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Drama: Engaging All Learning Styles

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Introduction

Drama is highly regarded as an effective and valuable teaching strategy because of its unique ability to engage reflective, constructivist and active learning in the classroom as well as enhancing oral skills development (Di Pietro, 1987; Via, 1976; Heathcote cited in Wagner, 1976; Mezirow, 1990; Schon, 1991; Donato and McCormick, 1994; Lukinsky, 1990; Miccoli, 2003). As teachers, we often search for effective ways to improve our classes, motivate the students that we teach and appeal to a range of learning styles. This paper will discuss some of the benefits of using drama as a teaching strategy, its power to engage all learning styles and offer some practical classroom teaching activities which incorporate various learning styles in English as a foreign or second language. Teachers are encouraged to try some of these strategies and provide a more active and engaging learning experience for students in the classroom.

Engaging All Learning Styles

Drama has the unique ability to engage many different learning styles, thus facilitating connections with students and motivating most learners today. As teachers, we understand that people learn differently and at different paces because of their biological and psychological differences (Reiff, 1992). Learning styles not only comprise the cognitive domain, but also the affective and physiological domains (Oxford, Hollaway & Horton-Murillo, 1992). Even one learning style is now considered to be multidimensional (Kinsella, 1996). Strong, Silver and Perini (2001) divide verbal-linguistic intelligence into four learning preferences including mastery (knowing), interpersonal (connecting with people; social skills), understanding (discovery and reasoning) and self-expressive (creativity). If learning styles are matched with appropriate teaching approaches, then student motivation, performance and achievement is more likely to increase.

A great strength of drama is in its appeal to various learning styles yet many teachers are wary of using it for many reasons. Some of these concerns may relate to fear of losing control in the classroom, students who may become too boisterous or unruly, unnecessarily loud noise levels, disturbing nearby classes and/or mass chaos. With clearly structured activities, most of these fears are unfounded. Students enjoy the activities, work together in groups and share their creative expressions. Even the shyest students are able to benefit from drama when they take on a new role and imagine themselves to be someone else.

Howard Gardner (1989) described his vision for schools which use multiple intelligences to incorporate authentic learning. Drama has the capacity to provide authentic learning as most of the intelligences are utilized in learning activities. For example, drama incorporates *verbal linguistic* learning through the use of language, scripts, vocabulary and reading. *Intrapersonal* learning relates to the feelings and emotions involved in drama, characterizations and how we respond as an individual, while *interpersonal* learning comes from working with others to create a scene or role play. *Kinesthetic* learning activates the physical self, the body and doing actions. As students re-create images, pictures, visual details, staging, movement, location and direction with drama their *spatial* learning skills are developed. *Logical* learning follows from using rational patterns, cause and effect relationships and other believable concepts involved with the drama. Sometimes *music*, or even the music of language, is also used in working with drama.

A long time advocate of drama as a valuable teaching strategy, Dorothy

Heathcote (in Wagner, 1976) stated:

If you cannot increase reflective power in people, you might as well NOT teach, because reflection is the only thing in the long run that teaches anybody. Reflection is what makes the knowing something that can be touched on and assimilated for further use.

This illustrates Heathcote's absolute belief in the power of drama to increase reflection in students, teach and build on knowledge for further use.

In the last decade, constructivist learning has received increased attention and become more and more important as a learning theory. Dewey in the 1900's was a constructivist proponent, as Piaget who studied the developmental patterns of his own children. Vygotsky (1978) stated: *What a child can do in a group today, tomorrow he can do alone*. Constructivist learning involves social, active learning; creates a powerful learning environment; is authentic and understanding-based; cooperative and collaborative; self-controlled; goal-oriented and draws on emotional intelligence. Constructivist learning helps to build confidence in students who are developing new skills. Drama enhances all of these skills, engages multiple intelligences and also increases the power of reflection in constructing knowledge. All of these attributes contribute to the power of drama in engaging all learning styles.

Validity and Historical Appeal of Drama in Education

The power of drama to engage all learning styles is evident through its history and development. Although drama in education is more recent, other military, government and corporate business institutions have used drama as a valuable training and teaching method for many years (Taylor, 1996). Drama was first developed in the Prussian Army as a simulation technique for use with the recruitment of officers. The Prussians discovered that they were able to recruit officers who may appear qualified from paper and pencil tests but in fact, lacked strategic military decision-making skills when it came to commanding troops in

the field. The solution was to introduce behavioral tests through simulation activities (Jones, 1982, p. 77). Without risk to life, the potential officer's tactical skills could be observed and thus demonstrated in a suitable manner. Officers who were able to commandeer troops successfully under the pressure of simulated battle were the ones successfully chosen as officers.

These simulation techniques were further developed by the British Army as TEWTS, or Tactical Exercises without Troops. Command decisions were made at 'staff headquarters' without the use of troops or bullets, using the reality of analyzing intelligence reports as well as in-battle strategies and tactics. The United States also began to develop training techniques for spies and agents during World War 2 using simulation, drama and improvisation techniques which proved to be effective. Partly as a result of this Office of Strategic Services (OSS) experience, the simulation technique was developed after the war as a tool of assessment in business management in America. Apparently, a successful spy bears a close relationship to a successful manager. American Telephone and Telegraph, British Civil Service Selection Board and NASA began to use drama and simulation exercises in training and recruitment, especially to prepare astronauts for anti-gravity and space travel. Such drama and simulation teaching techniques have been further developed in sports training and are also used by motivational speakers who encourage listeners to visualize and use the power of the brain for positive reflective imaginings. Finally, last but not least, education began to develop and use drama teaching techniques with the beginning of Communicative Language Teaching, particularly during the 1970's. With

communication at the center of the curriculum, classroom activities that develop this capability began to emerge.

This brief sketch of the background and development of drama through military, government, business and educational institutions demonstrates the ability of drama to successfully teach and train across a broad range of interests. The power of the brain to engage with authentic and understanding-based learning in a self-controlled, goal-oriented and active environment is apparent. Although drama is a fairly recent teaching strategy, more and more teachers are beginning to discover the increased capacity and benefits of drama to motivate, enable valuable learning and create more motivated engagement with learners in the classroom.

The benefits of using drama are numerous. A few of these highlights will be mentioned here as practical teaching activities such as theatre sports which involve improvisation and creative constructive learning. Drama is also a useful energizer in the classroom where students become active, have fun and enjoy their learning experiences. A shy student is easily able to take on an alter ego or persona, different from their reserved self, in order to speak and act. Drama is useful in text studies to identify literary devices, study language more carefully and to meaningfully enact the words. The benefits of drama in oral skills development assist students with pronunciation, intonation and development of emotional intelligence. Students gain an understanding of other perspectives, the

experience of being human and attaching appropriate feelings to expressions. Cultural similarities and differences may become more obvious and more understandable through drama activities.

Readers' Theatre is another useful teaching strategy where the students orally participate in reading poetry. Gestures and actions may be applied to enhance understanding and learning. Groups of students may share their creative interpretations or role plays related to Readers' Theatre. There are a number of websites for Readers' Theatre or teachers can create their own texts for active, kinesthetic readings. These activities encourage active listening, speaking and action performance in response to the words of the poetry. Multiple perspectives and interpretations may be presented by different student groups, which encourage a variety of possible readings.

Practical Classroom Activities

Theatre Sports is entertaining as theatre, which is meant to be watched and observed as well as a game of sports, because it has rules of play and scoring. Literary themes may be exploited, such as love, hate, death, etc. or various adjectives, adverbs or verbs studied more closely through such games. Students enjoy team interplay and preparing their presentations in response to a text. The cooperative learning skills are beneficial in addition to speaking; creative improvisation and critical thinking which develop as students improvise together

and score other teams. Theatre Sports can be effectively used as a warm-up for a lesson, a theme enhancer or simply as enjoyable speaking activities. See Appendix A as a guide for scoring and descriptions of several theatre sports games.

Text Studies: Oxymorons

Careful analysis of a text is possible through drama activities. For example, oxymorons can be studied using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. 'Sweet sorrow' is an oxymoron as it combines two incongruous or contradictory words brought together to make a striking expression. Much of *Romeo and Juliet* is about the class of opposites in family feuds, youth and age, life versus death, and so forth. These oppositions are expressed in the oxymorons in the play when Romeo says:

*Here's much to do with hate, but more with love:
Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
O any thing of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!*

Juliet also speaks using oxymorons:

*O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!
Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?
Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!
Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!*

*Despised substance of divinest show!
Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st,
A damned saint, an honourable villain!*

After sufficient explanation, the teacher may ask students to work with a partner or small group to choose one of Romeo's or Juliet's oxymorons (Romeo has a dozen oxymorons, Juliet has at least seven). Students can portray the oxymoron as a still photograph, or tableau, while the class guesses which oxymoron has been chosen. Students may also be asked to make up oxymorons of their own, acting them out for the class to guess.

Text Studies: Lists - Things She'd Rather Do

Shakespeare was also a great list maker. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet lists all the things she would rather do than marry Paris:

*O bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
From off the battlements of any tower,
Or walk in thievish ways, or bid me lurk
Where serpents are; chain me with roaring bears,
Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house,
O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
Or bid me go into a new-made grave,
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud –*

Juliet's list naturally lends itself to physical actions. Students can act out this list as one person speaks the lines above very slowly, pausing after each item, while

the others perform the actions. Alternatively, the lines can be shared in reading as group members take turns to act and speak. Students may also be asked to make their own list of things they would rather do than meet or marry someone not of their choice. Such activities personalize learning by creating links between the students' own knowledge and that of the text.

Speaking, Reading and Emotional Intelligence

Teachers may provide selected short script excerpts for students to workshop and perform. A brief love scene or emotionally charged scenario where students are challenged to engage speaking, reading and emotional intelligence in order to make sense of the scene makes an ideal example. Such an example might be the balcony scene from the well-known musical *West Side Story* (originally adapted from *Romeo and Juliet*) where students are asked to re-create the emotional intensity of Maria and Tony falling in love while each knows that the other is from an opposing gang and thus faced with an unrealistic and impossible courtship. Students could be asked to follow the stage directions carefully (i.e., climbing up to the balcony; smiling; grabbing Maria's hand; Maria reaching out to stop Tony; laughing; touching his face, etc) while making the scene as realistic and believable as possible.

As students step into the shoes of another character's role, they gain a greater understanding and empathy with that character. They are able to compare the responses of the characters with their own possible response, and are required

to recognize and manage emotions in themselves and in others. Using interactive approaches requires emotional intelligence, positive communication and the capacity to take others' perspectives and experiences into account. All of these experiences are an important part of the reflective power of drama to engage all learning styles.

Hot Seat

One of the characters from the scene may participate in Hot Seat. In this activity, the student remains in role as Tony, for example, from the previous scene and sits in a chair, or hot seat, in front of the class. Classmates are invited to ask him questions which he must answer in role as Tony. Through the hot seat activity, students gain a deeper understanding and perspective of the particular character's psychology, ethics and motivation through the questions and answers. This activity also encourages students to verbalize their thoughts by asking questions and interacting with the text, themes and characters being studied.

Conscience Alley

In Conscience Alley, students make two lines to form an alley (or pathway) and speak as the character's conscience when s/he walks slowly through the alley. Participants should be encouraged to develop their 'conscience alley' comment before lining up to form the alleyway. For example, if the character to walk through conscience alley was Maria from *West Side Story*, students might

respond to her love for Tony who is from an opposite gang hated by Maria's family, in a similar way as the Capulets and Montagues in *Romeo and Juliet*. Each person in the conscience alley might make individual comments such as: *Don't do It, Maria! You know it will never work out. It will only break your heart!* Or on the favorable side: *Yes, Maria, you know you love him! Love is strong and can overcome any obstacle! Go for it!*

Such an activity encourages students to respond to the text, the literary themes of the text and the characters involved in a personal way. It is an activity which requires a commitment from the student as they determine whether the character will be successful or has acted responsibly and ethically in a given situation. Alternatively, students can dramatize a conscience alley with their responses to contemporary news items portrayed in the media.

Readers' Theatre

Teachers may divide their class into sections or groups to expressively read a passage. There are many books and web sites available with sections of poetry and scripts for readers' theatre or teachers can create their own. A visit to any of the following Readers Theatre web pages will provide more ideas:

<http://www.literacyconnection.com/ReadersTheater.html>

<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

<http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/>

<http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html>

Students enjoy choral work, language rhythm, jazz chants, intonation, vocabulary, pronunciation and teamwork. After some basic rehearsal, teams or groups can be encouraged to add movement and share their performance with classmates. Readers' Theatre is motivating, active and enhances oral skills development. An example of Readers' Theatre could be Shakespeare's companion poems *Winter* where student groups share the owl's refrain *Tu-whit, tu-who!* and *Spring* where students speak or chant the chorus as *Cuckoo, cuckoo! O word of fear, unpleasing to a married ear!* after a narrator or main group reads the verses.

See Appendix B for another example activity for Readers' Theatre called *Ping-Pong*. In this poem, the aim is to re-create an exciting ping pong match. The class can be divided into two groups. Group A could read the left side words and group B could read the right side action verbs. The teacher could take the role as narrator, or referee according to the ping pong game. Alternatively, another student could be asked to referee. Everyone can join in as the game reaches its conclusion in a crescendo. After reading through several times, audience members could be asked to move their heads as if following the ping pong ball in the game and verbally express the action of the verbs, especially as the tension builds. Players could mime the action as the teams speak. Readers' Theatre provides an enjoyable way of learning language, speaking, re-creating images of poetry and working in teams.

Conclusion

Drama is an influential and beneficial teaching strategy that can be utilized in many ways in the contemporary classroom to provide active, constructivist learning. The history and development of drama as a teaching strategy is a result of valid use in various military, government and corporate business interests throughout the world. Drama engages the brain and physical body in realistic simulation exercises which have proven to be powerful and successful teaching and training techniques for a wide range of institutions, including NASA astronauts.

Although our students may not be NASA astronauts, drama does engage multi-dimensional learning styles including verbal-linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic, spatial, and logical and often incorporates music, or the music of language. In addition, drama has the ability to enhance reflection in students and can be used to create powerful social learning environments where students develop improvisational speaking and emotional intelligence awareness skills. Drama is an appealing teaching strategy which promotes cooperation, collaboration, self-control, goal-oriented learning as well as emotional intelligence skills. Drama is easily adaptable to a variety of text studies as demonstrated. Shy students are encouraged to speak by taking on another role. Students develop confidence in speaking from using language rhythms, expression, intonation,

pronunciation and choral work. With so many positive benefits, more teachers should be using drama to engage learners and maximize benefits!

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APPENDIX A

THEATRE SPORTS (Theatre- to watch. Sports- rules of play)

Students form teams to improvise a scene.

Teams: 5 - 6 people create a name for themselves
(i.e., The Angels; The Devils)

Scoring:

5= Take it on a National Tour!

4 = Excellent

3 = Entertaining

2 = Mildly interesting

1 = Get off the stage!

Scoring should be according to entertainment value, story line and acting ability.
Each team scores the other teams.

1 Minute Games - can be used for warm-ups, related to themes, or for speaking practice

- **I LOVE YOU SCENE**

A scene is performed where the phrase "I Love You" must be said at some time.

- **DEATH IN A MINUTE**

Title given. By the end of the minute, someone must be dead.

- **STATUES**

The players are molded into frozen positions by volunteers. The scene's start is inspired by the freeze. Upon their character's entry to the scene, each player must justify every aspect of their position. The players may stay frozen indefinitely if they desire.

- **SHARED STORY**

A team tells a story one word each at a time in strict rotation. The story can also be told one sentence each at a time in strict rotation.

- **EMOTIONS**

A title and two emotions are given. Every player entering the scene must enter with one of the given emotions and have swapped to the other emotion by the end of the scene.

APPENDIX B – Readers' Theatre

Ping-Pong

Swatted between bats
The celluloid ball
Leaps on unseen elastic
Skimming the taut net

Sliced
Screwed
Dabbed

Spun
Cut
Smashed

Point
Service

Ping
Pong
Bing
Bong

Pong
Ping
Bong
Bing

Point
Service

Ding
Dong
Ting
Tang

Dong
Ding
Tong
Tong

Point
Service

Angled
Cut
Floated
Driven

Slipped
Driven
Caressed
Hammered

Point
Service

Bit
Tip
Slip
Zip
Whip

Bat
Tap
Slap
Zap
Whap

Point
Service

Left
Right
Twist
Skids
Eighteen
Eighteen
Nineteen
Nineteen
Twenty

Yes
Yes
Yes
Yes
Seventeen
All
Eighteen
All
Nineteen

Point
Service

Forehand
Swerves
Rockets
Battered
Cracked

Backhand
Yes
Yes
Ah
Ah

**SMASHED
SMASHED
SMASHED**

GAME

Poems for Readers' Theatre from *Postcards from Planet Earth*

Gareth Owen Taylor, P. (1996). *Researching drama and arts education: paradigms and possibilities*. London: Falmer Press.