When drama is truly effective it is truly "educational, in the original meaning of the word 'education' which is to lead out," for the participants are led beyond the limits of everyday existence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1984, p. 12). By empathizing with a character they think and feel other than they are, more than they are in everyday life. Such an experience becomes "so enjoyable, that those who take part in it need no other incentive."

For the activity to reach this level the teacher must match the "opportunities for action [with] the actor's possibilities for action . . . . This balancing act must change in a dynamic, dyachronic interaction between the child's growing skills, and the growing complexity of the action system. . . . A dynamic increase in complexity is built into [the child's] sense of enjoyment. . . . The question is, how to structure situations where flexible and open-ended growth can be pursued. Most activities, dramatic or otherwise, are too rigid to allow students to find a comfortable match between what's to be done and what they can do" (pp. 12-13).

Traditionally, classroom drama is a safe literary activity that involves students in reading or writing scripts. The newer methods that would have the students out of their seats improvising drama can lead to the kind of experience described by Csikszentmihalyi, but few teachers have training in these improvisational procedures. More to the point, most teachers who have had some classwork in creative drama are still too uncomfortable with the medium to allow flexible, open-ended drama in their classrooms. Cuban (1983) asserts, "the margin of classroom change available to reformers is far narrower than expected in the elementary school and even slimmer in the high school. Historically, teaching practices have hewed to a familiar teacher-oriented pattern . . . ." (p. 165).

The challenge is to prepare teachers to move beyond safe lessons devoted to reading scripts or following lesson plans in texts to truly creative improvisation based on structured but flexible situations that have real meaning for the students. My thesis is if we can find a way to prepare teachers to be secure in leading "flexible situations" more drama will occur in the classroom. An analysis of current methods of teacher training can illustrate strengths in our curriculum and methodology and suggest alternative methods.

Current Teacher Training Methods

In the United States the major means of teaching how to teach drama has evolved from the work of Ward (1957) and Criste at Northwestern University. The three most popular texts are by Heinig and Stillwell (1981), McCaslin (1984), and Siks (1983). Their approach, essentially, is learning about drama, and involves teaching prospective teachers a sequence of activities to do with children. With some variation the sequence proceeds from sensory/concentration activities to movement/pantomime, dialogue, characterization, and improvisation/story playing. Descriptions of scenarios and appropriate stories for playing are supplied. To learn this se-
quence, the future teachers generally do the activities under the leadership of the professor. They often observe a master teacher doing similar activities with children and they may design and lead sessions with their peers or with children.

The strengths of this approach are the experiences students have playing out drama and the strong models presented for them to emulate. The weakness is that they learn a rather specific sequence of activities to do and stories to play. The teachers learn about the drama, but they don’t learn to intuitively create drama. They do not acquire the “flexibility” Csikszentmihalyi (1984) says is essential to create a “flow” experience when material, interest, and skill match. Kantor (1983) calls this learning “about” a subject rather than learning “how to perform and respond in the language” (p. 175). He is referring to learning English, but his comment has equal validity in drama which is a means of communication (player to player and player to observer) with its own special form.

A second approach, that of Dorothy Heathcote of Great Britain, is gaining popularity in this country. It is essentially learning through drama, and involves using the dramatic form to enable students to reach a greater understanding about themselves and their world. In the basic American text for this style of teaching, Wagner (1976) describes and analyzes Heathcote’s work as done during a course for future drama leaders. In her work, Heathcote creates drama situations based on themes of importance to the participants. The concentration and movement activities are buried within the context of the drama situation.

Demonstration with children and modeling of teaching strategies are also basic techniques for this approach to teacher training. The future teachers analyze exemplary sessions to discover how decisions were made within the lesson. The teachers play with the children and occasionally do drama with their peers (see, for example, O’Neill & Lambert, 1982).

The strength of this approach is its goal—to prepare flexible future leaders to create drama with children. The weakness is that because modeling remains the basic methodology, the approach teaches only “about” the Heathcote method. Even if the teachers-to-be develop security within this system, they are limited by the model.

To give future teachers the flexibility and the freedom to create drama with children we must move beyond teaching about the different approaches to drama and begin teaching “how to perform and respond” as a leader in the medium. This entails a new emphasis in inservice and preservice curriculum design.

Curriculum Based on “How to Create Drama”

For classroom leaders to be able to create drama with children, they must be able to “think drama” on their feet. They must know teaching strategies plus the form of drama. This entails being able to: (1) form appropriate playable dramatic action for the group; (2) facilitate individual and group involvement in the drama; (3) guide individuals within the group towards an understanding of the drama just created” (Wright, 1984, p. 20). Past teacher training has focused on the second item, facilitating participant involvement in the drama. Discussion techniques for guiding understanding of the drama created has also received some attention. On the other hand, the most essential skill, forming playable dramatic action, has not been taught directly. Instead, lists of activities, stories, structures, or examples of previous successful lessons have been supplied.

The focus of the drama curriculum for teachers should be on dramatic form, i.e., playable action. Knowledge of the basic form used in structuring a drama incident provides a framework within which teachers can guide creative effort. Although the relationship between theatrical form and form for the process of improvisation is not linear, knowledge of basic dramatic form is still necessary for classroom work in drama. This basic knowledge should in turn be supplemented with what is now the major content of the drama methods class—study of examples of proven strategies to facilitate involvement, plus experience leading drama sessions.

The Basics of Dramatic Form for Improvisation

Any drama scene/incident must have at least three elements: character, plot, and setting. These elements are similar to those of fiction, and it is this similarity (plus the differences) that may well serve as a basis for introducing the classroom teacher to the form of drama.

This introduction should lead to two kinds of knowing, an intellectual understanding of what constitutes dramatic action, characterization, and setting, plus an intuitive ability to visualize/imagine characters involved in dramatic action in a setting in time.
Setting

Where an action occurs may seem the most simple of the dramatic elements. The settings of a living room, ice cream store, or intergalactic space ship call up descriptions of overstuffed chairs, a soda fountain, and instrument panels; but unlike fictional descriptions, several important considerations must be met before drama can occur. Fiction happens in the mind of the writer and of the reader. Drama, even if it is history or fantasy, happens in real time, in real space, with real human beings assuming the roles of historical or fantasy characters.

An example from a journey story may help clarify the important differences between fictional setting and time as opposed to dramatic setting and time. In Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963), Max, the hero, is sent to his room after an argument with his mother. "The forest grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are" (n.p.).

In the mind of the reader, this fantasy trip can occur in seconds, with changing images quickly replacing one another. In drama, the child playing Max will have to take minutes, not seconds, to be in the bedroom and to experience the anger at being punished. The literal space of Max's room must be transformed for the boat journey, and the boat in the dramatic action cannot be in the same space as the land of the wild things. In working with this story, the drama leader can make a number of choices such as: (a) playing three separate scenes in the same "real" space—the bedroom, the boat, and the land of the wild things using perhaps a chair to indicate Max's bed and the boat; (b) playing the three scenes in sequence but using different areas of the room; (c) playing just the action in the land of the wild things; (d) creating a new scene based on the theme of the story—an imaginary journey to help the culprit realize that home is best; or (e) creating a different scene with Max, his mother, and Max's imagination. Whatever the leader chooses to help the children become dramatically involved with the story, changes must be made so that the imaginary action can happen in real time and space.

In fiction, an author can create a story from the point of view of one character or from an omniscient point of view of all the characters and action can be past, present, or future tense. Drama for the players is always first person, present tense. The action is happening now; and in role the players have the knowledge of who their characters are, what their characters did earlier, and who they already know. This means that for the players—especially older children who are ready to identify with a character and who want a sense of mastery—the leader may need to create additional scenes to precede the main action so that the players can internalize information about setting and circumstances.

An example from another journey adventure can exemplify this point. In The Odyssey, Homer (1956) recounts the journey home of Odysseus and his sailors. To play any of the adventure scenes, Odysseus and his sailors need to know one another and to have some sense of their personal history. Creating a scene before the group leaves Ithaca may help the group know the given circumstances for each character. The setting of this new scene will have to be specific (e.g., the courtyard of the house of Odysseus, a street in Ithaca, the beach before boarding the boat) and played in the present tense as if no one knows the outcome of the Trojan war or Odysseus's journey.

Since the elements of drama are intertwined, setting naturally leads to character and plot issues. Plot, like setting, needs to be specifically designed for drama. Since Aristotle's Poetics (1954), action has been the term used to describe dramatic story line.

Dramatic Action

As mentioned earlier, drama happens in the present tense in a specific place. Langer (1953) suggests that fiction is a recounting of the past because the work is finished and the reader can, at any point, turn to the last page and discover the ending. Drama, on the other hand, deals with the future because even though the action of drama happens in the present, both observers and actors continually want to know what will happen next. The tension (suspense) of wanting to know the next outcome is essentially the conflict of drama.

Tension/conflict/action is essential to drama but the meaning of this concept can be confusing. Action seems to imply a great deal of movement, not quiet moments of characters just talking to one another. Conflict seems to imply a fight or a disagreement. Drama does not need fights, nor does it need physical action. It does need the tension of not knowing what will happen next, a sense of
impending future, as illustrated by the following example.

A fifth grade teacher, wanting to try out drama, decided to play a scene with the Pilgrims unloading their boats and the Indians watching. The fifth graders were bored. My guess is that they responded this way because the scene had action/movement but not tension. Two earlier scenes needed to be played to create a palpable tension in the ship scene. The first could be a discussion by the Indians about the strange boat and the white persons on the boat (e.g., Are they evil or are they good and friendly? Why have they come? Should we investigate or not?). The second might be a discussion by the Pilgrims about whether to unload their possessions or not, especially after they have seen an Indian observing their scout and subsequently their activities on the boat.

Following such scenes, a playing of the unloading of the boats can have tension. Will the group of Indians, or even one or two distrustful Indians, try to keep the Pilgrims from landing? Will the Pilgrims, tired from the long journey and frightened by the presence of the Indians, move against them? Will either Indian or Pilgrim be brave enough to break the silent barrier to make a friendly overture? Now the scene has tension even though there is no fight and the ending is happy. It should be playable.

A second reason the scene can be playable is that the students will have had time to become acquainted with the given circumstances and to make a commitment to the characters.

**Character**

As we know from watching the undirected play of children, they can pretend to be anyone—parent, stranger, animal, creature. Yet in the classroom that natural commitment can be lost if teacher choices do not match student ability and the material to be played. Student ability becomes an issue because the more formal classroom drama builds in longer interaction time and more communication between players than happens in pretend play. Pretend play is often interrupt one another with informal directorial notes (e.g., “You are the father. Now you tell me to get your newspaper.” Or, “The enemy is over there. Now you take your gun and sneak around that way and bring them over to me.”) In the classroom, the drama usually plays for longer periods with no informal interruptions. The leader must choose scenes with characters and action that the children can sustain and that they are likely to find interesting and playable.

The teaching-about-drama approach (Sikis, 1983; Ward, 1957) directly teaches concentration and characterization. The teaching-though-drama approach (Bolton, 1979; Wagner, 1976) suggests that children do not need to learn characterization in the sense of the actor, who consciously develops knowledge of the character and adapts voice and movement to recreate that character. The child needs only to adopt the attitude of the character. My hunch is that young children, probably through the fourth or fifth grade, and novice drama players should be asked only to adopt the attitude of the character and that older, more experienced children want to learn more about characterization.

Whatever the age and experience of the children, the drama leader should make choices about character and action that match the participants' skills or create scenes or exercises to teach the skill needed. Way (1967) suggests that beginning drama students often want to play a fight. He has devised a series of activities to teach simple stage combat so that no one is injured yet the fun of a fight can be had. The leader comfortable with drama construction can easily design or direct action to accommodate the participants' skills.

**Visualizing the Drama**

In working with drama, the leader needs to understand how story, character, and setting must be contrived to happen in real space with real actors in real time. In addition, the leader needs to be able to use this knowledge as a basic form within which to imagine dramatic action, to see in the mind’s eye the players moving and talking in a real space. This ability to sense the action is the key to knowing what is playable and what is not. It is essential to discriminating between controlled but flexible action and what may be uncontrolled chaos or too rigidly controlled non-creative doing. Current research on mental imagery has proven that it is possible to increase and improve skills of perceiving, imaging, and imagining drama (Rosenberg, Castellano, Chrein, & Pinciotti, 1983).

**A New Curriculum**

A new methods course in drama should build on the strengths of current courses with the addition of lectures, readings, and exercises in the creation of dramatic form. Current practices of particular value are:
1. Demonstrations. To provide the teacher with a sense of what drama with children may entail, demonstrations (live or on video) should include work with children of several ages and with the teacher working in several styles. Readings in current drama texts can also be used to illustrate various teaching methodologies.

2. Participation in drama with peers. Future teachers, led in drama activities by a master teacher, can experience concentrating, imaging, moving, talking, and reacting as a character. They can also experience planning and evaluating drama. These activities are invaluable in guiding improvisation.

3. Developing and teaching drama lessons. These activities help the future leader realize the importance of goals and selection, and sequencing of drama activities to achieve those goals for the specific class.

To these three categories I would add exercises to help prepare the leader to make instant decisions about dramatic form. Written and oral exercises provide experiences in thinking through appropriate playable settings, given circumstances, dramatic action, and characters for children of various ages. In written exercises, future teachers could be given a description of a class and asked to describe appropriate circumstances, action, characters, and point for the drama to start. They could be asked to develop questioning sequences to help students evaluate their work and to help them select themes and develop dramatic form for their own drama (see example in box).

Such a curriculum will help bring leaders to a comfort level with drama. Once this is achieved, they will find many opportunities to use drama in their classrooms, both in formal drama periods and during teachable moments. As advocates get drama accepted into the elementary or secondary curriculum, teachers will be capable of implementing the drama activities in their classrooms.

Notes


2. Readings on this topic include the chapters entitled “The Law of Conflict” and “Dramatic Acting” in Lawson (1964, pp. 163-173) or selected portions from Smiley's (1971) Playwriting: The Structure of Action, especially from Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 (pp. 20-127). Chapters I-V in Grebanier (1961, pp. 1-138) also include basic information about setting, character, story/plot/action/tension.

You will be creating drama with a group of 24 fifth-graders in connection with a literature unit on mythology. The setting is the last period of the day in a metropolitan, inner city school. The children have had drama in the fourth grade but are not ready for in-depth characterization work. Using the story of Theseus (Hamilton, 1969, pp. 149-158) as a young man seeking his father: (a) decide what kind of trials would be interesting for him to encounter on his journey, and what action is essential in the final meeting between father and son; (b) write a description of the setting for the first scene that will introduce the children to the necessary given circumstances of character, plot, and setting (being certain that this setting will allow all of the children to assume a role and join the action); (c) write a description of the action at the beginning of this first scene; (d) write a series of questions that will help the children review what they know of the character of Theseus and the time and setting of the story, then lead them to the creation of a series of trials for Theseus to overcome on his way to finding his father; (e) assuming that the opening scene, trial scenes, and final scene with the father have been played out by the children, write a series of questions that will help them review what elements of the story they remembered to include in their playing and to evaluate their visualization of setting and commitment to character; (f) write a series of questions based on the playing of Theseus and the reading of other myths that will help the children discover the basic kinds of characters, action, and theme in a myth. Continue the questions to lead the children to the identification/creation of a modern mythic hero and theme, a setting, playable action, and an opening scene to start the playing.

An example of a written exercise for a methods course in drama.

References


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