REINVITE DRAMA INTO CLASSROOMS, PART 2
Exploring Stories Through Process Drama

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Little Red Chicken, the lead character in *Interrupting Chicken* by David Ezra Stein, just can’t contain herself. Whenever Papa reads her a bedtime story, she jumps right into the story world and tries to save ill-fated characters such as Hansel and Gretel or Little Red Riding Hood from impending disasters. Little Red Chicken’s responses aren’t unique. In fact, teachers, parents, and researchers have reported instances in which children, rather than chickens, become caught up in the web of stories, talking back to characters in their efforts to shape outcomes.

In his investigations of young children’s responses to picture books read aloud to them, Sipe (e.g., 2000, 2008) identified a form of literary response in which the story listeners appeared to surrender to the “power of the text” (p. 169) and enter into the story world. Sipe (2000) called these responses transparent and described them as occurring at moments of great intensity. Caught up in the action, the children spontaneously “talked back to the text” (p. 267) or joined the cast of characters by speaking original lines within an unfolding scene. Whether defiantly responding to a selfish and vain daughter in *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe or breathing a sigh of relief that Mama Owl has finally returned in *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell, children who are deeply engaged with stories often enact their connections with characters and the unfolding action. Such connections, made evident through transparent responses, suggest that children may have a natural affinity for stepping into story worlds, which teachers can build on by offering students invitations into process drama. In this second installment of our two-column treatment of drama and literature in the classroom, we review research and share examples of process drama—a form that invites participants to take over the story, shaping it in ways that make sense to them. The players’ deep concerns for fairness and equity (for characters in the story) can mean that their participation in drama may evoke critical thinking and surface issues of social justice through planning, playing, and reflecting on the drama. There is also evidence that children make reasoned arguments for their dramatic decisions, drawing on textual evidence for support (e.g., Adomat, 2007, 2010, 2012; Edmiston, 1993; Galda, 2005; Palmer et al., 2012).

### Defining Process Drama

Drama comes in many forms. In our earlier E-ssentials column, entitled “Reinvite Drama Into Classrooms: New Ways With an Old Form” (Roser, Martinez, & Carrell Moore, 2013), we reviewed research on classroom-based drama and explored five types of drama activities that teachers use with students to re-create entire stories or scenes from stories. These forms of drama include mime, choral response, tableaux vivants, Readers Theatre, and story reenactments, all of which have the potential to deepen students’ story comprehension.

Process drama, by contrast, offers participants a different kind of opportunity—the opportunity to step into the story before its completion to affect the action, to create scenes, and to shape events anew. In effect, process drama affords players the opportunity to create original scenes that may not necessarily appear in the story. Pioneered by Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), process drama allows teachers to help students “isolate moments...to create dramatic encounters in which students of any age may be challenged into new ways of thinking” (Edmiston, 1993, p. 251). The text—whether a story, a social issue, or a news event—serves as a springboard for improvisation, allowing exploration of the “thoughts, feelings, and actions” that emerge (Galda, 2005, p. 84). Freebody (2010) explains that process drama allows students to explore “issues that are potentially controversial or difficult to address in the conventional classroom” (p. 212). (See Table 1 for a list of studies focused on process drama.)

First-grade teacher Ryan Bourke (2008) uses process drama as a vehicle to enable his young students to step into stories, assume new perspectives,
and interpret more deeply. His goal is to help his class understand that all texts “position the reader” and “that multiple perspectives exist” (p. 304). During an early read-aloud of the Three Billy Goats Gruff, first grader “Jonathan declared, ‘The troll is mean, mean, mean!’” (p. 305). The other students agreed, accepting what Bourke terms “fairy tale architecture.” But by the next day, Bourke was ready to help his students “resituate themselves in the individual perspectives of the characters,” and it began to happen. Nicholas asked, “Why did the Daddy Gruff and Mommy Goat send Baby Gruff first? I wouldn’t do that!” As Bourke describes it, by taking on another point of view, students were beginning to see the undercurrents of (in)justice in the story. Six-year-old Jennifer offered a spark: “It’s not, it’s not really fair for the troll. The three goats all got to eat the grass, but the troll is hungry. Why can’t he eat, too?” (p. 306).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drama research</th>
<th>Age of the “players”</th>
<th>Type of drama</th>
<th>Research findings</th>
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<td>Adomat, D.S. (2012). Drama’s potential for deepening young children’s understandings of stories. <em>Early Childhood Education Journal, 40</em>(6), 343–350.</td>
<td>Second graders</td>
<td>Process drama techniques (e.g., soundscape, giving witness, caption making, voice in the theatre, interviewing)</td>
<td>As part of a novel study, students engaged in process drama techniques to explore various facets of the novel, including setting, mood, perspective, and characters’ emotions.</td>
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Table 1

Research support for process drama
Bourke (2008) reflected,

Like the goats, my students began to timidly trip-trap across the bridge that separated one world from the next. They were beginning to cross “boundaries and recognize that there are entire other worlds of meaning, depending on how they look at things” (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 51). (p. 307)

Bourke’s classroom demonstrates a potential outcome of students stepping into characters through process drama—the opportunity for more critical literacy. Like the steps of the first two Billy Goat brothers, such dramatic work and critical reflection may sound tentative at first. Bourke describes his students’ entry into drama and reflection as a trek: The progress is visible and steady, he notes, but incremental.

**Using Process Drama in the Classroom**

Even incremental steps toward process drama, though, can be thoughtful and rewarding. Besides selecting a text that is worthy of thought and talk, a teacher’s first step in process drama is helping to surface students’ ideas and choose their roles. Roles that have to ask or answer questions are usually appropriate, advises Cecily O’Neill, an international authority on process drama. You can observe her in action directing students and working with teachers in this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpy6EZVjRLw (Atteshlis & Davis, 2008).

But teachers must also select a comfortable role for themselves because in process drama, teachers, too, are central to the unfolding of the drama. “If teachers can be brave enough to let go of a little bit of the structure that dominates their lives, I think they discover what fun it is to learn in a more playful way,” O’Neill tells her audience in the video.

As we noted, in process drama, players are not tied to a text’s strict enactment; instead, they create scenes by drawing on what they know about characters, problems, and issues in the text (and here, text means the agreed-upon pretext for drama). For example, while reading Jack and the Beanstalk, a teacher might decide to use process drama to explore the issue of taking another’s property. In structuring the scene, the teacher may step into the role of Jack and invite his friends (played by the students in the class) to accompany him on a scouting trip up the beanstalk to look for treasures in the giant’s house. In the ensuing improvisation, players are likely to be torn between coveting the treasures (because of the fear of retribution if they help themselves to the wealth) and their own ethical code (because they recognize that the treasures belong to someone else).

In our explorations of literature-based process drama in classrooms, we observed teachers using culturally sensitive pieces of literature that invite students into real dilemmas. The teachers we observed read aloud, stopping to discuss at a critical juncture in the story—often a turning point when the central character is faced with a significant decision involving ethical or moral choices. As the book is closed (but unfinished), the teacher listens as students pose and discuss options for action and the potential repercussions of those actions. Playing out these options before the students know how the story plot actually resolves serves process drama, comprehension, and the search for text support (see Figure 1).

After discussion and playing out students’ proposals for action, teachers sometimes invite further reflection and allow students to play the scene again (see Figure 2). This might occur on the same day or a subsequent day, still without revealing the author’s resolution of the character’s dilemma. This platform for problem solving in varied ways gives students opportunities to step into stories and interact with issues for more extended periods than might occur in a typical read-aloud or book discussion.
Amigos del Otro Lado by Gloria Anzaldúa, offer opportunities for students to step into story worlds to explore these significant issues. In the classrooms in which we observe, such books set the stage for students to engage in deep conversations and thoughtful enactments that involve consideration of fairness, justice, inequality, and power. Table 2 lists books that we have introduced into process drama in classrooms.

**Scene Selection**
Once the right story has been selected, students are more likely to be motivated to step into story worlds and engage in the action at turning points—when characters may face a complex decision. The teacher’s task is identifying those moments. In *Henry and the Kite Dragon*, Henry loves, more than anything, the magnificent kites that Grandfather Chin makes and flies from the roof of their apartment building in 1920s Chinatown. When the children from Little Italy continue to destroy the handmade kites by throwing rocks, Henry is ready to lead his Chinese American friends into a confrontation with Tony and his Italian American confederates. At this dramatic moment of choice, and before the students know how the story resolves, we stop, consider, propose, and enact. Students step into the story to sort out the dilemma and try out their solutions—some in the roles of Henry and his friends and others as the children protecting turf of their own. The issues that emerge in *Henry and the Kite Dragon* let students cross boundaries and understand others’ perspectives.

**Selecting Stories for Dramatic Story Reenactments**
A wide range of stories and texts offers possibilities for improvisational drama. As described previously, texts that provide the most opportunities for process drama are those with some kind of dilemma—even one the students have never experienced. In *Harry and the Terrible Whatzit* by Dick Gackenbach, readers meet Harry, who is convinced that some terrible creature lives in his basement. When his mother goes down to the basement and does not come back, Harry must decide what he will do. This critical juncture offers an ideal opportunity for stepping into Harry’s character and trying out different perspectives. Very young students are likely to feel empathy with his dilemma, and this empathy can serve as the impetus for facing fears, getting help, admitting weaknesses, and more.

Stories that deal with issues of race/ethnicity, class, or gender, such as *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, *Henry and the Kite Dragon* by Bruce Edward Hall, and *Friends From the Other Side/*...
We finish reading the story after variant solutions have been played, and talk over what stepping in allowed us to experience.

**Planning**

We have found that the steps the teacher takes in inviting students into the drama are critical to the success of the improvisation. Before inviting students into the action, we have seen effective teachers first make sure that their students understand the character: “What do we know about Henry? Why does he love spending time with Grandfather Chin?” They also invite their students to take up the characters’ perspectives: “You are Henry or one of his friends. You have already seen Grandfather Chin’s butterfly kite destroyed. Now, you have worked for hours on a new dragon kite and have just seen it purposefully destroyed. What are you feeling and thinking?” Discussions that emerge from questions like these prepare students to step into story worlds and try on solutions to complex problems. It is important to underscore that process drama is not an attempt to guess what solution the author will choose or to bask in being right in one’s prediction after the plot is resolved. Instead, the goal is to pose, weigh, and try out more than one solution to see how the action shapes and what impact the decisions have on the players (characters).

**Dramatizing**

Recall that process drama is not simply acting out a story; instead, it is acting because of the story. Dramatizing (and reflecting) can occur throughout. Rather than waiting until the end of the story, we ask students to step into characters’ shoes and grapple with the problem, the characters’ emotions, and the likely consequences of varying choices at decisive moments.

In one second-grade classroom, Ms. Alanis read *The Composition* by Antonio Skármeta, a story in which a dictatorial government official enters a classroom in an unnamed country for the purpose of bribing students to write essays that would reveal their families’ possible revolutionary activities. Pedro and the other students in the story understand that they are being asked to betray their families. Ms. Alanis readied her class for the drama by first asking

### Table 2: Sample books for process drama

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<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher Information</th>
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them to take the perspective of the main character: “Close your eyes,” she directed. “You’re Pedro. This decision is yours,” she continued. “You have been asked to write about what your parents do at night. Raise your hand if you would lie to protect them.” At varying speeds, students lifted their hands, but not all of them (see Figure 3).

Later, the discussion became heated over whether it’s ever “OK to lie.” Mariana insisted that she would never report that her parents engaged in the behaviors that the officers in the story ask the students to report in their compositions.

Mariana: I would write on my paper, “When I come home from school, I do my work, and then me and my parents eat, and then we listen to the radio, and then we go to bed.”

Lance: Well, you shouldn’t write they listen to the radio, because then they will ask, “What type of radio?”

Mariana: They listen to music.

Lance: If you write—if you write about the radio [turns to Mariana and extends hand], someone will think, like, will say, like, “What type of radio?”

Mariana: I’ll say—I’ll write, “It’s a music radio. They just listen to music, and then we all go to bed.” [with a smug and self-satisfied expression]

Cruz: No, they’ll come at night, and they’ll take your family.

A good stopping point in Amazing Grace is the scene in which Natalie, a classmate, tells young Grace, the main character, that Grace cannot play the role of Peter Pan in the school play because she is black. As Grace’s classmates, students step into this story situation to ask Natalie questions about her opinion. Children’s sense of fairness makes Natalie’s ideas extremely hard to find support for in the classrooms we observe.

Teachers are often a bit hesitant to try their hands at process drama, anticipating that the improvisational demands will be too challenging or the freedom to create too likely to get out of hand. Indeed, at times, students may feel uncertain about what is expected of them. For these reasons, it makes sense to take small steps into improvisational drama. During storybook read-alouds, we let students remain seated as we invite them to respond as a story character: “You are Grace, and Natalie has just said that you can’t be Peter Pan because you are black. Show how you are feeling right now.” Other times, we invite students to respond as Grace’s friends: “You are Grace’s classmate, and you just overheard what Natalie whispered to her. What, if anything, are you going to say to Natalie?”

**Reflecting**

Taking time for reflection on dramatic improvisations is important, especially when an improvisation has explored significant moral, ethical, and social issues. Reflection, according to O’Neill (1995), need not just happen at the end of the event. Students can stop to talk about the decisions and enactments throughout the experience. Through discussion, students can consider alternatives, implications, and how playing into the issues can help them understand more about how a text works, as well as their roles as decisions makers in the world. Table 3 reviews the baby steps that teachers can take toward implementing process drama in their classrooms.
Table 3  
What the teacher does

- Selects a text in which the character(s) faces issues of ethics, morality, or justice, such as the following children's books:
- Identifies a critical juncture (or turning point) when the character(s) must make a decision involving ethics, morality, or justice
- Stops the reading before the plot resolves
- Helps students connect with the dilemma and (perhaps) unfamiliar scenes
- Sets the stage for students’ entry into the story by inviting stances: “If you were Pedro, ___.” “You’re Pedro, and you ____.” “Imagine that you are there. How would you ____.”
- Invites students to work through the dilemma, possibly reshaping the story and changing perspectives
- Sometimes becomes a participant to support students from within the dramatization

Conclusion

Young students (and those for whom reading is not an easy task) profit from crawling into stories and other texts, taking insiders’ perspectives, and then reflecting on what they are coming to understand. When young readers occupy the story world, they reposition the metaphorical lens that allows them fresh perspectives. With the guidance of teachers, students can apply critical thinking, pose and support ideas both from within and outside character roles, and make deeper sense of texts together. Edmiston and Wilhelm (1998) note that drama allows us to play into what we don’t yet know, and “we become receptive to...other views and interpretations” (p. 91). Teachers who invite young students to participate in drama are discovering that deep, critical, and complex understandings can result when readers step into texts.

References

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