REPOSITIONING DRAMA TO CENTRE STAGE: DRAMA, ENGLISH, TEXT AND LITERACY

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Abstract

A version of this article was first presented at the Drama Australia Conference, Fremantle, July 2002. It draws upon Freebody and Luke's four resources literacy framework, where they describe four kinds of literacy practices. It shows how this model is used within the literacy community and argues that this model is useful to describe the contribution that drama can make to literacy development. Freebody and Luke's model is used and promoted throughout Australia and the author argues that it is politically astute for drama teachers to reclaim and promote their links to the English/Literacy curriculum.



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Keywords: *PRIMARY DRAMA; PROCESS DRAMA; LITERACY; FOUR RESOURCES MODEL OF READING.*

Over the past three years I have been remaking myself as an English educator because of my position as English method lecturer at Deakin University. Like many drama educators, I have always taught both Drama and English, but being a lecturer responsible for English teaching method has meant relocating myself more decisively in that field, taking on new ways of seeing, immersing myself in different theories, other concerns. While this has not always been easy, I now feel located in both fields — my ground has shifted — my altered speaking position raising different questions and new connections.

As a drama educator, it seems obvious that many of the general education issues, such as increasing student engagement, teaching critical thinking and developing 'social competency', could be so easily addressed through the use of drama. I also believe that drama has an important part to play in literacy development, particularly in helping students develop the broad range of literacies needed in contemporary western society. Three years ago I had a feeling of smugness, rolling my eyes on the inside of my head

(so that no one could see) and casually asking (of students, curriculum documents, discussion papers, newspaper articles), 'Have you ever thought about using drama?' The English/literacy agenda raises problems to which drama seems to be the obvious answer and yet it is not always obvious to educators outside our field. In addition to this, there are models used in literacy that would be valuable for us to adapt to drama / adopt in drama curricula discussions. Sometimes I wonder if we only ever talk to ourselves. In this article, I highlight some of the work that has already been done linking literacy and drama and then present and discuss a model of literacy that is used throughout Australia, showing how that model can be used to describe drama education.

Why link drama and literacy?

Drama is significantly impacted upon by both the literacy push and the testing regimes that have accompanied it. In Victoria, the two hour literacy block in primary schools demands a significant timetable space, pushing out other areas of the curriculum. The literacy push has been accompanied by increased testing to measure the effectiveness of schools and programs, whether students are 'up to standard'. State testing and international tests such as the OECD-sponsored Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are used to measure the effectiveness of teachers and outcomes in our schools. These results are widely reported in the newspapers and the Australian literacy ranking in the 'league table' is seen as significant. Media discussions generally focus on ranking positions without engaging in a deeper debate about ***why*** some states have done better than others, or ***why*** some countries might do better than others or indeed ***what*** the test is actually testing.

The surface analysis does not consider cultural, economic and social differences, nor seek a complex contemporary view of literacy. The power of literacy on the public psyche is extreme — politicians care about how their state 'measures up', and parents are concerned that their children are 'above average' (even though half of them necessarily must be 'below average') and 'average' itself seems so – well – average. Literacy has been given a great deal of funding and curriculum time to ensure that national benchmarks are met and that PISA rankings remain high. Giving more time and money to literacy necessarily impacts upon drama, as there is only so much time and so much money to go around. Promoting the ways in which drama develops literacy skills and broadening notions of literacy requirements will help to preserve, if not increase, the time, space and funding allocated to drama.

We need to communicate how the use of dramatic form supports learning to a broader educational audience. As drama educators, we know drama engages learners and that learning through drama is significant and often profound. We see the power of the form and observe the impact that drama has on our students. Outsiders to the field often have little understanding or misguided notions about what we do, and there are misconceptions about how the subject operates. It is difficult to measure drama outcomes in quantifiable ways and drama is a form-rich subject where the content is often not defined. Some of the recent writing of our British colleagues (Ackroyd, 2000; Baldwin and Fleming, 2003; Winston, 2000) has been successful in moving drama into the compulsory literacy blocks and finding spaces for drama in the curriculum. Texts have been produced that promote links between drama and literacy, explaining how to implement the Literacy Hour while addressing the National Curriculum drama requirements. This excellent

drama education theoretical work has been highly influential and has resulted in some curriculum victories for drama in the UK. Drama is a significant area in the new Secondary Curriculum, Key Stage 3. Because drama has been included in this document, the Key Stages 1 and 2 curricula will include drama for continuity in the next edition[1] . These advances in the UK suggest that for drama practitioners and researchers to engage with literacy debates is a powerful way to increase drama's foray into the curriculum.

The Australian drama community is producing some work that actively promotes the links between drama and other curriculum areas that has been published outside the 'inner drama circle'. An influential text linking drama to literacy, *Beyond the Script* (Cusworth and Simons, 1997) was published by Robyn Ewing and Jenny Simons through the Primary English Teachers' Association (PETA). Publishing through PETA reaches a broader audience, increasing the likelihood that the ideas will be taken up and used more generally by primary teachers. Articles have been published recently drawing connections to: drama and literacy (Hertzberg, 2000; Hertzberg and Ewing, 1998; Martello, 2002); drama and learning (Simons, 2002); drama and new technologies (Carroll, 2002); and drama and current education agendas (Cahill, 2002; Donelan, 2002; O'Toole, 2002). At the International Federation of Teachers of English Conference (July 3-7, 2003, Melbourne University), work promoting links between drama and literacy was presented by Marjory Hertzberg, Josephine Fantasia and Robin Ewing. These practitioners are rising to the challenge of framing drama as a pedagogical tool for non-drama forums. O'Toole (2002) provides an excellent model for the mapping of drama onto curriculum documents in non-drama forums. In his analysis of the Queensland Productive Pedagogies agenda, he provocatively asks, 'Could drama be the New Basic?' (p.52). Following from the tradition of Bolton (1984), O'Toole argues that the new basics curriculum does not offer a strong pedagogical framework nor does it consider drama, yet drama is the pedagogy that offers everything that the new basics curriculum is aiming to provide — essentially this is an argument for drama at the centre of the curriculum. O'Toole is convincing and the clearly illustrated examples he provides show non-drama teachers the possibilities held within drama pedagogy. O'Toole's article exemplifies how drama educators might write and speak about their work for a broader audience, using language and classroom examples that illustrate the broad uses of drama pedagogy across the curriculum.

Drama and Literacy

Teaching English and literacy education has given me new insights into drama pedagogy, particularly the potential drama has in literacy teaching. Some of the most innovative work in literacy teaching is Australian (Comber, 2001a, 2001b; Davies, 1993; Durrant and Green, 2001; Gee, 2001; Knobel, Lankshear and Primary English Teaching Association (Australia), 1999; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Lo Bianco, Freebody and Language Australia., 2001; Luke, 1994). As the definition of ***literacy*** has broadened, so has the definition of ***text***. Freebody and Luke describe:

> We take the term 'literacy' to refer to the extent to which people and communities can take part, fluently, effectively and critically, in the various text — and discourse-based events that characterise contemporary semiotic societies and economies. The

1. Paul Bunyan (NATE,UK Drama Advisor) discussed this at an excellent workshop that he gave at Melbourne University, July 15th, 2003. As a Drama Advisor, it has been his role to train English teachers in drama techniques.

> circularity of this view is obvious. To be literate is to be an everyday participant in 'literate' societies, themselves composed of a vast range of sites, locations and events that entail print, visual, digital and analogue media. (2003:53)

This definition of literacy, widely accepted among Australian literacy educators, is embodied in an understanding of literacy as a social practice — to be literate is to be able to participate in the multi-literacies of Australian society. Preparing learners to take part 'fluently, effectively and critically in various text and discourse-based events that characterise contemporary semiotic societies and economies' has always been the work of drama educators — we teach learners to participate in a range of discourse, we show them how to read body as text, to understand how to read the semiotics of gesture and voice, and to use their own bodies and voices to communicate effectively. Our work centres around 'understanding and competent control of visual images and their relationship to the written word'. Importantly, we teach learners about relationships of power and how discourses of power shape and are shaped within society. Through our work on multiple perspectives and positionings in process drama, we teach learners to be both empathic and critical of other voices, to read the complexities of situation and to imagine other possible worlds. In short, we teach learners many of the skills that they need to be an everyday participant in our diverse and complex literate society.

The Four Resources Model of Literacy Practice

Like drama education, literacy education has had competing models of best practice. Those of you who have been involved with (or even on the sidelines) will be aware of the debates about phonics, whole language, genre teaching and critical literacy. As each new set of teaching practices has been introduced, old practices have tended to be dismissed and discarded.

The history of drama education has parallels with the debates and competing sets of teaching practices found in literacy — speech and drama (Bruford, 1948); child drama (Slade, 1958; Slade and Way, 1954); theatrical genres (Burgess and Gaudry, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989); and process drama (O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1990; Taylor, 2000) — roughly parallel the literacy movements, potentially indicative of larger social and political patterns. Freebody and Luke have developed a well received and accepted model of literacy (Freebody, 1992; Freebody and Luke, 1999) that is inclusive and three-dimensional. Rather than focusing on trying to find the 'right' teaching methods, their model maps the resources that literate persons draw on when they read or make texts, encouraging teachers to ascertain whether their program equips students with a broad range of literacy practices. They describe:

> Literacy can be seen as having three dimensions: the ***breadth*** of an individual's or a community's repertoire of literate practices; ***the depth or degree of control*** exercised by an individual or community in any given literacy activity; and the ***extent to which*** there is some degree of transformation and redesign at work (Freebody and Luke, 1999).

Considering how drama relates to these three dimensions of literacy, it can be seen that drama is part of our community's repertoire of literate practices — enactment, visual coding and performance being central to many of the texts that we encounter daily. Including drama in a school's literacy program increases the learners' breadth of literacy

repertoire, drama providing different textual experiences to other texts. Research has already shown that drama increases the depth or degree of control of other literacy practices (Morgan and Saxton, 1994; Wagner and Barnett, 1998). O'Neill (1995) describes how process drama constantly works towards transformation and redesign.

Freebody and Luke (1999) describe the repertoire of literacy practices:

- **break the code of texts:** recognising and using the fundamental features and architecture of written texts, including alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, conventions and patterns of sentence structure and text;
- **participate in the meanings of text:** understanding and composing meaningful written, visual and spoken texts from within the meaning systems of particular cultures, institutions, families, communities, nation-states and so forth;
- **use texts functionally:** traversing the social relations around texts; knowing about and acting on the different cultural and social functions that various texts perform both inside and outside school; and knowing that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality and their sequence of components;
- **critically analyse and transform texts:** understanding and acting on the knowledge that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views and silence other points of view, influence people's ideas; and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned, in novel and hybrid ways.

> The proposition here is that all of these repertoires are variously mixed and orchestrated in proficient reading and writing. The key concept in the model is necessity and not sufficiency — each is necessary for literacy in new conditions but, in and of themselves, none of the four families of practice is sufficient for literate citizen/subjects. (Freebody and Luke, 1999)

Learners in drama education draw upon and develop this same repertoire of practices as they work with dramatic texts, the ability to participate in making and viewing dramatic texts being important literacy skills. I have taken the four resources and described them in terms of drama practice in the following table[2]. While I have drawn the model in a table, this repertoire of practices should be seen as intrinsically linked — all four may be drawn on in the same moment as a learner reads a tableau as part of a process drama or makes decisions about how to light a character on the stage. It also should be noted that I have used the term 'dramatic text' to include the full gamut of theatrical experiences that a drama student would typically be exposed to from professional theatre productions to moments in a process drama.

Applying the Four Resources to Drama

To illustrate how the four resources can be used to describe drama, I will use the opening three episodes of Cecily O'Neill's work with 'The Seal Wife' as described by Philip Taylor (Taylor, 1995; 2000). This text has been chosen because O'Neill employs the four resources in the way she sets up the opening of this process drama through her use of pre-text and tableaux. The work should be familiar to the *NJ* readership, Taylor's

2. I used the work of Freebody and Luke (1999), Honan (2002) and Culican (2000) as my reference point for describing the four resources of literacy practices.

Code Breaker	Meaning Maker/Participant
How are messages codified in dramatic form? **Possible Practices and Strategies** • Pre-teaching specialized theatre terminology/genre/mechanics of stagecraft • Practicing voice usage/movement conventions • Learning the manipulation of theatrical conventions	*What does this dramatic text mean?* *How can I make meaning using dramatic forms?* **Possible Practices and Strategies** • Active participation to gain meaning from dramatic texts • Comparing own experiences with those of the dramatic text • Comparing the dramatic text with similar texts
User	**Analyst / Critic / Transformer**
What do I do with this dramatic text? *How can I create different texts for different purposes?* **Possible Practices and Strategies** • View a variety of dramatic texts (such as professional theatrical productions, still images created in class, spec-actor experiences, other students' monologues, school theatre productions) • Explore multiple genres of dramatic texts • Dramaturgical work • Creating performances for different audiences	*What does this text do to me?* *How can I create texts to affect others?* **Possible Practices and Strategies** • Question/challenge points of view by multiple representations of perspectives and outcomes • Problematise / interrogate dramatic texts to examine how they represent particular versions of reality • Alternative readings / performances/ responses to the dramatic text • Explore the relationship between this text and other similar texts — intertextuality

monograph (1995) is available through Drama Australia, however I will briefly describe these opening episodes before analysing in more detail how each fits into the model of the four resources participants bring to dramatic texts.

The pre-text O'Neill uses to launch this drama is a folk-tale, 'The Seal Wife'. Taylor describes this pretext as 'characterised by its brevity and lack of illuminating detail' and as containing the 'seeds of inquiry'. O'Neill tells the tale of the young fisherman watching a beautiful woman who then wrapped a garment around her body, transformed into a seal and returned to the ocean. The fisherman watches the woman do this for two nights. On the third night he seizes the skin. Completely powerless, she has to follow him. She becomes his wife and bears him three children. After seven years her skin is revealed, she takes the skin, flees to the sea and never returns. The text raises questions for participants such as 'Why did Patrick seize the woman's skin?', 'What was the relationship between the woman and her family over the seven years?'. In Episode Two, the pre-text is transformed — in small groups, participants create one moment, an image from the seven years Patrick and seal woman were together. In Episode Three, the participants — representing the seal-wives, the Patricks and the children — are lined up in character groups for further study.

Participants in O'Neill's drama are using their skills as **Code Breakers** during these opening episodes. Codebreaking emphasises the rules and skills of dramatic form. This includes recognising and using the fundamental features and elements of dramatic form such as gesture, voice, movement, stillness, light, darkness, sound, silence, dramatic conventions / mechanics of dramatic texts and stagecraft. In Episodes Two and Three, when participants read and manipulate the still images that others have created, O'Neill employs different techniques in her work that show participants how dramatic coding works. For instance, she may ask an actor in a tableaux to move their head in another direction so that we can see the difference that this makes. Taylor describes O'Neill's work in Episode Three:

> O'Neill challenges the participants to look closely at the representations which the small groups have constructed. She seeks a range of strategies through which the spectators can be can be supported in their looking. At times, she provides her own observations, at other times the spectators voice how the image appears to them. (1995:18)

This episode draws heavily on participants' understanding of the rules and skills in using dramatic form — the help O'Neill gives in order to read the images further develops participants' code breaking skills.

Participants use their skills as **Meaning Makers** throughout these episodes. Meaning Making emphasises the knowledge of the topic that the participant brings to the dramatic text, the participant drawing on their own experiences and prior knowledge to make meaning from the text. This includes understanding how a dramatic text is constructed and drawing on previous experiences of dramatic texts. In the case of the opening of the Seal Wife drama, participants draw on their knowledge of folk tales during Episode One as they listen to the story. The lack of detail of the story text provides spaces for participants to 'write themselves in' to the text, and to consider the story from a contemporary perspective. The questions participants raise about the text indicate they have done this, and both the creation and reading of the images in Episodes Two and Three give participants opportunities to read and write their own experiences into the texts.

Participants operate as **Text Users** in these opening episodes. This practice emphasises understanding the purposes and uses of different texts. This includes understanding the different roles and communication strategies we use in everyday life, from one context to another, through creating/watching different characters; using drama for real purposes or creating believable dramatic worlds; using a variety of types of dramatic form and genres appropriately and understanding the shaping influence of social / cultural factors and contexts. In Episode One, participants listen to the folk story. While this is the pre-text for the drama, the story is recognised as belonging to a genre of stories and the location of the tale is given importance. In Episode Two, particpants create a still image, and these images are re-shaped in Episode Three. Participants understand that the genre of process drama works in this way and participants deal with multi-faceted readings, multiple perspectives on the same event and ambiguity. The images produced, while a simple exercise, have begun to explore the social / cultural factors present in the folk tale itself, while aspects of the context for the story have been represented.

Participants also work as text **Analyst/Critic/Transformers**. This role emphasises the understanding that ideas and information in texts are not neutral and can be challenged. It recognises that performance texts represent particular voices, views and interests and silences others. When participants work in this way, they attend to what is included / excluded and examine how dramatic texts are crafted to the interests and ideologies of the creators (writers / directors / producers). Participants also may identify the way in which information or ideas are expressed influences audience emotions and perceptions. Participants in the Seal Wife drama work extensively as text Analyst/Critic/Transformers throughout the entire drama. In Episode Two, many of the images produced explore how the folk tale positions the seal wife and the drawing of the seal woman to the sea emerges as a recurring theme from this early work — this theme later becomes the dominant focus of the drama. In this opening episode participants are already considering how voices, views and interests are represented in the text. The work of Episode Three explicitly asks participants to attend to how they have positioned each of the characters in their representation of them through the act of lining the characters up 'for contemplation'.

Repositioning Drama to Centre Stage

The work that drama teachers currently do extends the breadth of learners' literacy practices, offering aspects of literacy that are not covered in any other area of the curriculum. Theatrical performances themselves are often an amalgam of live performance, film, projected words, dance and music, and audiences must have broad, deep literacy skills to fully participate. It would be politically astute of the Australian drama community to extend the work that has been done in mapping drama onto literacy models. This would have the greatest impact in the primary sector, where 'drama' is most likely to be neglected because 'literacy is more important' — defining drama as a literacy gives teachers the power to write it into their daily lesson plans in their everyday literacy program. As O'Toole (2002) observes, much of the new curriculum discussion is in search of a pedagogy to realize the theory and 'one is sitting there, right under their noses, and it's drama!'.

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