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Learning How to Use Drama in the Classroom: A Student Teacher's Journey



Abstract

Novice teachers often walk into a classroom with very little knowledge of how to conduct lessons and keep students engaged. In this article, student teacher Ashley and veteran teacher Sara share their experiences as Ashley learned how to use drama pedagogy in a secondary English classroom. Using the ideas and activities originally taught in classrooms by Dorothy Heathcote, Ashley experienced designing and implementing activities for the novels *Anthem* by Ayn Rand and *Lord of the Flies* by William

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Golding. Throughout the three months in Sara's secondary classroom, Ashley saw how drama pedagogy helped students, especially struggling readers, become authentically engaged, make connections with texts, and participate in class discussions using critical thinking. Ashley also witnessed reluctant students become highly engaged in learning. Because of her experiences, Ashley's knowledge of classroom management increased, and she discovered ways to use drama pedagogy in her future classroom.

Keywords: drama pedagogy, secondary education, novice teacher preparation, classroom engagement

Walk into just about any secondary English classroom in America and you will see a teacher trying his or her best to get students interested in the text they are studying. You are also likely to see many students being compliant, but not engaged. Those are the students who have been silently struggling to care about or understand a novel since they were in elementary school. The students who cannot remember what they just read and have no idea how to help themselves. The ones who will take a book home and then promptly ignore it to play a video game or watch Netflix. They are the students all teachers desperately need to reach, and many teachers are unsure how to do that—especially if that teacher is a novice.

As novice teachers enter the world of education, they have to learn the acronyms and expectations of a classroom teacher as well as

Helping students to understand a text using drama activities should feel like play and actually help students feel as if they are living the moments from the book. When students question a text, explore their own thinking, and engage with their peers, they are taking charge of their own learning (Burke, 2013).

effective teaching strategies. Ashley, a student teacher, entered the world of a non-traditional secondary English classroom. Sara used drama pedagogy regularly in her classroom, and Ashley had no experience with the strategy. She arrived and had to learn how to use drama pedagogy. Drama pedagogy is a collection of drama-based teaching and learning strategies to engage students with the content they are learning. It is facilitated by a teacher, uses academic content, focuses on the process and experiences of students during the process, and incorporates any type of drama strategy or activity (Lee, Patall, Cawthon, & Steingut, 2015). This article describes how Ashley and her cooperating teacher, Sara, navigated that learning process; it is also about how they hope more teachers can begin to feel excited, comfortable, and passionate about helping their students discover how to learn through dramatic play.

Theory Behind Drama Pedagogy

When a young child plays with an imaginary friend or an elementary student pretends to be a superhero, you probably chuckle to yourself and comment on his or her impressive imagination. Once that child is out of elementary school, the imagination is expected to move to the back seat, and he or she is expected to be able to sit and take notes or understand lecture without doing anything with it—especially in an English classroom.

Elementary teachers know the importance of play. It is why they enjoy putting on dramatizations of a story, create readers' theatre, or have stations where students get to imagine themselves living like Sarny in *Nightjohn* (Paulsen, 1993) or discover the concept of loyalty through *Because of Winn Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2001). Those students and teachers are using play to increase engagement and comprehension of a text; essentially, they are experiencing drama pedagogy (Heathcote, 1985b; Lee et al., 2015).

Dorothy Heathcote is most often credited with making the use of drama in the regular classroom setting a strategy that can bring power to students, especially those who struggle. Working primarily with elementary and early middle school students in England, she helped them recreate historical periods and

experiences and delve deeper into a text rather than merely answering comprehension questions (Heathcote, 1985a; Wagner, 1999). She also taught young teachers how to use drama in their own classrooms. Heathcote (1985a, 1985b, 1985c) believed teachers needed to participate with their students in the play to make it safe, meaningful, and highly engaging (see also Wagner, 1999).

In addition to the work of Heathcote, John O'Toole (2004) believed that to simply watch a drama caused one to miss not only the structure of the story but also the significance. With that thought in mind, drama pedagogy activities are designed to allow students the experience of being more than just an audience when reading a text. Students are given the opportunity to participate in the text while adding their own context. Additionally, O'Toole believed that in order for learning to take place while using drama in the classroom, teachers not only have to design activities with a purpose instead of a set of rules, but also have to convince the students to participate and that their participation will contribute to their learning. The use of drama pedagogy in the classroom allows both students and teachers to negotiate their own learning, build subtexts, and connect contexts between the fictional world and real world.

According to Burke (2013), Gavin Bolton's work stressed the importance of analyzing a work and not just reenacting it; this idea influenced the activities used in Sara's secondary classroom. Helping students to understand a text using drama activities should feel like play and actually help students feel as if they are living the moments from the book. When students question a text, explore their own thinking, and engage with their peers, they are taking charge of their own learning (Burke, 2013). Bolton's work impressed upon teachers who wanted to use drama in their classrooms that they had to be open to the reality of not knowing exactly what was going to happen during the activity, thus becoming learners themselves. His work has also been influential in the design of drama pedagogy activities because of his belief that when students work within the confines of an imagined yet plausible social reality, they are able to see others and themselves in a new way (Burke, 2013).

How Drama Pedagogy Has Been Used in Sara's Classroom

Drama pedagogy is a teaching style Sara has incorporated into her secondary classroom because she has seen struggling students become more engaged with a text when they get to play with it. The activities help students do more than just answer comprehension questions. She has used drama pedagogy to help students learn vocabulary words, think like characters in a novel, hear the differences in the way people interpret a story, and make inferences (Heathcote, 1985a, 1985b). While using drama pedagogy with secondary learners, Sara has had deep discussions about character motivations; students were able to make inferences more regularly and have been able to solidify their thinking when playing with text. It has made a difference in engagement for students.

Sara's students have created tableaus and social positioning portrayals of major events so they could process, analyze, and discuss the social structures and power changes within a novel. The tableau activity has served as an excellent way for students to think carefully about the most important events within a novel, summarize the story, and learn how to work together. During a social positioning activity, inspired by Augusto Boal (1993), students were asked to create images of major events from the novel. Students could use classroom furniture to create levels; those levels were intended to indicate which character they felt had the most power. Sara and Ashley took pictures of each group's social positioning images and then showed the photos to the students as a part of the class discussion. Students were surprised at how each group saw characters differently, yet no group was wrong. The activity helped the students realize the power structure of a novel changes throughout the entire story.

They have had heated debates while role-playing a town hall meeting with the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), and they have clarified their thinking about character motivations by writing-in-role to make decisions. When students imagine themselves as Boo Radley or Tom Robinson, instead of seeing the story only from Scout's point of view, they are able to create a life for the town, contemplate their own views of life, and develop empathy for characters. The writing that students create as they attempt to make inferences and embody their chosen character often reveals truths or ideas to them that they might not discover in class discussion. Their voice becomes stronger as they imagine themselves as that character and attempt to imitate the voices of Boo or Tom.

Each of those activities was designed with the purpose of engaging students and helping them find the joy in a story again. Each was created so students not only had the freedom to explore beyond the words on the page of a text, but also had the safety to question a text and the general interpretation. Those activities also make the class a unique experience for high school students who are regularly overwhelmed with an abundance of standardized testing.

Ashley entered the classroom with only general knowledge of how to create a lesson or lead a classroom, which primarily consisted of more traditional methods of what teachers often call sit and get education. As Ashley observed the classroom play, she quickly saw the engagement and jumped wholeheartedly into learning how to use drama pedagogy in the secondary classroom.

Discovering How to Use Drama Pedagogy

When Ashley found out Sara used drama pedagogy in the classroom, she was ecstatic. During her time in graduate school, she briefly studied the concept and believed students would enjoy it because of the movement and freedom to do more than sit in a chair and listen. Even though Ashley knew what drama pedagogy was, she was not confident in leading lessons with it. She had not experienced anything like it during her own secondary education.

Ashley's high school experience consisted of copying notes from the board, reading specific chapters when assigned, and taking a comprehension test. Ashley thought she needed only basic knowledge of PowerPoint, the ability to build a decent-looking worksheet, and stamina to lecture. She quickly discovered that is not how a successful student-centered classroom should function—especially one using drama pedagogy.

Within the first two weeks of Ashley's time in the classroom, they began reading *Anthem* by Ayn Rand (1961) and had the students play games Sara called *Follow the Leader*, *Mirror, Mirror*, and *Minefield* (see Appendix A). The goal was to connect the students' feelings of restriction, conformity, and lack of independence within the game to making predictions about the text. In each of those activities, students were told what to do or to blindly follow someone else's leadership, to which the students vocalized their displeasure in reflections. Students made predictions suggesting the characters in the novel would struggle with trust, individuality, violence, and discovery. Students not only discovered the value of being an individual, they also began to question ways characters would overcome their apparent bondage within the society.

The point of the activities was to preface the novel and lead students to a certain mindset when reading *Anthem*. Sara wanted the students to be able to connect with the primary character in the novel. She did not want to tell them how to feel; she wanted them to develop empathy towards the main character, Equality 7-2521. She wanted the students to feel what it was like to have no individuality and move through the activities questioning their own safety.

Throughout the semester, students talked about *Anthem* and how they wanted to be an individual rather than a collection of numbers. Drama pedagogy helped the novel make a lasting impression. Students were able to apply the theme of the book to their own lives because they were allowed to experience the novel in a relatable way.

For example, the activity Minefield required two students to wait outside the classroom while their classmates scattered across the classroom and created a difficult path to the other side. Students created human bridges, laid on the ground, crouched in balls in the middle of the floor, or stood on chairs to make the route difficult. When the classroom was set, one of the students from outside the room with eyes closed was guided and heard only verbal instructions to assist in navigating the minefield. If the student touched any of the mines, there would be an explosion and the entire minefield would reset with new obstacles. Both Sara and Ashley watched several students attempt to survive the minefield, and each time a mine exploded, they saw students become frustrated.

During the reflection of the activity, Sara asked how many students found the activity difficult and almost all raised their hands. They expressed the frustration they had felt with their eyes closed and relying on someone else's directions. Sara then asked them how they would feel if this same situation was applied to their lives:

What if someone gave you specific instructions how to live your life and if you did not comply, you would die? Ashley listened to the students complain how unfair that would be, and she watched them become invested as soon as Sara mentioned that was what they would see happen in the story. Immediately, the students were intrigued and eager to begin the novel.

Many of the students in the classroom complained about reading prior to their experience with *Anthem* (Rand, 1961), but once finished, many asked about the next book that would be read as well as asked for book suggestions. Drama pedagogy allowed the students to see novels in a new way, which increased their critical thinking skills and engagement. Students more quickly discovered emotions of the characters, questioned character motivations, and realized what they may have missed during the reading.

The wonderful thing about drama pedagogy was that the activities could be individualized, group-oriented, or used with the class as a whole. Every activity could be modified to fit the class's needs. For example, when reading *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954), Sara and Ashley had students read the novel like a script because the students were having difficulty telling which character was speaking, something both teachers realized was actually quite challenging as they went through the chapter and highlighted dialogue. That got the entire class involved and helped them retain the information in a much more efficient way.

During the same *Lord of the Flies* unit, Sara and Ashley introduced a tableau activity, where the students were divided into groups of three to six and had to create living pictures of a concept or event within the text using only body language, physical movements, and facial expressions. Before the students began to create their own tableau, Sara and Ashley performed one using a fairy tale. They understood that students were participating in the activity for the first time and needed to see how it might be done.

After reading the first chapter, Sara and Ashley asked students to recreate the crash landing scene, and each group member drew cards with characters they were to portray. A few students struggled with the characters who were unnamed or not main characters, but with a little guidance, they came to realize they had the opportunity to create interactions and relationships between and among characters in the novel. Their use of tableau and working in a group gave them the freedom to explore the characters, make inferences about the setting, and discuss any confusion they may have had about the opening of the novel.

Some groups portrayed older boys who showed mercy to the younger ones by carrying them to safety, while other groups showed hostility among characters by leaving the wounded to die. Every group interpreted the assignment differently and brought up the discussion of whether these preadolescent boys understood empathy or compassion. The activity also began a long and almost daily discussion about whether the boys would work together to survive. With limited information from the novel and the opportunity to show creativity, Ashley and Sara's

students were able to have an educated discussion about human instincts because they were able to safely experience a traumatic experience for themselves.

Drama Pedagogy and Classroom Management

When Ashley arrived in Sara's classroom, she had no idea how to manage student behavior. She had been taught what to say and expected those words to work immediately. The first time she took charge of the classroom, she was surprised that the words did not work the way she had been told. Watching Ashley struggle to figure out a way to manage and encourage students at the same time was difficult for Sara to observe; she wanted to take charge, but she knew Ashley would never learn if she did.

When first introduced to drama pedagogy activities, many students were uncomfortable. Many seemed shy, so Ashley and Sara worked them into the play slowly. They began with activities that required only volunteers so that all students could become familiar with the idea of using drama in their English classroom. Ashley and Sara also made a point to participate in many of the early activities with the students, thus assuring students that they were safe and their participation would be valued. When students on the sidelines laughed and saw the joy on participants' faces, they were no longer shy or unwilling to participate. They no longer saw the activities as something that could embarrass them. Ashley learned early on that even if the activities did not seem to catch on with everyone in the beginning, she had to keep using them. Students needed to warm up to change in the classroom.

When they began their *Anthem* unit with the sophomore students, Ashley was worried. She wondered how Sara would deal with students who did not want to participate, and she wondered if the students would actually find value in what they were doing. She saw quickly that when introducing high school students to drama pedagogy, Sara was straightforward and honest about the purpose. She did not hide things from the students about the activities. If she wanted them to participate in the game without knowing the outcome, she told them that. What Ashley saw with that openness and honesty was that most students accepted it, knew they were safe, and were not going to be made fun of by their peers or teacher.

The only struggle Ashley discovered was when a few students did not want to participate in the activity because they were too shy or felt uncomfortable doing more than sitting in a desk all class period. Those students wanted to blend in and hide from engaging in the class. One student thought the activities were pointless. She easily resolved the potential classroom management problem by pairing him with students who were outgoing and accepting.

Sara knew those students would give into peer pressure and participate, if for no other reason than to keep their friends happy. One student in particular was so irritated at being asked to play that Sara got him to participate by challenging him to prove her

Making connections is the most valuable thing to have in a classroom, and she found that drama pedagogy was the starting point of those relationships. She was a stranger in the classroom and using drama pedagogy opened the door for her and the students to bond with one another. With that relationship, Ashley was able to create a collaborative learning environment that they all found valuable.

wrong about a game. He showed himself to be an outstanding leader while he was showing everyone that the game could go on for a long time.

After watching and then mimicking many of the ways Sara managed the students during the drama pedagogy activities, Ashley saw that all students were willing to participate and that the teacher has to figure out how to make the students realize that as well. Drama pedagogy *can* work for students and *will*, especially if the teacher is willing to discover not only how it can help students understand a text better, but also if the teacher is willing to help students work into the play where they are comfortable.

What Drama Pedagogy Taught Us as Teachers

One of the things Ashley loved about drama pedagogy was that it allowed the teachers the opportunity to play with the students. Those experiences built a connection between teacher and student that cannot be created any other way, nor can it be fabricated. The students recognized that they were trying to make the material more appealing to them and they cared about their growth as people. Before Ashley knew it, the activities became enjoyable memories she shared with the classroom, and that made for a favorable learning environment for all. After every activity she led, Ashley asked students if doing drama pedagogy was helpful, and every time they responded positively. Not only were their responses overwhelmingly positive when speaking with Ashley, they were also positive on their student reflection sheets. Students who had previously struggled to make inferences about the text and characters were suddenly able to recognize the boys in *Lord of the Flies* were truly scared, becoming evil, increasingly frustrated with each other, and were never going to actually work together to accomplish survival tasks.

When students understood the material, they became more invested in their own learning and found it more enjoyable. Their

responses allowed Ashley the chance to evaluate how drama pedagogy affected them.

Another benefit of drama pedagogy is that it is student-centered learning. There are very few benefits to standing at the front of a classroom and lecturing for an entire class period. The traditional barriers of an English classroom or using only comprehension questions are pushed and students typically respond quickly and positively. Drama pedagogy allowed students to discuss what they learned together and create new ideas or concepts to generate a new conversation. Even though the students were experiencing the books in a new way, the activities were designed with a purpose. The *Mirror, Mirror* exercise was designed specifically for students to understand the lack of freedom Equality 7-2521 would face during the novel. Tableau activities were designed to help students focus on specific events or actions from the text. Role play activities were designed so students would have the freedom and safety to explore difficult themes in the novels without having to feel exposed as themselves.

Teachers want students to get something specific out of a book and by using drama pedagogy, students can figure out the message themselves and even add a new perspective to the discussion. Teachers were able to act more like facilitators and leaders than guardians of knowledge. Students were able to discover for themselves instead of being told what to look for in a text; they found the importance, beauty, pain, and nuances themselves. They saw drama pedagogy help students direct their own understanding without the fear of being wrong or failing. Ashley was amazed several times by students who raised questions she had never thought to ask, and that was when learning took place for everyone. It was not a one-sided experience.

Conclusion

Drama pedagogy opened Ashley's eyes to a new way of teaching. Instead of standing at the front of a classroom lecturing, she discovered that there are other, potentially more efficient options that can be beneficial for students.

After experiencing drama pedagogy in a secondary classroom, Ashley plans to use drama pedagogy to help students grasp the concepts of novels and plays, understand the proper use of sentence structure and grammar, and build effective relationships within the classroom community. Making connections is the most valuable thing to have in a classroom, and she found that drama pedagogy was the starting point of those relationships. She was a stranger in the classroom and using drama pedagogy opened the door for her and the students to bond with one another. With that relationship, Ashley was able to create a collaborative learning environment that they all found valuable.

Ashley's experience was designed to help her discover a new style of teaching. She was expected to participate in the activities and help design some of them. At first, she couldn't quite see the

purpose of having students play before beginning a novel, but as the semester went on, Ashley began to find herself thinking aloud about how she could use similar activities in her own future classroom.

It was rewarding to watch Ashley and the students enjoying the activities, see them be able to better understand the novels, embrace a new form of teaching, and become excited about English. When Ashley walked into Sara's classroom, she was shy and very unsure of herself; when she completed her student teaching, she could have taken charge easily. The students grew to love her and she grew to love them. Those relationships developed because Ashley was willing and able to embrace drama pedagogy and play with the students as they worked through novels together. She will undoubtedly use drama pedagogy with her students and watch them grow as readers and learners.

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How to Use Some Drama Pedagogy Activities

Name: *Mirror, Mirror*

Goal: Students build attention, trust, and feel unsteady. This activity is great to help students begin to think about what it might be like if they had no individuality or freedom of choice.

Possible Novel Connections: *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank

How to Play:

1. Have students pair up with someone they trust.
2. Tell students that they will need to focus on each other and ignore everything around them.
3. Instruct students that they may not make a plan before beginning, nor may they talk to one another during the activity (that makes things much more difficult).
4. When you say “go,” tell students to move as if they are mirror images of one another. Let them know that moving slowly will make the activity easier.
5. After a few minutes, instruct students to find a new partner and begin again.

Name: *Follow the Leader*

Goal: Students build attention, trust, and feel unsteady. This activity is great to help students begin to think about what it might be like if they had no individuality or freedom of choice. The leader will feel the pressure of being the center of attention and the others will feel the frustration of not being able to make their own choices.

Possible Novel Connections: *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank, *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen (pretty much any dystopian novel)

How to Play:

1. Have one student volunteer to be the leader and move to the front of the room facing the rest of the class.
2. Tell students that they will need to focus on the leader and do exactly as the leader does. (Think of the follow the leader games we played as children.)
3. When you say “go,” tell students to do as the leader does.
4. After a few minutes, ask for another leader.

Name: *Improvised Interview*

Goal: Students can explore characterization through the use of questioning a character in the novel. This allows students to learn to question a book, character, and even their own understanding of a character’s motivation. This activity should help students connect classroom discussion to inferences they are making about the text.

Possible Novel Connections: Great for any novel or nonfiction text

How to Play:

1. Either a student volunteer, or the teacher, will play the chosen role.
2. Have a student volunteer act as the interview mediator; this person helps to keep the questions on track with the text.
3. Ask the chosen character to step outside with the mediator. While they are outside, have the rest of the class brainstorm some questions to ask.
4. Bring your chosen character back into the room and send him or her to the front of the room.
5. The interview mediator will then ask the other students for questions and guide the activity.
6. If the chosen character is being played by a student, the teacher will interfere only if the questioning goes off course or students are struggling to follow an appropriate line of questioning.

Name: *Writing in Role*

Goal: Students can make inferences and think past the words on the page. They should write as a character who is not the main character in the text. This activity allows them to look at the text from different perspectives, experiment with voice, audience, and essay structure.

Possible Novel Connections: Great for any novel or nonfiction text

How to Play:

1. After reading specific chapters in the book, ask students to imagine they are a particular character, or assign them all the same character.
2. Explain that they will write a letter, diary entry, essay, explanation, etc. (announce the type of writing you would like them to do).
3. The writing can either be about an event in the novel as seen from their character's perspective, or about predictions that could be made as that character, concerns the character has, really anything that works with the novel and what you would like the students to focus on.
4. There is really no "correct" response as long as students are writing appropriately with the assignment.
5. This can be graded for content and voice, or structure, or a combination of aspects.

Name: *Tableau/Social Positioning*

Goal: Students will work to create a frozen, silent "picture" with their bodies. They should be either retelling the entire story or a specific event in a pre-determined number of "shots." This will cause students to go back into the text, evaluate what the most important elements are, communicate with the audience without words, and make inferences about how the characters might interact in each of the "shots" they have chosen. You can also take pictures of each "shot" and share with the class the next day to discuss what the students actually showed, and even which characters students see as having more power (do this if you are creating the Social Positioning activity).

Possible Novel Connections: Great for any novel or nonfiction text

How to Play:

1. Instruct students to get into groups of three to five (more than five makes things difficult).
2. Explain that students will use their bodies to create frozen, silent pictures that represent specific events or storylines in the novel (you can use this for reenacting an event that happened but wasn't written about, retelling the entire story, or making predictions).
3. Tell students that they will have 10 to 15 minutes to determine which "shots" they will create and practice them. (Encourage students to write down the order of "shots" and practice them multiple times.)
4. Have groups come to the front of the room one at a time and tell them that they need to move from "shot" to "shot" when you instruct them (I say, "Show me one", etc.).
5. Once groups complete their "shots" (you might require five to seven), ask the audience what the scene, event, or retelling was. Reflect on which character had the most power and why, or simply use the tableau activity as an informal assessment for comprehension of the text.