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Accessing the critical through drama

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...Play is serious business. It stimulates the imagination and keeps our minds flexible. It releases endorphins and increases our sense of pleasure. Play challenges us to solve problems, which keeps us focused. Play allows us to fantasize about having other identities, which opens us to the experience of others. Play allows us to test our limits by seeing how far we can climb or how playful we can be. Play allows us to experiment and therefore enables us to stretch the limits of the possible. All childlike behaviour encourages joy, creativity, and innovation. (Stoddard, 1996)

My approach to drama is about using play, as a way of moving towards the dramatic literary texts we call 'plays'. Using drama in the classroom has mystified and frightened some teachers and has caused them to relegate 'drama,' to reading plays around the class before having students respond in the form of a written, analytical essay on this form of literature. This I think is a shame as drama as performance has such wide and deep potential for developing all kinds of language and textual events with different modes of response in the classroom. I am one teacher who has always used drama in the English classroom and I have found it an excellent approach for helping students understand 'the critical'. Although there is considerable overlap, this distinguishes the way we use drama in the classroom from the approach taken in the senior subject, Drama, since our purposes are somewhat different. The approach I will outline here can be used to great effect, especially in the junior secondary school/ middle years, to help students come to terms with critical aspects of dramatic and other literary/ aesthetic texts and also provides an accessible way to deconstruct text and 'play' with everyday texts. Drama can also develop the cultural operational and critical strands of the current Junior English Syllabus to teach dramatic conventions of script writing for theatre or film. Here I'll discuss accessing the critical through an intertextual approach to aesthetic texts, including a script, within a possible unit for the junior school, based on discourses of 'body image' as an organising principle. In this paper my aims are to define and describe some effective performance activities and teaching strategies that have worked for me and my students in the classroom. I will outline some drama games and strategies such as role play and improvisation and an approach to scripts that helps students access the critical dimension of language and text.

Play scripts provide the most common form of aesthetic texts for accessing drama in the classroom. These certainly have their place among the literary canon, along with novels, and other literary prose forms, (lyrical vignettes, memoirs, autobiography, biography and non-fiction works), and various forms of poetry. Of course drama can be used effectively in the presentation of performance poetry. A common entry point to study play scripts, is to have students read the text around the class. This has the effect of sometimes mesmerising the students by the written form of the text, rather than allowing them to visualise the play as a work designed for performance. For this reason I often work backwards. Whether the end result is a summative task involving some written product, or a spoken or multimodal performance, I always *begin* with improvisation before moving to the script. This has the effect of allowing students to 'realise' the characters (the roles and relationships *within* the text), as well as developing the field and possible scene foci in the orientating phase of a unit. Also a script can be an almost dormant text, and as the playwright Shaw attested, "there are 50 ways of saying 'yes', and five hundred ways of saying 'no', but only one way of writing them down." The play text is always open to multiple readings, which then come alive in performance. Also physical performance engages students bodily with reading. In this case I will contextualise my approach within a possible unit context, which focuses on the subject matter of anorexia and 'body image.' These concerns are the central problem of the play, *Wasting Away* (Young, 1993), which will serve as the parent text for a possible junior secondary unit.

Beginning with performance

Ironically, my *language* investigations in drama, almost always begin using body language only. In 'performativity' theory (Butler), the body constitutes a significant location for negotiating gendered identity (Butler, 1990). This is particularly relevant to the field of 'body image,' being explored and developed in this unit, but I would always begin here anyway, before using vocal language or other kinds of text. The starting point is the *body as text*. Whether we're studying a play, or using drama for role play, or using reader's theatre as a result of some kind of transformative task, I usually begin with 'warm ups' and improvisation to get students moving and to simultaneously develop a few basic principles of drama; *observation, concentration and spontaneity*.

Clearing the room of desks, I have the students develop aspects of character by 'walking the room'. This is a technique I learnt at a summer school for mime, from Judith Anderson, who trained in the *Le Coq* tradition. Of course, therefore the next steps in the warm up are done without voice, although inevitably students will laugh and get excited during this process. The walk begins randomly and students need to be reminded not to all walk in a circle in the same direction, which for some reason, they often seem predisposed to do. The teacher facilitates this whole process and you do not have to participate yourself. At this stage you are acting as the director, although I often find that doing this with the students allows them to feel more comfortable and less 'under the gaze.' Encourage students to explore the entire room and the whole space, even those spaces behind or on top of chairs, taking care to avoid body contact with other 'walkers'. According to the teacher's directions, the walk which begins randomly, builds up and reduces in speed, and explores different levels (on tip toes, bending knees, crawling on bellies) and builds up to a jog. Call out 'freeze,' or use a whistle, if you want to preserve your voice, in between the transitions. Every now and then at the 'freeze' command ask the student to maintain their current posture and look around. The room looks interesting because everyone is doing something slightly different.

At this point you can begin to develop character by emphasising different 'parts' of the body as dominant. I might begin at the top of the body and call:

- Walk with your head- you are a character who lives in your head, has a tic, your chin might be up, or contracted into your neck.... and freeze! Now build up the pace and take a different level, whilst still walking as this character and now you are running for a bus as this character.... (call 'freeze!')
- Now turn to the person closest to you and have a conversation using only your head (no voice). Remember to also listen and 'take turns'. You may very well be different 'head' dominated characters, who will converse physically in different ways...

Continue in this way, constructing characters dominated by different body parts: the chest, hips, knees, pelvis, hands and feet having conversations with each in turn. This is developing both bodily and spatial awareness as well as character and is excellent for kinaesthetic learners. After a round of all the class constructing characters dominated by the same body part, have them choose their favourite and walk as that 'character,' meet up with a different character and silently converse by just using feet or hands and so on.

At this point there is still no need to introduce words, but you can ask characters to use voice in the form of sound effects. They can choose to walk the room as a predominantly head, chest, hips, knees, hands or foot character, adding sound effects and after freezing, turn to the person closest to them and converse, avoiding body contact but using body parts and sound effects or letters of the alphabet. Here they are developing intonation and other modulative devices, without the need to invent words. You can ask them to use just one word or a phrase which they repeat using different intonation in a conversation. This physical preparatory activity develops awareness of textual features of speech, such as modulative devices, which can apply then to other 'oral work'); paralinguistic (body language, gesture) and extralinguistic features (attitude, movement). It has the added benefit of allowing the students to feel part of an enjoyable whole class experience, which avoids the one-child-in-front-of-the-class strategy. Get them all acting together first.

This whole class 'character walking,' is a very quick way to develop character and identity using the body and can be tailored to the discourses mobilised in a particular text under study in a unit. If I was developing this into a junior secondary unit, I would use the play, *Wasting away* (Young, 1993). With this parent text in mind, characters can now become more specific. Students can be asked to imagine they are very thin, weak and hungry and have to walk this way, sit down and/ or run to catch a bus;

then walk as if they are carrying a lot of body weight, either as muscle or fat and walk this way, imaginatively experiencing, how this character would move and feel inside this body. That character might walk, whilst speaking all their monologue and dialogue, just one or two words or a phrase that represents them. An old, frail lady, walking very slowly and stooped, might utter, 'no money, I'm frail'. A young frail woman might utter, 'I'm starving, but I'm so fat'. A robust, upright, porcine control freak might utter, 'look sharp now, get it done now. EAT!'

The next step towards performance with words is to show how people speak and how movements help and give meaning to their words. You can ask students to say 'no', 'yes' or 'it's hot/cold' in as many different ways as possible whilst they sit, shout, whisper, glare, smile, seduce, complain, gesticulate with the words to the person closest to them in the room or across the room. They can then stand back to back and have a telephone conversation with one another, using just letters of the alphabet or nonsense sounds to develop the intonations of conversation and to develop the idea of turn-taking between listening and speaking.

This can then develop into improvisation games, of which there are many, including theatre sports. Student may be familiar with the concept of improvisation from the popular 7 Network program, *Thank God You're Here*. The most accessible 'game,' and the easiest to set up in a classroom is 'Space Jump.' Space jump develops observation, concentration and spontaneity skills and is highly immersing and engaging. It can also develop awareness of language specific to a discourse site. Space jump works like this:

1. A player begins the improvisation, acting alone. Remind students to use the different levels, pace, sound effects and character tips from the warm up walking, using mime and voice to create a scene. Encourage the students to speak as if they were actually in the situation.

A timer calls 'space jump' (this means player 1 must freeze in the exact position at the time of the call) after 30 secs (build up to one minute as students become more confident)

2. Another player jumps in, works from the frozen player 1 position, and changes the 'scene' and the pair interact to act out a new scene (focus on *conflict*)

3. Timer calls space jump after 30 secs – players 1 and 2 freeze- and the 3rd player jumps in and changes the scene.

The whole cycle is reversed:

Player 3 drops out (1 and 2 returning to the scene before)

Player 2 drops out (returning to the original scene)

Player 1 completes the original improvisation.

Everyone applauds and a new round begins.

The game can vary by having students watching suggest specific locations (possible discourse sites) for the action, which the improviser must take up eg: in a library, a school office, a shop the zoo, a hospital, a movie set and so on. These can be prepared as cards, selected by students. The game can be further complicated by adding specific emotions to be explored in those contexts, suggested by different students e.g.: anxiety + bus stop; grief + cinema; shame + catwalk. When first playing this, you can ask students to write these words with settings and emotions on cards. You can step this up further by adding cards, selected randomly by the students which suggest representations e.g.: environmentalist; mother; scientist; or actor.

With this kind of preparation focusing on character, setting and language, investigating the issues of the set text can become richer. Situation or characters from the play or novel may be further explored using role play and improvisation. Teachers may be familiar with using role play to explore character. English Teachers may be used to using role play and simulation, to develop situational dialogues. These can be great for teaching appropriate language and contexts and also power relationships/ discourses. They can, however, be limited in scope, since they are usually situational and 'one offs,' and often depict stereotypes. This limitation, however, can become the basis for discussion and

therefore be a useful means to establish identity of characters and representations. One useful trick here is to improvise an everyday situation where an asymmetrical power play might occur, play it through 'straight' and then reverse it. Some examples might be:

- A recidivist student goes to the principal's office
- Check out chick and customer accused of theft enter the supervisor
- Customs officer and weary traveller held up at an airport

These conflict situations can be tailored to suit the script you'll use. To go with the play, *Wasting Away* (Young, 1993), which explores body image and anorexia; the following scenarios could be used for role play:

1. A teen convincing a parent to go out to a party, with a focus on clothes as a point of conflict
 - Improvisation 1: parent is in control
 - Improvisation 2: child is in control
2. Shop assistant in a boutique or clothes outlet- young woman or man buying a fashionable garment
 - assistant is in control- convincing her to buy
 - customer is in control

Students can discuss the dynamics of what happens through oral and written reflections on the language used to exploit the situation and turn the tables of power. The resulting power reversal often produces comedy and can lead to useful verbal reflection on discourses of power and representations. These can be directed by focussed questions, such as:

- In that scene, who was in control?
- How did the characters create and/ or maintain or relinquish control or power in terms of the language they used?
- In what possible settings could this scene occur and how would the language change if the context was different?
- How did the dynamics change, in terms of language and voice when the roles were reversed?
- What issues were explored and what specific language devices (verbal and body language) did the players use to exploit the power play in the situation?
- What was the central conflict point of the scene?
- What might they have done or said differently if they had had more time to prepare and think about their responses?
- Which sections of the dialogue from the role play could you use in developing a script around the scene focus and characters?
- Which parts would you change?
- What might happen next?

In this way, possibilities for the students' understanding of some conceptual fundamentals of playwriting can be developed. Furthermore, the central problems and discourses of the play (parent text) have already begun to be explored and provide an entry point into critical reflection via performance with a written script. If their ultimate task is to write a transformation of the parent text, these questions and improvisational work can lead them to include workable naturalistic or stylized dialogue.

Script work

Scripts allow Students to discover the possibilities of *written* dialogue. The words on the page are brought to life by the particular 'reading' (or professionals if mediated versions of performances are available) the Students bring to the text. Reflecting on these may involve their own discursive histories and negotiable interpretations of what the text means to them as readers and performers and why?

When planning a lesson around drama scripts in English it could be useful for teachers to ask the following questions of themselves:

1. What language resources/ discourses are the text/ tasks calling on?
2. How can we use language to explore the situation and its possibilities more fully?
3. What is the relationship between the verbal and nonverbal parts of the lesson, and can one feed into the other?

The physical drama work described above has mostly covered the territory of the non verbal. Drama can be used to explore all kinds of verbal language use. Reporting on past and present experiences both real and imaginary, conflict situations in plays can engage students in the processes of arguing,

convincing, persuading, justifying, defending. Negotiating interpretations of roles and relationships, characters and settings can involve planning, predicting, projecting beyond the immediate situation, deciding, logical reasoning, presenting pros and cons, and coming to conclusions. When students take on the role of directing they can be informing, instructing and explaining, negotiating and mediating. In all of these situations, and certainly in arriving at an interpretation students can be finding *their own meaning* in the text, by interrogating it critically. They can ask questions about the historical context and what has gone on outside the frame of the text. Discovering the focus of a scene and how it is explored through language can be a gateway into the discourses of that scene and of the rest of the play and indeed the wider culture in which the play is set.

After this preparatory improvisation work, students can move to the play script. You may begin by reading just the first scene around the class, assigning roles to volunteers. Alternatively or subsequently, you can ask the students in groups to use the physical and verbal and character skills they have learnt in the lesson and prepare to *enact* one scene per group from the script, or to do a 'live' reading' using sections of the script. By this I mean, reading from the script, they also partially 'enact' it in the correct scene sequence. To arrive at this each group must negotiate the best way to present this using the script or determining the focus of the scene and improvising. This requires some rehearsal time, but it's well worth it, because the students stay awake and focussed on the scene they are developing and have time to master difficult vocabulary and develop character.

Following this initial enactment, of the first few scenes, further development of the knowledge about the subject matter can be explored by establishing students' prior knowledge about the issues raised in the play. What do they already know about anorexia?

- What do you learn from the scene you enacted or the ones you have now seen enacted from the play about the causes and effects of this disease?
- How are young women and young men represented in this play?
- What other 'identities' (parents, health professionals, actors, advertisers) are made available here and how do these position you as a young reader?
- How do you react to these representations?
- How does the play we've seen so far explore discourses of:
 - body image
 - fashion
 - constructions of femineity and gender
 - family

Students can be encouraged to conduct further research on anorexia via web sites for homework. There are also many audio visual resources available that explore the subject. This is a common topic in the ubiquitous stuffy of celebrity in popular magazines and current affairs programs.

The rest of the play may be explored in the same way as the first few scenes via groups, or the class can work over several weeks to a full performance for another class. In my experience this is a very satisfying experience for students and can easily be adapted to be assessed as a dramatic enactment, within the current Queensland Syllabus.

How this approach fits with the current Syllabus frameworks?

The English Syllabus revolves around investigations of language and text through the Cultural, Operational and Critical strands, whilst senior Drama objectives revolve around 'Forming, Presenting and Responding.' Whilst many of my pre-service teachers who are drama students are going to make brilliant English teachers they sometimes emphasise 'feeling' or 'character' when applying drama to English, without exploring the critical dimension in texts. In terms of its value for investigating language, drama is excellent, as long as it is engaging and immersing. The approach to drama described here also develops all the strands and sub-strands of the junior secondary English Syllabus. It involves reading and viewing through scripts and literature and provides springboards for performances of possible multigeneric and multimodal texts. It encourages listening, through hearing others perform, cueing roles, lines and 'parts'. It most obviously engages students in speaking through public performance and role plays and it can also lead to productive work in writing and shaping, by having students creating scripts from improvisation or other literature, as well as reflective writing on the processes of performance.

In terms of the Queensland Syllabus strands, the *Cultural*, which explores texts in context, some focus at the level of genre and text-type can occur since plays constitute part of our cultural heritage and their inclusion should satisfy the critics of the ostensible demise of literature, which has been regurgitated *ad nauseam* in the popular press (Donnelly, 2006; Slattery, 2005; L. Slattery, 2005). Plays serve varied purposes of entertaining, inviting reflection or making social or political comment and the in the case of those plays written for teenage audiences, offer representations and identities, which may or may not represent current subjectivities available to our young adult students. As an advocate of deploying literary texts along with those from popular culture, (Jetnikoff, 2006) poems, ads, songs, music, rap, stories, parody, slide shows/ video can all be incorporated within drama activities and skills in drama can improve performance in all other language/literary activities. So studying plays can lead to transformational work with both literary and everyday texts. For instance, constructing an alternative ending or significant scene to the play could provide possibilities for dramatic written responses. The text type can be changed to a multimodal one if the students make a current affairs style report or design a documentary about the subject matter explored in the play, interviewing 'characters' from the play. Or they could create blogs about the central concerns of the play.

In exploring the *Operational strand* elements of written scripts (which are of course different for theatre and for film) and fundamentals of dramatic speaking can be learnt through performative and transformative work with dramatic texts. If the transformations of text types suggested above are explored as summative tasks, the operational work of these texts would also need to be learnt or revised.

Finally the *Critical strand* can be explored through drama through representations, identities and discourses. Critical investigations through improvisation and script can extend students' critical thinking beyond what students already know. Drama provides an accessible way to 'get at' discourse, as seen above. Students can role play characters to establish naturalistic dialogue, work from improvisation to script to explore discourses offered by particular 'settings' (or discourse 'sites') and investigate power relationships amongst characters in conflict. Media representations can also be explored if the students respond further to the text by constructing media texts as extension work in written or multimodal forms.

Whilst engaged in drama activities, students are also potentially developing social, collaborative skills, and critically examining concepts of representations and identities, since drama is largely about human behaviour and interrelationships. Marrying the cultural with the critical dimension, students can perform and interpret narratives; by enacting reader's theatre or performance poems and use drama techniques and strategies to offer varied interpretations of written words of other literary and aesthetic texts, thereby exploring reading position and intertextuality. Other aesthetic texts which could work well with the play, *Wasting Away*, might be the recently published novels *Skinny* (Kaslik, 2004); and *Just Listen* (Dessen, 2007), dealing with eating disorders; or an earlier novel, *Love is the Crooked Thing* (Wersba, 1987), which deals with adolescent self image and obesity.

The teacher's role in drama

The teacher's role in this approach to drama is to extend interpretations, to *challenge*, arouse interest, give confidence, coordinate achievement and encourage reflection. It's also important to provide a safe environment in order for students to take language and interpretive risks. If confident, teachers can model (demonstrate) by sometimes taking on roles/ or suggesting possible direction in interpretation of scripts. It's necessary for teachers working with drama to strike a balance between control and total freedom, which requires careful lesson planning. A clear focus for the lesson, such as a language investigation of discourse, representations or identities through character, allows students to pinpoint an issue, a problem or conflict in a concrete way.

One of the reasons I have heard from my pre-service teachers who have not undertaken any drama training is that they are afraid of losing control in the classroom. It's important to establish clear 'rules of the game' when working physically, and make sure that all students understand what these are. For instance you might establish with students to avoid where possible actual physical contact. Teach mime skills. Teach the appropriateness of silence, listening and speaking according to context. When a certain cue is heard all action stops, including any speaking. When groups or individuals perform to an audience- everyone must listen (unless audience involvement is invited). When students perform, everyone applauds. Listen to suggestions by students; if they are impolite turn the suggestion into a

positive if possible. Control happens automatically when the class is *motivating, meaningful and fun*-as long as the kids are interested and they want to do it again, in my experience, they will behave. Know your class by observation. You'll quickly know who the leaders are, sense the class's moods and when to move on to a new activity.

Drama can develop: empathy, critical thinking, collaboration skills, creativity and imagination and can validate students' life experience. It allows a sense of physical engagement in reading since students are using their bodies and language to express meaning. This can result in a positive attitude in the use of English for purposeful communication as it potentially involves all the strands of language, and literature learning in meaningful motivating contexts. For these reasons there is plenty of potential for using it at junior secondary level, and I certainly hope the ideas presented here will encourage other teachers to include more drama work in their English classrooms.

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