24. STORY DRAMA STRUCTURES

‘Recipes’ for Success

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Twenty-five years ago, drama innovator Gavin Bolton (1984) recognised the power of embodied narrative when he argued for placing drama at the centre of the curriculum. Rather than seeing literacy practices as discrete competencies unconnected to students’ lives outside school, Bolton, together with Dorothy Heathcote (2003), uses drama to cross disciplines and subject areas. They create learning contexts in which students use their literacy skills in multi-modalities immersed in situations that demand their participation. It is this “apprenticeship into the very specific forms of [social] languages and literacies represented inside and outside the classroom” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 17) that makes drama such a rich pedagogy.

Our own work in drama and theatre education has been steeped in conversation about pedagogy and how we can assist in the development of teachers and learners. No matter what or whom we are teaching, drama is always an integral component of our classroom practice; story drama structures evolved out of that need to help pre-service teachers to become confident and competent users of drama across the curriculum. In story drama structures, there are two fictional worlds, the one provided by the story text and the one created by the drama participants who “play” within the context of that story and who reframe those worlds to reflect their own thoughts and actions. The bridge between the fictional world and the real world of the students’ everyday experiences is built through the variety of strategies, themselves bridges of access, as they only work when they are experienced, shared and undertaken by the whole class.

According to David Booth (2005), a story drama is “improvised role play stimulated by a story” (p. 8). Dramatic structure refers to a narrative in which the whole may be divided into parts. In story drama structures (Miller & Saxton, 2004), we use the improvisational nature of classroom drama allied to a narrative. That narrative, for our work, is drawn from children’s picture books where the illustrations often play a significant means of engaging with the text.

Childrens’ picture books are a part of the language arts program from early years through to teacher education programs and so young teachers are familiar with and comfortable using them in the classroom. Drama, on the other hand, is frequently a mandated component of the curriculum but not an area with which many teachers are experienced. Marrying the dis-ease of drama with the comfort...
of a known curriculum component was a natural approach. The structures serve teachers as complete frameworks of organization and are laid out as a series of parts (or activities) that provide teachers with specific directions as to the grouping, the strategy, the administration (requirements) and the focus. The teacher “talk” that follows serves as the facilitation of the strategy and is written out in action language: direct speech that will result in student action. Fundamental to each activity are questions and reflection. The former engenders wider thinking and opportunities for personal and generalized application, the latter for considering what has happened in the action. At the meaning level they serve to uncover the possibilities of where to go next. One of the challenges for effective drama is building coherence achieved through the linking of strategies. In story drama structures, the links are clearly demonstrated, often through teacher narration, moving the story forward while deepening meaning (“In the next bit of work, you will need to hold on to those new thoughts and perspectives to help you make some important decisions.”) The initial suggestion of Key Question and Statements offers possible themes and opportunities to enable reflection that moves from the particulars of the story to the more universal issues that the story addresses.

Through the use of drama and picture books, our pre-service teachers begin to understand how the structures provide a powerful means of integrating curriculum as each story acts as a lens into the human condition whether it be historical, social or personal. Stories that serve as the contexts for drama structures should connect in some way both to mandated curriculum and the “hidden” curriculum of social and cultural learning that Howard Gardner (1999) cites as a most significant part of a curriculum (p. 113). Good stories, writes Katherine Paterson, stretch children’s imaginations and “help them make sense of their own lives,” while at the same time, “encourag[ing] them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own” (Ewing, Miller, & Saxton, 2008, p. 122).

To illustrate, here are the introductory notes and initial three activities from “Now, write!” a story drama structure based on The Composition, written by Antonio Skármeta and illustrated by Alphonso Ruano.

Why Did We Choose this Story?

- This is adult-themed story told from the perspective of a child.
- The story personalizes the struggle that all oppressed people experience under a dictatorship.
- By setting the story in another country and another culture, the story provides the distance that allows us examine issues of bullying.
- The story provides an interdisciplinary approach to social studies and the hidden curriculum of ethical behaviour.
- The illustrations provide rich opportunities for interpretation and perspective-taking. There is a great deal of non-verbal text to be read and many spaces for the imagination to roam.
- The Composition was the winner of the Américus Book Award and the Jane Adams Award for the best picture book promoting peace and social justice.