

Challenging Our Assumptions: Playwrights and the Drama Curriculum

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With drama taught in a growing number of Canadian schools, the drama curriculum requires refinement. In particular, the playwriting component lacks an authoritative rationale. My research highlights 145 Canadian playwrights' views, some of which directly challenge assumptions in official curriculum documents and resource texts. Playwrights disagree with the use of teacher-assigned plots and fragmentary writing assignments. They also refute the widespread assumption that student writing may be graded after a first draft; playwrights consider revision an essential aspect of the writing experience and advise students to nurture a project through several revisions. They further hold that an opportunity for the writer to see her/his work performed is an essential element in the development of a student-written play.

Comme de plus en plus de cours de théâtre sont dispensés dans les écoles canadiennes, il y a lieu de raffiner le programme qui y a trait. Le volet dramaturgie, en particulier, manque de fondements théoriques qui feraient autorité. Dans cet article, l'auteur fait état des opinions de 145 dramaturges canadiens, dont certaines s'opposent directement aux hypothèses sur lesquelles reposent des programmes d'étude et des textes-ressources. Les dramaturges sont en désaccord avec l'utilisation d'intrigues données par l'enseignant et de travaux de rédaction fragmentaires. Ils réfutent en outre l'hypothèse très répandue selon laquelle les textes des élèves peuvent être évalués après un premier jet; les dramaturges considèrent en effet que la révision est une facette essentielle de la rédaction et conseillent aux élèves de remettre leur ouvrage sur le métier plusieurs fois. Ils soutiennent également qu'un élément essentiel du développement d'une pièce composée par un élève consiste en la chance de voir son oeuvre représentée.

INTRODUCTION

Drama has made remarkable progress in Canadian school curricula over the past two decades. Today, it is widely mandated as a learning method in elementary education and stands as a full-fledged subject in secondary schools of most provinces. The purpose of drama in education is seen as largely developmental. For example, the Ontario secondary school guideline states, "The function of Dramatic Arts is not to train young actors or technicians, even though some students choose to pursue these occupations. What must continue is an emphasis on the students' understanding of self and the environment in order that they may communicate on all levels" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1981, p. 12). This places educational drama firmly within the "creative self-expression" paradigm of artistic education described by Arthur Efland (1990). Most Canadian schools'

approach to drama would also meet most criteria for what Edward Errington (1992) has called a “liberal-progressive orientation” to drama education. Errington explains that, “for the liberal-progressive, learning *how* to do drama may only be valuable to the extent that refinement of dramatic work is necessary for self-expression” (p. 17).

Notwithstanding their developmental goals, however, Canadian drama teachers resist efforts to confine their work to a purely social or therapeutic domain. Secondary school drama programs following curricula like that prescribed for Ontario typically move from an emphasis on aesthetic experience and free expression directed toward novices of any age, to an exploration of the skills and knowledge associated with theatrical production for students at an advanced level. Although some theorists describe educational drama as radically different from conventional forms of theatrical expression, drama teachers, for the most part, see no discontinuity in a developmentally based program that incorporates a study of theatre form, providing that students are prepared for any eventual performance through an adequate exploration of related aesthetic processes.

This multidimensional approach to educational aims is shared not only by drama teachers, but by arts educators from other fields, within Canada and abroad. For example, a *National Arts Education Accord* (1991) published jointly by American professional associations representing drama, music, and visual art, presented a set of mutual goals including such diverse elements as creativity, arts literacy, social context, aesthetic judgement, and personal commitment to the arts. In Canada, drama programs actively pursue these goals, with considerable success.

Educators whose dedication and perseverance have made this important social and artistic experience available to students throughout the country can be justly proud. But there can be no resting on laurels. With the mantle of acceptability comes a responsibility continuously to refine the drama curriculum to ensure it serves students’ needs and abilities, on the one hand, and the realities and potential of the subject, on the other. One aspect of the drama curriculum requiring refinement is the playwriting component.

It may be impossible to implement a developmental drama program without incorporating some aspects of the playwright’s art. Improvisational activities at the heart of such a program engage students in the creation of original dramatic events—from individual scenes to extended stories. Guided by a teacher, drama students frequently invent characters and plot ideas, develop scenes, and generate dialogue. Although much of this spontaneous work may fall within the field of acting, many exercises clearly involve students in writing as well. For example, high school drama courses often require students to work collectively to produce short plays. Some courses specifically identify playwriting as the focus of a unit of study.

My research was motivated by a dearth of guidance and support materials for high school teachers who wish to include playwriting in their program of drama and theatre studies. Official guidelines mandate drama teachers, in many jurisdictions, to introduce their students to "the processes of the playwright's art" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1981, p. 15), but offer little rationale for this component and cite few support materials. For example, of government documents I examined for this study, none devoted more than two printed pages to an explanation of the playwriting process or how it might be taught. *A Model Drama/Theatre Curriculum*, published by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education [AATE] (1987), pays greater attention to the playwright's art. It proposes that playwriting be taught incrementally, beginning with improvisational playmaking and progressing through collective creation to the writing of short, complete plays. Even this superior guideline, however, presents only seven resource titles and stops short of critically assessing them.

I recognize that, in practice, teachers are not restricted to practices recommended in official curriculum support materials. Individual drama programs, particularly those taught by experienced playwrights, might use resources unrecognized by the guidelines. Nevertheless, even the most innovative teachers are required to follow the general tenets of government policy. Consequently, I assumed that inadequate or misleading policies would lead to ineffective teaching practices in many schools. On the other hand, guidelines recommending inclusion of a playwriting component would clearly be more effective were the rationale more extensive and authoritative.

Inadequate policy on playwriting may have arisen, in part, because of the composition of the writing and supervisory committees responsible for producing these guidelines. With the obvious exception of the AATE model curriculum, which was produced by a professional association rather than by a governmental agency, curriculum committees have traditionally been composed of teaching professionals, virtually excluding representation from any other jurisdiction. This practice has been criticized by David Pratt (1987). In a study of 100 curriculum documents from across Canada, Pratt found that only eight writing committees included non-educators. Pratt was concerned that parents, employers, students, taxpayers, and other client groups were unrepresented. It was equally true that professionals with expert knowledge of various subject areas had been systematically excluded, among them professional playwrights.

The question of whether professionals outside the education community should influence school curricula worries some educators, who fear that professionals would favour a content-centred curriculum over one that is student-centred. This issue is new to the field of drama, but science educators debated the question three decades ago. Their resolution can provide an instructive analogy for drama teachers. Joseph J. Schwab (1963) explained that early twentieth-century American biology textbooks' emphasis on credible scientific content was

replaced by an emphasis on pedagogical concerns. Whereas teaching methods had improved, the curriculum was impoverished. To strike a balance between valid scientific content and realistic learning aims, the American Institute of Biological Sciences established a committee of scientists and teachers. Educators' widespread acceptance of the curriculum this committee developed demonstrated the constructive role professionals could play in the design of curricula in their field.

If we are prepared to acknowledge the value of including scientists in the development of a science curriculum, then surely we must recognize the potential value of playwrights' inclusion in the creation of a playwriting curriculum. Playwrights, of their own accord, have shown a willingness to contribute to school curricula. They have also shown considerable knowledge about educational drama and sympathy for its developmental goals. This is demonstrated by a Playwrights on Tour program operated annually by the Playwrights Union of Canada. For a nominal fee, any Canadian school can obtain the educational services of a professional playwright for a day. Some playwrights participating in this program restrict their educational activities to reading extracts from their plays; others engage the students they meet in improvisational drama workshops. A teachers' resource guide prepared for the Tour Program by playwright Carol Bolt (1986) includes advice on "using creative drama in the classroom." Bolt's advice is entirely compatible with a developmental approach to drama in education.

The results of my study (O'Farrell, 1988) showed that many professionals are considerably more sensitive to the experiences of a secondary school student than some educators have been willing to acknowledge.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

I began my study with a search of the related literature, to determine the priorities and methods proposed for the education of aspiring playwrights. The bulk of this literature, which included Egri (1960), Hull (1968), Kline (1970), and Griffiths (1984), followed an Aristotelian model, consisting of critically-based monographs written by non-playwrights. These authors are generally less concerned with writing than with literary product. When offering advice on writing methods, they usually do so on the basis of inferences drawn from a critical analysis of "great" plays as literature, rather than from personal experience in writing plays. Contributions from a small number of acclaimed playwrights provide welcome illumination. But, by and large, reference works cite only the qualities of successful plays and not the methods used to achieve specific results. St. John Ervine (1928) acknowledges the limitations of relying on analysis rather than experience in *How To Write A Play*. "I do not propose

to tell the reader how to become a successful dramatist," he wrote, "for, if I knew that secret, I should become one myself" (p. 9).

One deficiency in the literature, most notably in official guidelines, is a failure to acknowledge research in the field of non-dramatic writing. This literature, although limited in some areas, is much more extensive than that relating specifically to the playwright's art. Theories were developed concerning the nature of the writing process. For example, Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) recommend that the focus, in the study of writing, be shifted from the product to the process. They conclude, "It may well be that some of the assumptions about writing implicit in various teaching methods will be challenged when we know more about these psychological processes" (p. 19). They propose a three-stage writing process (conception, incubation, and production) on the basis of current research. In the same vein, Graves and Stuart (1985) report research demonstrating how a primary language arts program could be enriched through "a waiting, responsive type of teaching," an approach recognizing the usefulness of natural writing patterns while acknowledging the individual writing process preferred by each child.

Recent literature considers the kinds of learning resulting from specific approaches to writing. For example, Harriet E. Goodman (1990) found that critical thinking skills and expressive language could be enhanced using brainstorming techniques, plot diagramming, and story maps as teaching methods. Maria Yau (1991) examined the subtle ways word processing affected how elementary school students approached writing tasks. She concludes that the full potential of word processing technology to enhance students' writing skills could be tapped only if certain conditions were met. These conditions concerned the role of the teacher, the integration of word processing with existing pedagogical methods, accessibility of the technology to teachers and students, and support for teachers.

In the absence of formal studies into the art of writing plays, this related research could prove useful in designing a playwriting curriculum. Widespread failure to recognize this work makes the completion of a study into teaching the playwright's art all the more urgent. The impressionistic and idiosyncratic nature of much related literature makes it imperative that a large number of practising playwrights be consulted, if recommendations made to teachers are to be credible. Accordingly, the study's second component was a questionnaire distributed to the entire membership of the Playwrights Union of Canada. This population was selected to ensure a knowledgeable response from practising playwrights who had met a relatively high standard of success. (To be admitted to the Playwrights Union, a member must have had at least one play produced professionally.) With 145 completed questionnaires returned, representing 50.5% of the sample group, the level of response was sufficient to indicate a representative cross-section of contemporary playwrights.

In devising the questionnaire, I consulted the related literature to identify recurrent issues in discussions on the process of writing plays. Particularly helpful was J. William Miller's (1968) book *Modern Playwrights at Work*.

The questionnaire was intended to elicit each "expert" respondent's point of view. Ten questions were posed directly and specifically to facilitate a comparison of replies. Because the study was conceived as qualitative rather than quantitative, the questionnaire included an invitation to add, on a separate page, comments about playwriting and the student-writer. Subjects were assured that all responses, in any form, would be included in the research data.

I subjected the responses to each question to a multi-phased content analysis, which revealed several areas of general agreement among respondents, along with a number of minority opinions. Comparison of responses to all ten questions produced a broad picture of how playwrights would like to see their discipline taught.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

The first three questions asked the respondents about their own writing experience. The educational relevance of these questions rested on the assumption that factors important in the development of practising playwrights might also be significant for students engaged in learning about the playwright's art, whether or not they had professional aspirations. Several respondents' comments supported this assumption.

Most respondents cited the importance of practical experience in writing. This clearly indicated that school programs should centre on students' own writing experience. From the large number of responses citing the value of practical experience and instruction in theatre production, I concluded that students should be encouraged to participate in the production of plays—acting, directing, or fulfilling any number of other roles. The importance of exposure to other playwrights' work also had clear implications for school programs. Respondents wanted students to be encouraged to read a large number of play scripts and to attend several performances. They further recommended that students have an opportunity to discuss and analyze these plays.

With regard to motivation for writing, the vast majority of students could not realistically share the motivation of those professional playwrights who wrote for financial gain, although even this factor might be important for the occasional student aiming at a career in writing. Of greater interest to most students was the factor motivating the largest number of respondents: the desire to communicate, to express oneself, is a universal impulse to which most drama programs are dedicated.

Also important for school programs is the enjoyment many respondents found in the writing process itself. The satisfaction derived from developing ideas and

exploring an area of interest could be as attractive to students as it is to practising playwrights.

Because most respondents chose to write during the routine working day at least some of the time, I concluded that most student writers would benefit from a similar approach. I also recommended, however, that school programs recognize that a small number of students will not respond well to such confinement and that special allowance be made for them. Furthermore, respondents indicated that any routine had to be flexible enough to respond to the incremental nature of the writing process.

The final two questions dealt specifically with advice to the teacher or administrator of a drama program. Respondents put forward many principles for the teacher's guidance, including a description of the ideal teacher as an encouraging and process-centred facilitator, and a recommendation that students be exposed to many playwrights' work. Respondents also recommended that students be given an opportunity to see their own work brought to life in some kind of performance, and that they be encouraged to become knowledgeable about and experienced in the practicalities of theatre and play production.

Respondents preferred that the teacher be a practising playwright. They saw his or her prime responsibility as the promotion of students' individual creativity, by adopting an encouraging and facilitating role, and avoiding doctrinaire positions and harsh judgements. They saw a happy and liberating classroom atmosphere, where process has priority over specific results and where students make many choices for themselves, as key to facilitating student creativity and learning.

For the most part, the responses to these questions confirmed current trends in dramatic education. For example, an Alberta curriculum guideline mandates a facilitating role for the teacher, stating that an effective program is characterized by "*praise and confidence building*" and "*a positive, confident approach to instruction and to the student, fostering mutual respect*" (Alberta Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 93). Curriculum support documents, however, often overlook student playwrights' need to see and hear an original work in performance.

Responses to another set of questions raised a number of issues, effectively challenging aspects of current practice. These questions centred on advice offered directly to the student writer about the writing of plays. I summarize the responses to each such question, noting conflicts with current policies and practices.

"How should the student pick characters for a play?"

This was the first of five questions inviting playwrights to offer advice directly to the student writer. It evoked a wide variety of recommendations. Respondents suggested that the school program incorporate a variety of exercises, instruction,

and critiques. They recommended that students be encouraged to try modelling characters on real-life people at least some of the time, possibly combining two or more models to create a composite character. Similarly, they said that students should populate their plays with characters who illustrate the theme or premise of each play and who are essential to the plot or story. The clear implication was that, at least some of the time, students should develop the structure of their play before making firm decisions about characters.

On the other hand, a significant minority of respondents regarded this emphasis on plot as untenable. They said plot is valuable only as an extension of character and that “the character should choose the writer” rather than vice versa. The metaphor in which a character chooses a writer is often used to describe the experience of some playwrights who become so occupied (even obsessed) by an imaginary character that they feel compelled to write a play about the character. To accommodate this alternative approach within the school program, I concluded that students should from time to time begin writing by focusing on people, or types of people, who most interest them.

This alternative approach contradicts advice offered in some curricular documents. For example, a drama curriculum developed by the Scarborough Board of Education, on the basis of the Ontario policy document, recommended the following: “Students are given a cast of characters and a description of setting: they then prepare a script” (1982, p. 78). While structured exercises may be effective in conjunction with a more open approach, this intent was not explicit in the Scarborough document, which also recommended students write scenes for their favourite television character.

“Should the student write a scenario before beginning to write the dialogue?”

Responses to this question clarified that at least some of the time students should be encouraged to write scenarios. The extent of the required plan might vary from a loose outline to a detailed treatment of plot. Respondents warned, however, that such a plan could stifle the creative process if applied rigidly; they wanted students to regard the scenario as a useful but flexible guide. It was equally clear that, from time to time, students should begin writing dialogue without concern for the ultimate outcome. This exercise might generate ideas that could organically develop into a play.

Although some curricular documents supported use of a scenario, they did not seem to understand the purpose of scenario writing. For example, the Scarborough guideline, mentioned above, ignored the importance of the scenario as a sketch of the student’s own ideas: “Students are given a scenario and then asked to write dialogue to create a scene” (1982, p. 79).

"How should the student go about developing a character?"

This question evoked many recommendations and related comments, covering many aspects of character development. Foremost were suggestions that students should prepare a detailed life history, observe people in real life, provide the potential for conflict, be open to changes in the character, and be sure of the character's motivation. Respondents noted that character and plot were inextricably interrelated. The school program could clearly benefit from implementation of these recommendations.

Similar advice was offered in some of the related literature, but the official guidelines I examined made no mention of character development, tending rather to stress the creation of plot and dialogue.

"What is the value of rewriting part or all of a play?"

Respondents were almost unanimous in confirming the importance of revision. Particularly significant for the school program was the concept that revision was not merely the correcting of technical errors. Most respondents saw rewriting as essential—the very heart of the writing experience. They suggested that students be advised to continue work on a single script through a series of systematic revisions. Such advice countered the traditional school practice of returning student compositions with a final grade after only a single draft.

Lack of attention to revision is certainly not limited to the drama studio. Although the non-dramatic writing literature has long recognized the importance of revision, this literature is far from exhaustive and its impact on teaching practice indeterminate. According to Jill Fitzgerald (1987), "work on the cognitive aspects of the revision process is scant" (p. 497). In her survey of research on revision in writing she observed, "Overwhelming evidence supports the belief that writers at various ages and various levels of competence mainly make surface and mechanical revisions, often revealing a view of revision as proof reading . . ." (1987, p. 492). This superficial view of revision contradicts most practising playwrights' experience.

"Is there a specific order of events which you can recommend the student follow over the course of writing a play?"

Most respondents put forward a specific order of events or were willing to assist in developing such an order. My analysis of their recommendations showed a number of shared steps. These, in combination, led the student from an initial period of gestation through the adoption of a suitable premise, the preparation of both a scenario and a personal history for each principal character, the completion of a first draft where the writer would make a concerted effort to "get it all out at once," and following the lengthy process of revision, have an

opportunity to see her or his work presented in workshop fashion. Clearly, students could benefit from such a progression, were it not applied too rigidly.

The organic, multi-dimensional model the playwrights recommended contradicts current approaches to writing education that emphasize a linear, problem-solving process.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, playwrights' responses to the ten questions provide a clear and broadly-based picture of an ideal playwriting component that might be included in the high school program of dramatic education. The dichotomy between the views of playwrights and a number of recommendations in official guidelines led me to propose a critical review of current guidelines and practices. This study also provided researchers with a set of hypotheses for further investigation. Considering the limitations of my study, its recommendations should be considered hypothetical, requiring additional research. Nevertheless, the substantial authority of the sample group and the respondents' clear agreement on certain points lends urgency to the recommendations. In the absence of contradictory evidence, they should be used to develop pilot units, to evaluate existing programs, and to identify bellwether courses which could become the subject of further study.

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