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RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATIONAL DRAMA

A pedagogical model

Keywords: pedagogy; holistic; partnership; issues-based learning; process

The pedagogical model proposed in this chapter has been developed as a result of the analysis of a wide range of data, gathered over a series of educational drama lessons with pupils aged 10-12 years in three Scottish Primary schools. The data comprised: interviews; observers' commentaries; pupils' evaluations; teachers' reflective journal entries and video recordings of the lessons. Close analysis of the data uncovered an overarching theme: that the nature of the relationships between the participants in drama lessons, and between the participants and the learning contexts, afforded a climate in which learning (in its widest sense) can take place.

Context

The drama lessons were based in narrative and story (Bruner, 2003): the stories of the people in the drama and the problems they faced (pollution, eviction, deforestation, disempowerment). The drama referred to here is issues-based, offering the learners, working both in and out of role, human dilemmas to explore and problems to solve. This was process drama, mainly improvised and employing a wide range of theatre-based strategies (Neelands & Goode, 2000). The strategy of teacher-in-role was central to the lessons, with the teacher adopting a range of stances from neutral to sympathetic or antipathetic.

Relationships in educational drama: The model

The matrix (see Figure 1) sets out the elements pertaining to each of the four aspects of relationships that emerged from the analysis of the data from the lessons. It is offered both as a summary of the conclusions emerging from the research and as model for teachers and educators who are planning educational drama based on issues of human concern, for example, social or environmental issues. It is suggested that all four elements should be considered when planning, teaching and evaluating drama projects. The elements of the table are discussed in the following sub-sections.

| Relationships in drama | Teaching and leaning strategies |
|---|--|
| The learners' relationships with the learning context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relevance of content/context - Shared learning intentions - Holistic, integrated learning - Range of activity modes - Peer assessment - Evaluative experiences - Sense of empowerment in tackling issues |
| All participants' relationships with the fictional context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Story at the centre - Context building - Role building - Range of dramatic conventions - Empathy and affective engagement - Action experiences |
| The relationships between the learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities for collaboration - Sharing ideas/plans - Whole group participation - Sharing common goals - Supporting peer learning - Respect for self and others - Kinaesthetic engagement |
| The relationships between the teacher and the learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transformative - Responsive and supportive of learning - Democratic - Values-based - Varied status within lessons - Shared reflection and evaluation |

Figure 1: Relationships in Educational Drama: A Pedagogical Model for Practice

The learners' relationships with the learning context

When introducing drama lessons, the ways in which the contexts and content of the lessons are relevant to their interests and learning should be made explicit to the learners (Black & Williams, 1998). In order for the learners to engage with the learning context, it is important to introduce the drama in ways that acknowledged the learners as partners, with each other and with the teacher, in the learning processes. Sharing the learning intentions with the learners gives them status within the learning experience and allowed them to monitor and evaluate the learning processes (LTS, 2006).

The holistic, integrated nature of the learning experiences in drama allows learners opportunities to make connections across other areas of learning: the drama contexts can offer learners opportunities to draw, to write, to research the issues involved, and to present information and ideas in a range of formats. Within drama lessons the learners are afforded opportunities to engage in a range activities that provided them with opportunities to experience four of modes of learning: 'living through' concrete experiences; actively experimenting; planning and thinking; and reflecting on their actions and the action of others (Kolb, 1984). This variety of modes of learning allows learners to become engaged with and actively involved in their learning experiences.

During drama lessons, learners can be offered opportunities to assess the work of others and to share in the assessment and evaluation of their own learning. They can comment on ways in which the learning intentions matched the learning outcomes and on the value of the learning experience. The value of this was evidenced in the research in the learners' positive reflections and evaluations, and in the way they remained involved and self-monitoring during the lessons. In addition, within the fictional contexts of the drama, the characters were afforded many opportunities to take action to benefit their own lives and situations. This empowerment gave the learners as sense of achievement and resulted in affirming learning experiences.

The participants' relationships with the fictional context

The stories of the problems and issues faced by the characters are central to many dramas. These can provide meaningful contexts and real purposes for the learners' drama activities. The time taken to build and develop the fictional contexts allows the learners' knowledge and concepts of the issues to develop gradually during the lessons, and this helps them to construct their own understandings and meanings based on their experiences (Selly, 1999). The drama process also allows the learners opportunities to construct their characters and to begin to form an understanding of them. In dramatic encounters, employing a range of dramatic conventions, they make an effort to be 'true' to the representations of their characters. Importantly, unlike some more traditional teaching, the roles adopted by the teacher allow her to enter the fictional worlds and to share, with the learners, in the problems and dilemmas encountered there.

In drama, the learners are asked, metaphorically, to put themselves 'in others' shoes'. This allows the learners to sympathise and even to empathise with the characters and their situations. They are personally involved with the imaginary context and are able to identify with the characters that they have developed. The research data demonstrated the learners expressing concern for, and understanding of, the problems facing the characters in the drama story.

The range of dramatic conventions covers four aspects of dramatic action: context building, narrative, poetic and reflective (Neelands & Goode, 2000). This range is important as it offered opportunities for variety of responses: opportunities to look at the dramatic situations in different ways and from different perspectives.

MARIE JEANNE MCNAUGHTON

Within the unfolding story of the drama, the learners face a number of challenging, unfamiliar situations calling for carefully considered responses. *A Curriculum for Excellence* (SECRG, 2004) advises that pupils should have opportunities to “develop and demonstrate their creativity” and to “sustain their effort” (p. 12). Drama offers opportunities for both. Because of the wide range of theatre-based conventions employed, responses, both vocal and physical, are often creative. Learners are required to consciously sustain their roles within the drama. The post-drama evaluations provided evidence that the learners were aware of this: “You had to keep being your character or the drama wouldn’t work.”

Within the context of the drama story, learners can have opportunities to plan for and engage in actions that can have a positive effect on the fictional environment. Critical discussion can also allow them to take a stance and to express their concerns outside the fictional context. Thus, the “action experiences”, central to citizenship and environmental education, (Laing & McNaughton, 2001, p. 177) can be part of the drama experience for the learners.

Relationships between the learners

Central to the pedagogy of drama education, is the provision of opportunities for collaborative and co-operative learning. Within the drama lessons, the learners are able to work collaboratively in small and larger groups, and this can support individual and group learning. Skills in communicating and collaborating are practised and developed during these small-group sessions.

In addition to working in small groups, the building of the fictional communities within drama lessons allows the whole class to participate in the creation and development of the fictional context. Bolton (1998) describes each child’s contribution to the “making” of *living through* drama as, “part of a collective enterprise, culturally determined in language and action” (p. 271). Both the ‘real’ class of learners (and their teacher) and the fictional communities share common goals. For the class, there is the goal of developing and maintaining the fictional context. For the fictional community, there is the goal of enhancing or sustaining an aspect of the environment in which they live. The research suggested that, because learners are engaged and focused, instances of disruption or inappropriate behaviour or responses are less likely to occur.

Educational drama usually begins with the negotiation of a drama contract in which all of the participants (teacher and learners) agree to ‘work for the common good’ (O’Toole, 1992). This enables whole-group trust to be built, with learners responding to and supporting each other’s efforts and learning, both in and out of role. They are encouraged to react to and respond to each other while in role, offering advice or showing concern for other members of the community. Respect for others, and for one’s self, central to citizenship education (LTS, 2002), is also central to drama education in, for example, turn-taking, listening, supporting each others’ efforts to speak and act in role, and offering positive feedback. In my research, during interviews and in class discussion, learners commented that the drama had helped them to find out more about other learners in the class: that they

had seen “another side” of some of their classmates and that “people worked together well”.

Particular to drama is the physical and kinaesthetic aspect of the learners’ experiences and relationships. Learners will often move together, and explore relationships through their physical proximity, posture and gesture. This, the evidence suggests, brings them closer as learners and as human beings and extends the ‘languages’ of learning (Nicholson, 1999).

The relationships between the teacher and the learners

The teaching approaches commonly adopted in drama lessons often fit Sterling’s (2001) model of a transformative approach to sustainable education: learners are supported in the construction of meaning from their experiences and allowed ownership of the learning context. The teacher is responsive and reactive to the learners’ behaviour and ideas, rather than seeking to impose rigid lesson structures. Strategies to support learning and to create a positive classroom climate (Massey, 2003) included: providing opportunities for the learners to participate in decision-making; allowing them to think freely about and to express their views; allowing for different perspectives and views; and encouraging the learners to be active contributors to the class and to the fictional communities within the drama.

These strategies are predicated on a certain set of teacher values about the nature of teaching and learning (Hayward, 2007): that learning is a democratic process and that the teacher’s role is to offer strategies that facilitate learning rather than imposing it. In drama, the attitudes and dispositions of the teacher in the education process are well-documented (Winston, 1998; Taylor, 2000): that a teacher should be open, flexible and approachable, but also should be fair and should ensure that there is a safe and secure working atmosphere in which learning can take place. These principles are communicated to the learners as part of the negotiation of the drama contract.

The participation in the drama, through teacher-in-role, allows the teacher opportunities to alter her status in relation to that of the learners; thus changing the nature of the relationship between them. Equal status and high status learners’ roles enable the teacher to seek help and advice, to be interrogated, and to be ignored and defied: all relationships outside the normal classroom pupil-teacher dynamic (Bolton, 1998). These relationships, and the open sharing of reflections and evaluations between the teacher and the learners, are instrumental in allowing learning to take place. In my research, the learners’ appreciation of the partnership between them and the teacher, developed during the drama lessons, was evidenced in unsolicited comments, both oral and in their evaluations, thanking the teachers for their work with them and saying that had enjoyed working in this way.

In conclusion, the research on which this chapter is based suggests that, when planning issues-based drama lessons, it might be useful for educators to be aware of the four aspects set out in the Relationships Model as discussed above.

MARIE JEANNE MCNAUGHTON

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