

[I am in a highly privileged position in being able to publish these insights shared with DH during a seminar kindly arranged for me on the 22nd December 2005 at her house in Spondon Derbyshire. The context I asked for in the seminar concerned the teacher training needs of colleagues in understanding and working in drama for learning systems where the teacher's role was one of guide and facilitator of learning in classroom encounters. Others too in allied drama/theatre fields may find the notes useful. They will I believe be published shortly by NATD in a full and extended form. – Luke Abbott]

Drama and Productive Tension-an essential ingredient –Dorothy Heathcote December 2005

Dramatic action is expressed through the human person-thought/feeling expressed in now and immediate time which invokes its future. There are no other tools-unlike the painter, the poet, the sculptor the writer, the engineer, the inventor.....

To the human presence/s is then added other aspects of 'sign'-the making of significance-surroundings, properties, light/shade, clothing, sounds, music.....

The drama element occurs when human action involves groups so that interaction becomes necessary. Theatre demonstrates this group interaction being driven by the varying motivations of those present, caught within the micro-world circumstances of the play.

Drama for learning which involves student groups of varying sizes and ages, works by creating micro-worlds which allow human events and motivations and outcomes to be explored thus widening our experience of the capacities of human beings to learn, endure, overcome, accommodate to and empathise with others. It may, but need not involve performance to audiences.

Playwrights introduce tensions into the actions of their plays which have the effect of building their characters into the events, which forces them towards the outcomes. These outcomes occur because of individual motivations and the resulting actions. Thus the actions are 'nursed' by the resulting playwright's inbuilt structure, to find the play's resolution.

The teacher must have access to the skills and strategies for creating productive tensions which 'nurse and challenge' students at the point of interaction in the classroom.

Productive tension is quite different from conflict. It is the key to deepening the exploration of motive influencing action and therefore the journey. Conflict is the shallower concept for it tends to lock people into negative repetitive responses during the interactive process and prevent more subtle exploration.

In the classroom the teacher can select from a range of tensions starting with crude encounters which attract the group to participate and explore first, so that deeper work can follow.

If the attraction holds, then attention, interest, investment, commitment, concern and productive obsession will progressively deepen and widen the range of interaction so that involvement can follow, and promote reflection about being human.

The main challenge is to create the binding circumstances which hold the group into the micro-world at the level of attraction which holds their interest.

A simple working description of productive tension would be 'leaving something in the situation to chance which cannot be controlled entirely'. This does not preclude planning in advance in case a particular element 'crops up'. There must be no cheating and surprises from the teacher without contracts. [!]

The work of the day will deal with structuring productive tension into classroom encounters and hopefully freeing colleagues into feeling confident that they have the tools they can deploy.

ALL IN REFERENCE TO 'DRACULA'-the book and the text.

Levels of tension in order of subtlety. Examples will be explained.

1. Note: first must be established the containing parameters of a situation. This can be assisted by a combination of
 - iconic,(drawn/images etc)
 - symbolic (language written/verbal charts, maps etc)
 - and finally expressive [Bruner's enactive] the physical action.
 2. The current action/circumstance must dominate and take the interest of participants at a level of attraction they can understand and appreciate at thinking level. Immediate task/s must be focuses within the containing parameters. This makes it possible for the first action/s to be launched.
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Level 1 (apprehended presences which threaten)

The danger named but not controllable.

The danger of the 'watcher' who is known to be there but cannot be located, human or animal.

The seen watchers/s-soldiers, Gods, witches, guardians etc.....not benign presences.

Level 2

Dangers known in advance-the quest-in the face enemy

- to find something

- to release someone [/thing]-and protect into escaping.

This involves being in a place which is forbidden!

Level 3

Duty in the face of distraction

Territories which daunt and are unpredictable as to their challenges and properties. E.g. ruins, wastelands, caves, water, (bones, giants-Rainbow)

(The head must sustain imagery to create territory)

Level 4

Herculean tasks-time, climate, dangerous loads, all require inherent pressures to be built in. (Sebastopol)

Level 5

Danger from guile- (Gethsemane, spy infiltration)

Level 6

Threats from stupidity: foolish carelessness, losing, forgetting critical information etc.....[Birthdays of loved ones]

Level 7

Pressures of timing limitations e.g.: Vampire day/night activity, bomb defusing etc

Level 8

Pressures from sickness, woundings, accident, traps of various kinds.

Level 9

Breaks in communication-the Minotaur's labyrinth-
Failure of messages, technical resources, lights failing.

Level 10

Missing signs or misreading them. (Dracula hasn't been there due to a lack of wounds to the neck!)

Level 11

Breakdown in relations and differences which threaten support systems.

Level 12

Loss of faith in some companions so called honourable betrayals.

? Others? There are bound to be some!

No matter which level of tension is invoked it must be clearly foreshadowed and contracted PLUS the power to resolve be possible but not easy-it has to be fought for during the process of the action.

Remember:

Define containment

Define motives and purposes immediately needed

Define what must be left to chance and why it is uncontrollable except through the group powers won in process.

Dorothy Heathcote (Taken in notes December 2005)

[There were several times in Newcastle in the 1980's when I began the research into time elements in dramatic enquiry. The first element that struck me was the notion of time that pervaded the ingredients of drama. The five are: people/these people as 'others' i.e in a contracted fictional agreement/these fictional 'others' facing a tension of some kind/in the now of time present/in order to reflect on our condition as humans. These had for me, within the 'tension' section, the added dimension of time- time past- time present and time future -as a 'given' within the expressed interaction.

In any context-real or imaginary-people face 'tensions' that are the result of actions and events in their lives. Events in the 'past', or 'right now' or that might be projected in a possible mind-constructed 'future'.

An example might be of a person diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer. If this were part of dramatic action-the 'playwright' could 'nurse' the role concerned so that we see the moment when the news was given-perhaps in the hospital consultant's room. We may also be guided by the 'playwright' to a point of action whereby the role is seen in their workplace-in the present for example-choosing not to 'let on' the news of the cancerous condition with their workmates. Dramatic irony is the result here-those on the 'outside' of the fiction know more than those on the 'inside'-at that moment! (The tension here is that of No8 above.) Furthermore-the 'playwright' may choose to construct in the 'mind of the role on their way home', a mind preparation for a family meal where

the news has to be played out for the members of the role's family-but exploring No 11 above as a tension device.

In this sense the dramatist and playwright wields the key tools of dramatic action- time tension and context-in common with the poet, film maker, dancer, visual artist and sculptor]