

# Writing and Dramatic Possibility in the Classroom

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to document the effectiveness of using drama and scriptwriting in the classroom to address diverse learning needs of language minority students in the general education English classroom. The paper focuses on the benefits to students of synthesis (writing) and performance (acting) with various texts and genres: from novels and short stories, to poetry and “real-life” job interviews. Some instructional techniques and strategies are discussed, as is some of the literature existing on this topic. Data collection tools used to collect evidence – from test scores to a student survey and observations – will also be highlighted.

## Introduction

As a struggling first-year teacher during the first weeks of the school year, I found a confluence of events led me to choose to explore the question at the heart of this paper. First, my ninth-grade English students in five classes (one Intensified, four General), were struggling mightily to comprehend the text our World History/SOL-driven curriculum placed at the outset of the year: *The Odyssey*. As Odysseus confronted his perils and obstacles, I faced every day the challenges of students frustrated by a difficult work presented by a novice teacher. (Nearly half the students I taught failed Virginia’s eighth-grade reading Standards of Learning exam; of course, the percentage was particularly high in the four General classes.) In despair, I recalled two important texts from my days as a graduate student: Seymour Sarason’s *Teaching as a Performing Art*, and Howard Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligences*. Also, around this time I attended a workshop under the auspices of the Secondary Language Arts Program for Arlington County called “Drama Coaching to Increase Understanding.”

My goal is to achieve a balance in the classroom between academic rigor and fun; my presentation of literature to the students seemed to be leeching the joy out of it for all of us. My intuition was that if, as Sarason maintains, teachers are performing artists, then we can only gain by including students in the act (Sarason, 1999, p.2). This “shifting of the spotlight” away from a single transmitter of knowledge to a community of learners and explorers seemed an exciting possibility to me, and a staple recommendation in all my graduate courses. Also, Gardner’s seminal work on the range of intelligences humans present has clear implications for educators, and the inclusion of drama in the classroom made sense as a powerful avenue by which to reach students whose intelligences may be bodily/kinesthetic, or visual/graphic. In seeking further explicit statements to bolster a rationale for using drama in my classroom, I came across this passage from Hetland and Winner (2000) that seemed to strike at the heart of what I was seeking to explore:

Based on 80 reports (107 effect sizes), a causal link was found between classroom drama (enacting texts) and a variety of verbal areas. Most [reports] were medium size (oral understanding/recall of stories, reading readiness, reading achievement, oral language, writing), one was large (written understanding/recall of stories), and one was small and could not be generalized to new studies (vocabulary). In all cases, students who enacted texts were compared with students who read the same texts but did not enact them. Drama not only helped children's verbal skills with respect to the texts enacted; it also helped children's verbal skills when applied to new, non-enacted texts. Thus, drama helps to build verbal skills that transfer to new materials. Such an effect has great value for education: verbal skill is highly valued, adding such drama techniques costs little in terms of effort or expense, and a high proportion of students are influenced by such curricular changes (Hetland & Winner, 2000).

The research question I decided to explore, then, was whether specific drama and scriptwriting techniques and activities could improve student understanding across a range of texts. My motivation for including the scriptwriting (synthesis) portion of the question was fairly simple; I needed a means of assessing a student's unfolding comprehension of a work, rather than waiting for a drama activity or assessment to gauge that understanding. But there are any number of good reasons for including writing as an essential component of these drama activities.

### Scripts and Strategies

The "public" nature of the performances – the fact that the performances were learning opportunities for *both* actors and audience members – required that I make sure students were on the right track, and that they know what they were reading and what the essential understandings were that they needed to communicate via their performances. I achieved this by asking students to write down the main points in their text that they needed to communicate to their audience. This on-going assessment of students' comprehension was particularly important given the extremely difficult nature of the first text for which we implemented the drama activities: *The Odyssey*.

The first activity we attempted was suggested by the Prentice Hall *Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* textbook Arlington County uses in the ninth grade. To cover some of Part One of *the Odyssey*, I decided to have students participate in a play-by-play radio broadcast (Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 893). I began by letting students know the timetable we had for producing, in small groups, a play-by-play script for a radio broadcast that would present their creative understandings of the work we were studying. I found it useful in all my classes to brainstorm with students on their understandings of what "play-by-play" in the media meant. Many students knew the term from television sports, and thus did not immediately grasp that the script they were producing was for a purely oral exercise. Students need to understand that they are radio journalists, and that

they are not simply reenacting a scene from a work. In March, a colleague mentioned that he had seen a compact disc for sale of great moments in sports radio history; I think it would be ideal to play a number of tracks from that as an introduction to this activity. Interestingly, many of my language-minority students were more familiar with the concept of a radio broadcast than native English speakers were. I will discuss the importance of modeling later in this paper. I let students know that for their final performances they could either read their scripts in class or bring in an audiotape of their performance.

After breaking classes into groups of three or four, I asked students to choose roles they would perform: play-by-play announcer (narrates moment-by-moment events), color commentator (gives analysis, opinion, personal interpretation of events), on-site interviewer (asks questions of characters in story), and Homeric character (Odysseus, Cyclops, Telemachus, etc.). I continued to emphasize that they were radio journalists who were reporting a story, because their first attempts at scripts were often more straightforward attempts at enacting scenes. I asked students to write down three or four main points from their scene that their broadcast would need to communicate to the audience. Also, as a class we came up with criteria by which the play-by-play would be evaluated. Students did an excellent job of establishing standards by which to judge their own work, including accuracy, excitement, vivid language, etc. Assessment and closure for this activity came from a number of sources.

Ongoing assessment was described above, and is the single most important factor in ensuring success with this activity. Final assessment came from student performances and scripts. Also, students wrote "exit slip" reviews of their classmates' performances so that I could gauge the essential understandings that were getting across to them. Student response to the broadcast was especially positive in the General classes. Students made comments like, "I liked pretending what Odysseus was thinking," and, "It was funny to hear the sounds of the men turned to animals on Circe's island."

After using the play-by-play in Part I of *the Odyssey*, I like the balance I got by using this almost completely visual exercise in Part II. The combination of using these two early in the school year made later forays into drama more successful. Called "living statues" or "tableaux vivants," this exercise required students in groups of three or four to represent their understandings of a text in a purely visual manner. As the audience opens and closes their eyes on command, students performing assume different posed, frozen positions on stage. We begin with a modeling activity in which I asked them how they might represent some of the most basic human emotions (love, rage, joy, humiliation...) using only facial expressions and body positions. I did this with them, and it was silly and we were all self-conscious, but it made for a fun beginning to the activity. I then used a scene we had just covered from Part I of *the Odyssey* to model my expectations for the activity. I moved four students through the positions I wanted them to assume in a four-scene/snapshot rendition of "Cattle of the Sun God." The class got to see and participate in our rehearsal. They made excellent suggestions, and then watched as our final product came to "frozen" life.

Much as with the play-by-play, an essential component of this activity is that students reach an understanding of what the key concepts are that they need to present in their performance. I required that every student submit a written list of at least three key components/events/understandings to their scene that they would have to represent visually. Again, this allowed me to make sure groups were on the right track. Ongoing assessment took place most significantly here, but also in circulating and observing group rehearsals. Early in the year, final assessment came during their performances, and closure came from exit slip commentary from classmates and from students' critiques of each other's scenes.

Conversations with my colleagues from LMTIP provided the spark for the next step in the project. I became interested in using the drama activities not as an end unto themselves, but as a means of facilitating student comprehension. The point may seem obvious, but it's worth restating. As my narrative above makes clear, I was using drama strategies to cover student understanding of works, but I needed a means of assessing how much they were comprehending. For example, would the drama activities demonstrably improve student performances on written exams or tests? Other than the products of play-by-play broadcasts and living statues scenes, I hadn't yet demonstrated that student understanding improved as a result of these drama activities. My next task was to assess the efficacy of drama in aiding student comprehension.

## Structure and Selection

Of the five classes that began the year with early introductions to drama in the classroom, I decided that only three would continue to use those techniques at length to deepen comprehension. The Intensified students – or at least a vocal group of them – claimed in conversation and on feedback surveys that they did not enjoy the drama activities and that they did not feel there was a substantial benefit to them in comprehending texts. As language minority students made up a small percentage of the Intensified class, this was not a difficult group to rule out of the remainder of the research. The second class to be ruled out was a General English class that had a sizable percentage of Special Education students. Classroom management issues were substantial with this group, and drama activities with this class often felt unproductive and chaotic to me. (On surveys, of course, the students were extremely positive about the drama activities, but I simply did not feel I could justify continuing with that approach; they responded better as a class to a much more traditional, transmission model of teaching and learning.)

What I resolved to do was to compare results from two specific units – one on poetry, one on *To Kill a Mockingbird* – that all five classes were studying. The means of final assessment would be varied (portfolio and standard exam for the poetry unit; guided reading questions, short research paper, and final exam for the novel.) With the two classes that were no longer involved with drama activities, I sought to enrich the curriculum with more traditional activities. I don't believe these activities were any less enjoyable for students, but, for example, we did spend more time in these two classes looking at vocabulary and terms

(through drills, games, etc.) We were engaged in a variety of activities in the three General English classes as well, but we spent a considerable amount of time honing our drama skills and using them as a means of approaching the various works.

I won't spend a great deal of time talking about the variables that come into play in comparing results across the five classes. Suffice it to say that there are many, and that this was not a scientific, exact process. Contrary to my expectations, results from the poetry unit were not substantially better for the three drama classes. I think I had assumed that the drama activities would help students be more creative and more exact in their own composition of poetry, and this was not the case. Where drama did seem to help these students was in comprehension of difficult passages from the poems they encountered. The creative shaping of language that takes place in poetry often seemed to throw off my language minority students, and the drama (particularly the living statues) was one thing that seemed to help them picture what was unfolding on the page. But the one General English class that was not using drama actually performed slightly better on the poetry exam, particularly in defining and employing specific terms such as alliteration, assonance, simile, etc. The four General classes were comparable throughout the year from the standpoint of grades (avg. 72, 76, 73, and 73 for the non-drama group), but the non-drama group did as well with their poetry portfolios and considerably better on the exam for the unit (73 average for drama classes and 78 for the traditional approach). Results were almost inverted for the novel. Final exam scores in the three drama classes averaged 79, while in the traditional class the average score was a 69.

While it might seem that these scores provide an ambivalent response to the question posed at the beginning of the paper, I hope my interpretation of them provides some comfort to those of us who believe in the use of drama in the classroom. My sense on reflecting about these scores is that the drama was particularly useful in helping students "break up" the substantial length of the material of the novel. It gave them a new way to assimilate subject matter that was unfolding over a long period of time (in school – a three-week unit) and over a large number of pages. The poems we studied were of course much shorter, and I'd deliberately stayed away from choosing poems from the canon (or the textbook for that matter) and had sought works that were primarily narrative and not rendered especially difficult by flowery language or complex syntax. I also think that students may have put too much care and effort into their drama scenarios, and not enough of their creativity into the actual composition of their original poems. That clearly is a fault of mine, and one I will seek to redress in the future. The most difficult thing I found about being a first-year teacher was my frequent sense over the course of the year that I was not doing a good job for my students. They were a terrific group of young people, and I often felt like I just wasn't teaching them well enough. Failures in my implementation of drama activities over the course of the year were my failings, and ones I hope to ameliorate next year and continue to improve in subsequent years.

There is much I would do differently when using drama in the classroom, though I will not hesitate to employ these activities in the future. One essential

understanding that I came to this year was an appreciation for the need for modeling and structure for all high school students (I'm guessing), but for ninth-graders, especially. I mentioned the sports radio moments CD that a colleague brought to my attention, and we will listen to that in class before another play-by-play ever gets assigned. I intend to use video to model and enhance the "living statues" activity when we use that next year. I also intend to establish parameters much earlier in the school year about my expectations for classroom behavior and classroom focus during these drama activities. I'm comfortable with a fairly relaxed classroom atmosphere, but there were times when the classroom felt out of control to me this year, and I plan to have structures in place next year that will help mitigate the danger of chaos. The "essential understandings" writings help students build toward a final goal, and they allow for ongoing teacher assessment, but they are not enough by themselves as "steps on the ladder" for the kind of guidance the General English student (language minority or not) needs in the classroom when the focus is not on the teacher. Finally, I hope to introduce basic general concepts from drama (i.e.- movement, tempo, voice) early in the year with simple texts and with a great deal of purpose. The idea is that we will build toward using these skills as part of an ever-developing repertoire of drama techniques that can help us understand works better.

As I think my paper makes clear, I am a believer in the potential of drama to help all students in my classes. Drama is in some ways a means of empowering students in the classroom; one reality I became tired of confronting during class discussions was my awareness very early in the year that it was often the same three or four students who contributed in class. What drama ensures is that all are participating in some form or another. (There does need to be a cultural sensitivity to students who may be extremely shy/reluctant to perform in front of classmates, but I found those issues easily surmounted.) My classes had almost ground to a halt as we confronted the trials and tribulations of Odysseus, and the drama activities were a means by which students came to understand a significant and satisfying amount of that difficult work. Throughout the year, drama activities helped provide an array of varied learning opportunities to students, and I would not hesitate to use them again. There is laughter and movement when there is drama in the classroom. Done properly, there is a great deal of authentic learning as well.

## References

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

Please circle one:

A) *English is my first language.*

B) *English is NOT my first language.*

1. On a scale from one to five, rate your enjoyment of our drama activities:  
 Hated them            1        2        3        4        5        Loved them
2. Did the drama activities help you understand the work we were reading?  
 How? Please be specific.
3. Is there anything you would change about the drama activities we've done in class to help you learn better? Please be specific.
4. What is one positive experience you've had while participating (either as an actor or audience member) in the drama activities?