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Forging new realities: using drama conventions and poetry to explore the issue of terrorism

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the possibilities for restorying the self through drama conventions using narrative poetry as a stimulus. Using the poem “The Terrorist, He’s Watching” by Wislawa Szymborska to engage with drama conventions, we illustrate how educators might support young and marginalised people to participate in the process of restorying. In doing so, we argue for the importance of using poetry and drama to create meta-narratives of discourse which empower participants to restory themselves into the dominant forms of narrative through creative exploration. Szymborska’s poem has been chosen as a stimulus due to poet’s use of the multiple perspectives and roles, in different times and places, which enable people to reshape and reimagine their identity and explore dominant narratives about terrorism. The authors intend to follow this conceptual piece with an empirical study.

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Introduction: the power of storytelling

Forge new realities, free our earth

Of distorting shadows cast by old

And modern necromancers (Soyinka 1972, 7)

Young and marginalised people are increasingly finding ways to “resist exclusionary discourses and practices” (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2018, 345) and reshape dominant forms of discourse and media. Agents who can be categorised as marginal or non-dominant, such as LGBTQIA communities, disabled people and ethnic minorities, have always been active in creating narratives and telling their own stories (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2018). One of the most prevalent and productive practices which marginalised groups and individuals employ in the struggle to articulate their identity against dominant narratives is the art and craft of storytelling (Barton and Booth 1990). In becoming conscious of the process of writing stories, Assia Djebar reflects on being “struck by the realisation that we were all marginal participants, actors on the sidelines” (1999, 170). In expressing the singular nature of their selfhood through forms of narrative discourse,

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Note: All named and italicised drama conventions in this paper are drawn from Neelands and Goode (2015).

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young and marginalised people can participate in concepts and practices of universal significance and complex human experience (McGregor, Tate, and Robinson 1977). As Alexievich (2015, 7) makes clear, “In telling a story, humans create, they wrestle time like a sculptor does marble. They are actors and creators”.

Storying and critical restorying

Storying is necessarily identified with power in terms of the narrator, the mode of narration and the narrative conditions (Adichie 2009). If people are presented with a “single story”, the possibilities for the imagination are restricted. One means of combating the predominance of the single story is to employ the practice of restorying. Restorying is a process by which narratives are refashioned to convey the heterogeneous diversity of voices which exist in any given society, particularly those which attempt to “silence subaltern voices” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016, 314). If educators attempt to teach a singular “truth” then the story belongs to those with power (the teacher, the exam board, the education department, the government) and not the young and marginalised people (Freire 1998).

When marginalised voices restory and reshape dominant narratives, the diversity of identities and perspectives helps to empower these “actors and creators” and provide them with a critical and participatory role in the world. Restorying can recover “experiences that are often missing in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016, 313). In addition, restorying allows marginal and discarded voices to “forge new realities” (Soyinka 1972, 7) to empower agents and provide them with a critical framework by which they can challenge the dominant narrative and reconstruct their world. Janks (2014, 355) proposes a similar undertaking of restorying with her programme of critical literacy, whereby “the act of redesigning enables ‘readers to resist textual positioning’ in the ‘process of creating a world’”. Vasquez (2017, 5) describes this process as “imagining thoughtful ways of thinking about reconstructing and redesigning texts, images, and practices to convey different and more socially just and equitable messages and ways of being that have real-life effects and real-world impact”. For Janks (2000, 178), both diversity from and access to dominant narratives is an integral part of critical literacy as it involves providing “access to dominant languages, literacies and genres while simultaneously using diversity”. Educators can play a decisive role in enabling young and marginalised people to reach an understanding of the challenging diversity of human experience. If pedagogical practices fail to engage young people in this way, then, as Chomsky (1991) notes, they will always be at the mercy of the media. Therefore, educators should support young and marginalised people as they critically navigate their emotional and rational responses when engaging with serious and controversial issues.

Terrorism

The topic of terrorism is an important and contentious issue which is predominant in most forms of mainstream media. Quartermaine (2011, 3) defines terrorism as “violent acts that have affected a civilian population”, and suggests that pupils are likely to have gained their knowledge about terrorism from television reports, newspapers or online news

(2011, 3). Altheide (2007, 207) notes that “the role of the mass media in promoting fear has become more pronounced since the United States “discovered’ international terrorism on 11 September 2001”.

As mainstream media outlets tend to dominate discourse on terrorism, students can learn to deal with and take ownership of the issues by restorying themselves into the narrative in a way that creates contextual and more relevant alternatives to dominant perspectives. However, as Pinar Alakoc (2019) points out, “Despite its popularity among students, terrorism is a sensitive and emotive topic that is difficult to learn, and challenging to teach”. This is because it “is a subject where interactive methods cannot easily be incorporated” (Pinar Alakoc 2019, 218). We argue here that drama conventions can offer an interactive pedagogical approach to explore relevant issues like terrorism.

Drama conventions

Drama conventions are focusing devices that suspend the relationships between people, place and time, and are effective ways for allowing marginalised people to access and restory dominant narratives (Neelands and Goode 2015). By fusing the roles of spectator and actor, they enable participants to act “as if” they were another person in a different place and time. Drama conventions are an “educative form of entertainment that responds to a basic human need to interpret and express the world through symbolic form” (Neelands and Goode 2015, 4). The symbolic form enables participants to create stories and investigate themes relevant to the context of the “here and now” lived experience, and are always live, transient and ephemeral (Clark et al. 1997). This creates a form of active inquiry which enables the participants to problem solve (Edminson 2014). An active inquiry mode uses drama to engage with complex human experience and discover questions and themes relevant to the participants’ needs. In doing so, it enables young people to interpret and express themselves and develop their understanding of complex human issues through the unfolding narrative. As such, drama conventions support the problem-posing model offered by Freire (1998, 64) where students are subjects who develop “their own power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves”. In this way, drama conventions offer young and marginalised people access to critically participate in exclusionary and highly politicised topics such as terrorism without ever accruing the consequences of their actions in the real world (Goode 2014).

Drama conventions have the virtue of creating an appropriate level of distance through varieties of “dramatic action” (Neelands and Goode 2015, 6). Bolton (2006, 58) suggests the “protective distance” of drama helps students engage with complex and sensitive issues securely. He argues that young people should be protected “not *from* emotion, but *into emotion*”, to ensure that participants are engaged but not threatened (Bolton 1986, 122). Distance in drama can be achieved by structuring the participants’ drama experience in such a way that they are protected by the context of fiction established by the narrative (Bolton 1979). Distance is often created through “metaxis” – “the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds; the image of reality and the reality of the image” (Boal 1995, 43). Drama conventions act as a safeguarding strategy by using distancing as protection from real life situations (O’Connor 2015).

Narrative poetry

As a stimulus to structure drama work through drama conventions, the use of narrative poetry creates another level of distancing function and protection (Ntelioglou 2011) from the raw and brutal nature of the issue of terrorism. Eagleton (2007, 46) describes poetry as “verbally inventive”: readers can “experience the words as material events”. Poetry is especially suggestive as it is “a concentrated composition in verse” (Whitla 2010, 176) and although reading poetry involves much more than pure subjectivism there is room for multiple and competing interpretations. Exploring narrative poetry and drama conventions together has been used by educationalists such as Neelands (2013), Vodickova (2009) and MacGregor (2010), who use the narrative poems “The Identification” by Roger McGough, “What Has Happened to Lulu” by Charles Causley and “The Bullfight” by Rainer Maria Rilke respectively to enable students to explore issues. Using both narrative poetry and drama conventions can be empowering and help young people shape their identity through critical questioning and discourse (MacGregor 2010). Therefore, when dealing with sensitive issues like terrorism, young and marginalised people are protected from violence, bias and stereotypical views by “teaching terrorism without terrorising” (Pinar Alakoc 2019, 222). Distancing facilitates a way of exploring, engaging with contentious issues while “stimulating critical reflection through amazement, curiosity and surprise” (Eriksson 2011, 69).

As a stimulus for restorying using drama conventions, this paper focuses on a poem by 1996 Nobel Laureate Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. Her work deals with a range of subjects “that the dominant culture works to suppress” including martial law, totalitarianism and terrorism (Cavanagh 1999, 189). Through poems such as “Children of Our Age” and “View with a Grain of Sand” she questions:

What happens when you set different views of human nature against one another, when you juxtapose human nature as conceived by different epochs, different art forms or philosophies, different ideologies? What are the limits and the possibilities of humanness? (Cavanagh 1999, 178)

The narrative poem “The Terrorist, He’s Watching” (Szymborska and Baranczak 1995) is an example of how Szymborska ‘tries to find an outside viewpoint from which to examine human nature’ (Cavanagh 1999, p.178). “The Terrorist, He’s Watching” explores the issue of terrorism from multiple perspectives within a narrative framework. This poem is an effective stimulus as it opens up a “particular set of fictional circumstances, situations and characters” (Neelands and Goode 2015, 145) using a straightforward narrative approach. This allows young people to explore the issue of terrorism in ways which are accessible and lend themselves to the restorying process. According to Thomas and Stornaiuolo, young and marginalised people write and imagine themselves into stories in order to reimagine dominant narratives, “as people of all ages collectively reimagine time, place, perspective, mode, metanarrative, and identity through retold stories” (2016, 318). This paper follows a similar model outlined by these authors and deals with restorying dominant narratives surrounding the issue of terrorism. It uses narrative poetry as a stimulus under the four headings of: restorying time; place; perspective and identity through drama conventions.

Restorying time through drama conventions

According to narrative theory, narrative time relates to incidents and events; it is the events themselves which “create the order of time” (Abbott 2008, 4). Time is also organised in narrative through abstract means such as seasons and years and is represented in terms of number. Szyborska’s poem is written in free verse with six stanzas and depicts the four minutes before a bomb is detonated inside a bar. It uses both narrative time and clock time as it contains both a sequence of events and a countdown internal to the structure of the poem. The poem offers a fertile temporal framework where students’ voices can engage in co-authorship by exploring the present, linear/non-linear, narrative and performance functions of time (Aston and Savona 2013).

Possibilities for restorying are abundant from the first line of the poem, “The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty”. Conventional narrative analysis might highlight the fact that the poem opens with a firm, definite statement. It asserts that something, an explosion, will most certainly occur. The statement also announces the specific location and the precise time for the explosion while the auxiliary verb “will” creates a sense of certainty over a future event. It can be inferred that such certainty is based on knowledge of past events, namely the planting of the bomb. The potential to reimagine temporal alternatives is also plentiful through the internal rhythms of the poem itself. Exploration of these literary devices might be investigated through the drama convention *A Day in the Life*. Working backwards from the bomb detonation, a linear sequence of events is constructed by sub-groups at different times in the preceding 24 hours. This would involve use of an identical role signifier, e.g. a scarf, to represent the terrorist role. Next, scenes are run together and re-rehearsed to reflect the decisions made by the other groups. For example, a group might focus on a telephone call from the terrorist’s handler who informs him of the time and location for the detonation. Another scene might focus on the terrorist’s interactions with his family – he might be somewhat awkward and not behaving naturally. Finally, a scene could depict the terrorist surreptitiously planting the bomb and walking to the place of safety. Each scene might emphasise the character’s inner conflicts and thus the impact on his decision making. In doing so, students begin to develop and challenge their understanding of the temporal and human relationships that influence and motivate the character’s decision making (Barlow 2021).

The series of opposites, “woman/man”, “short/tall”, along with the steady repetition of “in/out” also establishes a definite rhythm internal to the poem. This rhythm is like the ticking away of seconds, whereby the poem itself becomes the countdown to the explosion. This is reinforced when, in Stanza 3, this rhythm is punctuated by an announcement of the time to the very second, “Thirteen seventeen and four seconds”. The feeling that the poem itself is like a ticking time bomb creates a sense of drama, urgency, tension and excitement. This might be investigated through the drama convention *Time line*. *Time line* requires students to create a variety of small scenes before and after the main event in the poem. Next, the drama convention *Still Image* could be used to represent the initial moments of the poem’s key events and are centrally positioned in the room. Thereafter, a representative of each group is asked to stand where their group scene fits in relation to its impact on, or time relationship with the terrorist. In doing so, the convention enables students to represent and reflect on how they connect (or not) the relationship between

the poem's rhythm and the events leading up to, including the aftermath of the terrorist act – much like the voyeuristic approach taken by the terrorist.

Throughout the poem, Szyborska examines the essential difference between the terrorist, who knows and watches the time, and the victims, who are ignorant of the time that they have left. Through exploring this vital difference, the poet can show us something of the terrorist's attitude towards his victims. This point might be explored through the drama convention *Everywoman*. *Everywoman* provides the opportunity to bring actors together who are playing the same character at multiple points in their life. For example, the character of the terrorist could be selected at three stages in his life (pre, during and post explosion) – all iterations of the character should wear an identical role signifier. The oldest iteration of the terrorist speaks to the middle iteration explaining his regret for detonating the bomb and desire to change his actions. The middle iteration, speaking to the youngest, suggests that he wishes that he hadn't been so naïve or concerned about "fitting in" with the crowd – it might have saved innocent lives and his own. The youngest iteration, speaking to the oldest, asks him to explain why he appears to be so weak – he should be happy that his actions made a difference to the cause. This convention requires an existing understanding of the character and motivation while exploring his life journey. Consequently, students might develop a greater understanding of character stance/perspective and how this can alter through time itself (Barlow 2011).

Restorying place through drama conventions

Another common form of restorying involves alternative settings and scenes. Quartermaine (2011, 8) found that when terrorism is explored in structured discussion groups with students 'the main regions that were mentioned included the Middle East, Iraq, Asia, Afghanistan and "religious areas"'. However, acts of terror have been committed in many Western towns and cities and are in no way limited to what dominant media narratives commonly refer to as war zones. To explore and engage with the issues, students re-imagine, re-write and disrupt dominant narratives through moving locations into contexts of their own and their communities, shared experience. Szyborska's poem provides us with a model for dramatic restorying as the colon at the end of the second stanza serves to introduce the *mise-en-scene* of the poem – the street outside the bar. However, "Szyborska takes us beyond the picture's frame to remind us of the limits of any one worldview, and to undercut its claims to comprehensiveness" (Cavanagh 1999, 189). This leaves it open for students to engage in the restorying process in a range of participatory ways.

The construct of a "picture frame" (Cavanagh 1999) could be actioned through the drama convention *Window on the World*. This convention requires four large sheets of paper which represent a windowpane. The first sheet represents how the terrorist views himself; the second represents how people who are close to the terrorist view him; the third represents how the terrorist's friends view him; the fourth represents how a stranger would view him. Each group write their observations and character analysis in the relevant sections outlining world views.

Collective Drawing, another drama convention, could be used in sub-groups to create a collective image representing the *mise-en-scene* of the bar, street and people mentioned in the poem. This image can become a reference for a conceptual

framework of ideas and discussions. Additionally, the group can create an alternative *Collective Drawing* representing their chosen character's secure place (e.g. a home, holiday park, religious space) in contrast to the devastation which is about to transpire in the bar. The group might wish to create a drawing, using materials which best represent the mood and atmosphere of their scenario, depicting images of the place pre and post explosion. These images could then be used as photographs for an extended piece of persuasive writing where students write in role as a reporter for the national press on the incident.

Delving deeper into the setting of the poem, students might use the drama convention of *Guided Tour*. *Guided Tour* establishes a form to the imagined street while encouraging a collective belief in the fiction and thus creating a shared group response. This convention is a form of narration which involves group members providing a detailed picture of the poem's environment. For example, students might use their *Collective Drawings* to provide a highly descriptive commentary of place outlining key features of the street to another group. This might be done with students working in pairs – one person leading and describing their section of the street to a partner from another group who is blindfolded. Individuals are taken on a *Guided Tour* using adjectives to describe the sounds, smells and textures of their street area. The class might wish to undertake a *Guided Tour* pre, during and post the terrorist incident. Thereafter, students could retrace their steps to select areas of the tour which were most powerful for them. The group can use the drama convention of *Thought Tracking* (somebody taps a character on the shoulder enabling them to speak their thoughts aloud) to describe what the young people see in their mind's eye. Students should be encouraged to give a detailed response and expand on the description they received from their partner about the specific location. Next, they can write about their experiences as a character walking on the street before, during and after the terrorist incident. In doing so, drama conventions are used to restore a sense of place. They offer alternative spaces and create communal hubs where students can explore their own reality, in relation to sensitive issues, surrounding terrorism such as stereotyping and cultural bias (Barlow 2017).

Restoring perspective through drama conventions

Re-imagining narratives from alternative or multiple perspectives is arguably the most common form of restoring as it helps to foster understanding and empathy (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2018). In participating in restoring dominant narratives, people from marginalised positions can bring new and interesting points of view on important issues (Boal 1979). Szymborska's poem provides a useful space for discussing the issue of terrorism as her narrative brings "attention to those marginalized by their society's prevailing ideology or aesthetic" (Cavanagh 1999, 189). Perspective is one of the key drivers throughout the narrative. Actors looking to explore perspective can investigate the part in the poem where a bus obscures the view of the girl; the terrorist becomes unsure whether she has entered the bar or not. The terrorist's omniscient perspective of the scene is "suddenly" broken and as a result his knowledge of the situation is disrupted. Following a conventional literary analysis, we could point out that the poet's use of the word "dumb" is significant as it gives us an insight into the terrorist's psychological perspective. "Dumb" indicates that the girl is ignorant, having an overall lack of

knowledge in terms of the situation. However, it also suggests stupidity and is an expression of frustration on behalf of the terrorist over his own lack of knowledge. In other words, because the terrorist is irritated at losing control of the situation, if only for a few seconds, he disparagingly insinuates that the girl is stupid.

Using the drama convention *Harmony*, students might explore the comparisons and contrasts between the girl's life and that of the terrorist. Like a Venn diagram this convention uses two overlapping circles to compare and contrast similarities and differences between characters. For example, one circle represents the terrorist and another symbolises the girl with the green ribbon in her hair. Students write information about the characters in each of the circles. Then in the centre circle they write the similarities or differences between the characters. This can be expanded to include the drama convention *Role Reversal*, where an actor playing the terrorist swaps roles with someone portraying the girl. In doing so, the two actors experience the encounters from both perspectives (Barlow 2017).

To understand the terrorist's multiple thoughts in any given situation students can use the drama convention *Giving Witness*. The facilitator or pupil offers a monologue to the group from the perspective of the terrorist; this could appear to be an objective account of the bombing. However, this restorying will likely be viewed by the students as a highly subjective account charged with emotion. Students might then enact the monologue attempting to stay true to the subjective retelling. Thereafter, an additional monologue is given, however, this time from a different perspective from the first – it could be from the stance of the girl; this can be performed by students via a re-enactment. Once both perspectives are given and re-enacted, students should interrogate how subjective language is used through the combination of information and affective response – thus, identifying and establishing bias and prejudice (Neelands 2001).

Restorying identity through drama conventions

One of the most significant forms of critical restorying is re-imagining identity. This involves young and marginalised agents altering or re-creating the identity of central or dominant characters to represent the range and variety of multicultural, sexual and religious identities. Szymborska's poem provides fertile ground for exploring the themes through identity, as "she understands all too well the seductions of a single, unyielding frame of reference, and she resists them in her verse through the suppleness and shifts of her own poetic voice" (Cavanagh 1999, 179). Throughout the poem Szymborska leaves the identity of characters open to interpretation. The poem offers potential for actors to create identities as the characters entering and exiting the bar are carefully depicted using minimal description. They are described like film extras and characters that merely have bit parts, for example, as "A woman in a yellow jacket", and "A man in dark glasses". By presenting the characters using slight and minimal description, Szymborska not only creates suspense and tension through the idea of cinematic experience; the poet also provides the reader with an insight into the psychological make-up of the terrorist. Although the characters contrast in various ways, there appears to be no factor or feature determining who lives or dies. Szymborska constructs a paradox to establish an important idea. The terrorist views his victims in detail, as an assortment of contrasts. However, this simply represents the fact that age, sex and appearance do not matter. It highlights the

indiscriminate nature of the terrorist and his actions – and perhaps of terrorism in general. This further develops the theme of depersonalisation and emotional detachment.

Drama conventions can be used to understand the terrorist's identity and thus motivation to plan, plant and detonate the bomb. The drama convention *Role-on-the-Wall* requires students to draw a human outline which is large enough for them to include written facts about a character. Any information which the students are unsure about can be placed outside of the outline. For example, we know the following facts:

- he is male and in a public location
- a timepiece is used
- is observant/voyeuristic
- removes himself from danger

This raises the following questions:

•What was his motivation to terrorise this locale? (ideological/religious/fanatical/nationalist?)

•How did he know the safe distance – is he experienced in bomb making/was he told to stand there – if so why?/Has he participated in terrorist acts before?

These questions, coupled with the statements inside of the *Role-on-the-Wall*, can construct an identity for the character. In addition, the question could then be asked to the character (via Hot-Seating) and the answers added to the inside of the role as statements of fact. By drawing out cultural differences through aspects of identity, people can seek to produce the empowered models which are established through diversity (Barlow 2020). Therefore, marginalised voices can resist traditional power structures by transforming themselves, and their understanding of the issue of terrorism, in the process of active engagement and meaning making (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2018).

Conclusion

Using narrative poetry as a stimulus for engaging young and marginalised people through drama conventions opens alternative spaces where the sensitive issues surrounding terrorism can be explored. In using poetry and drama as a mode of inquiry, students can challenge and restory themselves in and against the dominant forms of discourse which are predominantly put forward by the mainstream media, as most people “rely exclusively on the media for terrorism-related information” (Nellis and Savage 2012, 751). Such dominant narratives are connected to power structures whereby, in modern societies, the “mass media” succeed “in maintaining a preferred or delimited range of meanings in the dominant systems of communication” (Hall 1998, 1050). Foucault (1991, 10-11) makes the stronger claim about discourse control by holding that all societies “have procedures whereby the production of discourses is controlled, selected, organized and redistributed”. The dominant forms of discourse produced by the mainstream media not only result in excluding a variety of viewpoints from being represented; studies show that people who “watch terrorism-related news reports are more fearful and feel less safe from terrorist activity”(Nellis and Savage 2012, 751). Therefore, educators have an

obligation when teaching about terrorism not only to encourage and draw out the diversity and differences of young and marginalised people, but to do so in such a way that is sensitive to the fears, stereotyping, bias and complexities surrounding the issue.

Teaching about terrorism using narrative poetry and drama conventions creates appropriate levels of distancing, whereby students can articulate their own reality and experiences through creative and critical collaboration. The levels of distancing provide learners with conditions which function as a “safeguarding strategy” whilst at the same time providing “parameters within which themes and issues can be safely explored artistically, critically and educationally, and with a commitment for change” (Eriksson 2011, 69). Drama conventions can be viewed as distinct phases of systematic decoding of dominant modes of narrative in the restorying process. Narrative poetry is also a rich source for restorying perspective using drama conventions as it “is the most allusive and elusive of genres, the one which thrives on ambiguity, the one which, if pinned down to a discrete meaning can lose life” (Hakes 2008, 77). By engaging with the poem’s wealth of equivocality regarding point of view, students can explore nuanced perspectives and create a multiplicity of voices using drama conventions.

Educators can engage and empower students to explore sensitive and contentious issues, such as terrorism, in ways which are critical and transforming. By encouraging young and marginalised people, in the spirit of Soyinka, to “forge new realities” individuals can restory themselves into dominant forms of narrative, using creative media such as poetry and drama.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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