11. The Attleboro Conferences were organized by Ann Haggerty, Bart O’Connor, Barbara Sandberg, and Ann Shaw to provide specialists in creative drama and/or theatre for children a forum for an exchange of views on issues central to the field.

DRAMA AS EDUCATION

DOROTHY HEATHCOTE

Considered one of England’s outstanding educators, Dorothy Heathcote is currently professor of drama at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Her course in Drama in Education was the first of its kind to be introduced into the curriculum for British teachers. Students come from all over the world to study with her, and her teaching assignments have taken her to the United States and Canada. Mrs. Heathcote left school at the age of fourteen to work as a weaver in a wool mill. At nineteen she won a scholarship to Northern Theatre School and was tutored by Rudolph Laban, J. B. Priestley, and London stage designer Mollie McArthur. She has presented work in action over the BBC and her recent films, Three Looms Waiting and Dorothy Heathcote Talks to Teachers, I and II, have been shown throughout the United States. Her successful use of drama with the disadvantaged has attracted much attention. In this essay Mrs. Heathcote explains her philosophy of education that accords drama a core place in the school curriculum. She sees drama as practice for living, in which the areas of feeling and social relationships are of major concern.

It seems sensible to me that, if there is a way of making the world simpler and more understandable to children, why not use it? Dramatizing makes it possible to isolate an event or to compare one event with another, to look at events that have happened to other people in other places and times perhaps, or to look at one’s own experience after the event, within the safety of knowing that just at this moment it is not really happening. We can, however, feel that it is happening because drama uses the same rules we find in life. People exist in their environment, living a moment at a time and taking those decisions which seem reasonable in the light of their present knowledge about the current state of affairs. The difference
is that in life we have many other things to consider at the same time and often cannot revise a decision taken, except in the long term. So drama can be a kind of playing at or practice of living, tuning up those areas of feeling-capacity and expression-capacity as well as social-capacity.

Poets do this in their poetry, painters in their painting, writers in their books, and film-makers in their films. All these art forms, however, require technical understanding and often elaborate equipment; drama requires only a body, breathing, thinking, and feeling. We begin this practice of playing at an early age because we realize that identifying with others is a human act of which we are capable. It is in the nature of drama that we start exactly where we ourselves are, with our own “prejudiced” views. The diagnostic potential in drama is, for teachers, therefore, very valuable. I believe that classes have the same privilege as other artists in ordering, and reordering their worlds, as they gain new information and experiences.

So for drama with our classes we must select an incident for review (not an easy thing, this isolating of key incidents), and this incident has then to be clothed with such elements as place, period, persons present at the relevant time, season of the year, or any other “fixing” device. This fixing is really the work of the class and reflects their prejudiced view. Some fixes need little assistance; others require much more elaborate preparation; but it must feel real to the players, not to some future audience. Broadly speaking, I use a very simple guide if I am in any doubt. There seem to be three ways of structuring the situation (there are probably a hundred but I have managed to isolate these three): simulation, analogy, and role.

If you choose simulation as a device, you often need to bolster reality by facts, being, and feeling. Much drama in school works on the simulation level, but it is hard for teachers to keep it believable when working with an uncommitted class. If you choose to begin with analogy, emotion can usually be the fixing device. This is the easiest approach, as it is in the true theatre tradition, which is about the spaces between people being filled with meaningful relationships. All too often children never get to that kind of experience in their drama. The third way of starting is with a person who is already fixed, for example, a derelict or a policeman or a rent man, who demands (because of his own strongly fixed role) an immediate emotional response. I often work in role at first because it fixes emotional reaction. I find much prejudice against this way of working, though I maintain it is the equivalent of good paint or clay and proper tools. The proper tools of drama are emotional reaction and the state of being trapped, a state from which one can escape only by working through the situation.

Now we have a starting point. Next we need to know what this starting point is likely to teach our classes because of what it will demand of them. This is the difference between the theatre and classroom teaching. The theatre makes us think, wonder, and identity through our watching position (I know that some theatre also allows us, or pressures us, to participate more actively); the drama of classrooms allows us to employ our own views while experiencing the nature of the tensions so that, in the act of making things happen, we think, wonder, communicate, and face up to the results of our decisions and actions. The most important part seems to me to be the chance to build up the power to reflect on our actions. Without this reflection process, the full use of the work is never exploited. This process demands the building of a storehouse of images and the language with which to reflect.

Some work started in classes serves the short term as, for example, when I recently introduced a class of infant children to the Goddess Pele (the guardian of volcanos in Hawaiian literature). I wanted to make a double thrust into the area of these manifestations because I considered it more efficient to learn, on the one hand, that modern man has a scientific explanation for events, but that in ancient times man had other explanations for the eruptions. I introduced the two kinds of truth. Both kinds seem of equal importance to me, depending on which point of view stretches a class the most at the time. Both certainly deserve recognition. A much longer project, which altered radically the behavior of a class of eleven-year-olds, was the founding of a city-state in which only eleven-year-olds could live. The city-state made laws, developed a system of education (school every other year!), dealt with sickness, negotiated with adults, arranged for food, and handled finance. In the Goddess Pele experience the class stayed as it was and entertained her presence. She could come and go as required. In the city-state, however, though the children were themselves, they began to live according to other rules and to take on different burdens of responsibility.
All drama, regardless of the material, brings to the teacher an opportunity to draw on past relevant experience and put it into use; language, both verbal and nonverbal, is then needed for communication. The qualities of sympathy and feeling are demanded as well as aggression and its results. This is not always comfortable for the teacher, for the expression of the class sometimes threatens her. But if we grant that it is the artist's right to begin from where he is with his view of an idea, then we must also grant that right to our classes when they create. A second opportunity, of course, is our right to insist on the other side of the coin—that of reflecting on the results of our view of the event. In such arts as pottery and painting this is easy; it requires only the hands to stop and the eye to view. It is more difficult in drama because the means of expression is the same as the means of looking, namely, the person himself. Art cannot exist outside the person and take on its own life. It becomes a memory of the event.

I am much criticized for "stopping to consider," especially when "it's going nicely, thank you," but it is for this very reason that I can stop. I know that the event can be rediscovered. Reflection about work is one of the best ways I know to elicit trust, for I can stop work in order to show enthusiasm, to challenge, to demand more, and to show my own involvement as well as my non-interest in value judgments. The outsides of the work matter to me only when they begin to matter to the class; of course, some classes like to feel that they are doing a "proper play" from the start. I want them to feel this, too, in that case, until they find themselves more interested in the ideas than in the shape. The shape is just as interesting; but not everything can be done at once, and I prefer to leave that aspect until later. I am primarily in the teaching business, not the play-making business, even when I am involved in making plays. I am engaged first of all in helping children to think, talk, relate to one another, to communicate. I am interested primarily in helping classes widen their areas of reference and modify their ability to relate to people, though good theatre can come out of this process, too. But first I want good people to come out of it. One difficulty of drama is that often the behavior of a class threatens us because it seems inapplicable to the circumstances we are interested in exploring. Purple trees in paintings do not threaten us as much, for they stay on the paper and are obviously the personal viewpoint of the artist; drama, on the other hand, threatens the very spaces we occupy, and the attitudes of others threaten the very air we breathe.

The procedures are as follows:

1. We make the world smaller by the isolation of an area of concern.
2. We involve groups of people who, in turn, are involved in group decision taking. Groups can work in fantasy or life situations (truth). These are the same; only the rules are different. But whichever they choose, they must realize that in drama there must always be the acceptance of the "one big lie." This is an agreement to pretend that we are in the situation we have chosen. The truths are the truths of how we see the situation, our own behavior, our own language and expression, our own significant actions and the truths we find to be important to us in the situation. I have discovered that all people understand the idea of the one big lie. It is like giving well-mixed paints or good wedged clay to classes, and it eliminates the silliness that often characterizes children's work at first. One reason for self-consciousness is, of course, that the person of the child is used as the material; another, that the rules are hard to perceive. This is unlike the rules of paint and clay, where the clay falls apart and the paint runs off the paper if the mix is not right. The mix in drama is just as fundamental to the success of the work as it is for the visual arts.

3. We establish certain ground rules:

(a) First the situation must be defined. There must be a beginning that each person can recognize as true to the situation. In games the rules stand at all times when the game is played, and the players learn them once and for all. Drama rules may appear to change because the actual start must use the present capacity of the class to relate to each other. In drama the space relationship is the social health of the class, plus the nature of the game it is about on each occasion. This demands very special skills to be mastered by the teacher; books alone cannot teach them, though as we learn how to isolate factors, it will become possible to teach teachers more rapidly than we do at present.
(b) Group views must be put to use so that the drama starts where the groups are (simply because you cannot start from where you aren't). This means that the leader/instigator must find a common starting point. If the common starting point is negative, then the negative must be used—positively, of course. This is why, when I am asked what I teach, I can only give the answer, "I teach children." What else is there to teach at first, whatever the subject area? It seems to me that we all teach children until such time as the classes are committed to an interest in the particular discipline and a desire to learn the skills of that discipline. To commit classes, however, requires strategies. Far too little time is spent in training for strategies or for holding staff conferences regarding those usable strategies that successful teachers stumble upon. Indeed, there should be no need to stumble upon strategies. The study of these should be a constant in-service part of running a school.

(c) There must be some instigation to review progress. Progress can easily be seen in the visual arts, but drama often disguises progress or shows it falsely; for example, if the action moves quickly, the result can be mistaken for quality. A slower approach can suggest lack of progress. I usually take on this responsibility at first because it is difficult for a member of a group to get the ear of the class. Once the social health of a class has improved, however, it is easy for others to assume responsibility and they should be encouraged to take it.

The first leaders are often those who have language confidence, though not necessarily the most ability. Later the demand shifts from talk to action, from the repetition of facts to the understanding of feelings, by the demand for skills of different kinds (often not socially acceptable, such as picking locks or brazening out a stand against authority).

I am much criticized for instigating early review. I do it because one thing that must happen in learning is the development of a sense of commitment to work. I will not guarantee that classes work; what I will guarantee is that I will always keep the work interesting. Another advantage in early review is that it prevents rot from setting in, without its looking as if one had stopped for that reason. So review can be a "failure saver" as well as a "slower down into experience." Reviewing, to me, is a strategy.

(d) Strategies must change according to the class and the drama. Because I often work in role at first, there is an assumption that that is the way I shall continue to work. In an organically changing situation such as teaching, one is constantly seeking to make the first strategies redundant, while seeking to serve the class in other ways. I am weary of explaining to my profession that I do not do the same things every time; I start where the class can start and from then on, as we become more understanding of each other, I try to build a working relationship, in which we can take more liberties with feelings, make more demands upon each other and move more as a team.

A class with poor social health requires a more delicate strategy than one in better health, where there can be some self-help. So strategies are of two kinds: those that stimulate the class to working and those that further the action in the drama. Progression lies in the growing ability of the class to accept the discipline of the drama form and to put the work before personal interest. Concern for each member of the group, ability to take more thoughtful decisions, the courage to risk making and rejecting suggestions—all these are progressions.

There are also the art-form progressions. These are closely related to the above, of course, but there are the extra dimensions of awareness of the overview: the avoidance of anachronisms, the checking of facts, the groping with unfamiliar skills and pursuing them past weariness, the never giving up until it feels right. In other words, it is conceding that sometimes the work matters more than the individual.

There is also the confidence of making the form work for you, revealing how those rules, which seem so limiting to the inept player, help to release the brilliant player. When a class can take liberties out of knowledge rather than out of ignorance, we can rejoice. This is rarely achieved in drama because much of the time students never really understand the rules.

(e) The work must go slowly enough to give a class an
experience. This is very difficult with classes of poor social health because they do not want to go slowly. Another reason for strategy! I never object to any ideas the class wishes to work on, but I do interfere with the pace. I cannot say that this is right, but I believe pace an important aspect of work and I do much to ensure that it contributes to the best experience. This is an area that a class cannot manage for itself.

(f) Tension of some kind must be present in the drama. Teachers rarely understand how to provide it. The simple factor in making tension work is that something must be left to chance but not more than one thing at a time. So long as there is that one factor and no one in the room knows precisely when that thing will occur (though everything has been set up so that it must occur), we have tension.

Subtle tensions are useless in a class that will only respond to cruder ones. An example of such a tension might be waiting in the dark for an intruder to enter a room. Or a less crude one, demanding more patience while awaiting one's turn to be interrogated, knowing that one of the group will be found guilty. The pressure must come from within the situation, not from the teacher/role insisting that it be done right.

Every conceivable situation can provide the tension to suit any type of class. I remember a group of delinquent children (fourteen-year-olds) who moved very quickly through a series of such tensions, each one making the group work harder than the preceding because each one demanded more of them while allowing them satisfaction. The first was a mugging; the second a verbal threat to a lady of wealth to blackmail her son; the third a painful forging of a document that would fool the guards; the fourth a telephone call made under the nose of the police, warning a friend of a police raid. Finally, the wait outside a temple to find out whose baby—yes, baby (and they themselves were the mothers)—would be chosen to be sacrificed in a prayer for rain. They also did the ritual mourning.

One feature of using tension in teaching is the opportunity it offers for using the same situation while it apparently changes for the class. An example of this was seen with a group of retarded children working on the theme of Macbeth (not, of course, the text, for they could not read):

Tension 1: Aiding the King safely through a forest in which dwelt a wild, often hunted, but never captured boar of great strength and size.

Tension 2: Finding that the lair of the boar was occupied and needing to be sufficiently silent while in that area.

Tension 3: Finding that the boar was loose and might attack at any moment.

Tension 4: Finding that the old guide, who would have been able to predict the boar's reaction, had fallen sick and could not help them.

Tension 5: Realizing that darkness was falling and they were lost in the forest.

This class explored fear and responsibility each time, while apparently changing their play. Each time they carried over more of the factors involved in looking after kings. They also "grew" a vocabulary in order to discuss the subject of fear. This came about because of "teacher interference." Before the teacher can interfere, however, the class must understand or make a decision as to which factor it will reinforce and why, while apparently changing the tension. I chose the problem of having to keep the King safe because I believed it helped the class to avoid using their own instinctive aggressive behavior, which would have been to kill the boar and thus rid themselves of the situation quickly. If a solution comes too easily, there is no opportunity for a class to be stretched.

(g) Feelings and thoughts that exist inside persons have to be made explicit to the group so that it can see and respond to the expression in the group. In drama this expression takes place through what can be seen to happen, what can be heard to happen, and what can be felt to happen.

The elements of darkness and light, stillness and movement, sound and silence are held in a constantly changing expression of life. In drama these must be in use from the very start and I personally try from the beginning to introduce classes to the use of them so that they begin to be
selective about the way they will make their statements, though I do not necessarily discuss them in any technical way. I might say, "How will we first know that a monster has been here while we were away?" From the answers I receive I move the class to active decisions, which can be seen to employ these elements.

It is the use in common of these elements that make classroom drama and theatre kin. In theatre they are used for their effect on other people whereas in teaching they are used to make the impact on the very persons who create the work. Drama is about filling the spaces between people with meaningful experiences. This means that emotion is at the heart of drama experience but it is tempered with thought and planning. The first is experienced through the tension and the elements; the second, through the reviewing process. Out of these we build reflective processes, which in the end are what we are trying to develop in all our teaching. Without the development of the power of reflection, what have we? It is reflection that permits the storing of knowledge, the recalling of power of feeling, and memory of past feelings.

All too often we phase out emotion in our classroom work as if it were unimportant. (Certainly emotion is harder to deal with than thinking because children do not expect to use their emotions in school.) If we take the emotion out of drama, there is only the burden left. I recently heard of a group of "Roman soldier juniors," who were expected to attack a British fort in a "noisy way but without making a noise." I do not blame the teacher, who was trying to avoid disturbing the class next door. I do not blame the children, who mouthed all the words they would have spoken, had they been permitted. They were neither fish, flesh, nor fowl as they tried to do a noisy thing quietly, while trying to be the efficient fighting machine they understood the Roman soldiers to have been. They had to do all the external things while being denied the internal experience they needed in order to find their truth. If they could have made a silent attack, out of the necessity of a silent approach, they might have managed it.

I blame only the training of the young teacher, which led him to think that what he was doing was drama.

Please note that I am not quarreling with the fact that the children could make no noise—only that they were expected to do and believe in noisy things while keeping silence. If they had decided to try to attack in silence, then their movements could have been a real experience of battle. Likewise, if they had been allowed to assume a bargaining position, which would have demanded a careful choice of words, they might have experienced the significance of the spoken language while facing an enemy who misunderstood the words and the promises.

I believe that the child and the actor have to follow the same rules. It is not possible to simplify these rules; it is only possible to simplify the demands we make. Some potters make clay work harder for themselves than others do; some painters do the same with paint; some actors say more with fewer gestures; and some musicians get more out of fewer notes. The processes are the same for the great and the mediocre, but the expressive use that is made of these processes is the varying factor. Surely we owe our classes the real material that our artists have to use. Drama is possibly more liable to criticism than other art forms because the rules exist in use, by people in action, and they never exist outside that reference except in the memory.

The elements of darkness/light, stillness/movement, and silence/sound offer an incredible range of expression. They embrace all clothing worn, all places in which persons find themselves, all words said, all groups formed, all sounds made, all gestures employed; and the teacher must master the flexibility of the elements so as to make them available at will to their classes.

The method of teaching classes is usually via the theatre exercise. But exercises have a built-in, self-destroying force, particularly when used with uncommitted classes. They have a drive toward ending themselves. True drama for discovery is not about ends; it is about journeys and not knowing how the journeys may end. Once there is real commitment to this way of learning, there is a reason for studying the factors we employ in order to isolate and practice techniques.

But let us give a few examples before we start on the means by
which ideas are communicated. We have crippled our children beyond the breaking point by insisting on rewardless labor before they are given the opportunity to experience any reality. Learning about being a person comes from trying out, not by practicing for it. I am not saying there is no value in exercise skills. I am saying that we must have some motivation for doing a thing before we start imposing our theories. When drama is exercise-driven, the natural discoveries that come from emotional involvement cannot arise. Pace, pitch, tempo are discovered in the heat of the moment. Exercises exist to take emotion out, so that coolness and repetition can exist. I know you can devise exercises for emotion, but why should you with children who have the real thing so readily available just waiting to be tapped?

Recently I was working with a class of nine-year-olds who were just becoming interested in the Luddite rebellion, which took place when the first spinning frames were destroyed by the incensed weavers in 1812. The children set up a frame in “heat.” That is, they knew nothing about such frames but in confrontation with an owner of a mill, who was impatient to see the frame working, they not only built it slowly from hints given in role but they also developed a sense of responsibility as skilled workers, brave men who dared build such things in troubled times. They developed at the same time a distinct feeling of the rhythm of building together. Exercises do not work so efficiently. Their value lies in the way they help to isolate a factor and let special attention be paid to it. I say that exercises are for those who have already tasted the riches of a tough and real experience. Far too many classes never get to the reality of their art because of time spent on exercises.

Drama, then, teaches in the following way. Taking a moment in time, it uses the experiences of the participants, forcing them to confront their own actions and decisions and to go forward to a believable outcome in which they can gain satisfaction. This approach brings classes into those areas that in the main are avoided in school: emotional control, understanding of the place and importance of emotion, and language with which to express emotion. We expect good fathers, husbands, honest citizens, fine sensitive friends, tolerant and understanding neighbors to emerge from the classes we teach but we have done very little to prepare them for these roles.

I should not criticize our educational system so much, if we did not profess to be doing more than making children literate. We talk of career classes, for example, and then we proceed to ignore the relevant areas of responsibility that are emotionally based, except for a little advice in the form of cool discussion. We talk about religious education in our English schools and behave with arrogance toward our children. These and many other subject areas demand a steady reaction of emotional input for thorough exploration but we often present our material in such a way that emotional material has to be treated without emotional response.

Though drama is probably discussed more today in terms of teaching and learning than it has been in the past, it is far from being fully exploited in our schools. It continues to limp along, never quite able to show its potential because the system, as it stands, preserves jealously the “one class, one teacher” syndrome, the “everybody has to be the same age in the group” syndrome, the “teacher has the secrets” syndrome, the “we can’t have more than one person making decisions” syndrome, the “let’s keep everything in short periods” syndrome, and above all, the “let’s not have too many children surprising the teacher” syndrome. I know, of course, that pockets of superhuman experiment do exist, and I do not want to denigrate these in any way. But the basic problems remain and give rise to the apathy and the social ill health in our classes.

PROCEDURES AND PRACTICE

First, let us examine a simple table. I think that the best learning takes place when there is a balance between the two extremes, but I present them here as opposite sides of the same coin. When I am actually teaching, I am happiest in an area that lies midway between the two methods as, for example, in the Goddess Pele work mentioned earlier, where the truths of scientific explanation and myth were taught simultaneously.

In Informal Approach (often referred to as left handed):
emphasis on applying experience in the act of learning
using the emotions to aid understanding
being involved in the teaching
being able to challenge the teaching
taking decisions to modify the pattern of the plan

Formal Approach (often referred to as right handed):
emphasize on learning from others' information
learning through the mind
convergent learning
objective learning
strong reliance on the proven

It will be readily seen that these two methods need not be in conflict; some kind of happy medium can be found in order to give the teacher security. Indeed, it is not factual information and emotion that oppose one another; it is the approach to the class and the strategies employed. The left hand relies heavily upon mutual appreciation and mutual decision making between teacher and class. Drama is not an efficient means for straight factual teaching, but it provides a rich ground for making facts understood in action. When building a spinning frame, for example, if you are not certain of the details and are asked if all the cogs run smoothly, you either ask questions about its construction or someone tells you (there is always more information in the group than emerges at first), or you do the thing that feels right. It may elicit the question, “What about those under the shafting?”

And so it goes on until looking at a plan seems a good idea; then you may either gather around the board and draw what you think you have been building or look at a picture of a real frame. The main thing, of course, is that when you do look at a spinning frame, the illustrations must not only be of good quality but may be more complex than they might otherwise have been. The class studying the Goddess Pele worked simultaneously in the areas of correct vocabulary, technical detail, ancient beliefs, the power of Pele as seen in her person, peril to people, and the formation of new lands. In a formal approach the class would have dealt with these elements one at a time, gradually building up a factual picture. With Pele to challenge and be challenged by them, to offer her explanation in reply to theirs, the students absorbed many layers of feeling and information at once. Also, it was possible to test the understanding straight away, for many diagnostic techniques can be used during the action to test the grasp of concept and factual understanding.

The basis of all my class contacts seems to depend more and more upon a few relatively simple techniques. I plan the areas where the class will make the decisions. I also plan strategies that I shall use to get the class committed to work. This planning is always done from an inside experience approach rather than from an external tasks approach. I try to know the impact of every verbal statement I make as I make it. I select all signals with extreme care and sensitivity, even when working with my back to the wall with what I call “dragon’s teeth” classes. I spend much time examining the uses of questions and the types of questions asked. I recognize a dup question and set about recovering from it immediately. One dud may take ten or more other good questions to make a recovery. I decide when and why I shall leave role and become interrogator-leader. People assume that because I use role early, I mean to go on with it. I use role in order to teach the class that emotion is the heart of drama. Talking about emotion is no substitute for feeling it. This is the advantage of being in role but, of course, it is a complicated tool and takes some patience to learn how to use it. I have not yet met a teacher who cannot use it and who does not learn more about the use of drama in her teaching as a result of its use.

I seek rather than plant information. And I never mix plans. In other words, I decide very clearly what the lesson should achieve. It may be an unplanned session when I deliberately decide to test the class in order to find out where it is; all subsequent sessions can be based on what I learn in the beginning. Or it may be a session especially designed to introduce some aspect of learning, such as the Pele work discussed earlier. It may be very specific, such as the work done to readjust opinion or to bolster confidence in order to answer questions in examination. Or it may be to help study how the text comes alive on the stage.

Drama is so very flexible because it places decisions in the hands of the classes; the teacher acts as midwife. I select all the best artifacts, literature, and reference books I can find (adult materials for the most part, as I find them superior). I do not withhold information if I can find a way to impart it. I believe far too much information is withheld from classes, or children feel that it is being withheld, which has the same effect.

I work slowly in the beginning. I do not move forward until the class is committed to the work. This does not mean that I stand still; it means that I use many strategies to keep in the same place while