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ABSTRACT

The language of drama (movement, sound, and energy) is as old as drama itself. Its place within a multiliteracies framework needs to be articulated because drama is another medium that can be used to help students interpret and communicate the meanings of themes in narrative texts (Pascoe, 1999; Wagner, 1998). The process of enactment enables students to see things from different perspectives, to experience someone else's reality. To take on the role of a character challenges students to develop empathy for the motivations and/or reasons for their actions in an important way that is quite unique to drama. This paper describes a practical workshop that examines how the non-verbal language inherent in sculpting and "still image" drama strategies enables students to explore and question narrative texts and, at the same time, actively engage with the themes and issues that emerge. In addition, some findings from the author's research in this area will be presented. Prominence in this section will be given to the children's voices as the author analyzes what they said about their learning when engaged in the process of drama. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/RS)

USING DRAMA TO ENHANCE THE READING OF NARRATIVE TEXTS

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The language of drama (movement, sound and energy) is as old as drama itself. Its place within a multiliteracies framework needs to be articulated because drama is another medium that can be used to help students interpret and communicate the meanings of themes in narrative texts (Pascoe, 1999; Wagner, 1998). The process of enactment enables students to see things from different perspectives, to experience someone else's reality. To take on the role of a character challenges students to develop empathy for the motivations and/or reasons for their actions in an important way that is quite unique to drama.

This practical workshop will examine how the non-verbal language inherent in sculpting and still image drama strategies enables students to explore and question narrative texts and, at the same time, actively engage with the themes and issues that emerge.

In addition, some findings from my research in this area will be presented. Prominence in this section will be given to the children's voices as we analyse what they said about their learning when engaged in the process of drama.

KEY WORDS

Drama, Multiliteracies, Reading, Literature, Active learning.

PREAMBLE

This is not a conventional paper.

In this workshop I referred to a research study (Hertzberg, 1999) that examined many different areas and aspects of Educational drama. Space constraints (four pages) preclude a paper to cover all of these in adequate detail. Therefore, just one aspect highlighted in the workshop is selected for further elaboration in this paper—the findings from interview data about what children thought they learnt when engaged in the drama strategy of still image. In the workshop a snap shot of one thirty-minute session with these children was presented to demonstrate how drama helped these children interpret and communicate the meaning of an excerpt from a narrative text. To help put these findings in context, workshop participants engaged in the same drama experience used in the research project. A brief explanation of this drama activity follows.

USING STILL IMAGE TO INTERPRET A TEXT: ITS PLACE IN THE MULTILITERACIES FRAMEWORK

Still image involves the participant/s creating a still (frozen) image with their bodies to feel the dramatic moment. The analogy of a still photograph is useful when explaining this strategy. Photographs record a moment in time, depict an idea and/or capture a dramatic moment. The same applies in still image and the drama language emphasised is facial expression, gesture, posture and placement in space (position, levels and so forth). In addition, other elements such as contrast, symbol and mood contribute to this form of communication.

To demonstrate this, workshop participants read an excerpt from the book *Onion Tears* (Kidd, 1989, p. 9). This novel explores the isolation and despair that Nam-Huong, a recently arrived 12 years old female Vietnamese refugee, feels when she is teased and rebuked by three children because of her name. The participants then divided into groups of four and assumed the roles of either Nam-Huong, Mary, Tessa or Danny and made a still image to communicate their interpretation of this scene. These were then presented to the group. In the subsequent discussion the following aspects were analysed:

- How the language of drama communicated the meaning of each image;
- That each group's image was different—reflecting the concept of multiple interpretation within critical literacy theory;
- That in planning an interpretation it was necessary to re-read the text and attend to both the linguistic and story discourse.

To demonstrate how these same aspects were either attended to and/or noted by children some findings from the research project were then presented in the workshop. A brief explanation of this project now follows.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The drama plan for the book *Onion Tears* (the book used in this workshop) was part of a larger project (Hertzberg, 1999). This consecutive fourteen-day project was conducted with one mixed ability co-educational year five class (ten and eleven year-olds) in a large Sydney government school. All drama sessions took place in the first three and a half-hours of each day. The project was based on both action research and case study methodologies. It was an action research project because it was an investigation of my practice as a drama educator. It was a case study project (in an unique setting), because it investigated the students' language and literacy learning during drama activities planned as part of their literature-based reading program.

The overall objective was to investigate how a variety of drama forms and techniques could be used to enhance students' language and literacy development when reading a range of narrative texts. Altogether three different drama plans were written in consultation with the co-researcher (class teacher). The "Onion Tears" plan was deliberately designed to analyse how drama strategies ***during*** the reading of a narrative

text develop critical reading skills (in this case issues dealing with cultural diversity). Other drama plans within the overall investigation included the use of Readers' Theatre to enhance interpretative oral reading skills (Hertzberg, 2000) and the use of teacher-in-role, improvisation and playbuilding to read the visuals in picture books (Hertzberg & Ewing, 1998).

My role as researcher was to facilitate the teaching of each session in the children's classroom, and the co-researcher's role as critical friend involved taking anecdotal field notes. Other data gathering techniques included: video taping; semi-structured audio and video interviews with all students and the co-researcher; written work samples from children and both researcher's reflective journals. In accordance with action research methodology these data collection techniques were selected to adhere to the principle of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

ANALYSING DATA

Audiotapes were transcribed and each drama strategy or form distinguished and coded. A similar process was also undertaken with all journals. I then viewed the videotapes, noting examples from both the teaching sessions and interviews that related to language and literacy practices in general and critical literacy development specifically. Not only did the video remind me of what happened—it showed me things that I did not see while ***in*** the action. Confucius is believed to have said, "Keep your eyes on things you cannot see".

The data were then matched to specific outcomes and their indicators as presented in the mandatory *English K-6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies, NSW, 1998) to demonstrate how drama enables the achievement of the syllabus outcomes pertaining to critical reading of narrative texts. Furthermore, and to ensure trustworthiness in the analysis of "reflection in action" and "reflection on action" (Schon, 1983), I asked some teaching colleagues to act as "critical friends" to contribute to the trustworthiness of the analysis.
Three teachers distant from both the project and me (Hammersley, 1993) were asked to view the video data for the "Onion Tears" plan. As critical viewers their brief was to:

- view the video and highlight aspects/episodes they thought related to critical literacy practices;

- match these episodes to specific outcomes in the *English K-6 Syllabus*.

With the exception of one teaching activity all teachers identified and made comments about the language and literacy learning occurring in the same sections that I had. Again, their matching of these episodes to English syllabus outcomes and indicators was almost identical to mine. Their comments were insightful, making interesting links between the drama methodology and generic pedagogic practices and the combined effect on the critical reading practices of the children. Hence, I decided to report my findings and discussion in a quasi-narrative form that would represent all stakeholders' perspectives.

REPORTING FINDINGS

Space precludes a full report from the perspective of all stakeholders. The findings from just some semi-structured audio or video interviews with children have been isolated from the narrative. Refer to Hertzberg 1999 to cite this comprehensive version.

Drama Language to Convey Meaning

Kate's comment summarises the comments made by other children that referred specifically to the language of drama (movement, sound and energy) as a means for communicating ones interpretation of a text.

Margery: Why do you think I got you to do some drama activities?

Kate: For you to teach us that we can learn through drama.

Margery: And why do you think that? I noticed you wrote that in your journal.

Kate: Just that we can do the things we do in class the same through drama like we can learn through drama and do those activities through drama... . You can learn through drama ... you can use as much body and facial expression as you want to so people watching us can see who our characters are ... . This way (drama) is better because you can by the expression on your face and the way you're sitting and moving around people can tell how you feel (Video interview C).

Re-reading to Interpret a Text through Drama

To plan their still images children re-read the excerpt several times. The following group's discussion whilst in the planning process illustrates their interpretation of meaning through attention to linguistic form:

Chris: Yeah, but Mary was asking her to come bike riding remember, so she is nice.

Tim: What about Tessa?

Chris: I don't know.

Sam: Hey but look, 'coconut' is in capitals so she's shouting at her. I don't think that's nice.

Chris: Yeah and princess is nicer than saying 'coconut' or 'dragon'

(researcher's field notes 1/9/98 and video recording excerpt).

The group then positioned themselves in still image. Nam-Huong was seated and towards the front, with Mary standing nearest to her "because she was trying to be kind". Tessa was positioned further away whilst Danny placed furthest away stood in an upright and aggressive manner.

As well, all groups reported that doing drama as opposed to only reading a text helped them understand the story because they could as one child put it "feel the character". Further comments included:

John: Because it, like, helps you in reading, writing. Helps you understand heaps of stuff that you never understand, as well as if you don't do drama. Usually, like, when you read books you don't understand it but when you're doing drama you understand why they're feeling and how (Audio One).

Rob: Well, if you're just reading the book and you see Nam-Huong being teased, you don't really get the feel of the book, but if you're doing drama about it then you really know how she's feeling about it. (Audio Two).

Jake ...you can understand it, 'cause you're the one who's like in the shoes sort of and you're the one who's doing it, so you understand it (Audio Three).

Drama Strategies that Promoted Understanding

When asked to comment on drama strategies that helped them to read Onion Tears responses specific to still image included:

Sally: (Still image)...because like you're actually doing frozen moments like you sort of feel like how they would be feeling ... (Video B).

Kate: (Still image) to see from Nam-Huong's point of view how she felt. (Video C).

Luke: Still image 'cause I like working in groups... . It's like interesting to hear all the ideas that other people have and you learn to cooperate and combine your ideas with theirs (Video D).

Ned: (Viewing and reflection of still images) I really liked watching everybody else ... to see what interpretation they have of it... (Audio 5).

Active Learning: Book-talk through Drama Versus Book-talk through Class Discussion

All children said that they learnt more when doing drama in book-talk sessions than in book-talk during class discussions. Comments included:

Rachel: *You could a little bit (understand the book in discussion activities), but not that much because you're not in that position you're just talking about it.* (Video E).

Clive: *(It's) good to act out ... so you just don't talk about it. You can just like do it, so you know like you can like actually do more about it. Like you can act it out more and you can do more than talk, you can act out and every thing like that. Because when you're just talking about it you're just talking about it, you're not actually doing anything, you're just sitting there and talking. But when you're acting you're standing up and doing something so it gives you more opinion what you're doing. It's more interesting to do things like that.* (Video F).

Motivation and Learning

Children also thought they learnt in drama because it was fun. Playing devil's advocate I often said in interviews that, although fun, they might not be learning anything.

Kate : *It's fun this way but (we are learning because) the expressions on your face and the way you're sitting or moving around people can tell how you feel* (Video C).

In response to my saying that it was exhausting, Tom and Bob (Audio Two) said:

Tom: *Well, it is a bit exhausting but it's not that bad. I found it more fun than exhausting.*

Rob: *Yeah. And 'cause it's fun you want to do it rather than if you're just sitting on the floor reading, you think, oh, it's boring.*

Margery: *But are you learning anything? Some of you might not be learning anything.*

Rob: *Yeah, you are because you want to learn about it because it's fun. If it was just boring, you wouldn't want to learn about it...* (Audio Two).

CONCLUSION

The wonderful thing about books is that they allow us to enter imaginatively into someone else's life. And when we do that, we learn ... (about) other people. But the real surprise is that we also learn truths about ourselves, about our own lives, that somehow we hadn't been able to see before

(Paterson, 1991, p.36).

Katherine Paterson's books were read and enjoyed by many children in this class. This quote was read to two of the more talented children for their comment. Tom's response was "... there is a link between reality and fiction" and Rob said "but sometimes the

reality is hard. I like drama 'cause you can say things that are you, but nobody has to know because you are acting someone else (Audio 2).

Central to drama is enactment—the ability to take on a role to step into another person's shoes. In this process and through protection in role, children can explore the themes within a book distanced from their own lives but bringing the realities and understandings of their own experiences. Furthermore, for many students in this research group the active nature of drama—the get up and do it —was important. Our challenge as teachers is to get up and do drama with children. In so doing we can demonstrate its role within a multiliteracies framework as a means for students to interpret texts critically. In this way we can contribute to the growing body of research that demonstrates just what the language of drama can do.

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