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With rest ... and time ... and a little hope

Moving into virtual worlds through multimodal literacy forms

Linda Laidlaw and Joanne O'Mara with Lee Makovichuk

Introduction

In this chapter, we describe a powerful encounter between two classes of kindergarten children and three educators using drama to engage with the picture book, *How to Heal a Broken Wing* (Graham, 2008). Multimodal literacy work is often conceived of and represented as primarily existing within digital forms, however drama can be an important part of a multimodal repertoire. Drama enables students to quickly move between ‘real’ and virtual worlds, and offers a variety of opportunity for expression, representation and critique. We document and discuss the extended pedagogical developments that emerged after beginning with the dramatic work in response to the picture book. We examine how a variety of narrative explorations and constructions developed over the year, and locate our discussion within a multimodal literacy framework. We also look at how the classroom teacher, who was new to this way of working, was able to incorporate the embodied work of the texts into her own multifaceted teaching approach within an innovative learning environment. This eventually extended into the use of digital cameras, iPods and iPads within both the dramatic and the real life worlds of the classroom.

After an introduction to the two guest teachers in their midst and the beginnings of an intriguing new text, *How to Heal a Broken Wing*, the children move slowly within the carpeted area of the classroom, their attention focused on the motion of their feet. “Think about the sorts of shoes you might be wearing ... think about what your feet look like ... start by walking very slowly ...”, Jo directs. The children step carefully, observing closely. “Now we’ll walk a little bit faster and see if your feet look different”. The children shift pace, still watching as they travel within the contained space.

Serendipitous connections and boundary crossings

The narrative example of children attending closely to the movement of their feet captures a moment from a powerful encounter three educators and two classes of
kindergarten children had with a children's book, using drama to enter into the world of the text. We had a well-laid plan for the beginning of the drama, 'the pre-text', as is usual for process drama work (O’Neill, 1995), but process drama works in an emergent manner, so curriculum planning is rehearsing a range of possible outcomes and places that the work might go, albeit that what might happen in the moment is unknown. In this case, Jo had already worked extensively with this text, but with older students. As Linda and Jo were planning for Jo’s sabbatical visit, which would include some time working with drama in Lee’s classroom in the Canadian province of Alberta, the inadvertent selection of a book – the Australian 2009 Children’s Book of the Year for Younger Readers – which Jo brought in order to share an Australian picture book with Canadian children, turned out to be a particularly right choice. As complexity thinker Steven Johnson (2010) has commented, serendipity can be key in sparking new connections and innovations. Our venture into new ways of working with multimodal forms was consistently informed by serendipitous and emergent connections. Another important influence in this work was that the three adults as well as the children were all involved in an experience of ‘boundary crossing’ – working within a space of disequilibrium and unfamiliarity. As others have suggested in relation to shifts into digital modes, ‘new literacies’ and other kinds of multiliteracy practices (see e.g. Carrington and Luke, 2003; Davidson, 2009; Lankshear and Knobel, 2007; Leander et al., 2010; Marsh, 2004), such ‘spaces’ are fluid, open, and often involve new social conditions. As complexity theories suggest (see also, e.g. Gough, 1999), disequilibrium is key in conditions and opportunities for change.

For the three of us, the navigation of what was unfamiliar was central to this collective work. Jo, an Australian university visitor much experienced with drama and multimodal teaching and learning forms, was nervous about working with four and five-year old kindergarten children, as a former secondary-trained teacher. Lee was in her second month in a new school building and administrative structure, and new to working with drama experiences as a way of exploring literary texts. She was also taking a risk in inviting Jo and Linda – whom she’d never seen teach – to lead her young students. Linda was new to the research partnership with Lee, as they developed ideas for collaborating within the new classroom space. And, working in this way with drama was unfamiliar to the children, who were also fairly new to one another, a month into their kindergarten year.

However, such conditions also seemed to create a situation of openness to the unfamiliar, and a recognition that we were all going to be required to work improvisationally on a deeper level. Although Jo and Linda were familiar with drama structures and working emergently, a real tension existed that heightened the collective experiences. As drama educator Dorothy Heathcote (in Wagner 1999) suggests, tension is the ‘third dimension’ that leads to good dramatic work. For us, the most significant tension of our work together was this “tension of the task” (Haseman and O’Toole, 1987) which enhanced our collective abilities to attend to the world of the text and the drama. Boal (1995) writes
about "... the phenomenon of *metaxis*: the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (43). The simultaneous involvements of the dramatic world and the 'real' world were enhanced by our lived experiences of tension as we entered the drama. While we do not know exactly how the children experienced our own heightened awareness, we suspect that they, too, were watching carefully as events unfolded. At the very least they were conscious of the two strangers in the room, one with a foreign accent, but the video data highlights the intensity of their work and engagement with the events that were shifting their classroom space, and perhaps their teacher, too, in a way that fed into the work within the text. Reviewing the video, we notice moments where the 'busyness' of a young kindergarten group evolves into focused attention and a 'hush' that communicates a different kind of connection within the 'drama world'. In one particular moment of focus, we see the children picking up their 'injured birds' through mimed actions – each child has their own 'sock' to represent the bird with the broken wing. The children are able to transform these inanimate objects into creatures that are given 'life' through the drama, crossing the boundary into the world of the imaginary.

**The context**

Before describing our journey into the virtual worlds elicited by the drama, we address the current context for multimodal literacy experiences in the province of Alberta, Canada, where these events took place. In Alberta, the Ministry of Education recognises the necessity for a 'transformation agenda' in relation to curriculum, and a pressing need to develop innovative educational approaches to address new challenges (Government of Alberta, 2009, 2010). However, as the OECD notes (2010a, 2010b), frequently schools are still operating as they did at the beginning of the last century and not engaging students in practices to develop deep thinking, creativity and innovative activity. This is not entirely surprising in an era where standardised testing, 'ranking and sorting' children via testing endeavours within North America have increasingly dominated district and provincial curriculum initiatives. For example, in the classroom in which our drama experiences took place, kindergarten children are screened in the first few months of school via the *EYE – Early Years Evaluation Teacher Assessment*, which asks teachers to 'code' children according to specific, observable measures, for the purpose of assigning additional supports and services for children. As Lee noted, after completing this screening, she often could not find descriptors that fitted many of her classroom activities and projects, especially those that were open-ended or multimodal. The impact of the American No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (see Goertz and Duffy, 2003) has been significant within both the Canadian and Australian contexts. When what matters most are test scores, industrial-era transmission approaches are increasingly valued, in contrast to approaches that are inherently less 'testable' by quantified means. As Genishi and Dyson (2009)
suggest, such approaches in the US have virtually transformed childhood into "a
time period for particular kinds of learning, marked by rigid benchmarks" (8). In
the Canadian context such emphases create shifts away from curriculum
approaches that invite creativity and playful exploration. For example, in the
province of Alberta the most recently issued drama curriculum document was
published in 1985 (Alberta Education, 1985), and newer teachers are often not
even aware of its existence. With local districts focused over the past decade on a
structured *Balanced Literacy* approach to literacy instruction (Brailsford, 2002,
2003), with a strong emphasis on a direct instruction approach to spelling and
writing and the use of levelled texts for reading, teachers must be willing to work
'against the grain' in pursuing drama or even rich literature-based studies, and in
using technology in open-ended and exploratory ways rather than as 'drill and
skill' focused on narrow outcome areas. Often, too, when multimodal literacies
are addressed, the 'digital' realm is seen as a priority.

Within a context that seems often to represent educational 'scarcity' (Clifford
et al., 2001) and a pedagogical starkness that increasingly focuses on 'testable'
literacy skills, the teacher who is central to our inquiry, Lee Makovichuk, has
developed a classroom environment that is a rich oasis of inquiry, aesthetic design,
and materials presented to provoke and stimulate child response and engagement.
Jo and Linda, in initial encounters with Lee’s pedagogical approach, experienced
a ‘recognition’ of sorts, that her classroom would be just the right place to explore
approaches to text through drama, and that Lee herself might be interested in
following where the work in drama might lead. And so, we began ....

The classroom

Lee’s two groups (one morning and one afternoon class) were settling into the
time, spaces, and relationships of school after beginning the year a month
previously. While for the children, this classroom existed as their ‘usual’ space,
Lee was still adjusting to a ‘new’ space, both in a physical and institutional
sense. Previously her kindergarten setting had existed in an old three-storey
house located on the university grounds and she had organised her programme
without ‘in house’ administration and with little bureaucratic structure. Her
new space was a more typical classroom located in a K–6 elementary school, and
was now administered by a local public school board. After a busy summer
transitioning from one space to another, the start of the school year was one of
a much larger transition than the typical beginnings of a kindergarten year.
However, by the time we three worked together, ‘the dust had settled’, boxes
were unpacked, and Lee was carefully observing her two groups to see what
interested them to consider possible directions for exploration and inquiry, in
addition to learning about the social relationships, strengths, needs and
challenges in the group.
Under the covers: caring for an injured bird

No one saw the bird fall. (Graham, 2008: np)

Graham's (2008) picture book How to Heal a Broken Wing presents captivating images and a sparse but powerful text. In a busy, urban setting, no one but a small boy notices an injured bird that has fallen after flying into a tall building. Will convinces his mother to let him take the bird home to care for it: "A loose feather can't be put back/but a broken wing can sometimes heal" (np).

While shared picture books and 'pretending through play' experiences were familiar to the children, using drama to explore a story was new to them. Through imagining they were the people walking past the bird and 'moving into the book' in a physical embodiment of the text, they brought the story to life and were able to notice particular details of the text. They were able to 'read' the images of feet walking quickly and slowly, represented by the illustrations within the text, because they were recreating those images. However, we saw the children move into an even deeper engagement in the drama in the moments Jo directed the children to connect with the 'injured birds'.

In planning for the work, we had chosen to use socks as objects to represent the injured bird, partly because these items were familiar and easily available but also because they were a good size and 'heft' for small hands to be able to manipulate easily in providing an imaginary focus. After the children are given their own 'bird' (sock), Jo has them get acquainted:

We're going to put our sock in front of us, and then what we're going to do is to move the sock around until we can really imagine that it is a bird. So, we're going to pretend it is a bird and we're going to move them until we can believe it is a bird that is hurt on the ground.

As the children begin to work with their birds, with Jo providing instructions, the children move to carefully pick them up:

Think about what Will is doing. It's actually hard to pick up a bird, especially if the bird is sick or injured. And we want to pick it up very carefully so that he doesn't get scared or fly away and we don't want to hurt the wing any more . . . So what we are going to do is just practice, thinking about how we can put our hands and how we can pick it up. Do you want to have a go first? And then we can talk about it . . .

The children practice several times, picking up their birds. They are intent on the task - it is evident that most of the children have begun to build belief, breathing life into the inanimate objects of the socks.

Jo presents an added challenge, picking up the birds from a standing position as Will does in the book, and then holding the birds gently in their arms. In this work,
the multiple engagements with 'the birds', the children slow their actions focusing
to create a mental and emotional connection – observable in our video of the
drama. The children became controlled in their movements, slowing the pace of
their actions. While Jo and Linda find that their pre-service teacher education
students understand drama to be about movement and ‘activity’, often in more
powerful dramatic work it is the realm of the ‘virtual’, or, what is going on in
children’s minds – that is key. As Bolton (1986) suggests, “Action, even imitative
action, is not in itself drama” (255), but “it is the significance of the universal
implication behind those actions” (256) that creates drama. Children’s actions
within the physical realm must provide an effective connection to the imaginary
and conceptual world of the drama. In literature-based drama, we aim to go beyond
simply dramatising a good story, instead creating situations where children go
‘under the covers’ of the book to deepen understanding and where they may also
compose their own virtual texts through individual and collective actions. Next, Jo
provides instructions that transition into a new focus for the dramatic work:

We’re going to take our birds and put them in a special place around the
room. Find a special place to put your bird.

The children find hidden locations and secret ‘hidey spots’ in the room, talking
quietly among themselves about their birds. After the ‘birds’ are carefully placed,
it is clear they are no longer regarded as socks by any of the students. Linda
introduces the next challenge, seeking the children’s help to think of a plan for
how they will look after their injured birds. We mention that ‘getting better’ can
take time and that broken wings might need something different from what a
broken arm might need. Lee suggests the children consider what might be
needed to make the birds feel safe and comfortable. The children are given writing
and drawing materials to develop their ‘plans’ to note their ideas through drawing
and emergent or scribed writing. In this task we see that all children, even those
who are normally less eager to write, are keenly engaged in expressing ideas to
help their bird recover:

This is the bird and these are the wings and this is an ice pack. The ice pack
is healing it.

...........

There is medicine for the bird to heal. And there is a pillow for the bird to lie
on. There is a blanket to cover the bird and there’s also a worm for the bird
to eat.

...........

I bet he will need 51 bandages....

...........

Here is a little lamp to give him light .... and here are 2 bottles of medicine
and a worm. It will take 2 weeks.
Composing texts through drama

Working within the mode of process drama children create and shape virtual and embodied texts in ways that touch upon digital new literacy experiences – that is, children are able to change and manipulate the text, compose via group authorship, and experience different temporal dimensions of a text. As O’Mara (2012) writes, “Process drama is about composition and response” (102) as students and teachers work in and out of role to explore literature. Process drama is not scripted, and children may explore an infinite range of possibilities that may emerge through an improvisational encounter with story. However, there are also specific conventions integral to this mode (Bowell and Heap, 2001; Miller and Saxton, 2004; O’Mara, 2012; Neelands and Goode, 1991). As Jo and Linda developed a plan for the kindergarten drama, they drew on these conventions and incorporated Lee’s insights and knowledge about the children, and her input regarding what might, or might not, work well with each group. While Lee was less familiar with the conventions of process drama she was familiar with ideas and practices of story dramatisation (e.g. Paley, 1997), and included many dramatic play opportunities in her classroom, through various centres and manipulatives. Lee was also familiar with an emergent approach to learning and teaching, as developed through early childhood contexts (see, e.g. Rinaldi, 2008; Wien, 2008). While the specific drama conventions that Jo and Linda were drawing upon were new, Lee continued with the work initiated by the How to Heal a Broken Wing drama in ways that enabled children to continue to extend, develop and compose their ideas in a recursive manner – drawing from the interests and children’s imaginative stories that continued to return to the larger ‘text’ of the drama. As we look back to the pathways of learning that emerged from the work of the drama, the classroom trajectory resembles the ‘emergent’ and multiple interconnected patterns that Johnson (2001, 2010) describes as being characteristic of digital and internet structures. While the affordances and value of online or digital learning experiences for students are increasingly being acknowledged in contemporary literacy studies (see, e.g. Davidson, 2009; Honan,
process drama engages children with similar connectivity and abilities to shape and create texts in ways that seldom happen in schools. As O’Mara notes, drama provides teachers with:

... strategies to interactively connect students with texts and co-create textual responses in ways which draw upon what they have come to expect with new textual encounters in terms of connectivity to the text, ability to manipulate and change it, group authorship of text, immediacy of text, and the immediate ability to explore temporal dimensions.

(O’Mara, 2012: 101)

However, there is also increasing acknowledgement of the value of process drama in developing language and literacy skills (see, e.g. Harris et al., 2011; Miller and Saxton, 2004; Schneider et al., 2006). Drama can contribute to student literacy and writing through:

- providing ‘real purposes’ for writing;
- providing ‘real events’ to write about;
- providing opportunities to motivate reluctant writers;
- allowing for more complex multimodal forms of representation;
- awareness and use of heightened language and experimentation with different types of discourse;
- providing opportunities to explore and write from different points of view.

For young children, learning is profoundly social. Drama offers classroom opportunities for social, language-based work that appeals to the textual dispositions of young learners. Following Kress (2005) who addresses ‘old’ and ‘new’ dispositions to text in relation to mode of approach, and in relation to the ‘new dispositions’ in response to multimodal and digital texts, we wonder, then, if part of the power of drama in contemporary elementary classrooms is that it appeals to those old ways of learning – the connection to social, language-based play activity for younger children – and the structures of process drama – emergent, multimodal, interactive, connected – are similar to those of the virtual texts that are increasingly familiar in children’s lives as new textual learners.

**Beyond the text**

In working with the two groups in our drama, it also became evident to us how children do ‘compose’ these texts. With the afternoon group, with whom we worked on the first day, we had time limitations and drew the work to a conclusion where Lee had the students engage in a movement activity where the birds could ‘fly away’ – with the socks/birds on the arms of the children and soft music in the background. She intended to follow up with the children the next day, to discover where their birds had travelled. With the morning group, on the second day, the
adults had time to discuss their experiences with the first group, and planned their conclusion somewhat differently due to having more time. The children went outdoors and ‘released’ their birds as we narrated, then returned to the classroom to draw and write about what had happened in their birds’ journeys. This had been a structure Jo had used earlier to create an ending for drama work with the same book with a group of pre-service teachers – and had been wildly successful. We were surprised to read the children’s texts, later, where many of the children resisted the idea that the birds would venture off on their own. As one child’s scribed words suggested, she did not wish her bird to leave, and viewed this as an ‘outside’ request:

It’s flying North and then it’s going to fly South and she’s going to fly to her nest and then she wants to come back to me every day. She loves me. And they want you to go off and fly on your own.

Many children similarly expressed a need to keep their birds ‘close by’, as represented in the following:

My bird is in my sister’s classroom. My bird wants to learn, too. My bird just came back because it loves me. It went to the mountains.

While the ‘teacherly’ plan for ending the drama was to mirror the ending of the book: “Will opened his hands ... and with a beat of its wings, the bird was gone” (np), the kindergarten children clearly had other plans after developing relationships with their birds. Lee recounted that several of the children kept their ‘birds’ in the classroom for some time, in the ‘special places’ that had been part of the drama activity.

From the work with *How to Heal a Broken Wing*, Lee followed with learning events and inquiries that continued to develop the children’s interests and questions coming from the drama. The socks – which the children clearly wished to ‘keep around’ – were incorporated into stuffed creatures the children made. Lee noted that the children included a deeper level of detail in their stuffed animals than she might see normally, perhaps facilitated through the children’s imagining that these socks could ‘be something’. The bird drama was followed by several weeks of hospital play and activities where children explored the role of doctors, patients and learned about how broken bones heal from two classroom parents who were nurses. The children also learned about adaptive mobility using prosthetic limbs, crutches and a wheelchair from a physiotherapist from a rehabilitation hospital and a child in the school who has limb differences.

The work of exploring texts through drama continued over the year. Lee used process drama to explore the folk tale *The Name of the Tree* (Lottridge, 2002) and encouraged the children to compose and dramatise their own texts as a response to solving the problem presented in the tale. In this work, Lee took photographs and video of the children’s work, and Linda and Lee made several iMovies so that
the children and their parents could view the children’s own ‘story play’ representations, as they came to call them. As the school year drew to a close, the children also created story narrative videos, exploring the possibilities within a digital mode alongside print-based texts that they developed.

Our collective project continued with a new school year and the addition of some new tools: iPods, iPads and an interactive whiteboard. With time and exploration, Lee uncovered intriguing possibilities for merging virtual realms – using the digital tools to capture and extend the dramatic and imaginary possibilities. For example, the new groups of children explored ‘magical’ stories using iPads and special effects apps to show ‘before’ and ‘after’ effects of drinking magical potions; the interactive whiteboard was used to create backdrops and settings for dramatic play and process drama, and the i-devices were used to capture images and compositions for narrative work and storytelling. We see intriguing new possibilities and learning potential with a merging of the multiple forms of ‘virtual’ representation – enabling an expansion of digital technologies beyond the ‘old wine in new bottles’ and transmission era approaches we see still too often in many school settings. As we suggest elsewhere (O’Mara and Laidlaw, 2011), developing innovative approaches to fully exploit the opportunities and potentials that new cognitive tools can offer is key to shifting the nature of pedagogical activity to meet 21st century challenges. Perhaps, “with rest ... and time ... and a little hope ...”.

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