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Sense and Sensibility and the Spaces In-Between: Critical Improvisations With Jane Austen

Abstract

Using Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* as an anchor text, the authors argue for applied theatre strategies as vivid and viable tools for exploring challenging texts and applying critical lenses in an embodied way. Readers are guided through a series of theatre-based, English-classroom accessible improvisational frameworks to help students and teachers penetrate important but challenging texts with a sense of agency. These research-based frameworks foster artistic explorations of prior knowledge, enliven the idea of multiple perspectives through role-taking, connect past and present through games and simulation to humanize/personalize the "antique text" by honoring present-day text generation through theatre. In using applied theatre to help students open and embody ideas and perspectives, accessibility increases alongside students' belief in their own rights and abilities to speak back to a canonical text in a complex, inquiry-driven context. Enlivening a critical lens through theatre short-circuits the potential for "critical" being code for a distanced "critic" creating a "critique," aiming instead for a space of sharp-edged, shared inquiry.

Keywords: applied theatre, multimodal literacy, critical pedagogy, accessing classic texts, "New English Education"

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"If they marry, they will be sure of doing well, and if they do not, they may all live very comfortably together on the interest of ten thousand pounds."

– Sense and Sensibility (Chapter 1)

First published under the pseudonym "A Lady," *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen, 1811/1957) follows the romances of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Upon the death of their father, the two young ladies, their mother, and youngest sister, Margaret, are left with a small annuity administered by their half-brother who inherits the entirety of the family estate. As the novel unfolds, Austen introduces a series of possible suitors—Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, John Willoughby—for the two eldest daughters and we follow the ups and downs and twists of courtship, disappointment, and finally, resolution in 50 chapters when both Elinor and Marianne marry.

Sense and Sensibility is a novel that often appears in high school English curricula—one of many "great books" written in a time and language past. However, if as Smith and Wilhelm (2002) documented in their study of literacy and the lives of working class adolescent boys, "Reading Don't Fix No Chevys"—reading *Sense and Sensibility* certainly doesn't make a whole lot of sense for the increasingly culturally and linguistically complex populations today's ELA teachers engage. Thus, while the Janeites (Jane Austen fan club members) of various ages and creeds readily resonate with nuanced relationships at play in Austen's novels, others struggle to see the Dashwood sisters as distinct—let alone believable—characters.

Applied theatre, we argue, is an alternative, embodied way of reading an "antique" text and making it relevant to the issues that surround our lives as well. Our intent is to encourage teachers to create spaces for adolescents to "be the book"—even an 18th-century novel—in generative ways that allow for the questioning of privilege and oppression relevant to students' lives and communicated within the texts we require.

To take students inside the relationships and social contexts that shape Austen's novels, we respond frequently with explanations and close readings. Before we know it, the discussion—in words—is limited to a conversation between ourselves and students already drawn to Austen—thereby short-circuiting the engaged reading context we hoped to initiate and sustain. With the bigger picture of critical pedagogy in mind, we also need to think through the small steps—the how and when to scaffold analytical interactions with students before, during, and after reading. Here, extending an ongoing collaboration, we apply the theatrical improvisation strategies of Neelands and Goode (2000) to critical engagement with *Sense and Sensibility*. In the sections that follow, we begin with a broad contextualization of applied theatre. We continue with four specific improvisation scenarios for embodied engagement with *Sense and Sensibility* that might happen before, during, and after a reading.

Critical humanizing pedagogies that speak truth to power in ways that embrace individual and community literacies, interrogate assumptions, and problematize perspective have emerged as an undergirding principle for what Kirkland (2010) and others have characterized as a "New English Education" (see also, e.g., Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, Miller, Beliveau, DeStigter, & Rice, 2008; Paris, 2012). Yet, in classroom practice, the transformational interactions we thoughtfully plan around dismantling the "taken-for-granted" in a canonical piece of English literature such as *Sense and Sensibility* can stall within minutes of the bell change. Applied theatre, we argue, is an alternative, embodied way of reading an "antique" text and making it relevant to the issues that surround our lives as well. Our intent is to encourage teachers to create spaces for adolescents to "be the book"— even an 18th-century novel—in generative ways that allow for the questioning of privilege and oppression relevant to students' lives and communicated within the texts we require. Although we use the Austen text as a unifying point of reference, we encourage teachers to adapt and improvise these critically humanizing approaches across their curricula. Our argument is that by reading Austen and other 18th-century canonical texts through the embodied critical lens of applied theatre, we can engage our students in issues of power and privilege within the novel and the lives that we bring to reading.

Sense, Sensibility, and Improvisation

The applied theatre label unifies a wide range of theatrical forms that leverage drama-based strategies as a means for participants to make and challenge individual and collective meaning. Many practitioners of theatre and artist/educators across academic disciplines, inside and outside schools, have found theatre particularly effective for framing critical inquiry with youth. Sometimes that embodied meaning-making process feeds into a production; sometimes it explores social justice or integrates curriculum; sometimes it reaches toward rehabilitation and social change. Usually, it is a combination of some or all of these things, with participants crossing the boundaries between actor and spectator inside and outside the emerging, improvised dramatic worlds that they inhabit (Boal, 1979; O'Neill, 1995; Prentki & Preston, 2008). As such, critical pedagogues have argued the potential of applied theatre for generating embodied spaces for interrogating literature (Jasinski-Schneider, Crumpler, & Rodgers, 2006); scaffolding talk (Dwyer, 2004); integrating inquiry and problem-solving across subject areas (Bowell & Heap, 2001; Swartz & Nyman, 2010); shaping and informing writing (Grainger, 2004); and inspiring literacy growth among groups traditionally labeled "reluctant" or typically underserved by their system of education, including English language learners (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

The concept of "text" in an applied theatre environment is productively plural, fluid, and democratic. The improvised texts of wor(l)ds and enactments created by participants and teacher are as valuable as the words strung together on pages by Jane Austen in 1811. The generative space between participant and author-written texts is a rich context for literacy learning (O'Neill, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1994). The theatre work can occur before, during, or after the book reading. When an authored text is particularly dense or difficult, interspersing applied theatre techniques at intervals across phases of book reading completion helps readers construct context, humanize distant characters, trust and connect with prior knowledge, embody ideas, and find motivation to read deeply.

Improvisation Strategy #1: Un-packaging Concepts

Because the style, language, setting, and other particulars of *Sense & Sensibility* can constitute barriers for students' access to the narrative, it sometimes helps to begin more broadly with students' ideas and a trust in their expertise. Applied theatre can help students actively explore nuances of words and their range of symbolic meanings. Sharing the work of artistic interpretation

with students lays the groundwork for less of the banking/transmission type of instruction that Freire (2007) critiqued, in favor of a pedagogy that includes students' voices and perspectives as a starting point for learning—rather than a finale.

To begin, assemble a collection of artifacts around an idea. For example, Austen's novel is filled with possible themes, threads, and motifs that reveal oppressive social structures such as family, inheritance, and marriage. Challenge students to bring in and/or submit three artifacts related to a single critical concept. For example, the question "How does income label and sort people?"—an idea central to the novel and the Dashwood sisters' plight—might produce artifacts ranging from some loose change or bills; to a downloaded image or photo cut from a magazine promoting consumption or revealing poverty; to a phrase or sentence that the students might generate or find about "income" or "sorting"; to a standard definition gleaned from a dictionary, and so forth.

For each artifact, ask students to talk about its relationship to the umbrella inquiry under examination. Teachers may want to have a sharing of sorts, or they may prefer to review the materials independent of the students first—or some combination. Take the students' submissions and make them (or a good number of them) available to the whole group. As a variation, teachers can decide if they want to assemble a different "package" for each group or provide more of an open market from which student may choose one that speaks to them.

Approach the students "in role" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995): They are members of an advertising agency. The teacher is a client interested in creating PSAs (public service announcements) that make people stop to think about "Income." Solicit their questions—e.g., "What is income?"—as a starting point for a critical examination of how income potentially defines individuals and the categories that income generates in contemporary societies: low income, working class, old money, etc. Close by challenging participants to create one-minute multimedia PSAs on the concept of "Income"—an announcement that critically interrogates the social construction of wealth and its consequences for individuals and communities. Teachers may want to have a rubric or checklist outlining common criteria (this could be developed with the class ahead of time or imposed by instruction). Explain that each group will have a five-minute limit, which includes an introduction, a screening of the PSA, and a brief Q&A session with the review panel. Allow groups a little time to plan and rehearse their presentations. Be sure to troubleshoot the technology and have media items cued and perhaps a designated operator. The purpose of this context building/prereading strategy is to create a theatrical space for students to begin socially negotiating meaning in an improvisational space. Certainly teachers could simply choose to initiate a discussion about "Income" as a preamble or warmup to the novel—and its relationship to students' lives. The intention, however, of this particular context-building improvisation strategy and the ones that follow is to do more than talk about income—but to somehow enact it and by so doing, enter its meanings bodily.

Improvisation Strategy #2: Rules of the Game

When readers enter the world of a book, they need to learn its rules and ways. By so doing, readers potentially become more aware of the societal norms that govern action. When those rules and ways are not clearly spelled out—or not particularly interesting—students struggle to wade through worlds they only half understand or care for. Explicit identification of the "rules" governing a world different from a student's own can sometimes be more vivid when framed in a game. Including the students in designing the game provides an authentic motivation for close reading and analysis as well. The fun part is that spelling out the rules of a story world—which starts to get at things like shared values and priorities of a group—sharpens student perceptions of everyday symbolic acts and cultivates interrogative reflection with fictional worlds that can also be later applied to our own.

To help students look into "spheres" (Neelands & Goode, 2000) of the Dashwood sisters' world, identify four "focus" characters. For each character, place the name in the center of a large sheet of paper. Divide the rest of the paper around the circle into four sections. Label each with one of the following: home, family, play, day. The heading "home" indicates where the character lives; "family" indicates immediate or extended family as well as estranged family members; "play" is social life; "day" indicates the character's workplace or daily routine. Teachers may want to do this in a cumulative way, adding information as chapters are completed, for a few sessions. Be sure that students feel free to describe what is in this element of the character's life, but also to raise questions about it.

Once there is ample material accumulating in the spheres, students will be able to talk more clearly about the world of the story and the rules governing that world. Have students imagine they are preparing a person to go back in time and enter the world of *Sense & Sensibility.* What are five rules a woman would need to understand to re-enter 18th-century society and operate successfully in a particular social sphere?

Teachers may also want to have students write five rules for helping a character from *Sense & Sensibility* enter present-day society successfully. Taking those rules as inspiration, discuss with students these questions: "If the Dashwoods' world were a game, what sort of game would it be? A board game? A hide-and-seek game? Another sort of game? Why? What rules would govern the game? How would an individual win or lose? Would it always be fair?" Teachers can challenge groups of students to each create a game based on the Dashwoods which all can later participate in. Or teachers can more carefully begin constructing a simulation game in which the entire class participates, pulling event types from the actual story (e.g., Lose your inheritance; move back three spaces). These games can be played with full bodies as "game pieces" complete with stylized movements on paper-square pathways or as sit-down standards.

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Improvisation Strategy #3: Representation and Women

Sense & Sensibility has inspired modern retellings (Trollope & Austen, 2013) and loose adaptations (Ziegler, 2011)—as well as period and contemporary film and television remixes including some far from the context of 18th-century Sussex (e.g., *I Have Found It*/*Kandukondain Kandukondain* or *From Prada to Nada*). The "riches to rags" sisterhood story transcends time and place, it seems. Many teachers use modern adaptations and media as counterpoints to novel study, particularly as a reward after a tough book conquered. Applied theatre strategies can expand the standard Venn diagram comparison.

After watching a film or reading a modernized version of *Sense & Sensibility*, have groups of students find similar moments or situations that appear in both versions. Challenge each group to boil down that moment to a 30-second pantomimed (actions without words) scene from each version. Share and discuss vivid images, similarities, and differences. Have groups line up to perform all the scenes from one version in sequence, without a break. Rehearse smoothly transitioning from one scene to the next. Teachers and participants can play with adjusting the order of groups as the process evolves. To bring a more explicitly critical lens on the performance, we recommend applying a "gender filter" to a culminating discussion, with questions surrounding how the scenes function in the storyline and what they reveal about the status of Austen's women. Critical questioning facilitated by the teacher might sound something like "What patterns did we see in the place of women in more than one of these scenes? Where is the power in each scene—and is that power made visible? What gestures or movements or relationships or roles repeated? How were gendered stereotypes perpetuated or challenged? How did race, ethnicity, and/or class factor in with gender?"

Improvisation Strategy #4: Mapping Gender

Teachers may want to follow or accompany discussions about gender with map making. For Neelands and Goode (2000), map making or diagraming is a way of defining a "problem" visually and reflecting thoughtfully about what those spaces represent. Bringing map making to the gender analysis of *Sense and Sensibility* as an ongoing context-building activity, participants might first map out in their own institutions the explicit and assumed gendered geographies that exist, how these borders came to be, and how they are negotiated and potentially improvised. Just as the worlds of Austen's heroines are gendered—the drawing room, a park allée—so too are the spaces that we inhabit four centuries later. What happens, for example, when such spaces are troubled or ruptured?

Individually or in small groups, challenge students to choose a locale from the story and draw it as a gendered space. This may be a very literal place, or a psychological space, or a combination. The map should give a lay of the land for those curious about navigating gender roles therein. Share and compare. Once the story-based depiction is complete, challenge students to find a gendered space within their own lives or experience. Map that. Share and compare, wondering what has changed in 400 years and what has not.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we have presented a series of improvisational theatre frames to scaffold critical, embodied transactions with *Sense and Sensibility*—an 18th-century novel that English educators will possibly encounter with their students. Our intent has been to illustrate how even within a prescribed curriculum that privileges texts from a time and place different than ours, applied theatre can create a critically reflective space for teachers and students to engage in the humanizing project of a "New English Education." In using applied theatre to help students open and embody ideas and perspectives, accessibility increases alongside students' belief in their own rights and abilities to speak back to a canonical text in a complex, inquiry-driven context. Enlivening a critical lens through theatre short-circuits the potential for "critical" being code for a distanced "critic" creating a "critique," aiming instead for a space of sharp-edged, shared inquiry. We hope that these strategies will provide a concrete pathway for the sorts of embodied readings that challenge and grow critical individual and collaborative responses to Jane Austen's wor(l)d and our own—and the classrooms and communities to which we aspire.

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