

G Bolton, Towards A Theory of Drama in Education, chapter 10

The drama teacher must be a flexible thinker, often being required to promote a mode of thought differing from that of the class:

- if the class thinks in story-line, he will think situationally;
- if the class thinks in conceptual hierarchies, he will think in values;
- if the class errs towards the abstract, he will move towards the concrete;
- if they stay with the functional, he will emphasise the universal.

SITUATION VERSUS STORY

Drama has often been associated with telling a story classes will often be concerned with 'what happens next'.

Dramatic form is essentially concerned with the present or as Susanne Langer puts it, it is 'a present filled with its own future' - 'situational' means staying with the present in order to examine it.

Drama is a series of presents steeped in significance.

When working with a known story, or with history, the temptation is to use drama as narrative because the events seem more amenable to presentation than to exploration.

To think situationally within a story, the teacher often works indirectly or obliquely to the story itself

- the participants experience the town of Hamelin bereft of children after the Pied Piper has left; they experience the guilty return home by Jacob's sons after they have sold Joseph to Egyptian merchants;
- they experience the conflict of professional and personal conscience as Creon's soldiers, forbidden to allow the burying of the dead;
- they experience the conspiratorial planning for mutiny before Columbus sights land ...

To think in terms of plot is usually misguided, sometimes teachers become plot dependent in their planning, even where the story is not previously known, they will start building one, thinking that this is what preparation is. Compare

Plan A

1. The chief of the tribe has died mysteriously.
2. A scene where cause of death is investigated;
3. Someone is accused of murder;
4. A tribal trial scene
5. Execution scene

Plan B

The chief of the tribe has died mysteriously.

The situation must open up the experience of:

- (a) spreading or coping with rumours (the most superficial level); **or**
- (b) not knowing who you can trust; subtly testing; **or**
- (c) a cover-up; **or**
- (d) living with the shock of the sudden removal of security (the most sophisticated level).

Whichever of the experiences in Plan B is chosen, the teacher knows that it will depend on a very slow build-up of meaning, with much checking on the normal values of the tribe, perhaps it would become necessary to go back in time.

Plan A however, is bound to a movement from event to event.

With Plan B something recognisable as plot will develop, but it will be because whatever happens appears to be a potentially productive situation in terms of meaning.

CATEGORISING

Most topics suggested by a class can be split into various aspects, e.g.

War: fighting, strategies, training, prisoners, shortage, civilians, soldiers.

Ships: design, building, safety, crew, passengers, navigation.

Florence Nightingale: Scutari hospital, training, nurses, patients, doctors, battles, journey.

Each aspect can then be broken down further. Thus, under Ships 'crew' could be subdivided into: officers and men; work and leave; clean jobs and dirty jobs; sailing ship and steam ship. These classifications do not bring us to drama, they narrow the field from which to create drama.

So, if the class suggests doing a play about Florence Nightingale, the teacher's thinking has to take a perspective on Florence Nightingale that implies a tensions which may further imply a potential learning area. So a different kind of categorisation might be:

Scutari Hospital:

How do you write a letter for an illiterate soldier

How do you cope with the smell of putrid flesh?

Who is in charge?

How do you cope when you have been on your feet for twelve hours and nobody takes over for night duty?

If you are a doctor and an officer, how do you cope with untrained women around?

This is an intrusion of women into a man's world.

This is a place where you help people to die.

Women who have never left England before journey to a different part of the world out of a sense of duty or as a means of escape.

All of these point in emotional directions, towards implications for dramatic tension, attitudes and sometimes actions, all imply a requirement that the participants will need to find some feeling value.

Consider the thinking of two hypothetical teachers on **Ships**:

Teacher A

- (a) Putting your faith in a vessel so small in a sea so big.
- (b) A journey is a looking forward; there is no going back.
- (c) Only one man is Captain, whether the ship sails or sinks.

Teacher B

- (a) Your hands may be numb and the skin raw, but you pull on the rope and you don't let go.
- (b) What do you write in your diary when you can't see the coastline anymore?
- (c) You can see by the way the colour of the ocean bed is changing that the Captain is heading for a reef, but you keep your mouth shut.

Both teachers' thinking is loaded with emotional implications and both have a drama potential. The difference is in the degree of specificity. Some teachers think from A to B, others think from B to A; others confine themselves to one or the other, but this is thinking with their hearts rather than their heads.

CONCRETISATION

The teacher's thinking also needs to take account of universality as well as of specificity. Crucial to dramatic form is the ability to see the action not as a specific instance, but as a representation. A representation which symbolises something much bigger than itself, something held in common by people, something about which people share feelings.

Actions must be seen as resonators of meaning, thus actions must be thought of as, at once, particular and universal. The implied actions of Teacher B's list on "Ships" must have the power to generate the thoughts and feelings that are nearer to and beyond the abstractions of the A list.

Within the drama, actions may remain functional, but the important thing is that the teacher's thinking never loses touch with the potential power within the most simple action. This is where teacher-in-role (which challenges; gives confidence; promotes belief, sets style; builds tension) is most effective, for the teacher-in-role can establish through use of gesture, tone of voice, physical stance, choice of language, BOTH the particular AND the universal. This is the most important kind of teacher thinking, to think on one's feet - in role, to particularise and universalise at the same time.

The teacher must not only become skilled at this kind of thinking, he must also train his classes to become skilled thinkers; they too must know when it is important to categorise, to reflect on feeling, to find a universal, to seek an analogy and to particularise in an action that crystallises many layers of meaning. What they need is a teacher who will reflect back to them the levels of thought they are trying out.

One of the most useful forms of reflecting back their ideas, their hunches, their feelings and abstractions because it is a way of sharing the publicly testing their thinking, is to use the blackboard.