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Moving Interpretations: Using Drama-Based Arts Strategies to Deepen Learning about *The Diary of a Young Girl*

Three drama-based arts strategies enhanced middle grades teachers' and students' engagement with Anne Frank's diary and historical circumstances.

Few canonical texts have received as much attention for varied approaches of teaching as *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Assorted editions of Anne Frank's diary and the numerous texts that have been based on this work all provide particular perspectives on how Anne's words and life ought to be understood and what Anne's legacy is or should be. Examples abound that describe problematic ways in which *The Diary* has been framed in middle school English language arts (ELA) classrooms. In general, scholars of Holocaust studies mark two instructional tendencies that should be avoided, but have prevailed nonetheless. To give students a sense of the horrors of the Holocaust and to contextualize Anne's story, some teachers and texts present students with graphic images depicting shocking scenes from concentration camps. In some settings, simulations are used to encourage students to develop an appreciation of what it might have felt like to be in hiding, like Anne and her family were in the Annex (Abramovitch).

On the other end of the spectrum, some teachers and texts emphasize the hopeful messages embedded in Anne's words and use these messages to examine contemporary social issues on which Anne's words might shed light, which can lead some students to appreciate Anne's horrific context in overly sentimental and inappropriately positive ways (Spector and Jones). Despite the well-intentioned efforts of some ELA teachers and textbooks to situate Anne's diary during this disturbing historical period, students may leave such

instructional engagements with broad misconceptions about Anne's life and narrative and the Holocaust (Juzwik). Because *The Diary* represents for many students the first and perhaps only instructional encounter with the Holocaust, the consequences for misrepresenting Anne's words and life are too severe to overlook (Magilow and Silverman). Instruction about the Anne Frank narrative demands the most ambitious of curricular approaches.

In this article, we describe how an embodied arts-based approach to teaching the story of Anne Frank enhanced eighth graders' experiences in three middle school classrooms. We begin by framing the theories that guide our perspectives on embodiment and drama-infused instruction to promote literacy learning. We follow this theoretical framing with an overview of the Anne Frank: Bearing Witness project from which these samples were derived. Next, we offer three drama-based strategies to highlight the ways in which *movement* engaged students' minds and bodies: using an instructional tool called the cordel, inviting students to sculpt each other's bodies to better understand the meaning of the Anne Frank diary, and dramatizing a poetic text from the historical period to deepen a growing empathetic stance. By engaging in these and other arts-based strategies, eighth graders and their teachers took intellectual risks and produced moving interpretations of the Anne Frank narrative and associated paired texts. The strategies created "thick air" around the topic and elevated the likelihood of eighth graders committing themselves to the work. They promoted students' empathetic

perspective taking and embodied meaning making. We encourage ELA teachers to consider how these arts-based strategies could enhance their teaching of Anne Frank's diary and other challenging and meaningful texts.

Embodiment and Drama-Based Literacy Instruction

We emphasize in this article the integral role of the body as text and tool in fostering literacy learning. "Embodiment . . . describes teaching and learning in acknowledgement of our bodies as whole experiential beings in motion, both inscribed and inscribing subjectivities" (Perry and Medina 63). Embodiment in the ELA classroom reimagines what it means to comprehend and compose texts by engaging learners—in body and in mind—in processes of transmediation, what Marjorie Siegel characterizes as the recasting of meanings across sign systems. Eighth-grade learners used images, gestures, and movement to interpret texts related to the Anne Frank narrative. They generated insights that were likely not available using only verbal language. Such interpretive engagements with texts have the potential to promote enduring understandings, questions, and perspectives.

Drama-based instructional strategies provide a space in which such transmediation and embodiment may flourish to promote learning within ELA classrooms. Learning is not just acquiring information and committing it to memory; "[l]earners must *do* something with what they are finding out from teachers or peers, not merely listen or speak" (Edmiston 2011; italics in original). When students *do*, they "frame" their performance from a particular perspective, and this positioning informs their exploration and authorship of the content. Furthermore, drama-based activities help to shape embodied reflection and promote affective responses. Drama-based approaches to textual interpretations mobilize the body as a tool for meaning making, which in turn establishes itself as a text to be interpreted by the audience who hears, sees, feels, and reads the bodies of performers to transmediate understandings. As Christine Woodcock and Phyllis Hakeem synthesize, "[W]e learn more effectively when we learn in an emotional, embodied manner" (17).

Anne Frank: Bearing Witness

Teachers and students in four eighth-grade classrooms (one in each of four middle schools) participated in Anne Frank: Bearing Witness, a professional development and curriculum creation project anchored in the Performance Cycle (Landay and Wootton). The Performance Cycle is a flexible, arts-based and drama-infused instructional framework for teaching and learning across content areas that includes six components: building community, entering text, comprehending text, creating text, rehearsing/revising text, and performing text. At the center of the cyclical framework is teachers' and learners' reflection. Each teacher developed his or her own unit of study rooted in an enduring question related to the Anne Frank narrative (using all or parts of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* [Frank] or *The Diary of Anne Frank* [Goodrich and Hackett] and other texts). Although the units varied in ways drama and other arts techniques were incorporated into the Performance Cycle, three arts-based instructional strategies portray the literacy learning that took place in three of the four schools.

The Cordel as a Site for Entering Text

Missy, the drama teacher at Williams Middle School, incorporated the cordel strategy into her teaching throughout the Performance Cycle. The concept of the cordel originated in northeastern Brazil. Cordels display stories and poems on street corners and market places (i.e., *Literatura de Cordel*, or "string literature"). Missy tied a cord between two poles along one wall in her classroom, and just as it functions for Brazilian artists, Missy invited students to engage with various texts suspended on it. At different times she posted excerpts from Anne's diary, expository texts that related to the context of the Holocaust, black-and-white photographs from the period, students' visual artwork, and, eventually, plans for the performance that concluded the study. Missy's Anne Frank unit posed an essential question: What is your humanity footprint? The cordel became the center of the study.

To introduce the unit and the time period, Missy invited students to gather in front of the cordel to carefully examine the contents of each hanging text and the photo of Anne Frank projected

on the interactive whiteboard behind it. Students approached the cordel at first with curiosity and verbosity. Within the next few minutes, however, conversations died down as students took in the messages of the black-and-white photos and read excerpts from *The Diary* (see Figure 1). With their arms crossed or hands in pockets and their feet planted firmly, they engaged as a group with the experiences of those who lived during one of the most disturbing periods in the history of humanity. Missy allowed students as much time as they needed to absorb the information in front of them. Several minutes passed, and with their eyes still focused on the cordel, students slowly began to move from one artifact to another, carefully reading both the visual and print texts. Sometimes they leaned forward to get a closer look at a small detail or moved back to allow space for someone else to view the image. Their bodies worked in harmony, keenly aware of each other, as they positioned themselves along the cordel in a way that allowed everyone to be included in a shared experience. It was as if

together they could better encounter and interrogate both the horrific realities and hopeful reflections depicted on the papers in front of them.

In a focus-group interview reflection on how they learned using arts-based instructional strategies, one student noted how focused they were and how interested they were in the topic as they explored the cordel for the first time: “[P]eople were actually reading the cordel, and paying attention to what the pieces on it actually said. Instead of just skimming, they are intently reading so they can get a good understanding of the topic.” Another student wrote, “Everyone’s heads are looking at the pieces because it’s so drawing. No one here is laughing or smiling. [There is] a sense of community reading about something so serious together—as one.”

Even though it was a still and solemn experience for students, the slow and deliberate movement involved in this activity and the proximity of bodies to each other and the text, as well as the invisible bonding that occurred during the close examination of the artifacts, immersed students in

FIGURE 1. Students stand solemnly, in close proximity to each other, and as one unit in front of the cordel. (Photo by Kathryn F. Whitmore.)



The Diary of a Young Girl. Their physical interactions with texts initiated students' positions toward empathy with Anne and others.

Sculptures as Response to Anne's Diary

Body movement also contributed to the students' collaborations with each other in every classroom. However, across town from Williams Middle School at All Saints Catholic School, neither George nor most of his eighth-grade religion students had used drama to mediate their understanding of texts previous to this project. George is a knowledgeable teacher about the Holocaust and brought years of teaching similar content to the study. He selected an ambitious enduring question for his unit: As we bear witness to a world in which people are marginalized, forgotten, and persecuted, what obligations to social justice does our faith place on us?

To provide support for the risk taking required to try drama for the first time, a teaching artist named Shea assisted George in implementing drama-based activities within his curriculum. A sculpting activity, in which students used their bodies to respond to excerpts from Anne Frank's diary and their own journaling, exemplifies the types of movement that became significant as a means for this class to enter a

poetic text, explore its meaning in nonlinguistic ways, and deepen an empathetic stance.

One morning, students were seated in a circle on the outskirts of the room; all desks had been moved aside to create a space in which movement could occur. George opened the class by reminding students that their goals for the unit were learning to bear witness as members of a faith community and exploring the theme of social justice; he gave students a moment of silence to "get into that frame

of mind" before beginning the activity. George configured students into two groups. He explained that they would use their emotions in response to spoken reflections, which interwove excerpts from

students' journals with Anne's actual diary. "Sculpting a shape with their bodies," he said, would allow them to "have that courage to be bent by how you feel." One group would perform by creating sculptures as meanings for texts being read, which would allow the other group to become an audience, observe, and respond.

Next, Shea took up the role of facilitator and gave students the authoritative role of sculptors of classmates. She invited students to form an inner circle, facing outward, and an outer circle, facing inward. She directed the outer circle to be sculptors, creating the ideas in their heads using their "clay" (i.e., their inner-circle partners). Shea provided the students with three options to sculpt another person. First, the sculptor could show the clay using his or her own body, so that the student clay could mirror a sculptor. The second option was for the sculptor to ask permission to touch the partner and shape the clay into the sculptor's idea. The third option Shea provided was for the sculptor to act as puppeteer, using imaginary strings to move her or his clay into different positions. Finally, Shea directed the students to use movement, and not words, to mold their clay, as this was the focus of the activity.

The students began with their hands neutrally at their sides as Shea read a passage:

Birthdays aren't what they used to be. When I was younger, I was excited for presents and cake but not so much anymore. I guess I'm growing up. I looked around the room at my friends after they sang "Happy Birthday," and I thought this might be the last time we do this, because we are all going away soon.

The students mirrored with, or moved, their partners throughout the reading of the passage, which Shea read aloud multiple times, working with their clay to capture its essence. Figure 2 depicts a sculptor, Anna, as she worked with her clay, Derek. She chose to act first as puppeteer, guiding Derek's movements into her responding image. As Shea read the passage, Anna used her "strings" to guide one finger up into a thinking position against Derek's temple; she changed this to a hand covering his eyes, and indicated that he should project his gaze downward, as if in sadness. Anna then moved into mirroring and light touch, using her own feet to show Derek that he should take a wider stance.

A sculpting activity, in which students used their bodies to respond to excerpts from Anne Frank's diary and their own journaling, exemplifies the types of movement that became significant as a means for this class to enter a poetic text, explore its meaning in nonlinguistic ways, and deepen an empathetic stance.

FIGURE 2. Students sculpt responses to lines from Anne's diary and their own journal writings. (Photo by James S. Chisholm.)



She gestured her own hand outward, shown mid-process in the image, which Derek then mirrored in response. This froze Derek into a position of reaching out toward something that was already gone.

As the clay froze, Shea directed the sculptors and the audience to move around the circle and examine each of the sculptures, inviting the audience to make meaning from the sculptor's interpretations as well. The sculptors and audience made a complete round of the circle before taking their seats once more. Shea asked the students to respond to what they saw, remarking that she noticed sculptors created quite figurative responses toward a literal statement. Jessica agreed, noting that Derek, and some of the other clay figures, were covering their eyes as if they "didn't recognize the birthdays anymore." As the activity repeated several times, students rotated roles as sculptors, clay, and audience members, with Shea reading a new passage for each group. Afterward, the students debriefed the sculpture experience. Derek, the clay in Figure 2, explained, "As the sculptor was moving my arms I could feel what she was thinking and how she wanted it to be."

Rehearsal and Performance as Meaning Making

In two of the middle schools, students used their bodies and movement to connect with each other and Anne's circumstances through culminating

performances in front of peers and faculty. At Daybreak Middle School, which is a public arts magnet school, the enduring question was: Why is it important to study the Holocaust? As developed by Jennifer, the teacher in this classroom, the unit had a strong focus on empathy as related to Anne Frank. It culminated with a multimedia production that demonstrated students' learning. The eighth-grade drama students designed, wrote, and rehearsed the production with their teachers. Nellie, Oscar, Dana, and Kristin selected from the documents on the cordel a quotation

from Martin Niemöller, a Protestant pastor whose opposition toward the Nazi regime led him to spend seven years in concentration camps. The quotation begins, "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist." The text continues by repeating these lines but substituting the names of various groups targeted by the Nazis (namely, Trade Unionists and Jews). The quotation ends with the speaker's stark realization when "they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Immediately upon selecting this text as their responsibility to integrate into the class's performance, the group brainstormed ways to convey the meaning of Niemöller's words. After reading the quotation, they decided to have Oscar, Dana, and Kristin recite the lines that identified the Socialists, Trade Unionists, and Jews, respectively. After each student recited her or his respective lines, Nellie placed her hands on the shoulders of each student and guided her or him toward the floor. Students smiled and laughed and giggled through the entire first rehearsed scene, at the end of which Nellie uttered the chilling lines, "And there was no one left to speak for me," falling backward to the embrace of her classmates.

The students rehearsed and revised this scene several times. With each rehearsal, students became increasingly serious as they interrogated the text more deeply with each interpretation. In the

FIGURE 3. Nellie performs the line, “And then there was no one left to speak for me.”
(Photo by James S. Chisholm.)



third rehearsal of their performance, students embodied each element of the quotation stone-faced, and Nellie finished the performance by falling back without anyone being there to break her fall. Before their final performance in front of the entire eighth grade and invited community guests, including one Holocaust survivor who had shared his story with students, the group revised Nellie’s final move one more time. Instead of falling down when there was “no one left to speak for me,” Nellie dropped to her knees, raised her hands in the air, and stared directly out at the audience, inviting viewers to consider their own empathetic stances (see Figure 3). As students embodied meanings in the Niemöller text, they transformed their interpretations and stances toward the content by reading the message conveyed by the combination of the language of the text and the particular way that Nellie’s performance recast that message gesturally. Comparable to revision in the writing process, each iteration of the students’ movements pushed the meaning of their multimodal and highly communicative message.

Engagement, Embodiment, and Empathy

Movement offered the means for teachers and students to enter and explore the Holocaust and the Anne Frank narrative during this project. From the still bodies that first encountered the texts at the face of the cordel, to the deliberate shaping of “clay” bodies into positions of meaning, to the dramatic performance of a chilling poetic text, movement

supported teachers and students to take intellectual risks, engage with challenging historical texts and ideas, and take empathetic positions in response to the narrative.


Entering the narrative of Anne Frank with the cordel laid the groundwork for risk-taking and appreciating the historical context. Responding to Anne’s words using nonlinguistic modes freed the students from the constraints of language—they were able to interpret the diary and convey the meaning they made of it through positioning their bodies as clay. Embodying poetic texts that were paired with the Anne Frank narrative helped students to rehearse and revise meanings. Throughout the study, students moved and used their bodies to mediate their learning about the complexity of Anne’s historical and emotional experience and relied on each other to interpret the texts they were reading.

ELA teachers can borrow from and extend these arts-based strategies to help students engage more deeply in many types of challenging texts. The following are examples:

- Reorganize the classroom space to create opportunities for students’ bodies to be close to one another. Proximity encourages students to react and respond to challenging texts together.
- Invite students to individually position their bodies in statues or create scenes in small groups (called tableaux) to help them transact actively with passages and poems. These activities encourage readers to “step into the

shoes” of characters, imagine literary scenes, and feel the essence of significant events.

- Provide time and opportunity for students to reflect on their embodied learning experiences and to talk with one another about how movement contributed to their growing understanding. The students in the Anne Frank: Bearing Witness project expressed new thinking as a result of being the “actors” and being the “audience” for the drama-based activities they shared.

Learning experiences like those described in this article promote the processes of transmediation whereby students generate new insights into the texts they read by recasting their meanings across visual, linguistic, and gestural sign systems. Such risk-taking paid off for the teachers and students in these classrooms as they positioned Anne Frank with neither a distancing othering nor a trivializing sentimentality, but with an authentic empathy. In these cases, the arts enhanced literacy learning by propelling students into deep reflections and moving interpretations of a text and context that brought into focus the relevance and power of Anne’s diary in today’s ELA classrooms. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

After reading *Beloved* or another suitable novel, students review some of the critical elements of drama, focusing on differences between narrative and dramatic texts, including point of view. They discuss the role of conflict in the novel and work in small groups to search the novel for a passage they can adapt into a ten-minute play. Students write their play adaptation in writers workshop sessions, focusing on character, setting, conflict, and resolution. When the play draft is complete, students review and revise it, then rehearse and present their play to the class. As the plays are performed, students use a rubric to peer-review each group’s work. Because students are responding to a novel with significant internal dialogue and conflict, they are called on to use both analytical and creative skills as they create the adaptation, rather than simply cutting and pasting dialogue. <http://bit.ly/1BKGC4p>