

CONTEXTS BETWEEN PLAY, DRAMA, AND LEARNING

A workshop at the 1997 N.A.T.D. conference
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led by

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In this workshop we explored some aspects of the contexts between play, drama,
and learning.¹ We developed the view that when we use drama in the classroom the
context is ideally both playful and dramatic, as well as a space in which learning occurs.

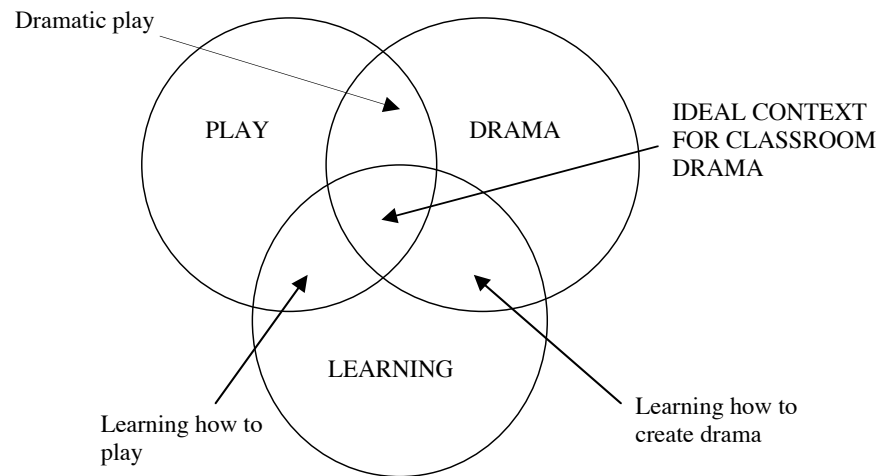


FIGURE 1 -- CONTEXTS BETWEEN PLAY, DRAMA AND LEARNING

We developed this diagram (figure 1) in order to illustrate some of the points we wanted
to explore in the workshop. The centre of the diagram is the overlap between play,

¹ We conducted the workshop over 5 hours on Saturday 27th June and over 2 1/2 hours on Sunday 28th June. This article describes most of what happened on the Sunday.

drama, and learning -- the space where we hope to spend most of our time in the classroom as we create with the children the context for our work. In this context children and teacher are both playing and creating drama; they are also learning about the topic which is being explored in the work.

We illustrated some of the overlaps and differences in the contexts of play, drama, and learning. After asking for examples from participants of what children play on their own, we used one of these and put participants into groups of three. Two played at "hairdressers" as the third observed and considered why, if they had been observing children at play, they might consider intervention. The open-ended play of the pairs was shaped and given some dramatic form when Luke gathered the players together and asked them to introduce and develop something which the watcher might consider "controversial." Now, in addition to imagining the tools and procedures of caring for hair, the players also paid attention to the shape of their interactions, the evolving content, and in addition they added some dramatic surprise. As examples, one person wanted a gang-style haircut while one hairdresser was sharpening a razor like Sweeney Todd. What could have been repetitive safe play had been shaped by drama and a potential learning context was developing -- a space where one person trusts another to cut and shape their hair.

We discussed when and why as teachers we should (and should not) intervene and interact with the children. We noted that, as teachers, our decisions about when to intervene and interact with the children are based on our learning objectives in tandem with our observations about the needs of the specific children with whom we are working. In the fictional context we want the children to cooperate and be emotionally

safe as they explore the content. We also noted the danger of censoring content -- from death to gangs -- topics with which we may be uncomfortable yet which children may want to explore.

In the classroom we want children to play as they create drama with or without the teacher otherwise the drama will not be theirs. Drama gives the work a "body," but in play we discover its "heart." Play is imagination in action and play is where caring is born as we imagine from the perspectives of other people -- from hairdressers to gang members. Drama which is structured by the teacher as a series of exercises or encounters may appear to an observer to be dramatic. However, unless as the children interact they are actually playing with ideas, feelings, and perspectives which they care about, then the experience for them will be emotionally empty. In addition, when we pay attention to the content of the work -- what is being learned -- then teacher and children discover the "head" of the work. When we become clear about our purposes and learning objectives -- from cooperation to learning about gangs -- then the work has a centre around which ideas and experiences can turn and be considered from different points of view. Most importantly, we can then make informed decisions about when and why we interact with the children.

CONTEXTS

Play contexts

Children will be "just playing" when they explore ideas on their own terms in a play context when, for example, they replay and expand on events and conversations they have overheard at the hairdressers . The value of play contexts for exploration and socialization are well known. Rather than regard play as something which is not work or

not serious, we regard play as an imaginative mode of being and interacting which takes us beyond the space of the actual into the realms of the possible. The hairdressers can become a site for exploring the implications of social resistance or even murder. When we play we experiment with ideas and metaphorically try out different ways of seeing and interacting in the world. We are playful when we are not literally concerned with survival. When children, for example, are not hungry, tired, angry, or worried about being judged then they will tend to be playful. When we play with children we can create shared fictional worlds which can be shaped by dramatic form and become sites for learning about the world.

Drama contexts

At other times, children may be "just making drama" in a drama context -- concentrating on getting right the theatrical or technical aspects of sharing ideas dramatically. Children who are "showing" their work to others are often concerned about who stands where as well as who says what and when. Classroom drama ideally occurs in the dramatic play overlap between drama and play -- where the free-flowing energy of play is socially shaped and given form through interactions and through the teacher's structuring decisions. For example, in making a film for trainee hairdressers the children could still be concerned with how to show their work, but the form of the work would be intrinsic to their play rather than separated from it as a performance.

Learning contexts

When the children are "just learning" they won't be engaged in drama -- they may be reading, writing, talking, experimenting, or researching with others in a learning context. It is when children are learning at the same time as they are playing and making

drama, that the context of the work becomes most powerful and we have the ideal context for classroom drama. Then the talk and image-making with and between the children explores matters of importance both to the children and to us as teachers. When we interact within the fictional world we are able to explore beneath the facts, creating experiential, social, political, historical, cultural, and ethical layers of meaning. (See figure X above -- in Brian Edmiston's keynote talk). If the film for trainee hairdressers dealt with how to interact with clients who ask for gang-like haircuts then the work could begin to explore some of the sociocultural and political reasons for gangs and touch on ethical dimensions like client privacy.

TEACHER-CHILDREN INTERACTIONS

We identified three categories of teacher-children interactions:

1. to learn how to play (the overlap between play and learning);
2. to learn how to create drama (the overlap between drama and learning);
3. to learn about the content of the work (the overlap between play, drama, and learning).

Learning

How we view "learning" is critical to our decisions about when and why to intervene and interact with children.

A behavioural theory of learning assumes that meaning is given to us and that we learn best through reinforcement and external rewards and punishments; others need repeatedly to tell us how to behave, what to think, and what is "right." This view of learning, exemplified by Pavlov's dogs salivating for food in response to the sound of a bell and Skinner's rats scurrying round mazes, is much more pervasive than we might

expect. Phrases like "I can't believe she said that," "How many times do I have to tell him?" or "If you're good you'll get out early," betray this theory of learning. In the classroom we are behaviourists when we believe that we can teach by telling children what to do or think.

A "sociocultural" and "constructivist" view of learning in contrast emphasises that we can only teach when children want to learn with us and that understandings are constructed as people interact and dialogue with each other. Though we can tell children information and views, we must build on the children's interests and questions about the world because unless children are self-motivated they will not really listen or enter into meaningful dialogue. Further, meanings are not predetermined but are always created by individuals as they connect their understandings of new experiences with their existing views and understandings. Exemplified by democratic conversations and respectful equitable struggles over competing views of society, this theory of learning leads us to look for social and historical, as well as individual reasons for actions and to promote authentic dialogue among and with children. It is this view of learning which leads us to use drama to set up dialogue among different perspectives without prejudging some as wholly superior and to say such things as: "How do you see this?" "Let's talk about this," or "Why do you think she feels that way?" Our decisions about when and why to intervene and interact with children will be based on a view that we need to dialogue about events from many different points of view.

Learning how to play

If children are not playing together productively then we must intervene. If some children are excluding others, for example boys saying that girls cannot run their barber

shop, or if they are destroying the work or using play to be mean, for example using an imaginary razor to actually frighten another child, then we will not allow the play to continue unchallenged. We can intervene within the play to ask a provocative learning question like "Is it fair that girls don't get to run the hairdressers?" If necessary we can always talk with children directly about the need for "the laws of play" and help them agree on inclusive and fair ground rules which make sense to them.

We can set up conversations among and with the children, both in and out of fictional contexts, so that all can be heard. We also model how the laws of play operate to create spaces which are safe, playful, and open to the respectful sharing of everyone's ideas. Then, within fictional spaces we can together examine both the "dark" and the "light" sides of humanity -- from murder to heroism.

We noted that teachers sometimes also need to learn more about how to play with children, for example, how to ease in and out of different roles, how to see the world from previously considered perspectives, how to let go of preconceived endpoints, or how to listen to children and create understandings with them about topics of concern to them. We may do so if we stop trying to direct or censor play and concentrate instead on learning more of the possibilities of play. By joining, as an equal player, children's play in home-corners or on the playground around a story like Sweeney Todd, we could discover, for example, what intrigues children about the story.

Learning how to make drama

With younger children we teach about dramatic form mostly indirectly -- through creating experiences of the power of drama to shape, sharpen, and deepen the ideas and

experiences which are being explored in the work. For example, the dramatic tension of not knowing whether a hairdressing client might be a gang leader in disguise, significantly changes the quality of the interaction.

Sometimes we will want children explicitly to learn about some of the "laws of drama." We may talk about the elements of interaction, now time, tension, contrast, mood, imagining perspectives etc. in our reflections on the experiences of a piece of work and then discuss how everyone in the class can harness these dramatic forces to create powerful shared experiences.

As teachers we can also learn from those children who have developed a keen sense of the dramatic. When they come up with ideas or interact in ways which "fit," if we can relax enough to play along with them then we may find that the work has been deepened and enriched. For example, a child who enters the hairdressers as a police officer asking for information about suspected gang members has introduced a dramatic tension which would heighten any ethical dilemma about protecting client privacy.

Learning about the content of the work

Ideally, this will be the main reason for our interventions and interactions. As we pay attention to the mood and deepening interests of the children we both facilitate their play and shape it dramatically. But we also pose questions which press and probe for meaning-making as we ask for interpretations, views, and decisions. By focusing the children on the implications for people of their choices and actions within the fictional world, the children will consider aspects of the topic which we think are worth learning about. We will examine examples of these interactions in the following example.

THE MINING EXAMPLE

To conclude this paper we describe an hour-long example from the workshop, led by Luke and analyzed by Brian. Analysis will be in italic type.

1. Discussion.

We displayed, on an overhead, a photograph which showed a miner on a stretcher, being carried out of a pithead. (For copyright reasons the photograph cannot be reproduced here.)

We used the context diagram (see figure X above) in order to talk about what would be worth learning about mining. Responses included: coping with death; the politics, history and culture of mining; the choices which workers and mineowners had; the social consequences of mining and pit closures; as well as the ethical tension between a need for jobs and a need for safety.

We wanted to show that what is worth learning goes far beyond the facts and further, that rather than there being a single view on a topic, we can always uncover multiple competing perspectives.

2. Imaging a coalmine.

Participants were asked to close their eyes and imagine a coal mine -- to wander around it in imagination, to look at the equipment and to call out the sorts of things they were seeing. Participants saw: wheels, cages, darkness, water, buckets, rails, a canary, dirt, a person lying on the floor etc.

Participants were individually playing with ideas and creating images of coalmines. They drew on whatever knowledge they had of mining which was sparked by our discussion of the photograph.

3. Taking up a perspective.

Participants were asked to "look with the eyes of an inspector of mines" -- one who has "eyes that look for details, for things that could cause problems." Then, with a partner, they talked about the things they had seen and they were encouraged to ask each other for details.

The participants looked again at the images they had created but now with a critical eye. In asking them to be selective and suggesting a way of looking the teacher was creating a space to move their individual imaginative play toward a shared drama context.

By sharing their images they could clarify for each other and amplify their ideas collectively. They were also developing the beginnings of the shared perspective, or "frame," of an "inspector of mines."

4. Recording details and considering action.

As participants shared, each was asked to jot down the details they had noted. Then they were asked to work together to convert details like "rust on wheels" into "issues for action." Connection was also drawn to their existing views on, and experiences of, inspection when the teacher said to write the issues for action "like in an OFSTED report."

The frame of inspector was intensified through hinting at their responsibility for the actions needed to redress the potential problems previously noted. The feelings of inspecting and being inspected were deepened through connecting them to feelings and opinions which had been touched on earlier that day during B. Varley's keynote address: "Taking the F out of OFSTED." Also, those participants who considered possible action were thinking dramatically as they imagined how the present pressages the future.

5. Developing the perspectives of inspectors and managers.

The group was divided into two halves for only a few minutes. One person from each pair joined the teacher and the others gathered together as inspectors to make their report. The teacher talked to the group who had gathered with him as if they were all mine managers -- "We've had the inspectors in and they're filling out their reports now." He did not try to create a negative "conflict" but on the contrary emphasised a non-confrontational and status quo viewpoint that once they had heard the reports it should soon be "business as usual." They looked at the inspectors as they deliberated and wondered about what they might say.

The participants' perspective of inspector was deepened in the dialogue about the issues for action as they asked questions of each other about what might happen if action was not taken, and how repairs would have to be made. The managers' perspective was easily adopted since it was simply a shift in point of view and responsibility relative to the details of the mine which they had already created -- the managing (rather than inspection) of cages, tunnels, coal removal etc.

In working to avoid a stereotypical conflict between "us" and "them," and a potential drift into an immoral space where each side defends its position but fails to uncover complexity, the work stayed in an ethical space where different views could be shared and participants could learn through dialogue. Everyone was playing with ideas but within agreed-upon dramatic boundaries which deepened one position without dismissing another.

6. Encounter, in pairs, between perspectives of inspectors and mine managers.

The teacher brought the managers to the inspectors and politely thanked them for the inspection -- the implication was that they had nothing to hide and nothing to fear. "Good day. I have brought the mine managers here and we've come to listen with open ears." He asked how much time the inspectors needed to make their reports and was told five minutes. Then the pairs reconstituted but now they interacted as an inspector presenting and a mine manager reacting. Inspectors were polite and stressed that they were mostly satisfied yet they noted that there were also some troubling safety issues which would have to be addressed. Mine managers responded and tended to downplay the implications for workers.

The teacher mood and attitude continued to work against an escalation of unproductive conflict and instead the social conditions of the need to listen were assumed. Dialogues between different views were fostered -- the conditions which are necessary for learning, in this case, about working conditions and the need for safety. The pairs could play again though now they would do so from two different perspectives.

7. Public encounter

Within a few minutes the teacher spoke to the whole group and asked the inspectors if they had finished. However, some of the inspectors politely made it clear that safety rules had been broken, that working hours were too long, and that some extensive changes would have to be made. Managers disagreed about the need for any substantial changes since they said that there had never been any serious problems identified in the past. One manager asked the inspectors to clarify: "What are you saying we need to do?" The teacher asked them to consider the implications of their proposed actions for the mine: "Are you saying that we need to close the mine down?"

The individual reports of the inspectors were given a public space so that the affect of their proposals could be shared, made more explicit, and the managers could publicly respond to them. The participants continued to play with ideas, but by dramatically repositioning their interactions in a public arena the teacher was asking them to reconsider all that they had previously said and could press them into thinking about some of the learning areas being opened up: the politics of mining, and the choices which mineowners had.

8. Private discussions

Again the groups were separated so that they could talk in private, reflect on their positions, and plan. Each group considered options and wondered what the others might agree to.

Having been asked questions about clarification and possible closure, the inspectors talked about a need to see documentation: time sheets, safety measures, previous accident reports etc. They talked about what parts of the mine might have to be closed down and for how long. They also pondered on how conditions could be improved and what they might do if the managers refused to cooperate. They considered the consequences of publicity both for the mine and for themselves.

The teacher met with the managers who took up the attitude of justifying the existing conditions. Comments included: "We've not had serious problems before" and "It's a question of wages -- the workers need to work long hours." Most managers interpreted the history of the mine positively, others admitted that accidents had happened which might have been avoided. All wondered what the inspectors could and could not insist that they do.

The inspectors and managers both explored responses, from their perspectives, to the questions which had been posed in the public forum. Everyone was engaged in deep dialogue which touched on the social complexities of mining issues including the ethical tension between a need for jobs and a need for safety.

9. Multi-layered sharing

Before the groups gathered together again each looked at each other and wondered about their attitudes. Answers ranged from concern to hostility to being guarded. The teacher then asked each group two questions: "What can we be open about?" and "What should we be closed about?" Now participants heard about how both groups would keep certain facts and opinions secret -- from a manager cover-up about injuries caused from previous lapses in safety to inspectors dissembling about their lack of enforcement authority. The sharing was intense, measured, and serious.

The drama convention of hearing what would never be spoken in public allowed for a sophisticated multi-layered intermingling of points of view beyond what would happen in playful talk or a standard discussion. The context between play, drama, and learning which had been carefully constructed created a space in which participants could feel and think deeply about the human concerns uncovered in work around coal mining.

10. Discussion

The session concluded with a discussion about how the fictional context of nineteenth century mine inspection had not only been about mining but had also illuminated questions for the participants about contemporary school inspections.