Humanizing education with dramatic inquiry

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HUMANIZING EDUCATION
WITH DRAMATIC INQUIRY

In dialogue with Dorothy Heathcote’s radical and transformative pedagogy

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What else is drama and theatre about other than examining ‘what it is to be human’ in the safety of the made event?

(Heathcote, 2009a)

One of the most revered teachers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Dorothy Heathcote (1926–2011), was a humanizing educator for whom drama was integral to her teaching throughout the world for over six decades. Heathcote described herself as a “radical” teacher. Her transformative vision was to “change the schools so that more young people begin to question what they are told … and in positive ways to find their own deep interests, skills, and competencies so that they become life-long learners” (quoted in O’Neill, 2015, p. 153). She championed drama because of how it creates collaborative spaces for experiencing and reflecting with imagination upon “the complexity of living” in relation to “all the affairs of [hu]mankind” (Heathcote, 1983, pp. 696, 701). She desired that, working alongside teachers, people of any age or condition be able to “examine and inquire into citizenship and community” on educational journeys that presage a lifelong exploration of what it means for them and other people to become more fully human in society (quoted in O’Neill, 2015, p. 11).

Brian and Iona, the authors of this chapter, have been in dialogue with Heathcote’s ideas and teaching practices for much of their professional lives. Brian studied with Dorothy for his master’s degree and then, as a teacher educator in the US, remained in contact and correspondence with her until her death. Dorothy planned and conversed with Iona over two decades as she led professional development programs across the UK. In their professional collaborations for nearly 20 years, Brian and Iona have dialogued about how their teaching has been deeply affected by their understanding of Heathcote’s pedagogy along with its significance for education in the light of other theorists and pedagogues.

Heathcote pioneered the use of drama, along with other arts, to humanize classroom communities and educational pursuits so that young people might become more grown-up. For over half a century, she showed how young people and topics can come to life in schools that too often deaden learning and teaching (Bolton and Heathcote, 1999; Heathcote and Bolton, 1995; Johnson and O’Neill, 1984; O’Neill, 2015; Wagner, 1999). Brian introduced the overarching

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term “dramatic inquiry” to characterize Heathcote’s deceptively simple yet highly engaging, complex, inquiry-based approaches to drama as education (Edmiston, 2010, 2014). The term has been taken up in New Zealand and elsewhere (Aitken, 2021). We argue that Heathcote was a visionary educator whose practice has been oversimplified in its application, undertheorized, and underappreciated for its humanizing potential. She was a pioneer in advocating for teachers educating by dramatizing, dialoguing, and inquiring with young people about life rather than by merely using drama to facilitate learning within the formal curriculum.

Though we would not have developed our teaching as we have over the past decades if we had not been guided by Heathcote’s practical wisdom, following her repeated advice to all educators, we have made her pedagogy our own. We share her transformative hopeful vision. She used dramatic inquiry pedagogy to create the possibilities for people of all ages to change their understanding of whatever subject matter might be studied, to make a shift in how they relate to other people, and to develop more grown-up awareness, attitudes, and ways of being and acting in the world. She was tireless, not only in demonstrating how classrooms could become crucibles for transformative change but also in advocating for radical transformation of schooling. We argue, as she does, that if we want all young people to become more responsible, responsive, and creative people in the world, then classrooms must become more like art studios and experimental labs in schools that advocate for education located in the actual needs of communities, local and global.

The human condition is Heathcote’s curriculum. Writing a year before her death, aged 85, Heathcote (2010) remained adamant, after six decades as a teacher educator in her native Britain and as a guest teacher in classrooms throughout the world, that in addition to any short-term curricular objectives, the core goal of teaching ought to be to embrace learning about life in all its diversity. Content should always be encountered contextualized in the joys, the struggles, and the humanity of actual people in societies across time and space. Heathcote was a humanizing educator. She was emphatic that young people should not be abandoned to take at face value the images and ideas they encounter in and out of schooling via “television advertising and subject experts” (quoted in O’Neill, 2015, p. 153). If she had been writing today, in the “post-truth” age of Trumpism and Brexit, she would likely have extended her list to include youngsters’ daily dose of whatever simplistic, partial, and polarizing ideas and views they see, read, and hear repeated uncritically on social media, the Internet, and in too many classrooms. She had no time for generic teaching targets or abstract standards. Rather, she recognized that young people are on journeys of personal discovery yet are rooted in social relationships and cultural worlds propelled forward by the momentum of history.

Regardless of whatever subject she might have been exploring with people of any age, at the core of her curriculum was always dialogue among competing positions and inquiry into how we may better understand and extend our own humanity in relation to everyone else in the world and to respond productively and humanely. “All my ideas … are rooted in the remarkable variations of human encounters” (Heathcote, 2009a, n.p.), as teachers explore with young people “what sort of society we want,” both within and beyond the walls of a classroom (Heathcote, 1983, p. 693). She wanted pedagogical relationships with young people to mean that they are alive to a reality that says, “I’m not just sitting there letting knowledge or learning happen to me.” Sometimes they might take on responsibility to “teach other students.” At other times they might raise ethical questions about “power, rights, justice,” or feel a need to declare: “I don’t think that’s right” (Ibid., pp. 699, 701), leading to more humanizing dialogue and inquiry over time.

Heathcote’s teaching strove to connect students’ lives with facets of the messy complexity of the lives of other people who might live in communities and cultures across time, as
represented by events in factual and fictional stories that could always be dramatized. Her intention was never to replicate the status quo but rather to work toward transforming classrooms and schools into more humanizing communities so that, with their teachers, young people could both better understand societies while also working at making a difference to improve their own lives and those of people beyond the school.

Heathcote was eclectic. She turned to theatre artists (e.g., Brecht, 2014), sociologists (e.g., Goffman, 1975), cultural anthropologists (e.g., Hall, 1959), sociocultural theorists (e.g., Britton, 1972; Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978), critical pedagogues (e.g., Freire, 1970), and indeed to anyone who could provide her with theoretical frameworks for better understanding how drama may illuminate more of the social, cultural, historical, and ethical complexities of life for people of any age.

Along with Cecily O’Neill, who has championed Heathcote’s work throughout her own illustrious career, we too are, “confident that these visions of active, empowering, and authentic education will continue to inspire, motivate, and challenge new generations of teachers and learners” (O’Neill, 1995, p. 6).

Four approaches to dramatic inquiry

The perfect model I keep before me is of a commission engaging students and staff, and serving the world community.

(Heathcote, 2002b)

Heathcote invented four related and complementary approaches to dramatic inquiry pedagogy: Process Drama, Rolling Role, Mantle of the Expert, and the Commission Model. With each approach, young people and adults work as an ensemble to dramatize, dialogue about, and inquire into the meaning of events (Heathcote, 2000). Heathcote (1969) stressed that, “Dramatic activity is concerned with the crises, the turning points of life, large and small, which cause people to reflect and take note” (p. 74). To plan as teachers, we must be able to imagine being with students in events. When we are in the classroom, then we must embrace imagining with young people to create “the immediacy of action” and the possibility of “realizations” in reflection (Heathcote, 2009b, p. 17). In dramatic inquiry, students and teachers can inquire together to interpret the significance of coauthored dramatized events in other people’s lives.

Rather than portraying them as distinctive, Heathcote envisioned her approaches as facets of a comprehensive pedagogy that educators could move between and supplement with other methodologies, to use within, between, and beyond individual classroom spaces. None separates education from life inside and outside the classroom; rather, each one may “forge links between schooling and society” (Heathcote, 2009a).

Heathcote’s initial approach has come to be known widely as Process Drama (O’Neill, 1995). It has also been called drama as education, drama in education, educational drama, curriculum drama, living-through drama, classroom drama, story drama, drama for learning and creativity, applied theatre, applied drama, drama used to explore people, or just drama. This is dramatic inquiry limited to a single session or several sessions in which a teacher artfully structures activities to focus a group on dramatizing and inquiring to, for example, to make sense of events in a story. In one such session, Brian worked for a morning with 12- and 13-year-old students exploring in the world of Romeo and Juliet to inquire into questions that included the following: Why might children not do what adults want them to do?

Heathcote created her Rolling Role approach to be used primarily by teachers in a secondary school who wanted to work collaboratively across different classrooms. Heathcote
invented Rolling Role to show how her pedagogy could be used across disciplines in schools where schedulers divide up subjects like pie slices, making it more difficult to work in the interdisciplinary way she advocates and that help learners make meaning. Sue Davis (2016) has written an extensive analysis of how this approach can be used in the digital age. As we have only passing experience of Rolling Role, in this chapter we do not refer to examples of this approach.

Heathcote’s Mantle of the Expert and Commission Model are more complex approaches envisioned to continue over weeks or months of extended and deepening dramatic inquiry that may focus on any aspects of a curriculum. We most often refer to these approaches using the widely used abbreviations “mantle” and “commission.”

The Commission Model, Heathcote’s most ambitious approach, remains largely unknown (Heathcote, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). To set up a commission, a teacher negotiates with people outside the classroom to commission the young people to work with other people on an actual project that would benefit from their expertise. For example, working with Iona from 2015 to 2017, young people aged 16 to 18 were commissioned by Swansea University in collaboration with the local museum on behalf of Sally Burton, the widow of the actor Richard Burton, to create a movie for the local community about his life.

Heathcote’s equally comprehensive pedagogy, Mantle of the Expert (see especially, Abbott, 2018; Aitken, 2021; Heathcote, 2009a; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; mantleoftheexpert.com; Taylor, 2016), has been used very successfully, especially in England, Wales, and New Zealand, to engage and teach children with a focus that includes learning aspects of a required curriculum. With mantle, the young people collectively take on a “mantle” of responsibility framed as if they are a team open to developing their expertise so as to complete a big job for imagined people, often referred to as “clients,” who need their assistance or help with problems. For example, Brian worked with children aged five to six, who learned about fire, firefighting, and the lives of firefighters, as well as related literacy practices, as they dramatized a previously successful rescue of a cat stuck up a tree. The children worked collaboratively as if they were a team of firefighters presenting to the fire chief as they prepared to teach their effective techniques to newcomers who were about to arrive at the fire station.

Heathcote’s dramatic inquiry approaches were radical and potentially transformative. Heathcote envisioned drama as education. She regarded humanizing inquiry-based approaches to drama as methods for contextualizing and integrating teaching and learning in any classroom rather than as being limited to dramatic strategies, being used to promote engagement, or restricted to a curriculum subject.

**Pedagogy and curriculum**

We needed people to be literate, to count their money, and so on. But now, we need them to be human, generous, thoughtful, with many kinds of languages. They should be really knowing what it’s like in this world. As it is, we’ve protected them, so that they need take no responsibility in their education. The curriculum is still made for them. It is not made by them. And we need to make the curriculum by them, from a very early age

(Heathcote, 2002b)

A pedagogy creates a framework for conceptualizing how people experience life in a classroom that includes the teaching and learning of curriculum. For Heathcote, education could not be reduced to either planning the formal learning of curriculum content dictated by bureaucratic institutions or merely following the existing interests of young people. For her, the curriculum was the human condition. Like the curriculum theorist, Ted Aoki (Aoki, 1986;
Pinar & Irwin, 2005), we regard curriculum as something that emerges from what happens among people in classrooms as well as any written document outlining goals, objectives, generic intended outcomes, or standards that may be referred to as “the” curriculum. Aoki argues that as teachers we need to live in the tension between the “curriculum-as-lived” and any given, mandated, or prepared “curriculum-as-planned.” As contemporary science teacher Travis Fuchs puts it, the problem with a mandated curriculum is that “it is neither concerned with the diverse students [who] are expected to achieve those goals nor the experiences of a teacher working towards them.” However, when we pay attention to the “unique, diverse, and dynamic elements” of our actual classroom, then we can create a pedagogy that “encapsulates the hopes, dreams, motivations and curiosity of pupils, their experiences in a school setting, and their past histories” (Fuchs, 2019, n.p.).

Dramatic inquiry humanizes subjects and topics as aspects of life. Dramatizing events puts people in relationship with people’s ideas, information, and other aspects of life that would be of concern to the other people being depicted. In dramatic inquiry, people always have a shared purpose in both dramatizing events and making meaning via collaborative inquiry into the implications of those events for us and for other people, including those being represented with dramatic imagination.

One of the great benefits of harnessing dramatic imagination for education is that each young person makes sense of any subject can be accepted as a valued contribution. Their curiosity, motivations, hopes, and dreams (along with their attitudes, and any fears or confusions) can be given form within dramatized events and then made sense of in responses that connect with the lives of other people, including ourselves and characters in stories. Youngsters’ typically unacknowledged inchoate feelings or thoughts resonating with their lives are integral to any embodied social interactions as if within imagined events. As Gavin Bolton (1999), a longtime colleague of Heathcote’s, explains, when youngsters dramatize events, they may be “protected into” emotional experiences that would rarely be able to be shared productively or appropriately in the everyday. Just as young children can imagine they are monsters and heroes and thus contextualize emotional responses of hatred or love as well as their ideas of how mythical figures might act, so in the classroom any young person can draw on their feelings, as well as their ideas, as they dialogue with one another, and with us, in response to fictional events as if we are all living inside another world. Rather than being only able to respond directly in the actual context of the classroom, with dramatic inquiry, anyone’s emotional responses, attitudes, and ideas may be productively contextualized and responded to in dialogue within or about collectively imagined events.

As humanizing teachers, we must address young people so that they may respond as their best (not their worst) selves. Young people themselves may not recognize their assets or value what they might achieve, especially those who have internalized deficit or damaged narratives about their self-worth in a system that is failing them as unique people. Education can dehumanize pedagogical relationships in subtle ways by not creating, or by undermining, the interactions, conditions, environments, and cultures in which each young person could come to recognize their potential and work to extend it in relation to everyone else in a classroom community. As Heathcote put it, schooling can feel like a perpetual “waiting room,” where the institution is denying them “the power to influence” what’s happening in the classroom. They are not being treated as the responsible people they could become (Heathcote, 1980, p. 132). This is a discourse of being “not ready” that can infantilize people of any age and exclude the contributions of those who would feel very ready to be involved in group projects that feel meaningful to them and to the lives of people outside of the classroom.
Education humanizes when the classroom community culture changes so that every young person feels they belong because they are being addressed as already sufficiently competent, capable, or knowledgeable in relation to activities and possible actions that they care about. In contrast to feeling that schooling is, in effect, saying to them, “one day you will be good enough to really do [something worthwhile], but not today,” as Heathcote (1980) claimed, young people’s relationships with peers and teachers may be transformed when, in relation to an imagined future that they care about, they hear: “Today you are good enough and you really are going to do it” (p. 178).

Dramatic inquiry can humanize relations with people. Heathcote was adamant that she wanted all young people to “realise their power” in relation to everyone else in their classroom community that they “create together.” Everyone in the group is equally always “good enough” to contribute to the collective and collaborative dramatization of events with the teacher as “an active community member.” No one is excluded or marginalized because of who they are, or who they are not. Dramatic inquiry is always a joint enterprise involving everyone in the classroom community. Drama is never about some people talking to explain about something “over there,” with the rest of the class being passive. Dramatizing happens in the “here-and-now” as people “stand up” with diverse ideas and in dialogue make meaning collectively, as all consider possible responses to the imagined deeds of other people and their implications for our shared lives (Heathcote, 2009a, n.p.).

### Humanizing teaching with dramatic inquiry

William Blake said a marvelously apt thing for teachers. He said, ‘If you would do good to anyone you must do it in minute particulars’

*(Heathcote, 1984)*

We wrote this chapter amid the coronavirus pandemic. Connecting via the Internet between the two continents where we live, we’re more aware than ever why we’ve spent our careers championing the humanizing potential of drama as education. No longer having access in person to the complex human reality of classroom communities, we came to more appreciate Heathcote’s insistence on paying attention to the “minute particulars” of our teaching. As Brian struggled in the US to teach via Zoom Ohio teachers who desperately wanted to be physically present with their students, for the first time in decades, he was not working directly with children. In the UK, Iona created materials for teachers in Wales to use online with children. She devised a way to replace a cancelled in-person meeting with a local museum officer about including their work in a display about the 75th anniversary of the ending of World War II. In this section, we’ve constructed a dialogue based on our recent actual exchanges.

#### Brian

It’s interesting that recently you used the unifying theme of “Journeys” as you embarked on inquiries across three classrooms in Swansea. You focused on World War II (WWII) with Year 5 (Y5) and Year 6 (Y6) children in Talycoopa Primary School and on *Hansel and Gretel* with Years 3/4 (Y3/4) children in Pentrechwyth Primary School. You began last November, when you’d been brought in by the Welsh Arts Council to promote collaboration, lead professional development focused on learning Heathcote’s pedagogy, and promote the well-being of the children in the three classes across the two schools in South Wales.

I was thinking that teaching with dramatic inquiry is like taking a shared journey with young people. We explore facets of life that we as teachers must recognize (or come to
realize) are both important for the young people and which they find engaging as the people they are. We never teach generic children, right?

**Iona**

Yes, even when we may only see faces on Zoom. Going online made me realize how much I had to adapt in response to what these children needed. I had initially chosen journeys for several reasons. A thematic study can feel static with arbitrary content, whereas journeys are stories focused on events in a different time and place, are engaging when characters experience dramatic tension, and show change. I wanted to look at WWII primarily through the eyes of children who are changed by a war that brought unavoidable change to people caught up in events not of their own making. With the nine- and ten-year-old children in Y5, we explored the journeys of evacuee children from multiple perspectives. Using narratives and photographs from the time, the children a year older, in Y6, were intrigued to realize that the evacuated children were often confused about the reason for the journey, and anxious for their own safety and that of their parents, while being apprehensive about the reception they would receive with host families. I began working with the Y6 children focused on the picture book *Rose Blanche* (McEwan, 2004), a story about a little German girl on a dangerous journey from her town to a concentration camp, following a truck rounding up Jewish children. With the Y6 group, we also explored the journey of the visual artist, Josef Herman (1911–2000), as a young man escaping from Nazi-occupied Poland to a town in Wales, not far from where the children lived. Additionally, as they were in their final year of primary school, the Y6 children were about to embark on a metaphorical journey to secondary school. In the other school, I began working with the seven- to nine-year-old children in Y3/4 on a fictional journey: the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. Later, the plan was to compare the folktale with the stories of child evacuees that the older children would focus on. In March, I had just completed negotiating a commission from the Learning and Participation Officer at Swansea War Museum: all the children had been invited to create resources for a planned three-week WWII exhibit at the museum. Then the pandemic hit.

**Brian**

Of course, you couldn’t have anticipated how the pandemic would disrupt those metaphorical journeys. But you didn’t just abandon the work, even though you could have, technically. Rather, you created a resource for the older children. It seems like you wanted the children to realize that, despite being in lockdown, part of what it means to inquire, as grown-ups, is to humanize whatever challenges might arise in our lives.

**Iona**

It was a challenge for everyone when the schools closed. Julia Knaggs, the Y6 teacher, wanted to try working online with the children. I wanted to embrace rather than ignore the experiences that the children were going through, knowing that one day this would be a memorable moment in our history. Fortunately, I had a strong relationship with her and the children, since I had worked with all of them the previous year. When they were in Y5, I had organized a commission from the Swansea Maritime Museum that had resulted in an afternoon presentation including delighted children and a display at the museum of their work on stories about the sea. The children had all risen to that challenge, and a year later,
they still had a grown-up glow when I told them that the booklet created from their stories was still available in the museum shop.

The children were ready for another grown-up inquiry project that would make a difference in their community. Julia wanted to focus on the Welsh curriculum topic of “diaries,” so I decided to go ahead and introduce the planned focus of child refugees via a resource that could be also be used by the Y5 teacher if she wished. Discovering that the exhibit was to move online, I contacted Swansea War Museum and renegotiated the commission. I drafted a letter for the museum director that he provided on headed paper. I created a video and included his letter as a still image at the beginning to frame the resource as inviting responses that were for an actual client. In the letter, he stressed how anything that the children might create (written diaries, writings, drawings, oral diaries, etc.) would be included on the museum website.

Brian

When you and I were planning, while the children were in lockdown, how you might write and record your 15-year-old granddaughter reading a diary entry, we did what we always do in planning. We imagined how everyone could connect their likely present situation and feelings (in this case, of isolation and disconnection from many friends and family members while being stuck in a house) with the situation and feelings of people in the subject world (in this case, how child evacuees in WWII might have felt experiencing and remembering a journey from their family home to a strange situation elsewhere that they could not predict). The narrative you invented about sibling evacuees leaving their parents in the Midlands to take the train to an unknown town in Wales would have had clear resonances for Welsh children right now. You crafted that narrative as if it was entries in the diary of a young girl in 1939. Hearing a voice-over that accompanied historical still photographs of child evacuees, each child today could imagine and identify with a child back then who was like themselves in age and in other ways.

Iona

I was intending to humanize past, present, and unknown future events by drawing attention to details in the lives of a family in the past with whom the children were likely to identify. I wanted to introduce parallels with the children’s lives right now. I constructed the narrative carefully, so that it might have multiple emotional narrative resonances with their own lives in the lockdown: the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds; the everyday irritations of family life; relationships between and with parents; parting from and missing being with older relatives who are no longer physically present; family relationships with an older child having to be responsible for a younger sibling; the confusion and vulnerability of parents; a young person torn between wanting to act grown-up but still being a child. Some of the implicit inquiry questions were these: How do people cope when a sudden change is imposed on them? What might happen in your lives, as children, when adults decide what’s best for you? How does it make a difference that they are uncertain and don’t seem to know what’s going on?

Brian

It took me a long time to realize that dramatic inquiry must always be a shared humanizing endeavor. Drama can be superficial without an inquiry focus, yet inquiry can be dehumanizing when it’s a technical matter. Content is dead to students unless we bring it to life with
them. We’re both passionate about using dramatic inquiry because we know how we have brought to life events that are like a portal into other worlds that can contextualize inquiry into life’s challenges. How people respond within events can turn abstract ideas into concrete experiences that may be interpreted by students of any age as they dialogue with one another and with us, as teachers. Over time, we can imagine, encounter, and dialogue in imagination with people whose lives and concerns may become the subject of our exploration. I know from your work, from Dorothy’s, and from my own experiences in the US (where teachers, under even more constrictions and surveillance than their counterparts in the UK, have become less inclined to embark on projects), the exponential value of using mantle or commission approaches to dramatic inquiry over prolonged periods of time. I wish the philosopher of education, Gert Biesta (2014, 2017a, 2017b), knew about dramatic inquiry, since it could exemplify his beliefs about the purpose of education. Via the art of dramatic inquiry, everyone in a classroom community can become more grown-up in dialogue with imagined unexpected events and views, grow more socialized into working collaboratively, and come to feel more qualified in making contributions to society within and beyond the school.

**Iona**

Whenever we plan, we’re always trying to imagine young people making sense of whatever subject world we intend to explore with them. People of any age can’t be educated about anything unless they connect prior experiences in their own lives with events in the imagined lives of other people. That’s as true in our everyday lives as adults as it is for young people when they encounter what we bring to them as teachers and as we respond to what they do and speak.

**Brian**

I was reading Vivian Paley (1991) recently. Paley believes that one of the most important things that she does as a teacher is make a difference to how children are able to connect. She uses the metaphor of “drawing invisible lines between the children’s images” that each child brings into the classroom and that they are creating in-the-moment. As a preschool teacher who centers classroom life around collaboratively dramatizing stories, she documented over a lifetime how those lines that are drawn as children, with adults’ assistance, tell and create stories and bring them to life in imagination via dramatic play and dramatization as well as by reflecting to make sense and develop some shared meaning with their peers about their mutual interests. In the preschool classroom, Paley is aware that, over a year in a classroom with her children, they seek out and create increasingly complex connecting lines as they inquire into how they might live and make sense of their lives together. Have you found anything similar in your extended projects with older students?

**Iona**

I can see a parallel between Paley’s metaphor of “lines” and what one of my students, Assim, realized in the Richard Burton commission. Toward the end of his year-long involvement in the project, Assim said that everyone in their group could connect differently with Burton’s life because “he has threads for all of us.” Significantly, Assim recognized that, like everyone else, he had had to find and follow his own threads. No one could do that for him. Assim had moved nearly every year since he started school and had a rocky relationship with his single-parenting mother. He spent most of his class time drafting scripts for scenes for others to dramatize for
the movie they had been commissioned to create. He connected with Burton as both a family man and as a writer. Over the year, he developed significantly in his writing abilities. He also became more grown-up, in Biesta’s sense of realizing the importance of fostering more connections with other people in relation to aspects of life that were important to him.

It’s clear to me that young people can only attend to and begin to engage with more investment in inquiries when they are thickening and weaving together connecting threads (or invisible lines). The weaving of these threads creates an increasingly complex web of connections and meaning. There is no distinction between connections across imagined and actual spaces. The important thing is that they create connections between their own lives, the lives of their peers, and the lives of the people they’ve encountered in subject worlds.

**Brian**

Meaningful inquiry can only happen over time. The extended projects that Heathcote envisioned for the commission and mantle approaches, conducted over weeks or months or even a year, promote deeper connections for everyone. Process Drama can also foster deep connections. The work you did in February was like a Process Drama that began to set up a relationship with the subject world of WWII that was central to the commission.

**Iona**

Yes. For a couple of hours one day in February, I worked with a self-selected group of ten young people who were specifically interested in painting. The Swansea War Museum intended to feature paintings from their collection in the upcoming WWII exhibition.

The young people formed deep connections with paintings by Josef Herman. He was a Jewish man who had escaped to Wales from his native Poland, where his family had perished in a camp. I had prepared materials that included photocopies of his paintings, printed quotes from his writing, as well as sheets with the dates and titles of the three periods of his artwork: The Years of the Sun, … the Moon, and … the War. As I had researched his life (Herman, 2002), I felt prepared to respond to whatever interested the children.

I wanted them to feel that the paintings were addressing them. At first, we played around with the photocopies, trying to sequence them chronologically by paying close attention to how the images might be symbolic of his life experiences. The children were especially curious about why he might have depicted so many people as faceless. Then, we dramatized meeting Herman. To extend and deepen our conversation, I stood in for Josef. The children sculpted me. Talking across time, they could now address their questions to Josef directly, and in response I gave information speaking as if I were him in different spaces and times in historical contexts. Two other children were eager to join me as if we were all Josef. There was a more somber tone to our interactions that now felt like what Heathcote called the “now and imminent time” of events in the Nazi-infected world of WWII and later in Josef’s adopted home of South Wales. As an escaping Polish child, Josef spoke, not knowing what might happen to him. Later, as an adult British citizen, he appreciated how he had felt welcomed in Wales.

**Brian**

I love how organic your explorations were with the children. You provided information and used quotes from his writings in context but always in response to what interested the children, what they wanted to know, and the questions that arose for them. Teaching with
dramatic inquiry can be deadened if we give information unasked for, tell students answers, or pose questions that we already know the answer to. Such gambits may shut down inquiry before it has had a chance to enrich classroom life. You and I could both tell stories from our own early teaching that illustrates those errors!

Having dialogued with Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986, 1990, 2011) ideas over the years, and more recently with Biesta’s, I’ve come to realize that, whatever activities we introduce, the young people must feel addressed as competent, capable, knowledgeable, and with relational agency, if we are to be able to dialogue. That must be the case despite any stories we’ve heard to the contrary, for example, about “naughty boys.” As you did, we must trust that if we present material likely to intrigue humans of their age and background to focus collaborative activities, they’ll choose to engage in relation to their peers because of how they connect with implicit imagined events in the lives of other people. It’s worth spending time to find or create, select, and present material with narrative threads that invite multiple possible responses because they are varied, ambiguous, and emotionally textured. Clearly, the children felt captivated as they were addressed by Herman’s paintings and words. The children listening to and watching the video of the diary would have felt similarly addressed.

I was thinking that, in effect, we want everyone in any group to feel addressed by something that is presented so that they ask themselves implicit fundamental inquiry questions:

- What connection do I feel with the people in this imagined world?
- What do people in the imagined world seem to be asking of me, of us, as people?

The responses from the young people are like answers to those implicit questions. Each person’s answers will reveal something of them, using the sociocultural theorist Anna Stetsenko’s (2017) phrase, “knowing-doing-beings”: how they feel connected (or not) with this imagined world, as well as something of what they already know, can do, are interested in as an inquiry focus, and who they are becoming as unique human beings. Making those responses public will also reveal some similarities and differences in how they are making connections to enrich the ongoing dialogue and collaborative inquiry in the classroom community. The resource that you created for the Y6 children had the potential to do all of that except that each child would not be in a social, physically shared time and space in the classroom with a teacher able to make a difference in the ways you were that day, as you explored the life and artwork of Josef Herman.

**Iona**

The children’s responses suggested that they were making deep connections with what they inferred about Josef’s life experiences. Their language referenced states of being that included memory, being apart, and being powerful, as well as emotions that included sadness, escape, freedom, loss, feeling apart, and aloneness.

**Brian**

I know that if we want to initiate and support inquiry, then we must be open to accepting however we are being addressed by the young people. In the same way you were, we must be curious enough to listen and watch without judgment for what is happening as each person is experiencing and making sense of the world, and then to promote dialogue and respond authentically as another human.
We’re not only presenting but also receiving and then answering whatever each young person has offered in response. We’re all in dialogue with one another. Now it’s as if the basic inquiry questions are reversed as we wonder, for example:

- How can I connect with how the young people are connecting with the imagined world?
- What are the young people asking of me as a teacher, and of us as people?
- What is the agreed focus of our inquiry asking of me?

**Iona**

I had wanted the paintings to speak to them, and they did. As we stood round the photocop-ies, the children were paying close attention. They wrote comments and questions on post-it notes. Wanting them to infer meaning, I asked focusing questions like, “I wonder what these paintings could tell us about his life?” Mostly, I felt I was being asked to be open, to just listen, and not interrupt as they responded. I was not being asked for definitive information. In response to what the children had said, I occasionally made affirmative statements, like, “I hadn’t thought of that,” or I asked genuine questions that occurred to me in-the-moment. For example, suggesting where to look to see if he was indeed Jewish, as one child had inferred from the spelling of his first name. And having discovered that he was, I asked, “I wonder if that made a difference to what he painted?” Assuming at the time that we were to be asked to contribute to the museum display on WWII, I focused our inquiries on making connections between what they already knew about the war and the Nazis and how Josef’s paintings might be symbolic of his own life journey, for example, representing feelings of escape and relationships between people. When we moved to dramatization, I was open to them sculpting me. As I responded, I drew on my knowledge, and the quotes on display, to give factual and truthful answers and introduced new ideas. There were gasps when I told them, as Josef, that I had burned some of my paintings. One of the girls, Mary, asked, “Were you trying to forget about what had happened to you?” Sutish responded, “He can’t escape his memories even if he destroys his drawings, so I wonder how he handled that in his life?” This was a boy who had been as deeply engaged as everyone else yet was labeled as “at risk.”

**Brian**

We can say we’re doing “inquiry” with children but not until young people have become curious enough to follow lines of inquiry will inquiry have begun. We both know that we can’t make children curious. But having embarked on a journey of inquiry, it’s as if they are now feeling addressed by more far-reaching future-oriented questions:

- How might we proceed – what might we need to do?
- What might we need to know?
- How might we need to be?
- How might we need to transform our classroom community space?

As we respond to such questions and collaborate, then everyone is coauthoring both the journey and what it means for us. In the Josef Herman session, when did you feel that the inquiry had taken off so that everyone had embarked on a shared “we-for-us” journey in which everyone was contributing?
Our collective and collaborative sense of “we-ness” deepened significantly when we dramatized talking to Josef Herman across time and space. Everyone was either speaking or listening closely. We were in humanizing dialogue as we inquired together as colleagues. To find out what they wanted to know, children were ready to pretend to be elsewhere: using dramatic conventions such as speaking across time to someone standing in for a person in another world (Heathcote, 1982).

Agreeing that they wanted to create artifacts for the museum, everyone wanted to paint about evacuation, some in the style of Josef Herman. They also wanted to write a voice-over about his life and his art. The next week, the school closed. As I wrote the diary and created a voice-over, I imagined the children listening to my words. We were continuing our humanizing inquiry.

It was significant that this was a self-selected group interested in painting. It reminded me that not everyone has to work on the same aspect of a project. Also, because I’d worked with all these children the previous year, I had already developed what we both always desire: a collegial relationship with the whole class. With their teacher, Julia, we had developed social practices that had humanized the norms of the classroom community. These included changing the space as needed including by moving furniture; looking at materials (like paintings) on the floor rather than on screens or tables so that we could walk round them; being open to any suggestions; collaborating without asking permission; and dialoguing with anyone that was always assumed to be presaging more humanizing inquiry into facets of life.

**Looking forward**

If one could run the [commission] project on full timetable, what those kids would have done! How much they’d have been out of school; how much science experiment they’d have been doing, with soil, observation, art. Their days would be packed. And they’d be walking tall on their understanding.

*(Heathcote, 2002b)*

We desire a life in a classroom community where everyone is equally valued for who they are on the day they walk in and where all feel needed and able to contribute what they can already do as well as what they know. The inverse is also true for us: in every classroom community we desire that each person is celebrated as unique, yet no one should be valued more than anyone else because of their sense of privilege or entitlement and no one should feel unsafe, feel marginalized, or be excluded. We intend to apply those truths to everyone, including ourselves. We work to establish a sense of belonging to an unfolding community with shared humanizing values. We desire to connect with joy, care, kindness, equality, freedom, dignity, compassion, and love. We aim to co-create a space where everyone embraces curiosity, collaboration, honesty, playful hard work, equity, and fairness. We strive for mutual respect and responsibility, as well as freedom from fear, dehumanizing judgment, and any form of oppression.

We dramatize dialogue and inquiry into the meaning of narratives about significant topics intending to create encounters in which we may explore with young people how humans may act, experience, reflect, and respond in ways that acknowledge and foster our common humanity while recognizing how all people, ourselves included, can dehumanize others. Our teaching is both consciously as humanizing as possible and, when necessary, intentionally anti-oppressive. We are open to exploring events illustrating both the “light” and the
“dark side” of humanity so that young people may come to understand more about why people choose to humanize as well as the barriers to doing so, and they can see how people can make mistakes, even make disastrous errors, yet can always learn from them. In doing so, we hope that the young people in our care may come to understand more about themselves in their relationships with others. That’s true for us as well. We embrace dramatic inquiry as a pedagogy because all may change in how we understand ourselves and others to become more of the people that we desire to be in life, while collaborating in classroom communities to transform our world so that it may become more humanizing.

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Brian Edmiston and Iona Towler-Evans


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