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research article

From Dover to Knysna: Educational Drama Transcends Cultural Boundaries

—Anna Visciano (Edited by Sarah Matrumalo)

There is no blueprint for using educational drama in the classroom. There cannot be. The nature of drama itself is creative, evolving, and situational. Since each classroom, teacher, and student is different, so too will be processes and products of an educational drama program.



Anna Visciano and Thembelitsha students smile and play during break time.

Prior to researching and carrying out my own educational drama program in Knysna, South Africa, and Dover, New Hampshire, I hypothesized little as to what the students' reactions would be. I tried to remain neutral and open-minded about how teaching through drama would be received in two different cultures, and planned to carefully examine differences and similarities in the students' responses. Courtesy of an International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) grant in 2007, I was able to create and implement an educational drama program first during the regular school year at Woodman Park, an elementary school in Dover, and then over the summer at Thembelitsha Primary School in Knysna. I captured the students' performances of drama activities on film, and at the

completion of my research I created a thirteen-minute film that showcases some of my most meaningful interviews and experiences, clips of which may be viewed throughout this article.

Drama in Classrooms Worlds Apart

The method of this cross-cultural research project was qualitative. Due to the nature of drama and my goal to discover how effective drama could be in teaching both academic subjects and drama skills, it would have been difficult and irrelevant to focus on quantitative data. Instead, my observations and videotaped interviews led to my most significant research findings. Throughout this article are references to clips of video footage that supplement this text and give the reader a glimpse of what I observed.

The educational drama activities I implemented were created in collaboration with the classroom teachers. Through our discussions about the current curriculum, I was able to create or modify drama games and activities based on the subject being studied. The purpose of all the activities was to assist the students in learning their core curriculum through the means of drama. For example, at Woodman Park School where the students were learning about the water cycle, I created a drama activity in which the students incorporated movement and voice to show the different parts of the water cycle. ([See Water Cycle Clip.](#)) For each activity I created, the students in Dover and Knysna were aware of its double purpose; in fact, during group reflections after the activity, questions about the curriculum topic as well as what drama skills were used were discussed.

I spent about three days a week with a group of thirty–three fourth graders at Woodman Park School over a period of about five weeks. When I was in Knysna, I visited multiple classrooms at Thembelitsha Primary School five days a week over the course of four weeks. During this time, I worked with classes from first through seventh grade. Initially I had planned to work with one fourth grade class in Thembelitsha; but on arrival, I discovered that the fourth graders' English skills were not as proficient as I had originally thought.

Due to this unexpected difficulty with the language barrier between the native Xhosa language and English, coupled with high demand for my classroom assistance, I used educational drama with Thembelitsha students of all ages during those four weeks.

Differences in Class Scheduling, Structure, and Children's Reactions

During my work with educational drama at the two sites, I was able to observe stark differences and some similarities between the two cultures. One of these differences was the way in which the teachers at each school created lesson plans. When I sat down with Woodman Park teachers Mr. Hobson and Ms. Mallett to discuss when it would be appropriate for me to come into the classrooms to hold a drama program, they both took out very full schedules and gave me exact dates and times when they could squeeze in an hour for my program. However, I would be replacing another subject scheduled for that day, which forced the teachers to catch up in that subject later. I was asked to prepare detailed lesson plans reflecting the topics the students were learning and to e–mail these plans one day prior to my visit.

Class scheduling was very different in South Africa. At Thembelitsha, there was one schedule that all the teachers carried around to note when students moved from room to room, but detailed lesson plans for each day were not typical or required. With little exception, I was told I could do any activity I wanted on any day. In fact, much of my educational drama at Thembelitsha was impromptu. Since the days often did not go as I had planned, it was difficult to prepare formally for a lesson.

Once I was asked to enter a first–grade classroom to help teach a math lesson. Since the first graders spoke very little English and conversed in their native language, Xhosa, this was an unexpected challenge. Yet, since my purpose was to teach using drama and I love the challenge of on–the–spot teaching, I quickly made use of a worksheet the students were using. The subject was subtraction, so once I learned the Xhosa word for *minus* I was ready to go. I led the students in acting like the pictures being subtracted on the worksheet (such as flowers, bees, and stars), and through the simple drama skills of body and movement, the class was able to better visualize the way of subtraction. ([See Knysna Math Lesson.](#)) Although I can't be sure that all the students completely understood subtraction after our half–hour interaction, there were definitely students who came up to me with beaming faces because they had benefited from drama used as a teaching tool.

Another difference that impacted the effectiveness and implementation of educational drama was that the students at Woodman Park School were much more reserved in their participation in the program than were the students at Thembelitsha. ([See Action Verb Exercise.](#)) In my past drama experiences, one of the biggest challenges has been integrating all students, even the shy ones, into the activities. This was not the case at

Thembelitsha. Of course, it would be incorrect to state that there are *no* shy students at Thembelitsha, but even the shy children were willing to try an activity and would often warm up to it more quickly than a shy student at Woodman Park. I had never realized how shy the Woodman Park students were, even as a group, until I was in South Africa watching a classroom of about forty–five students completely and entirely dedicated to acting out a poem using their bodies and voices. ([See The Frog and The Hippo.](#))

I concluded that this difference in participation is more ironic than first meets the eye. The students at Thembelitsha do not live in carefree conditions and struggle with the everyday facts of rape, car–jacking, robbery, death, gangs, and poverty. These topics were openly discussed with the students in a subject called *Life Orientation*. Yet despite the living conditions, many of these students loved to participate in drama activities and were especially anxious to get out of their seats and play. The students at Woodman Park School, who were not faced with such adult problems as are the students of Thembelitsha, also enjoyed the drama activities but did not dedicate themselves to the same degree as did the students of Thembelitsha. Many Woodman Park students were concerned about self–image during the activities and were less willing to risk looking silly.

The irony, of course, is that the American children, with whom adults often sympathize for being forced to grow up too fast, had more trouble just being kids and acting like flowers or animals than children who really are forced to grow up fast and face dangerous adult situations. I reasoned that the educational drama program may have been an outlet for the students at Thembelitsha to forget about their serious troubles for awhile. The educational drama program at Woodman Park may have been seen by some students as just another lesson for which they were too cool and, at the same time, too self–conscious. In both schools, however, the educational drama allowed freedom for children to be children even if to different degrees.

The different social conditions the children lived under meant that I needed to modify American activities to be relevant to the South African students' lives. In one activity I called “Problem Solving,” students were split into groups and given a problem they had to solve through the means of a short skit using problem–solving strategies, creativity, and drama skills. Each group would then present their skit to the class. Examples of the problem scenarios I handed out in Dover included “The President is coming for dinner, and you don’t have any groceries!” and “Your parents give you a new bike for Christmas, and you lose it the next day.” When I was introducing the same activity to students at Thembelitsha, I looked around the room and, remembering that a few minutes earlier I had heard the classroom teacher quizzing the students on what to do if they were hijacked, I ripped up the pieces of paper with trivial, fluffy problem scenarios used in Dover. I let the shreds fall to the floor and created new problems for the students to solve. These scenarios included “You are being robbed at knifepoint. What do you do?” and “A hijacker is taking your car. What do you do?” Though these scenarios made me pause as I was handing them out, the students and teachers at Thembelitsha didn’t blink an eye.



Students at Thembelitsha playing and laughing during a drama activity in the school yard.

The last difference I would like to mention relates to the types of educational drama activities I found to work the best in each school. The students at Woodman Park reacted best to activities that involved individual tasks done in a group setting. For example, I would ask the class to gather in circle formation so that each student

could take a turn in the activity and have their own spotlight even if just for a moment. This format is often used in many educational activities other than the dramatic ones I used in my program. Woodman Park students seemed to feel comfortable in this setting, and until I worked at Thembelitsha, I thought that this format was the best way to allow every student a turn while still working as an ensemble. The students at Thembelitsha, however, reacted more positively to activities that were done in a call-and-response format. In this type of activity, a group of students would mimic the leader in song, speech, or movement. The students preferred to work together without focusing on the individual. I attribute this difference not only to the focus on the individual that the United States stresses at an early age, but also to the manner in which the students are generally taught. For example, the students at Woodman Park have silent reading time, when they are expected to work individually. The students at Thembelitsha, when instructed to read in either English or Xhosa, do so aloud and in unison. The students at Thembelitsha were accustomed to working as an ensemble, and the students at Woodman Park were accustomed to working as individuals. While both formats can be translated into educational drama activities, each has its advantages and disadvantages relative to the lesson goals at hand.

Drama and Learning Happen All in Good time

The differences I witnessed in classroom structure and lesson plan organization greatly contributed to the way that I integrated drama into the lessons. As I mentioned earlier, at Woodman Park the classroom teachers scheduled their lessons far in advance. With such busy schedules there was little open time for an educational drama program without making both teachers and students feel rushed. When I was in the classroom, there were often instances when the activities we were working on got cut short due to this tight schedule. On the other hand, there was hardly a schedule of lessons at Thembelitsha. I had much more freedom in my planning and allotted time at this school. If the students had not completed an activity by the time the bell rang to switch classes, the teachers would be more than willing for me to lead the next lesson as well or, in some cases, follow the students into their next class to complete the activity.



Each square on this quilt was created by Woodman Park students and was given as a gift to the students of Thembelitsha. The intention was to create a bridge between students, cultures, and schools. The quilt now hangs in the front hall of Thembelitsha Primary. A cultural bridge has begun.

After experiencing these differences, I realized that drama in the classroom works best when the classroom schedule is flexible. Since drama is not an activity that has a clear beginning and end, a lesson centered in drama can best evolve in a timeframe that is not limited. When doing activities with the students at Thembelitsha, we could take the time for each student to have a turn. When I felt that the students were

getting restless or that the activity objective had been achieved, we could move on to the next lesson rather than be pressured by the sound of a bell, such as was the case in the Woodman Park schedule. However, at the same time, I found myself struggling to understand what the students at Thembelitsha were learning in their core subjects since the teachers did not have clear-cut lesson plans or schedules for each hour in the day. Thus, I feel that a combination of time flexibility, long-term curriculum goals, and weekly lesson plans would produce the best setting for educational drama.

Educational Drama Provides Benefits Across Cultures

Although my research findings show obvious differences between classrooms in Knysna and Dover, there was no substantial evidence that one country, educational system, or group of educators created the perfect setting for the implementation of my drama program. That I could creatively use educational drama in different countries with effective results shows that educational drama transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. I believe that if this research topic could be extended to other countries and schools around the world, similar findings would result. For all individuals, drama has been shown to improve self-confidence, imagination, and learning. These elements are also goals of education. Thus, the combination of education and drama complement each other perfectly. Through my involvement with Woodman Park School and Thembelitsha Primary, I am entirely confident in the effectiveness and the value of educational drama programs in classrooms worldwide.

I would like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, specifically the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP), for funding my project and assisting me in my first research endeavor. I would also like to thank my UNH mentor, Professor Raina Ames, and my Knysna mentor, Bill Fussell. Both individuals helped me shape my project idea and were available for collaboration during my research. I am eternally grateful to Travellers Worldwide for allowing me to complete my research in the framework of their South African program. Finally, I would like to thank the teachers and students of Woodman Park School in Dover and Thembelitsha Primary School in Knysna. I feel honored to have made contact with such inspiring educators and creative students. Thank you.

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Author Bio

Anna Visciano, a senior anthropology major, is originally from Dover, New Hampshire. With funding from the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP), she conducted this research in her hometown and in Knysna, South Africa. Having been involved with theatre her entire life, Anna decided to research the use of drama in education because of her personal interests in the arts, education, culture, and children. While the language barrier was a difficult problem to overcome in teaching drama to children overseas, Anna took away a lot from her experience, coming to understand how educational drama can effectively transcend boundaries, regardless of available resources. After graduation, she hopes to travel to schools around the world and use educational drama to help students with their studies, emphasizing what a critical part of her life the IROP program has been.

Mentor Bio

*As the director of theatre education at the University of New Hampshire, **Raina Ames** was the perfect fit as Anna's mentor during her IROP research. Ames, who has been at UNH for five years, is an assistant professor*

in the Theatre and Dance Department. Though she had mentored students for the INCO 590 course in the past, this was her first time as an IROP mentor, and she found the experience rewarding. During the research period, Raina enjoyed communicating with Anna about the vast cultural differences between Dover and Knysna, and found it interesting how Anna's teaching methods were impacted by these differences.