

DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

This is the published version:

O'Mara, Joanne 2002, Understanding the complexity of social issues through process drama, *Talking points*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 27-30.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30012658>

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright : 2002, National Council of Teachers of English

Understanding the Complexity of Social Issues through Process Drama

Joanne O'Mara

I read *A Poem for the Rainforest* by Judith Nicholls aloud to my junior high school students, a poem I love and can almost recite from memory. The poem tells a story of deforestation from several perspectives, beginning with the first verse, "Song of the Xingu Indian":

They have stolen my land;
the birds have flown,
my people gone.
My rainbow rises over sand,
my river falls on stone.

There is a silence. Then we talk about the poem's content and form. Students sense a sadness in the poem itself, and indicate awareness of what the loss of a forest might mean. Hilary and Shannon notice the poem's different points of view, which Timothy interprets as "post-modern." Joseph comments on the issues in the poem, "But what about the people who live in the forest? That is the saddest—they have nowhere to go—the last man is left alone. He is homeless."

So begins our process drama—a discussion of a poem that launches our dramatic investigation into deforestation. Process drama is a form of drama education within which students and teacher work both in and out of role to explore a problem, situation, theme, or series of related ideas or themes through the use of the artistic medium of unscripted drama (O'Neill, 1995). While process drama is improvised in the sense that it is not scripted, it can be a highly structured way of creating theatrical experience in the classroom. This way of working with drama has developed primarily from the work of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton, although use of the term can be traced to O'Toole (1990, 1992) and O'Neill (1991, 1995). Teachers' work in drama practice tends to be individualistic

and idiosyncratic, so even when practitioners follow models created by others, they approach it uniquely. If a drama is to be a work in process, it must be open to the possibilities which unfold as it is experienced rather than working towards a predetermined outcome (Taylor, 1995). Even if the practitioner uses the same material with different groups, the drama will be experienced uniquely according to how the group shapes its experience. *A Poem for the Rainforest*, because of its vignette-like form, already has some of the elements of process drama: it is episodic, consists of multiple perspectives on the issue of deforestation, and it offers the reader an opportunity for personal connection.

In this article, I attempt to capture the process of understanding and questioning deforestation through process drama. This class had been working for two terms with process drama, and I had encouraged them to think more diversely about the work that they presented. The more the drama work encouraged them to think "outside the square," the more interesting, challenging, and engaging they found it.

Finding the Focus, Developing an Issue

With students' interests at the center of process drama, we find a focus and begin with an exploration of what a forest-dwelling community might be like, what rituals they might

Joseph comments on the issues in the poem, "But what about the people who live in the forest? That is the saddest—they have nowhere to go"

celebrate, and how their lives might be structured. How do communities define themselves? How do they create an identity for themselves? What rituals are important in shaping their lives? The students recall rituals they participate in—baptisms, funerals, weddings, New Year’s Eve, birthdays. I ask, “What rituals might a forest community create or celebrate?” We compile this list on the blackboard:

- birth
- death
- the coming of summer/ spring/ rain
- catching food
- spirits going to the Gods
- swearing in a new community leader

With our rituals established, the class divides into two groups, and each group develops its own ritual to present to

Students create short improvisations that represent a variety of perspectives within this forest community, as represented in Nicholl’s poem.

the class. We move beyond Nicholls’ (1987) original text, by creating rituals and raising issues integral to our own forest community. One group portrays a birth ritual, while the second group does a “thank you” ritual. Reviewing my notes, I notice that I was somewhat surprised that the students completed the work so seriously, given that the issues are very challenging and they had seemed very unsettled when they had first gone in. During this time, students find their focus, begin to develop the issue of deforestation and the impact it may have on the rituals within this fictional forest community.

Tension Builds as the Drama Progresses

In our second session, the two original groups are reformed, this time with different aims. The groups develop and rehearse various “photographs” (tableaux) from the ritual that they developed the previous day. From these photographs, students create short improvisations that represent a variety of perspectives within this forest community, as represented in Nicholl’s poem. In-role as the managing director of the logging company, I call together a meeting of loggers who will work in this forest. There is an atmosphere of expectation and tension as students realize their new

roles. In-role, I speak to them individually, asking how the logging is going down at Ford’s Creek and inquiring about their families. I outline our current situation to the loggers: “We have a problem. Our plans may be interfered with by some conservationists. An anthropologist has found some pictures of the forest community, and will show them to you. Please look at them carefully.”

Lisa, one of the students, acts as the anthropologist and calls up each frozen image.

Lisa: I have found a photo of a strange birth ritual. Would you please bring the photographs up? (Students who performed in the birth ritual freeze-frame various scenes of the ritual.) These people live in the forest. They have strange rituals and are not like us.

Managing Director: These are strange images that we see before us, but be assured, loggers, these people will be better off if they are moved out of the forest and live in real houses.

Loggers (together): But it is their home! They own it! They live there!

Managing Director: Your livelihood depends upon this project. As loggers we want to sweep this all under the carpet and just get on with our job.

There is an uncomfortable agreement of silence among the loggers. They realize that they must make a difficult decision: Should they work to remove the families of the forest community so their own families can survive? Or, should they stand up for what they know is right by refusing to cut down the forest?

To build more tension and layers into the work, students are again paired as either loggers or family members, and briefed individually. The loggers are told that they must go home and talk to their families about the anthropologist’s visit. They are uncomfortable and suspicious of the anthropologist. The family members are told to apply pressure on the logger because of family needs. They are to convince the logger to return to work and not complain.

The students perform all of the scenes, each pair improvising different perspectives, and the work is much more diverse than I had anticipated. A wife puts pressure on her husband to stay in the job because they need money to keep the family going. A female logger tells her family that there is no more work for her. A child pressures his parents

for monetary things, and an older parent convinces his child who works as a logger “not to rock the boat.”

Moving out of these improvisations, I ask the students, “What might happen if the loggers refuse to cut down the forest?” Students raise a moral issue: loggers know that the lives of the forest community are important, yet they must provide for their own families as well. To individualize reflection, we write journal entries about what we believe should happen and how the situation should be dealt with.

Improvising Images of Destruction

In our deforestation improvisation, one student changes the dynamics of the play. Joseph wants to play a young boy named Malajini who lives in the forest. He suggests that other students improvise images of destruction that he sees as he runs through the forest: trees falling, animals scurrying, loggers eating lunch, butterflies dying, chainsaws buzzing, and loggers angrily converging on the boy. The class agrees that Joseph’s idea will add to the overall improvisation.

Joseph acts as director and choreographer of this scene, helping his classmates improvise various photographs that depict destruction. The scene is played out, and Malajini runs past these images of destruction and becomes more and more distressed. Before the second rehearsal, Joseph suggests that, to heighten the drama, those improvising photographs think up a noise or a line they could say, and a line that Malajini would say as he ran past them. The students add dialogue to their photographs and re-order them to make a better performance. Now this piece represents more of how the students feel about deforestation.

Opposing Parties Meet

Now that students have worked out the initial tensions that exist within the loggers’ families, and those that exist outside when deforestation happens, territorial issues come to play. A meeting (excerpted) between representatives of the logging company (Lorena and Timothy) and the forest community (Joseph and Sueanne) is held:

Joseph: If you cut down trees then we will both die because we need the oxygen.

Lorena: We’ve cut down trees all our lives and we’re not dead yet, are we?

Joseph: You’re not dead, but this is a different place. This is our place.

Lorena: We only want these trees. Why don’t you move somewhere else?

Joseph: Because we are here. Our ancestors have been here for generations. It seems like you are not going to listen to us, so case closed.

Joseph turns and walks off

Narrator: The meeting ends. The forest people go home, unhappy and upset. The manager of the company feels that they have gotten nowhere. Another meeting is organized.

Sueanne: You kill our forest and use all of the wood.

Timothy: There are more of us and so we use more wood. And you are just as guilty as us using wood. We haven’t had anything to do with you until now.

Sueanne: We use a little bit of wood. We don’t waste it.

Timothy: We don’t waste it either. We use just as much as we need. There are more of us than you, and we need it as well as you. There are heaps of forest where no one is living.

Sueanne: It is our forest. Why should you have to take ours?

The company workers put their hands over their ears. Symbolically they are the body of the company refusing to listen.

Coming Full Circle

The improvisation on deforestation continues with a discussion of the impact of the meeting on the logging company and what happens in the future. Timothy stands in the front of the room, with students forming a thought tunnel, two lines opposite each other. As Timothy walks through, each person (in-role) says one thing that may be on Timothy’s mind. These collective thoughts indicate that Timothy feels guilty, is trying to consider all perspectives, and wonders what will happen if he decides not to cut down the forest.

The last scene shows the rainforest 100 years from now. Students improvise what was once a vibrant and living place, with forest community members telling stories

Moving topics such as the destruction of a rainforest into process drama introduces complexity into social issues. Students learn to think beyond their own point of view and consider multiple perspectives on a topic.

around campfires of when they were young. Other scenes show that there is nothing left now. The last photograph is of a fast food hamburger restaurant, with workers taking orders where the forest once stood.

Reflection, Insight, and Thoughts of Social Justice

Moving topics such as the destruction of a rainforest into process drama introduces complexity into social issues. Students learn to think beyond their own point of view and consider multiple perspectives on a topic. Students recast themselves as the “other” and understand how to consider life from another’s viewpoint, create complexity, and explore multiple dimensions of the topic. As Atticus, in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, shows us most

powerfully, the ability to work for social justice comes from the ability to understand another perspective—to be able to try on someone else’s shoes and walk around in them for a while. Process drama gives us the ability to wear other people’s shoes and see the world from a different point of view. ●

References

- Bolton, G. (1979). *Towards a theory of drama in education*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Bolton, G. (1984). *Drama as education: An argument for placing drama at the centre of the curriculum*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Bolton, G. (1992). *New perspectives on classroom drama*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Heathcote, D. (1983). Learning, knowing and language in drama: An interview with Dorothy Heathcote. *Language Arts*, 60 (6), 695-701.
- Heathcote, D. & Bolton, G. (1995). *Drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote’s mantle of the expert approach to education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.
- Nicholls, J. (1987). *Midnight forest and other poems*. London: Faber and Faber.
- O’Neill, C. (1991). *Structure and spontaneity: Improvisation in theatre and education*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Exeter. The British Library Document Supply Centre. DX 96342.
- O’Neill, C. (1995). *Drama worlds: A framework for process drama*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- O’Toole, J. (1990). *Process in drama: An investigation of processuality in the art form, with particular reference to the genre known as drama in education*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Queensland.
- O’Toole, J. (1992). *The process of drama*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, P. (1995). *Pretext and story drama: The artistry of Cecily O’Neill and David Booth*. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: National Association for Drama in Education.

Joanne O’Mara is a Lecturer in Secondary English Education in the School of Cultural and Social Studies in Education at Deakin University. Her research focuses on the use of reflective practice in process drama.