

# Drama as Experience: A Critical View

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Contemporary drama education theorists tend to justify drama education in terms not of theatrical knowledge and skill but of affective understanding of self and society. Moreover, it is the undergoing of the experience of drama itself that is thought to be of value in engendering the kinds of understandings at issue. I argue that there are significant difficulties with such claims about the educational value of dramatic experience. These difficulties centre on the possibilities for learning from unguided experiences, the role of reflection in dramatic learning, the danger of manipulation of students, and the problems of narrowness of curriculum.

Les théoriciens contemporains ont tendance à justifier les cours de théâtre non pas par les connaissances et les compétences qu'ils permettraient d'acquérir dans le domaine, mais plutôt par la compréhension affective de soi et de la société qui en dériveraient. On prétend en outre que l'expérience même du théâtre engendrerait cette compréhension. L'auteure soutient qu'il est très difficile de mettre de l'avant de pareilles affirmations sur la valeur éducative de l'expérience du théâtre, compte tenu des possibilités d'apprentissage à partir d'expériences non encadrées, du rôle que joue la réflexion dans les cours de théâtre, du danger de manipuler les élèves et des problèmes suscités par les limites d'un programme.

Unlike many subjects offered in schools, the arts in general, and drama in particular, must continually justify their place in the curriculum. And, again unlike many other curriculum areas, the justification offered for drama has centred not on the learning intrinsic to the subject, but rather on personal and social understanding. This is not to say that such understanding is totally ignored in other subject areas, but rather that in virtually no other area is this seen as the only goal. Thus many contemporary drama education theorists justify drama education in terms not of theatrical knowledge and skills but of effective understanding of the self and the social world. Way (1967), for example, refers to drama education as providing "emotional, intuitive, and social training" (p. 10), and is variously echoed by such noted theorists as Slade (1954), Heathcote (see Wagner, 1976), Bolton (1984), and Courtney (1980, 1989). All these theorists believe it is the experience of drama itself that is of value in engendering the kinds of understandings at issue. In what follows I critically examine these theorists' claims about the educational value of dramatic experience for personal and social understanding.

## THE DRAMA/THEATRE DICHOTOMY

The justification of drama education in terms of personal and social understanding rather than of the understanding and appreciation of theatre is based on a dichotomy between drama and theatre that pervades the drama education literature. Way (1967) characterizes the difference thus: “‘theatre’ is largely concerned with *communication* between actors and an audience; ‘drama’ is largely concerned with *experience* by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience” (pp. 2–3). Drama is characterized by what both Bolton (1984) and Courtney (1989) refer to as dramatic playing: participants focus on “being in” the dramatic situation and experiencing the emotions it generates, not on portraying the emotions to an audience, as would be the case in theatre.

Drama and theatre were originally viewed as in opposition, but some contemporary theorists now see them as representing the ends of a continuum (Bolton, 1984; Morgan & Saxton, 1987). Nonetheless, the drama end of the continuum is given educational priority, while activities related to theatre are neglected or downplayed. The dichotomy between drama and theatre can certainly be questioned, as can the denial of theatre’s educational value which is predicated upon it. These tasks I have taken up elsewhere (Bailin, in press). Here I shall cast a critical eye on claims about dramatic experience’s possibilities for personal and social understanding.

## DRAMA AS EXPERIENCE

The claim is seldom made for most school subjects that simply experiencing them will contribute to students’ social and emotional understandings, even for such subjects as Social Studies that deal with human issues and problems. What is it, then, about the experience of drama that is thought to be unique and thus to contribute to this type of understanding? Drama educational theorists hold divergent views about the exact nature of the experience of drama. Way, for example, views drama experience as a kind of direct experience transcending knowledge and appealing to intuition. Slade views it in terms of self-expression. And Bolton characterizes it as a kind of pretense involving an interaction between the fictional and the actual.

Nonetheless, all three theorists agree that certain features of dramatic experience give it transformative power. One of these features is that drama deals with emotions. Thus it can provide for a kind of understanding thought absent in more cognitively oriented subjects. Drama experience is also direct and intuitive. It is not mediated by intellect but “touches the heart and soul,” to quote Way (1967, p. 1). With respect to the power of dramatic experience, perhaps the main feature is its eliciting of spontaneous reactions. Drama is in the present; it

is characterized by “a spontaneous, existential quality,” to use Bolton’s (1983, p. 53) phrase; it involves “living at life rate,” to use Heathcote’s (1969/1984b, p. 55). Thus it allows for direct, authentic, intuitive reaction by participants, rather than a calculated intellectual response. Some theorists do give a role to reflection in drama, as I discuss later, but I think it nonetheless accurate to say that all theorists under consideration connect drama’s educational value with the spontaneity of response characteristic of dramatic experience.

#### THE DILEMMA

The experiences involved in drama are thought to be special, then, in that they deal with the emotions, are direct and intuitive, and elicit spontaneous reactions. Because of these features, it is believed that undergoing these experiences has educational value for students. This claim, however, is problematic. Even Dewey, that champion of experience, recognized that not all experiences are equally valuable, and that much depends on the nature of the experience and the possibilities it affords for future growth. And we have been reminded by numerous theorists—Peters (1972) and Dearden (1976), for example—that personal growth may take any number of directions, not all of which are deemed educationally valuable. Thus this view about the educational value of dramatic experience faces the same dilemma confronting all child-centred educational theories: either the experience is totally open-ended and unguided (but in this case there is no reason to believe the experience will necessarily be of educational value), or the teacher really does have an agenda, a vision of a desirable direction for growth (but this would undermine some assumptions about the educational value of dramatic experience). The second case poses the additional problem that the educational agenda is hidden or even denied and so not readily available for critical scrutiny.

#### DRAMA AS UNGUIDED EXPERIENCE

Some of the theorists under discussion contend that the experience they provide through drama is open-ended and deny that they move the experience in particular directions. This is very much the position of Slade (1954), who sees drama as involving free self-expression. Nonetheless, he does go on to list at length character traits he believes such self-expression can foster:

cleanliness, tidiness, gracefulness, politeness, cheerfulness, confidence, ability to mix, thoughtfulness for others, discrimination, moral discernment, honesty and loyalty, ability to lead companions, reliability, and a readiness to remain steadfast under difficulties appear to be the result of correct and prolonged Drama Training. (p. 125)

The unguided approach is also advocated by Courtney (1989) in his claim that we must “start with the learner — not with the idea of where the activity will lead

us, which imposes our ideas on the child” (p. 15). The problem here is that the activity may lead in any number of directions, some of which may be contrary to the kind of outcomes claimed for drama education. So, for example, it is difficult to see why simply having dramatized experiences would result in the kinds of personality traits Slade describes in such rhapsodic detail, unless, of course, the teacher deliberately shaped and rewarded these traits in the course of the drama activity. That engaging in dramatic self-expression will automatically increase participants’ honesty, moral discernment, and even cleanliness is a claim even the most optimistic drama educator might well find difficult to accept.

To take another example, imagine a young boy engaged in a dramatic improvisation centring on a domestic conflict. His immediate, spontaneous, intuitive response might be violence toward the female participant. This reaction, in itself, hardly seems of educational value. Moreover, the reaction might well be reinforced by other children participating in the drama, given similar background experiences. But a simple replay or even reinforcement of conventional responses is surely not what educational drama theorists envision. Rather, they hope for an advance in social or emotional understanding. Yet the claim that enhanced understanding will naturally emerge from enacting situations calling for immediate, unreflective responses is without justification, since students will react in dramatized situations precisely as they have learned to react in daily life.

This problem is also evident in Way’s (1967) formulation of drama education as practising living. When we speak of practice in other contexts, for example, practising the piano, we do not mean simply continual repetition in the same manner but rather trying for improvement according to standards of superior performance. Thus practising the piano does not involve simply repeating a piece, mistakes and all, but rather attempting to correct errors and to play better. Without guidance, feedback, or models of superior performance, the student will likely continue to repeat mistakes; performance will not improve. Dewey (1964) points out that simply sawing a bow across violin strings will not make a violinist, and continues:

It is a certain quality of practice not mere practice, which produces the expert and the artist. Unless the practice is based upon rational principles, upon insights into facts and their meaning, “experience” simply fixes incorrect acts into wrong habits. (p. 201)

So too in the “practice” involved in the drama situation, without guidance, feedback, or models of appropriate responses, there is no reason to think that students will do other than repeat learned, conventional responses.

It may be that Way (1967) falls prey to uncritically trusting immediate unreflective responses and disallowing reflection because his view pits intuition against intellect. The latter he characterizes as “a tangible and examinable process of understanding and thinking,” while the former he describes as “an imaginative and emotional and therefore intangible process of relishing and

enjoying, irrespective of whether or not there is full understanding" (p. 5). Perhaps because of this opposition he is unwilling to allow reason a role. This opposition is, however, untenable. I have argued elsewhere (Bailin, 1991) that not all intuitions are trustworthy, but that those that are tend to be based on past experience and implicit rational assessments. What we view as intuitive knowledge is knowledge assimilated and connected with emotional cues. Thus we may intuitively lash out at someone having explicitly assessed neither that their demeanour is threatening nor that this is appropriate behaviour in the face of a threat. Rather, we experience an emotion triggered by similarities between this and other threatening experiences in the past. Such intuitive responses are often invaluable, leading us to appropriate action without our having to take the time to go through a process of explicit assessment. Yet they may also be misleading and inappropriate if the implicit assessments are faulty (the individual in question may not have been threatening us, or lashing out may be an inappropriate response to the threat in question). Ultimately the assessments implicit in our intuitive reactions must be reflected upon and tested against experience. Thus the student whose intuitive response in the domestic conflict improvisation is violence will learn nothing, or, worse still, may have his reaction reinforced, unless there is opportunity for rational reflection on the reasons, both personal and social, for his reaction, and on the appropriateness of this type of response.

Even a number of drama education theorists who advocate drama as experience point to the danger that drama experience may result in simple repetition of learned, conventional, and sometimes negative responses. Thus Heathcote suggests that prejudice usually emerges first in student improvisations and often is reinforced (1971/1984d, p. 70). And Bolton (1983) states that

unless the teacher, at least, recognizes which door he is trying to open, . . . unless he goes through some labelling process, he may simply allow drama to do what play does most of the time: reinforce what the child already knows. (p. 67)

#### DRAMA AS DIRECTED EXPERIENCE

As a consequence of these types of problems, some drama education theorists take hold of the second horn of the dilemma, admitting that they really do have in mind some ends for the students' learning, some vision of what are appropriate or positive reactions or interactions, and that they direct the drama lesson so as to encourage these. Thus Heathcote refers frequently to the teacher's intentions, and the above quotation from Bolton (1983) similarly demonstrates his recognition that the teacher must have some learnings in mind. Let us, then, examine the nature of these two theorists' claims about the educational value of dramatic experience.

*Heathcote*

Heathcote conceptualizes dramatic experience as “concerned with what we discover for ourselves and the group when we place ourselves in a human situation containing some element of desperation” (1967/1984c, p. 44). She claims it involves gaining information in the area of emotional experience, thus dealing with the areas of emotional control, understanding the place and importance of emotion and language with which to express emotion. These, she claims, are necessary for life-roles such as being a good parent, an honest citizen, a sensitive friend, or a tolerant neighbour (1975/1984a, p. 99).

One question arising is how such learning takes place, particularly in light of Heathcote’s admission that it is usually prejudice which emerges first and is reinforced. She seems to believe students’ attitudes will be widened and challenged by the variety of attitudes exhibited in the group, and that the teacher also has an important role to play in exposing and challenging attitudes, although nonjudgmentally. Yet there seems no reason to be confident that such challenge will necessarily emanate from within the class, given that class members may well have been raised with similar social attitudes, and that this type of challenge has not necessarily arisen when these students have interacted in life. In fact, negative attitudes might even be reinforced through peer pressure.

This seems to lead to the conclusion that, for there to be some change in attitude, the teacher will have to play a crucial role in evoking it. But the teacher’s role cannot, then, be simply to expose attitudes. For change to occur, there would have to be some assessment that the attitudes are inappropriate. This would necessitate reflection on reasons for particular responses, both individual and social, and on the appropriateness of the responses in light of normative considerations. Daniels and Parkinson (1976) similarly argue that role playing is unlikely to enhance empathy unless it is accompanied by the acquisition of concepts and information coming from ethical theories, logical studies of normative discourse, psychology, and sociology (p. 336).

The learning in such cases is, then, a result not simply of direct dramatic experience, but rather of reflection on the experience in conjunction with the experience, and indeed Heathcote herself acknowledges the central role of reflection. But if this is the case, then the rationale for dramatic experience as transformative precisely because it is direct, spontaneous, intuitive, and unmediated by intellect is seriously undercut. Only a much more limited claim about the value of dramatic experience could be sustained.

There is also the danger of narrowness in this type of curriculum, the danger of simply maintaining students within the narrow confines of their present experience. Hornbrook (1991) warns of this possibility: “The limited agenda of ‘issues’ characteristic of a certain kind of drama lesson often plays to a narrow parochialism which confines rather than releases students’ imagination” (p. 38). But if we believe that education has something to do with broadening students

and enlarging their vision, then it would seem the most educationally useful way to deploy these role-playing strategies would be in the context of learning new materials that expand students' horizons and broaden their experience—for example, literature or history.

*Bolton*

Bolton (1984), on the other hand, sees the main purpose of drama as “the development of common understanding through the exercise of basic mental powers, that is, mental powers that are over and above the conventional thinking required of a particular Form of Knowledge” (p. 151), and says drama involves “the mastery of a common understanding of life” (p. 163). The kind of understanding he has in mind is not merely intellectual but also intuitive; it is in the form of what he calls feeling-values, which are feelings tied to judgment. He describes the teacher's purposes thus:

Whatever the topic, that is, the context for the drama, the teacher is concerned with refining in some way the feeling-judgment the children bring to it. The refining may take the form of a clarification, a broadening, a breaking of stereotyped thinking, a challenge of prejudice, a questioning of assumptions, making the implicit explicit, seeing something in a new light. (p. 61)

There are numerous problems with Bolton's characterization of the nature of learning gained through dramatic experience. The idea that there are basic mental powers which can be exercised is highly problematic. Ryle (1949) demonstrated that it makes no sense to view mind in terms of powers that can be exercised much as we exercise muscles, and numerous philosophers (e.g., Barrow, 1990; McPeck, 1981) have pointed to difficulties with the notion that generic mental powers or skills can be acquired and then simply applied across disciplines. Rather, our understanding derives from traditions of inquiry that have arisen through culture. This renders nonsensical Elliot's statement, cited approvingly by Bolton (1984), that the educated man [sic], rather than gaining from initiation into the disciplines, in fact loses his genuineness as a human being (p. 150). This implies that if one stripped away culture, the genuine human being would be underneath. But as Barrow (1992) has pointed out, these traditions of inquiry structure our reality. If we abandoned them, we would not know how to think (p. 29).

This problematic view of the nature of understanding allows Bolton (1984) to propose that dramatic experience could provide a common understanding “over and above the conventional thinking required of a particular Form of Knowledge” (p. 151). He fails to realize the degree to which the kinds of understanding he views as common actually depend upon culture and forms of understanding, and, further, the degree to which they are contested. What he offers up as

common understanding is actually his own view of the world, and any proffered view of the world must be acknowledged as such and examined critically.

This becomes clearer if we look at some of Bolton's (1983) examples of kinds of common understanding that can arise from dramatic experience:

Thus it may be that as a direct result of a drama experience, some children in the class might for the first time realize that being an historian is like being a detective, or that a scientist's persistence in examining what is natural is a way of ignoring what is supernatural, or that motherhood is a mixture of joy and pain or that freedom has limitations or that policemen are real people with houses and families or that heroes not are [sic] without blemishes, and so on. (p. 66)

That scientists' persistence is a way of ignoring the supernatural is certainly not an understanding to which we would all agree! And it would be difficult to come up with a common understanding of the limits of freedom. What are the appropriate limits to freedom is a highly debatable issue within philosophy and political theory, and the view one adopts ultimately depends on one's political philosophy. Moreover, one could certainly imagine dramatic improvisations in which the "common" understandings envisaged by the teacher were even more blatantly problematic. For example, a teacher could structure an improvisation in which the students "might for the first time realize" that one ought to support one's country right or wrong, that business people are oppressors, or that a woman's place is in the home.

The possibility of manipulating students is particularly acute in such cases because students are not simply being directed to accept rational assessments they are being set up to *feel* a certain way about issues. And, although there may be some reflection on the drama experience, rational assessment of judgments implicit in these feeling-judgments may never occur.

This potential problem stems at least partially from the fact that the teacher's intentions regarding what students are to learn are never made explicit. Indeed, according to Bolton (1984), the students are not even supposed to realize that they are learning certain sorts of things. Thus he says, "But this approach to pedagogy is unconventional for the learner does not and, indeed, should not see himself in that role" (p. 163). Numerous theorists have, however, pointed out the pedagogical and moral difficulties inherent in such a hidden curriculum. Portelli (in press), for example, argues that where teachers' intentions are not communicated to the students, this violates the trust, sincerity, honesty, and respect presumed in the act of teaching. And Siegel (1988) has argued that we have a moral obligation to treat our students with respect, an obligation entailing that we honour students' right to question, challenge, and demand reasons and justification for what they are taught. If they are unaware of what the teacher is attempting to teach them, they may accept without question, and may not look seriously at alternative points of view. That he thus advocates the fostering of a



certain sort of hidden curriculum may not have occurred to Bolton because of his belief that what dramatic experience will promote is common understandings. But if the teacher's aims are hidden or even denied, the teacher's vision of what is "common understanding" will not be brought to light to be questioned, and consequently the students will be denied the possibility of questioning whether the understandings the teacher has promoted—understandings with a strong emotional component—really are common or justified. Its bypassing of students' autonomy is certainly one ground for objection to this approach.

#### CONCLUSION

What, then, can be concluded regarding claims about the educational value of dramatic experience for personal and social understanding? First, it seems clear that the claim that simply having students undergo dramatized experiences will automatically enhance their understanding is unfounded. Teachers must have particular aims and must direct the experience in particular ways. What also seems clear is that reflection must be integral to the process. This is necessary for anything educational to transpire. It is also necessary to prevent manipulation of students, to prevent teachers from inculcating particular ideological beliefs in the name of common understandings. It must be noted, however, that admitting reflection as a crucial part of the process undermines the justification that drama experiences are valuable precisely because they are immediate, intuitive, and unmediated by intellect. It is the experience plus the reflection on the experience which is of value, not just the experience itself.

Another problem with the kind of curriculum often associated with the approach to drama education described above is that it can be narrow, emphasizing student-initiated improvisations that deal with issues close to students' own lives. I would certainly argue that there is value in dramatized experience. Drama can be a way of embodying ideas and experiencing reactions, a way of engaging affectively with material and understanding the feelings involved. Thus it is a useful mode of learning in certain contexts, for example, in trying to understand how individuals in certain historical situations might have thought and felt, or in trying to understand fictional characters' motivation. It gives students the opportunity to put themselves in other people's shoes, to try to think and feel as they may have done. Thus it is most useful educationally in the context of dealing with new situations, new ideas, new models of human interaction. Its educational value lies in the possibility it affords for expanding students' experience in conjunction with their learning of new materials, rather than in contexts in which students simply reexperience what they know.

In conclusion, some claims regarding drama as experience must be rejected and others must be moderated considerably. Inflated claims about the value of drama as experience have resulted in certain types of improvisation activities being viewed, in many circles, as all that drama education ought to be concerned

with. This emphasis has been at the expense of viewing drama as an aesthetic activity and of trying to develop students' aesthetic understanding with respect to dramatic creation and appreciation (see Bailin, in press, for elaboration). Once claims about dramatic experience are put into proper perspective, perhaps drama educators will be more willing to take Hornbrook's (1991) advice when he recommends "opening up the drama lesson to as wide a range of dramatic experience as possible and allowing students to experience within a context which acknowledges the broader culture (cultures) of which they are of necessity members" (p. 38).

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