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Critical process drama framework

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As art, activism, or both, critical process drama enacts an agenda of exploration and wonder, one that battles with the status quo and disrupts it (Moraes, 2003). The critical process drama framework evolved from my recent PhD thesis and encompasses six key concepts: hope, aesthetic, agency, agitation, action, and ambiguity (Coleman, 2019).

These six concepts dynamically reverberate off one another to correspond with critical pedagogy theories and the improvisational nature of process drama. Critical pedagogy was founded in the critical tradition of resisting systematic oppression and invoking social justice (Kellner, N.D). Relational and reflexive, critical pedagogy is realised through active participation in the world. Through unveiling the social constructs of dominant ideologies, active citizens might name, reflect, and act to change them (Freire, 2005). Process drama is an interactive, improvisational drama form where participants “live through” a fictional experience (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) as both actors and spectators (O’Neill, 1995). Motivated by a pre-text, participants create a fictional frame and work in role to navigate tensions and actively reflect in and upon the world (Bowell & Heap, 2013).

As dialectical approaches to education, critical pedagogy and process drama pedagogy encourage active and collective participation to create meaningful learning (McLaren, Martin, Farahmandpur, & Jaramillo, 2004). Explored most notably in Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979), critical process drama explicitly facilitates the enactment of critical pedagogy through process drama.

The framework was developed from a cumulative case study that explored the potential for process drama as an enactment of critical pedagogy (Coleman, 2019). The first case, a document-based analysis of Cecily O’Neill’s *The Seal Wife* workshop, provided a historically renowned example of process drama. The second case relied upon observations, interviews, and reflective journaling to generate data about a contemporary example of the drama form, *Mantle of the Expert*. Arts-based methodologies guided the analysis and allowed for a prismatic consideration and reconsideration of all data, resulting in the critical process drama framework below (Figure 10.1).

Conceptualised as an interwoven reflexive pattern, this framework complements the fragmented, relational understandings of critical pedagogy and urges drama facilitators to create a colourful plait rather than a “red thread” (Thomson, 2018). Six concepts emerged for guiding teachers to implement critical process drama. These are agency, aesthetic, agitation,
ambiguity, action, and hope – AAAAAH. They are invitations to inform, disrupt, problematise, deepen, and create anew these concepts that swirl around the chosen theme and weave the critical into drama.

**Agency**

Agency is a central concept when teaching for transformation and is often identified as an outcome of engaging in process drama (Freebody & Goodwin, 2018). Rather than taking agency through a suitable role within a given drama, the concept of agency needs to be radical in order to be critical. In a critical process drama, agency cannot be contingent on ideology, but it is rather contextual and responsive to the ebb and flow of the world surrounding it, whether real or imaginary. Facilitators dedicated to critical praxis must be self-reflexive and aware of their own limitations and biases. Young people and their place as active citizens within the world should be upheld, and assumptions of superiority by virtue of adulthood actively resisted.

Critical drama educators need to respect, respond, and invite a range of ideas from multiple sources (Freire, 2005). Inherent hierarchies may be further destabilised if the educator oscillates frequently between the roles of facilitator and participant and conceives of agency as enabling participants to hang on to hope, ask tough questions, and make new choices. Without being an architect of the matrix, participants invited into the drama can only ever play the pre-existing game.
Critical process drama framework

Aesthetic

The aesthetic values multiple ways of knowing and the ephemeral nature of social interactions. Process drama practitioners cultivate and value the aesthetic in order to facilitate meaningful and evocative experiences that create a holistic form of knowing that is out of the ordinary (Dunn, 2017). Through artistic inventiveness and imagination, drama challenges the parameters of ideological constraint. Through abstract and non-naturalistic conventions, a focus on the aesthetic can evoke and stimulate thinking beyond the reach of social construction.

If facilitators are committed to a critical process drama, they need to respond, reflect, and act with artistry to facilitate moments that can broaden and complicate participant experiences. As both educators and artists, facilitators must apply the aesthetic to engage individuals in a pedagogy that can foster hopeful and energised citizens (Giroux, 2018). Shifting beyond realism and the ideological boundaries layered within it, participants playfully refute the ideology and the medium of rationality that enforces it (Cahill, 2011).

Action

Critical process drama emphasises the role of the body and its movement as communication and critique. Contemporary critical pedagogy is reliant on academic forms of communication that privilege rational discourse (Giroux, 2010). Embodied inquiry can invite multiple viewpoints and engage in both internal and external somatic dialogue and debate.

An embodied art form, the action or doing of drama, is essential to critical process drama. A site for knowing, the body brings both being and matter into relation with one another to make meaning. Through the body, concepts of knowledge may be deconstructed and reconstructed (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015).

Regardless of external interference, the body remains the private domain of its owner and we cannot know what lies within. Secondly, any attempts to translate the body into language are inherently flawed. Facilitators cannot discount the significance of the body where perhaps it is the participants’ actions, reactions, and spontaneous physical expressions that offer the greatest emancipatory potential.

Agitation

Agitation is vital for considering the development of a critical process drama as a space of public critique (Apple, 1979). Essential to the ongoing hopes of an active democracy is the provision of space to dissent, challenge, explore, and voice individual understandings. The tension of the drama should agitate, disturb, arouse, unsettle, and confront compelling participants to think, reconsider, and act (Bundy, 2004).

Trouble is interesting and complex, and there is something delicious about behaving badly in drama and playing with trouble. Although a shared community is vital to drama education, agreeable compliance is not (Neelands, 2009). Agitation can unveil reality, welcome creativity, and demythologise certainty.

Drama that disrupts will resonate and agitate participants long after the drama has concluded. Critical process drama can embrace difficult topics and explore experiences as embodied knowing, and not as restricted telling.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity as welcome uncertainty resists endings, boundaries, or linearity and counters the oppressive role of certainty so often present within educational settings. Productive and
provocative, ambiguity evokes and invites a complexity over simplicity and resonates with
critical pedagogy as active, evolving, and contextually responsive (Delon, 2008). Ambiguity
heightens inclusion by regarding all possibilities and negating the appraisal demands of neo-
liberal education, which rank, reject, and invalidate. Gifting or insisting upon a resolution
to the drama discounts participants’ role as its creators and denies them the efficacy of their
own imaginations.

Inviting ambiguity into the drama requires that facilitators resist not only tidy endings
within the drama but equally fixed notions of character. Participants working in roles who
are forced to solidify a character according to “appropriate” behaviours are restricted to ei-
ther adhering to or rebelling against that established norm.

A critical process drama alludes playfulness, reflection in action, imagination and count-
ers the linearity of technocratic rationality. This ambiguity needs to extend to the portrayal
and exploration of ideas to avoid replicating the bounds of present social realities and engage
in the active disruption.

Critical process drama may apply non-naturalistic conventions, operate through an epi-
sodic structure, and employ anthropomorphic games to avoid simple, ideologically bounded
replication. Willing to cross borders between fiction and reality, critical process drama can
provide a rigorous, reflective, and embodied experience that generates personalised mean-
ings (Prentki, 2018).

Critical process drama invites a shared productive ambiguity, but is not a trick. Partic-
ipants must see the boundaries between fiction and reality to make conscious, active, and
informed choices to explore or breach them.

Hope

Critical process drama must offer a hopeful space for the “possibility of what can be”
(O’Grady & Smyth, 2017, p. 158). An innovation against darkness, hope is paradoxically
brought forth by injustice and can underpin the creative process, to illuminate, critique, or
act in the pursuit of change. Educated hope is dynamic and acts in spite of reality to move
beyond the costuming of idealism and into the bones of individuals, sensory, and profound
(Giroux, 2002).

Grounded in tangible personal and collective embodied experiences, drama originates in
the imagination (Appadurai, 1996). Playful and critical, the imaginary space as a site for hope
supplies the expansive space for remaking the world: the pre-text, tensions, and framework
of the specific drama provide the conditions for fostering critical hope.

Critical process drama must be sustained by hope, which erupts in resistance (Freire &
Freire, 2014); it is the impetus for the dance and fuels participants when their feet are tired
and their muscles sore. Without hope, inequalities remain, and fatalism tempts us to recon-
cile ourselves to reality and perform the same old steps. Hope needs a purpose, context, and
vision (Harvey, 2000) that stir individuals to care, debate, battle, and spark the revolution.

Final thought

Critical process drama offers something unique: a space to imagine a new world and, more
importantly, a space between worlds. We cannot dance forever in the imagination or plod
along hopelessly in reality. We need to recognise, operate, and travel between these spaces,
but it is in the transition that we can transform. It is in the crack between the light and dark
where we can dance and dance and dance.
References


