The Dramatic imagination

Talk for Learning? Do we really mean it...

This keynote will highlight MoE projects with children examining the power shifts dramatic learning can enable through the use of MoE. The 3 circles of inquiry will be explained and the ingredients of the Dramatic Imagination.

We can all imagine. Human kind has relied on this phenomenon to make meaning since the dawn of time. How did our ancestors explain the great mysteries of their contexts? The storms the night, the fire, other creatures, lightning and thunder? We create the images in the minds eye so that re-call, conjecture, creative use of the mind as well as summoning emotional memories, are the norm. So how does talk help learners into the world of the imagination and is it any use to them if they do? Things that stand for something else-things that represent other things are all part of the world of imaginative play and we now know how significant play is in the growth of the mind. In my early days as a teacher, play was seen as insubstantial and definitely something to grow out of! Yet play is the real substance of life and the world has moved a long way since the misconceptions of the 60’s in our revelations about play theory and the development of the mind and intellect.

For those of you new to the field of the range dramatic modes classified by the North East school of D4L, we can use a simplistic diagram to help us on the terrain.

- THE THREE CIRCLES MOE/DFL/INQUIRY

So returning to play and the dramatic imagination…. it was Dorothy Heathcote who shifted our attention to the infrastructures of life with that mind of genius of hers. She
introduced us to the significance of the dramatic artist working in collaboration with learners to create fictive and active meanings to learn. In her genius where she excavated the infrastructure of dramatic art she named the un-named at the time, dissecting the medium of drama with surgical skill.

The dramatic imagination we all knew about—but the dimensions she introduced by extending existing knowledge placed her on the world academic stage.

The 3 CONTINUA of the ‘dramatic’ imagination…..

A. SOUND AND SILENCE
B. MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS
C. DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Her genius was to suggest, model and explain to those of us who use drama in all its forms, that the trained and skilled adult worker could summon the dramatic imagination, deeply embedded within the infrastructure of the medium, through the symbolic representations of language as well as through the iconic and expressive. Enormously influenced by Robert Breen’s Chamber Theatre, Dr Heathcote uncovered the concept of the ‘the significance of the dramatic imagination’ in all fictional settings across the human creative spectrum. No mean feat.

Yesterday in a very socially deprived and emotionally challenged school in Norwich a class of year 4 students and I, as well as the class teacher and several other adults explored the first Roman invasion and the inquiry questions surrounding the event. The challenge was to ensure that the children had something to explore rather than receive.

• Task: What inquiry questions are we talking about then?
• Talk to a neighbor ………

• Have a look at the planning sheets, would they pass muster for an Ofsted??

Clearly the inquiry questions are critical especially as historians’ use the D-imagination all the time, after all, how else is it possible to understand how people behaved as they did in the past with such little data? But there is another genre of dramatic inquiry I used when I worked in another community based entirely on a fictive context. Another very annoying aspect of our work is to define what exact genre we are working in at any time. For example—when the class are confronted by a Roman general who has returned to Rome with ‘his tail between his legs’ asks for the senate to understand his loss, is this fictional, docu-drama, drama, improvisation etc etc??

Any way…….I have been working in Palestine for the past several years and came across a Bedouin Community to the south of Jericho where a school known as Al Khan al Ahamer exists on the barren rocky high slopes of the southern Jericho dessert. An international alert had been called since the school was under scrutiny by the Israeli Military as an illegal building. It seemed it was too permanent. A wonderful teacher at the settlement had heard of the power of the dramatic mode through the ground breaking work of Wasim Kurdi at the Qattan Institute, and literally begged in a heart churning open letter, for anyone who could spare the time, to work with the children in drama, before the school was crushed by the machines. This was the week before Christian Christmas and on the 25th December 2011 a court was to rule the fete of the school at a hearing in Jerusalem. Ironies abounded for those that could see them. The decree was that the roads to the school over the desert should be closed as they constituted a hazard to the main traffic travelling from and to Jerusalem and Jericho. The effect was to close the
school but the buildings still remain as many people across the world have been aware of
the context and were closely monitoring the outcomes.

Here is a synopsis of the message from Karimer……

Here is what we intended to do………STORY OF THE WAVING MAN IN THE
DESSERT. NADER AS THE MAN AFTER AN AGREED REPRESENTATION.
FIRST STEPS AND THE BALLOONS…

Karimer felt the day was a great success for the children as they had used forms of
knowledge and representation unfamiliar to Bedouins for example the use of pens to
draw and the engagement of the expressive form, which is not used at all in the teaching
methods found in the Middle East. Being familiar with the 3 modes of representation is of
course at the heart of the Heathcote’s teachings and method. Playing with ideas the
children began to find ways to play and engage in the context of the man in question so
we can begin to see how Jerome Bruner all those years ago in 1964 in ‘Towards a theory
of Instruction’ was going on about-the ICONIC/SYMBOLIC/EXPRESSIVE modes of
human representations as well as what he called the LEGITIMATE AND
ILLEGITIMATE.

So what has any of this to do with MoE, learning and the human condition? Recent
studies and new thinking in the realms of neuro-science is beginning to challenge the old
world order and of course is very annoying for many. Just when we thought we knew
everything about schooling and learning along come these young, and so called brilliant
scientists and look into areas they just don’t have any business looking into. What on
earth will this all lead to?
This of course is the story of our species! Galileo found exactly the same if you remember and Brecht used the context as a wonderful metaphor for the human capacity to cling onto the old…

*I don’t know why people worry about new ideas. I have enough problems with the old ones.*

*(John Cage 20th century composer of music the ‘avant-garde’ literally translated as ‘the advanced guard’).*

So getting back to MoE and enabling progress. We know that for the human mind to grow and for our young to progress *stimulation, motivation, engagement and challenge* are the keys to such growth. So the search is on for methods and practices that take us into the ‘avant-garde’ of schooling and learning. So what are we looking for?

1. Triggering meaningful engagements beyond the subjective/cognitive enables the human mind to create synaptic bondings as in the growth of the human intellect in babies.

2. Stimulation of the brain beyond recall creates understanding and the capacity to ‘see into’ an event of significance that further triggers challenge, thinking and connectivity, to what is already known. We know through the early pioneering work of R.S. Peters that the brain needs *constructs* to organize its knowledge blocks to grow further and it is not the number of brain cells that matter. It is a matter of training the existing brain cells to work harder and together to create the construct matrices for new KSU to be stored AND IMMEDIATELY ready for applying.

This all sounds terribly grand I am sure! But in the humble classroom, where life is real for a teacher, such lofty ideals are possible and on a day-to-day minute-to-minute basis if
they know not only a little about how the human brain works a little more but more importantly, the significance of the dramatic imagination for the life of the learners.

We see a depiction of a working child in the times of our past. As it stands, possibilities abound. So let me outline a context to be explored by a class in the heart of east London. They are a class of 10-year-old children. They are studying Victorian England under the broad inquiry question: ‘who exactly were the Victorians?’ The challenge for the teacher is that there are 23 different first use languages used at home. The class has English as its second language. We can imagine the drive of the school where such classrooms are the norm from EYs to Year 6. Language development!! In all its forms. So the class teacher creates a context to arrest the children’s minds by asking the class to agree to a contract of make believe. (We are not asking anyone for permission here!) Listen to the difference of linguistic registers and meaning between these teacher/leader of learning/facilitator type utterances:

1. T: I am going to represent someone in our story today about the Victorians, is that OK? (Permission asking!)

2. T: Would you agree for our work today on Victorians that I will represent and modern builder who has a house to sort out right now that was built ages ago in Victorian times? Class: Yes we can agree…. (Through signs of agreement i.e. gesture and language. Clumsy but close to using an authentic voice...)

3. T: I was wondering if we could agree to imagine I represent someone else today for our work with these Victorian people. There is so much to do in a house that is as old as the one I have been asked to work on and already we have had to call the police! What do you think, could we make something like that work? Class…
Each of these negotiations will carry different genes in their meaning ‘received’ so in my rather minimal way I am trying to suggest that the symbolic/linguistic forms of utterances need careful considerations when we use triggers and portals so to speak into the expressive forms—such as we do in dramatic engagements for learning.

So to sum then:

1. The linguistic register of adults using any of the dramatic manifestations will impact deeper on the minds and hearts of people if the ingredients of the dramatic imagination are used ‘deliberately’.

2. Hopefully I have taken you through some of the key concepts I believe are useful for practitioners so I remind us all of the main description of the keynote:

3. This keynote will highlight MoE projects with children examining the power shifts dramatic learning can enable through the use of MoE. The 3 circles of inquiry will be explained and the ingredients of the Dramatic Imagination.

I do hope some of the content has been useful to hear as I am very sure that there are keys here to unlock the minds and heal children from passivity and educational neglect in many settings in the hands of teachers who know what they are doing.
