the text with expression and emotion. Teachers interested in using readers theatre can select preexisting readers-theatre scripts, or adapt other texts, such as full-length plays, poems, short stories, or books, to meet the needs of their students. For example, Young and Vardell (1993) discuss adapting non-fiction texts for readers theatre performances, and McCaslin (1996) notes that readers theatre can be used effectively to dramatize historical texts, biographical texts, and letters.

In contrast to other educational drama and theatre forms, in readers theatre, physical movement and blocking are deemphasized, which allows participants to focus on the vocal interpretation of the text. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999) explain that in readers theatre *"the performer's goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action"* (p. 326). Worthy and Prater (2002) concur, emphasizing "*the focus is on how the participants convey meaning through their interpretive reading"* (p. 294).

Advocates of readers theatre note its relation to "repeated reading" (Martinez, et al., 1998/1999; Tsou, 2011; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002; Worthy & Prater, 2002; C. Young & Rasinski, 2009), a practice The National Reading Panel (2000) found to be beneficial for a number of reading outcomes, including reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Moreover, readers theatre provides *"an authentic communication event"* (Millin & Rinehart, 1999, p. 72) that motivates otherwise-uninterested students to read and reread a text (Keehn, 2003; Martinez, et al., 1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011; Worthy & Prater, 2002; C. Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Vasinda and McLeod (2011) expanded the traditional readers-theatre paradigm (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, et al., 1998/1999) by adding a modern twist: recording the students' readers theatre performances as podcasts. This innovative practice allows participants to listen to recordings of their own performances, creating opportunities for self-assessment. In addition, creating podcasts enables family and friends to listen to the students' performances, and provide positive feedback and encouragement. In sum, the variety of genres that can be dramatized, and the ability to produce readers theatre within a very limited amount of space and with only minimal (if any) costumes or props, makes readers theatre a dramatic form that is particularly suitable for inclusion in academic curricula.

4.5 Theatre

Educational *theatre* has two strands. One strand is a play or performance that is designed to educate audience members. The genre of theatre productions designed to educate (and/or entertain) children and/or adolescents are often referred to as *children's theatre*, *theatre for youth*, or *theatre for young audiences*. Although these productions may have participatory or interactive elements that engage audience members, most of the play is enacted by actors for the educational benefit, or entertainment, of the audience members. For example, a memorable moment in the play *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 2011) is when one of the characters, Tinkerbell, is dying, and Peter addresses the audience, asking them to clap if they believe in fairies. Although this moment of audience participation is pivotal (when the audience members clap, it signals that they believe in fairies, which saves Tinkerbell's life), the audience members are observers, not active participants, for the majority of the play.

The other strand of educational theatre is the production of a play with children and/or adolescents as actors. In this case, child and/or adolescent participants collaborating in the production and performing a character in the play comprise the educative experience. Although viewing theatrical performances can be educative, the focus of this article is on forms of educational drama and theatre that can be integrated into academic curricula. Thus, this section focuses on students performing in theatre productions, rather than adults performing in plays designed to educate child or adolescent audiences.

Educators who want the work they do with students to culminate in a performance for an audience can select scripts designed for child and adolescent actors, or experiment with ways to create original works. Some educators may, for example, write the script themselves. Others, however, may want to allow students to take an active role in "playbuilding" or "devising" the script. Tarlington and Michaels (1995) explicate,

"Playbuilding is a unique method of working with groups of actors to create a play. Unlike writing a play or rehearsing a play that has been written by a playwright, playbuilding is a collaborative venture that involves the entire group in the creative process. Collaboration occurs in both the development of the script and the performing of the final product." (p. 7)

It is important to note that *"improvising is central to the playbuilding process and is used to create the performance text"* (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995, p. 19). Weigler (2001) describes an issue-based playbuilding process:

"By telling stories about related situations, paying attention to the phrases, gestures, sounds, and images in each one, and looking for consistent patterns, the actors build their sense of what happens while they are

gathering evocative, dramatic material to help them illustrate it. They experiment to find the best ways to present, on stage, what they discover." (p. xv)

Thus, participants create improvised performances based on a theme or issue, and these performances are rehearsed, honed, polished, and structured into a performance.

Another way to create a performance script, in this case an *ethnodrama*, is through an *ethnotheatre* process, which combines social-science and research methods with theatre. Saldaña (2005) elucidates,

"An ethnodrama, the written script, consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceeding. Simply put, this is dramatizing the data." (p. 2)

Rao (2009) details an example of an ethnotheatre program for high school students that was based, in part, on the work of Anna Deavere Smith (Smith, 1993, 1994, 2000), a solo performer and pioneer in the ethnotheatre genre. As part of an exploration of the theme of justice, the high school students participating in the ethnotheatre program gathered data and created a performance based on the data they collected.

Another mode for creating an original script is to develop a play based on a book or other text. Mewald (2015) describes how a group of Austrian students in a teacher education program collaborated to create and perform a play in English based on the novel, *Wonder* (Palacio, 2014). The teachers-in-training worked together to develop a script, gather props and costumes, and create the sets for the production. Through their participation in producing and performing a play in English, they learned drama and theatre techniques they could use as teachers of "English as a Foreign Language," while simultaneously fostering their own development as speakers of English. Although the participants described in Mewald's article were adults, the process of collaborating to create and perform a work of fiction could be replicated with adolescent participants.

The rehearsal, preparation, and performance of a play, whether from a preexisting script or an original work, affords students opportunities to learn drama and theatre strategies and techniques, while exploring a theme, an issue, or an academic discipline. It also provides a platform for participants to demonstrate for an audience their understanding of a topic and a text, as well as to demonstrate the drama and theatre skills they have acquired.

5 Conclusion

This article provides a brief overview and explication of a number educational drama and theatre methods. The length of a single article prohibits an all-inclusive summary of the plethora of existing forms. Hopefully, however, this brief discussion of educational drama and theatre methods that can be integrated into academic curricula is sufficient to pique the interest of teachers and administrators, and inspire them to pursue an in-depth investigation into educational drama and theatre techniques, strategies, and paradigms that foster learning and engagement.

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[1] Davis and Behm (1987) note that this definition is "based on the definition developed by Ann M. Shaw, Frank Harland, and Anne Thurman" (p. 263).