

## **Report on research into teaching history through drama conducted at Homerton College Cambridge, England.**

**Paul Goalen**

The research described in this paper was carried out with the support of two small research grants provided by Homerton College between 1992 and 1994. Its aim was to increase our understanding of how educational drama can support the development of children's historical thinking and to strengthen the arguments for including educational drama in the repertoire of teaching strategies adopted by school teachers. The research, however, was conducted in the context of the introduction of the National Curriculum for history in England and Wales which has deskilled teachers who had previously enjoyed professional control over syllabus construction for 5-14 year olds, but who have retained the right to determine how the centrally planned curriculum should be taught. It is to this national context that I will turn to first in order to suggest that the history through drama movement remains strong despite the pressures of national curriculum change.

### **The context: history teachers and the National Curriculum**

The introduction of a National Curriculum for history posed significant problems for heads of history departments in secondary schools and history coordinators in primary schools who were faced with implementing what was widely recognised to be an overcrowded syllabus. The government was eventually to recognise the problem of content overload and appointed Sir Ron Dearing to review the National Curriculum in all subjects, a review which led to revised statutory orders coming into force in September 1995; but in the meantime, teachers had been required to implement the 1991 syllabus, and Phillips (1993) reported that 90% of Key Stage 3 teachers in his sample felt that there was insufficient time for varied teaching and learning activities.<sup>1</sup> Teachers were in effect experiencing the double blow of loss of autonomy in terms of control over syllabus construction, and demotivation caused by content overload:

'My fear is that the amount of content will necessitate 'teacher driven' delivery rather than pupil centred tasks.' (Teacher quoted by Phillips, 1991:23)

On first inspection therefore, the National Curriculum posed a serious challenge to child-centred learning, and the worries of teachers in this area had been fed by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pupils studying at Key Stage 3 are between the ages of 11 and 14 years old, and will be in one of National Curriculum Years 7, 8 or 9.

success of the campaign to have historical knowledge of British history placed at the centre of the new curriculum, and the belief, widely held by the Right, that the promotion of a 'national' identity could be protected by a syllabus that concentrated on the facts of British history which could be delivered most effectively through traditional teaching methods (McKiernan, 1993). However, recent research suggests that as teachers became used to operating within the framework of the National Curriculum, they became adept at interpreting it (Bage, 1994) and so developing a sense of ownership over it. Indeed, my own data derived from interviews with heads of history in 1/4 of a county's state secondary schools<sup>2</sup> suggest that while many teachers did indeed experience a sense of loss and pain during the initial period of implementing the new curriculum, they nevertheless clung on to their inner core of beliefs concerning teaching styles (particularly the use of drama about which they were being interviewed) and put such methods back into practice as soon as they felt they were in control of and had internalised the new curriculum (Goalen, 1995).

One of the most striking features of the interviews I conducted with heads of history was the strength of feeling shown by heads of department who had tenaciously held onto their beliefs and values concerning the efficacy of drama as a pedagogy appropriate to the teaching of history through the torrid experience of implementing the centrally planned National Curriculum. Their commitment was strongly held: indeed, one head of department was prepared to break the letter of the law, as interpreted by him, by dropping some content in order to continue to teach as he saw fit; another head of department informed her school governing body, 'I can not deliver all this and retain (effective) teaching and learning styles.' My interviewees also provided evidence on the extent to which they were practising the use of drama to teach history in the summer of 1994: this varied from two or three topics in Year 7 and 8 taught by one member of a department in one school, to at least one topic a term in Years 7, 8 and 9 for all classes plus some occasional use in Years 10 and 11 in another institution. Finally, these teachers justified their use of this particular pedagogic operation in terms of the social and educational objectives which they believed drama helped to foster. The range of objectives which, according to my sample of heads of history, drama teaching strategies help to develop may be summarised as follows:

- the acquisition of historical knowledge;
- the development of historical skills, including empathy and interpretations of the past;

---

<sup>2</sup> A county is a local administrative area. The heads of history interviewed were known by the Local Education Authority (LEA) of one county to be using drama to teach history.

- the development of an appreciation of history through the high levels of enjoyment and engagement experienced through drama;
- the promotion of equal opportunities and the development of individual self esteem. (Goalen, 1995)

The new context within which history teachers have been operating since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1991 has not therefore eroded their commitment to the use of educational drama, although it may have initially reduced the frequency with which it was used by some practitioners and have sapped the energy to experiment with different forms of learning. Indeed, one of my interviewees made the important point that the erosion of Local Education Authority support structures since the 1988 Education Reform Act and the growth of the Grant Maintained sector (schools centrally funded and exempt from local authority influences) have combined to reduce the frequency of meetings for history teachers thus placing new obstacles in the way of the dissemination of good practice.

### **The effectiveness of drama as a pedagogy for history teachers**

In this context it became important to strengthen the arguments then being employed to justify the use of educational drama in the teaching of history by demonstrating through research that it is an effective pedagogy in terms of developing children's historical thinking. Thus, in some earlier research with my colleague Lesley Hendy from Homerton's Drama Department, we sought to show through classroom based research how using drama to teach history in school without props or costume can help develop children's historical thinking to a significant degree (Goalen and Hendy, 1993). We approached this through teaching a Key Stage 2<sup>3</sup> study unit on Aztec history to a Year 5 class in a city primary school and by testing both our class and a comparable parallel group in the same school to see if the drama teaching made any difference. The results of our pre-test and post-test (Figure 1) were at first sight disappointing in that the difference between the scores of the experimental groups' pre-test and post-test were not statistically significant when taken as a whole; yet when we isolated the middle 60% of our cohort and applied the one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test, we found that the improvement of the experimental group over the control children was statistically significant at the 5% level for the middle 60% of the ability range.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Key Stage 2 encompasses National Curriculum Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 for 7-11 year old children.

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of the one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test, see Appendix 3, Goalen and Hendy (1993).

As well as this quantitative analysis, we were also researching qualitatively to discover what effect our teaching methods might be having on the development of children's historical thinking. One of our most striking findings was that the discussion our drama provoked seemed to help our pupils reach much higher levels of attainment than would normally be expected of a Year 5 class. The National Curriculum had introduced an assessment structure with ten levels of attainment and children at Key Stage 2 were meant to operate between levels two and five; yet some of our 9-10 year old pupils were able to reach levels six to eight in the levels of attainment, levels which according to government advisers were more appropriate for 14-16 year olds (TGAT, 1988, para. 108; DES, 1991a, para. 22).

An example of this was contained within our discussion of Moctezuma's death which took place after four groups had acted out four different versions of the scene based on four different sources we had given the children. We asked the children why there were different interpretations of Moctezuma's death:

- Child 1* Its because there were four different groups and they each had their own opinion.  
*Paul* That's a very good reason because there are four different groups... There's probably a second reason though too.  
*Child 2* No one actually saw what happened.

Herein lies much of what children need to know about interpretations in history: *Child 1* is on the way to suggesting that different groups may form different interpretations because of their selection of evidence (AT2 levels 6 and 8);<sup>5</sup> while *Child 2* is pointing out that deficiencies in evidence may lead to different interpretations of the past (AT2 Level 4).<sup>6</sup> We then discussed the issue of motive and in whose interest it was to pin the blame on either Cortes or the Aztecs for Moctezuma's death:

- Paul* ...Who might have wanted us to believe that Cortes killed Moctezuma?  
*Child 3* The Spaniards because they wanted him to be great.  
*Child 4* Cortes might have done it, if he was paid for it; if someone wanted him dead...  
*Child 5* The Aztecs because they wanted Cortes to go to prison.  
*Child 6* In all the different four groups it was Cortes who sent Moctezuma up so it was actually his fault.  
*Child 7* The Aztecs because they wouldn't want people to think that they killed Moctezuma.

---

<sup>5</sup>DES (1991b) defined AT2 Level 6 as 'demonstrate how historical interpretations depend on the selection of sources'. AT2 Level 8 was defined as, 'show how attitudes and circumstances can influence an individual's interpretation of historical events or developments.'

<sup>6</sup> AT2 Level 4: "show an understanding that deficiencies in evidence may lead to different interpretations of the past' DES (1991b:7)

- Paul* So in whose interests is it to put the blame on the Aztecs?  
Who might have wanted us to believe that it was the Aztecs  
who threw the stones that killed Moctezuma?
- Child 8* Cortes because he doesn't want the blame.
- Child 9* The Aztecs would want to put the blame on Cortes because  
they would be afraid that the gods might be angry with  
them.

In this way, these children were beginning to make judgements about the reliability and value of historical sources by reference to the circumstances in which they were produced (AT3, Level 7).<sup>7</sup> Such high level thinking from Year 5 children is a long way from the learning of facts by rote envisaged by some when the National Curriculum was introduced, and suggested to us that drama was providing a very favourable context for the development of children's historical thinking, a context which would merit further investigation and definition through research.

### **Defining the context: the relationship between educational drama and children's historical thinking.**

Effective teaching and learning depends in part on the skill of the teacher in constructing a *context* that will support learning. The definition of that context was what concerned us in a second piece of classroom research in 1994 in which we took a framing model for educational drama developed by Dorothy Heathcote (1982) and adapted it to help history teachers using educational drama strategies to teach National Curriculum history. What we found was that educational drama provides the teacher with situations that help to promote discussion and to clarify ideas and points of view, whilst also enabling teachers to lead children to a point where they can take on the role of a historian as a commentator on, and critic of, evidence and interpretations (Goalen and Hendy, 1995).

Our adaptation of the Heathcote model is reproduced here as Figure 2. The model casts the pupils as researchers and illustrates five ways in which distance framing enables history teachers to refocus an inquiry according to the frame chosen. Each frame has a clearly defined purpose and opens up the possibility of using a wider range of educational drama strategies than many history teachers may currently be familiar with. Although not strictly hierarchical, the 'questioner' and 'clarifier' frames are the essential building blocks on which all pupil research must be based in order to reach the higher level skills encapsulated in the other three frames. Some examples of pupils reaching the higher order skills may occur when the children are out of role and simply discussing the history they have been enacting, but we also found it possible to reach

---

<sup>7</sup> AT3 Level 7 was defined as, 'make judgements about the reliability and value of historical sources by reference to the circumstances in which they were produced.'

some of these higher level skills through practising educational drama as the following example of our *Collective Role Play* on Cromwell's record in Ireland illustrates:

- Lesley* Can I ask Cromwell a question? Can I ask whether you think that if you make a promise you've got to keep it? Would you say that's a rule you live by?
- Pb.1* Yes
- Lesley* Well in that case why did you break that promise to the people of Drogheda?
- Pb.1* We never even made a promise. What evidence have you got that we made a promise?
- Pb.2* You did. You gave them quarter (if they laid down their arms). That's a kind of promise isn't it.
- Pb.1* Yes, but where does that promise come from? Where have you got evidence for that?
- Pb.2* Clarendon.
- Pb.1* Yea, but he got defeated so he's going to try to make up some...
- Pg.1* He's biased anyway.
- Pg.2* You're biased as well.
- Pb.1* And we don't trust you.
- Pb.2* Yes, but why did you break your promise?
- Chorus* We didn't make a promise! You can't break a promise if you didn't make one.\

Here then we have children working as 'critical historians', challenging one interpretation of Cromwell's record in Ireland by questioning the reliability of the evidence being used in his defence (AT3 Level 7).<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Having defined the *context* that educational drama strategies provide for teaching history, it is now possible to provide teachers not just with a reasoned set of arguments for using drama to teach history, but also with a means of describing how educational drama can develop historical understanding in children by providing teachers and pupils with contexts conducive to cognitive development. Nevertheless, further research may be needed to test and refine the model in practice, and to determine those situations where drama is useful and should be encouraged, and those situations where educational drama would not necessarily be the most efficient and effective means of exploring the subject. Furthermore, it would also be helpful to be able to say more about the way in which this kind of active learning can promote children's historical writing since in the final analysis a pedagogy like educational drama may well be judged by reluctant converts on its potential to enhance children's performance in written examinations.

---

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 7 above for a definition of AT3 Level 7.

## References

- Bage, G (1994) History at KS1 and KS2: questions of teaching, planning, assessment and progression. *The Curriculum Journal* v4 n2 p269-282
- DES (1991a) *Circular No 4/91 The Education Reform Act 1988: National Curriculum Section 4 order History*. London: DES.
- DES (1991b) *History in the National Curriculum (England)* London: HMSO
- Goalen, P (1995) 'Twenty years of history through drama' *The Curriculum Journal* v.6 n.1.
- Goalen, P & Hendy, L (1993) 'It's not just fun, it works! Developing children's historical thinking through drama' *The Curriculum Journal* v.4 n.3 p363-384
- Goalen, P & Hendy, L (1994) 'History through drama: the development of 'distance framing' for the purposes of historical inquiry' *Curriculum* v.15, n.3
- McKiernan, D (1993) History in a national curriculum: imagining the nation at the end of the 20th century. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* v25, n1, 33-51
- Phillips, R (1991) National Curriculum history and teacher autonomy: the major challenge *Teaching History* n65 p21-4
- Phillips, R (1993) Change and continuity: some reflections on the first year's implementation of KS3 history in the National Curriculum *Teaching History* n70.
- TGAT (Task Group on Assessment and Testing) (1988) *A Report*. London: DES.

Figure 1

<b>Control Group</b>			<b>Experimental Group</b>		
Pre- test %	Post-test %	Difference	Pre-test %	Post-test %	Difference
14	38	(+24)	16	32	(+16)
23	41	(+18)	22	28	(+ 6)
26	36	(+10)	24	35	(+11)
27	34	(+7)	27	35	(+8)
28	31	(+3)	29	39	(+10)
29	48	(+19)	31	27	(- 4)
30	45	(+15)	31	40	(+9)
38	48	(+10)	31	34	(+3)
40	39	(- 1)	32	44	(+12)
41	45	(+4)	36	54	(+18)
43	42	(- 1)	38	45	(+7)
43	51	(+8)	38	55	(+17)
44	42	(- 2)	40	61	(+21)
44	46	(+2)	40	55	(+15)
46	59	(+13)	40	42	(+ 2)
48	41	(- 7)	43	42	(- 1)
51	44	(- 7)	43	69	(+26)
53	70	(+17)	43	58	(+15)
61	53	(- 8)	44	61	(+17)
63	66	(+ 3)	44	67	(+23)
		Average increase: 6.35%	44	52	(+ 8)
			45	57	(+12)
			46	41	(- 5)
			47	59	(+12)
			53	63	(+10)
			54	58	(+ 4)
			55	52	(- 3)
			56	68	(+12)
			63	68	(+5)
					Average increase: 9.86%



Figure 2

**History Distancing Frames with Drama Strategies and Examples of Use**

PUPILS RESEARCHERS	Frames	Drama Strategies	Examples of Use
<p><b>Questioner:</b> the event is reconstructed because it helps to raise questions and provoke discussion</p>	<p>Still Image Whole group-in-role Small group work Teacher-in-role Prepared scenes Mimed activities</p>	<p>Using a series of still images or freeze frames, small groups reconstructed an aspect of Charles I's Eleven Year's Tyranny</p>	
<p><b>Clarifier:</b> the ideas / views of the people in the event are played in order to clarify the ideas and interpretations</p>	<p>Whole group-in-role Small group work Teacher-in-role Collective role-play Tunnel of conscience</p>	<p>Through small group work, pupils reconstructed the black immigrant's view of finding accommodation and getting a job</p>	
<p><b>Alternating viewpoint:</b> the reconstructed event is played from different points of view to question different interpretations</p>	<p>Whole group-in-role Small group work Teacher-in-role Prepared scenes Thought tracking</p>	<p>The class was divided into two lines representing the Royalists and the Parliamentarians. Four pupils are chosen to walk through the tunnel. As they pass, each side must give reasons why the four undecided should join their side. Two pupils reconstruct the meeting between immigrant and factory manager. Two other pupils play their thoughts revealing the reasons for their utterances.</p>	
<p><b>Commentator:</b> a commentary is provided to give reasons why the event might have occurred and help make a judgement based on evidence</p>	<p>Whole group-in-role Small group work Thoughts in the head Hot-seating Ghosts</p>	<p>Whole group-in-role as MPs reconstruct two versions of the arrest of the five MPs by Charles I. Teacher describes the events as if talking to a friend or as if reporting to the king. Teacher-in-role as reporter. Small groups representing families during the Great Depression show the different viewpoints of the employed and unemployed.</p>	
<p><b>Critical historian:</b> evidence and interpretations are challenged to arrive at an informed understanding of the event</p>	<p>Mantle of the expert Teacher-in-role Documentary</p>	<p>Individually or in pairs, pupils come as ghosts from Cromwell's past to his deathbed and give reasons for liking or not liking him. In small groups, pupils make a series of photographs to show what happened on the Jarrow march. Pupils divided into three groups at a history seminar: one group puts forward the pro-martyr theory, another the pro-traitor theory, whilst a third acts as questioners. In groups, pupils develop a documentary about immigration from different viewpoints.</p>	