

Drama as a Teaching Tool

Drama in the classroom means honing thinking skills, increasing comprehension, bringing the written word to life—and fun. And it's effective with general, gifted, and at-risk students from K-12.

A *kindergarten class*. For the last few weeks the children have been doing short, improvisational scenes from *The Ugly Duckling* and *Cinderella*. They know the stories. Now it is time to go further.

The "stage" is divided into two separate playing areas. On the right side some ducks are making fun of the Ugly Duckling. Call this Group 1. On the left side the stepmother is telling Cinderella she is not going to the ball. This is Group 2.

Everything that will happen is strictly improvisational. Group 1 is given an opening line and begins its scene. Group 2 is quiet, listening.

At some point during the Group 1 scene the Ugly Duckling says, "It's not my fault. You shouldn't treat me like this."

"Cinderella" knows the rules—whenever a line spoken in one story can be spoken by a character in the other story, that new character must take the line and say it in his or her scene; the characters in the original scene must freeze.

"It's not my fault. You shouldn't treat me like this," says Cinderella.

"Don't talk back," says the stepmother. "You're not going to the ball."

The *Cinderella* scene continues until it is taken over by *The Ugly Duckling* scene, which in turn is taken over again by the *Cinderella* scene. And so it goes for a time—back and forth.

After the scenes are over, the students as a class will talk about what they saw, why things switched the way they did, how they switched, other places where they might have switched but didn't. What the students will be doing is comparing and con-

trasting the two stories. Had the classroom teacher or I begun the class with, "Let's talk about the similarities and differences between *The Ugly Duckling* and *Cinderella*," the pupils would have looked at us with open mouths. After all, they're just kinder-

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garters. What do they know about analogy?

A gifted and talented 5th grade class. Working in small groups over the last few weeks students have researched issues of pressing concern (for example, acid rain and pollution). Each issue has a pro and a con group that will address the class and state its position. The class will then vote, Congress-like, to support one or the other side.

The class has done its homework well—but unfortunately only on one level. That is, facts presented have been well researched; documentation where appropriate is supplied. But the positions are presented as subjects, not human problems. And the voting appears to be the result of voter predisposition toward the matter. No one's mind has been changed; no one's thought provoked.

When the presentations and voting are over, I ask the class, "Who is against the death penalty?" A few hands go up. "You have two weeks. Work as one group, and designate a speaker to state your position and why. Your position is 'Why the Death Penalty Should Be Maintained.'" The children who are now in this group look incredulous. "Who is for the death penalty? . . . Same thing. Two weeks. Designate a speaker. Your position is, 'Why the Death Penalty Has to Be Abolished.'"

Before the class leaves, I say, "In defending positions that run counter

to your beliefs, you will be forced to examine the issues you are presenting, to see the other side of things. Play it from the other side, and you will know it."

Two weeks later the voting is very difficult. The issue is no longer as clear as night and day. Students are really thinking. Genuine debate—internal and external—is taking place.

A 12th grade class. A new playwriting curriculum is being taught to an at-risk population.¹ The students are reading many years below grade level and have high rates of truancy and academic failure.

Pupils have just completed an improvisation. After discussing what happened in the scene, they have decided where the next scene takes place and are setting it up. The principal, who is observing today, is concerned about the potential for violence. A student tells him, "We don't kill characters off here," and then goes on to explain that they have to move from conflict to resolution without making easy choices. Killing a character removes the need to come up with dialogue for that person. That choice, the pupil feels, is too easy; you are not really dealing with the problem.

Student Participation, Student Empowerment

What is going on in these three classes is active, hands-on student involvement. What makes these classes work is student empowerment. The pupils have taken over their subjects. And in so doing, they have found the life, found the blood, and—most important—dreamt with the matter at hand.

To do a scene from *The Ugly Duckling* that didn't happen in the story, but could have happened, can't be done without knowing the text. But it also can't be done without making the text yours. It is no longer, quite literally, something held at arm's length. You are in it. It is about you. Once that connection has been made, the distance between the written word and the reader substantially decreases. Comprehension increases. Thinking skills are honed.

Similarly, the death penalty is not

just an issue to be researched, but something to be entered into. Something with very human implications and ramifications. Something that, addressed in this manner, enables students to become more than gatherers of facts, but rather assessors of them, questioners.

Moving from conflict to resolution is problem solving. For the students, the stakes are high. They know that the difference between a good play and a mediocre one is oftentimes the difference between a good resolution of the conflict and a facile one. Their plays—written or improvised—are *their* plays. They don't want them to be mediocre.

The three classes in these examples cover a wide range: elementary through high school; general education, gifted and talented, special education. The fact is, drama is an extraordinarily versatile teaching tool, applicable to quite diverse student populations and needs.

The Human Element

Let's examine some of those needs and how drama addresses them. The at-risk pupils fared exceedingly well with the playwriting curriculum. Every single student in regular attendance wrote a play, including pupils reading on an elementary school level and, in one instance, a primer level. This 0 percent failure rate² is the direct result of drama's having keenly and sensitively addressed an important need in this student population.

As the pupils progressed through weeks of improvisation preparatory to the actual writing of their plays, they were constantly performing scenes they made up. In this process they learned a valuable lesson—that they had something to say, that they could say it well, that other people were interested in hearing it. For the at-risk student with a history of failure, this was a startling revelation. Self-esteem and self-confidence grew. These pupils became learners³ because they came to think of themselves as capable of learning.

There was another dynamic at work here. Students were captured first through their oral skills, which were vastly superior to their written ones.

Only after they realized that improvisation is writing on your feet and that they could improvise well, were the pens put in their hands.

In the gifted and talented class, drama was used to move beyond the facts toward greater understanding. This is not a need confined to the gifted population any more than building self-esteem is a need confined to at-risk students. What it is, however, is something that is educationally important and that drama can accomplish quite well.

Drama helps one find the blood of things, the Human Element. A history text, for example, will supply information. We can easily evaluate the retention of that information by testing. But have we imparted the sense that history is about people who lived and breathed and hoped and dreamed and died? Improvisation can provide a door through which we can enter into their lives, and hence, History.

A young man leaves England for the colonies. Why? 'To seek freedom.' Do the students really know what this means? Do they understand what it's like to want so much to change your life that you are willing, at great personal risk, to cross an entire ocean to do so?

Set the scene up. Give a setting, characters, and an opening line. *We are in the kitchen of an English farm in 1770. A young man (have the class name him) is leaving for New England tomorrow. He has not had the heart to tell his parents before. He can put it off no longer. The scene begins in the middle with the father saying, "But how can you do this to us?"* Cast it and begin. Do not let the students plan. This will only give them time to get nervous.

When the scene is over, the class will no doubt have much to say. Let the students discuss what has just happened. (In the light of comments or suggestions, you may find it appropriate to do the scene again incorporating this new input. If so, have another discussion when the "improv" is over. After that, do the following.) Set up another improvisation. Go into it immediately. *It is the present. A girl is*

telling her best friend in the latter's living room she has decided to run away from home. Both girls are the same age as your students. The class should name them. The opening line, said in anger to the best friend, is, "My parents are always telling me what to do. I can't stand it!"

When this scene is over, let the pupils discuss it and the previous improvisation(s). Now they will be considering the historical period and today, the past and themselves. They will see many similarities, many differences.

We began by using drama to feel our way to the human element in history. We ended by using drama as a means to synthesize history with the present. Same teaching tool, both sides of the brain. Quite an efficient teaching tool, one whose applications are nearly limitless.

"Sure," you say, "In the hands of a drama expert." Not so. In fact, one does not have to have drama background or experience in order to use drama well in the classroom. What one needs is a sense of adventure, a willingness to try something new, and staff development that is truly about development.⁴

Partners in Staff Development

These days getting a drama professional into the classroom is not particularly difficult. There are countless Arts-In-Education organizations all over the country that will send a drama teaching artist into a school for a block of time. The difficulty is getting the teaching artist to partner with the classroom teacher and thereby draw on the considerable expertise of both. The difficulty is having the teaching artist go beyond modeling interesting techniques to provide support and mentoring as the classroom teacher tries these techniques solo. Without this coaching, the work is something that is done by an outsider in slots between "normal" teaching; student and teacher alike, thus, perceive it as extracurricular, not a part of the ongoing life (and learning) of the classroom.

Are experts or professionals necessary? Absolutely. To provide the class-

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room teacher with staff development. To give a firm base in drama skills and techniques. To provide a strong foundation in the art form so that the teacher is able to take it over and make it his or her own in the classroom. So that it becomes an important part of one's teaching repertoire.

It is not enough to know a few tricks. One must understand why and how something works so that one can apply that something (or variations of it) to address myriad needs.

You cannot move from skills to applications without strong staff development. And in the field of Arts-In-Education in general and drama in particular, that staff development must be partnered. Drama professionals may know more about their art form than the classroom teacher, but the classroom teacher is an expert in his or her field, education. Once basic skills have been learned, it is essential that time—real time—be set aside to discuss, to explore, to examine teachers' needs, and how to use those basic skills to address them.

A Word of Encouragement

To those teachers who are fearful of improvisation because they have never

acted and would never dream of doing so, I submit the following. Anyone who stands in front of a classroom day after day knows a great deal about performance.

To supervisors and administrators who might feel this kind of work is more suited to the lower grades, where there is one classroom teacher for all subject areas, I submit the following. True, having the same teacher for language arts, social studies, math, and science makes for an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum that is more difficult in the upper grades. But if we have seen anything in this brief overview, it is that drama can effectively address and hone thinking skills, greatly enhance and increase comprehension of subject matter, substantially decrease the distance between the

written word and the reader, and—last but not least—make learning a great deal of fun. These are matters that are every bit as important in grade 12 as they are in kindergarten, and just as applicable to the general and gifted populations as they are to those with special needs. □

1. During fall 1987, the *9th Grade Playwriting Curriculum* (now the *High School Playwriting Curriculum*, both by the author of this article) underwent a pilot test in various public high schools throughout New York City, grades 9-12. Students ranged from an Honors drama class at La Guardia High School of the Arts (the real-life school featured in the movie *Fame*) to severely at-risk students. References made to these students in this article concern matters that occurred during either the pilot or the ensuing semester.

2. The overall failure rate for the pilot (general education and at-risk combined) was 3.2 percent.

3. This learning carried over into other areas. Reading comprehension increased in many instances, sometimes quite dramatically—two grade years in three months for one student, eight months for another in the same time period. Pupils were allowed by an at-risk history and an at-risk science teacher to write their term papers in the form of plays.

4. I have developed two partnered staff development models for introducing drama into classrooms. For information, please write me at the address that follows.

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