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FACILITATING POST-PERFORMANCE PROCESS
DRAMA IN AN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOL

Heidi Schoenenberger

Imagining roles

Students are spread across the hall, huddled over blank pages. Excitedly drawing and chatting, their voices echoing through the large, open space. I weave through, asking questions about their role drawings. Some decide to discuss in role, telling me about themselves and how they relate to those around them. Others, unsure of who they should be, stare back at me shrugging. I encourage them and pose questions. When our brief 50 minutes together end, I collect the drawings and end with our closing ritual: passing a nod to acknowledge our practice together.

After they file out of the hall, I collect role drawings of every description: Spiderman, a ninja, Ariana Grande, Pennywise the Clown, famous YouTubers… a group of unrelated roles mostly based on popular culture. In my eyes, none of the roles seem remotely related to the performance we saw, and they are divided within the fictional town we created together: some are townspeople, and some are outsiders. The classroom teacher tells me that these students are not often asked to imagine what is beyond the world they live in, so when they do, they tap into what they know and what stimulates them day to day. I understand this. However, what do I do with what the students bring to the experience? How do I continue to exercise their imagination while bringing these divisive roles together? How do I guide students who are not often asked to imagine and step into a role?

Background to the study

This was the sixth out of nine drama sessions formed around the performance My Friend Selma by Terra Incognita Theatre Company, hosted by the Baboró International Arts Festival for Children in Galway, Ireland. Baboró and I hoped to initiate an educational intervention focused on pre- and post-performance engagement in the west of Ireland, as engagement programs connected to Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) performances are loosely defined and rarely documented in Irish research.

Using an action research methodology designed to be cyclical and self-reflective, I facilitated drama sessions for fourth-class students (aged nine to ten) at a local primary school classified as disadvantaged, referred to as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.
Post-performance process drama

DEIS (McNiff 2002, 11). DEIS schools are encouraged to attend low-cost or free events at the festival and are often offered further engagement opportunities such as artist-led workshops. I chose My Friend Selma because it focuses on themes of friendship and forced migration, which are relevant topics for the students in the chosen school, many whose relatives migrated to Ireland and others who are part of the Irish Travellers community. Throughout the fieldwork, I gathered data in the form of written and verbal field notes as well as voice recordings of group discussions, focus groups with the child participants during the midpoint and after all drama sessions, and in-person interviews with teachers.

Through this project, we hoped to shed light on challenges faced by practitioners who want to engage young audiences after they experience a performance, and the value of these extended experiences. How can a TYA performance be an opportunity for extended use of drama in a classroom? Furthermore, how can we know about Drama in Education (DiE) practices inform extended TYA performance engagement practices?

Structure and development of the sessions

I structured the drama sessions based on discussions of shared aims with the classroom teacher. I worked with the class for one hour per week in the classrooms and school hall, as per the curricular time allocated to drama. The workshop model I prepared was based on Imaginate’s Teaching Guide for extending the TYA experience, Evaluating the Performing Arts. This served as a basic structure for the sessions, aiming to guide conversation and debate while providing opportunities for teachers and students to feel empowered to express their ideas and opinions about performance (McGrath 2010, 4). To incorporate theme-based activities, I borrowed exercises from Terra Incognita’s education pack and Baboró’s adapted activities for My Friend Selma in an Irish classroom.1

My engagement model aimed to facilitate conversation and tap into dramatic possibilities using DiE techniques. Process drama conventions2 would provide a space for the children to decide the direction the workshops would go. Julie Dunn demonstrates that two of the key characteristics of process drama include its impromptu nature and the power to choose the direction the dramatic action takes based on this improvised form (2016, 128). This meant that there was a limited amount of preparation I could do, and that together with the teacher we would need to listen to the students and feed into their questions and interests when we began the process drama.

When I returned to the classroom after the performance, I collected information on the moments and questions that resonated with students through discussion, frozen image, and thought tracking. Based on these conversations, students displayed the most interest in the themes of leaving home and moving. The class was fascinated that Selma’s story was true. Based on this information, I created the context for a unique process drama for this group about a town that was in danger. However, the specifics of the place and the conflict would be created by the students. The participant’s agency is a key characteristic of process drama, allowing them to use the improvised elements to influence the dramatic action (Dunn 2016, 128). Therefore, the following sessions would be used to shape and define this dramatic context and the problem together as a group.

Challenges

The students responded most to the violent and sad moments from the play: they wanted to know what happened to the man taken away by soldiers; they sympathized with the little girl saying goodbye to her cat and later learning that her best friend died during the war;
they were curious about the guns pointed at her family in the hospital when her sick little sister needed care. These poignant, true moments transferred to the post-performance drama sessions. The students grasped at an opportunity to go deeper into a story that reflects human experience, demonstrated by their eagerness to know more about the characters’ lives. Our process drama focused on a town in which people began to feel unsafe. The reasons for this were created by the students in a rumor mill. We then held a town meeting, in which the students were invited, in role, to decide what to do about the threats they have encountered from a group of outsiders.

The teacher commented that imagination is not as widely used in this group, as many of the students’ parents are illiterate, so they would not typically be read to at home. Therefore, all projects and creative work are done in school because the students would not have the resources at home (field notes 4 Nov 2019). Therefore, to provide more guidance for entering role, I led an activity to help the students slowly develop and enter role as townspeople, leading to the creative yet conflicting roles mentioned previously. Perhaps this was due to too few parameters on the fictional context of the town. Or perhaps it suggests a need for the students to freely create roles that they are interested in. Yet, the story they wanted to tell, understood through their rumor mill and role drawings, was directly connected to the most violent aspects of the performance and the media they are exposed to in their own lives. It lacked a consistent problem to explore together, which is essential for a process drama.

Division in the drama makes it more difficult to work on a process drama with a common interest and goal.

I left the session wondering, how can, I as a facilitator, ‘encourage the ability of young persons to interpret their experiences in a world they come together to name’ (Greene 1995, 38)? How could I advocate for the students to come together as a community of thinkers, questioners, problem-solvers, to name the fictional community? While I wanted them to process and reflect on violence, they were stuck within it. I was eager for them to redefine a new, safe fictional context within which to understand their experiences, which would be challenging.

To address this challenge, I used the conventions of time and Teacher in Role (TiR). Time can be manipulated in a drama so that the participants can gain perspective from different moments within the drama (Neelands and Goode 2008, 3). In this case, we moved from a time of violence to a moment years later, when the townspeople were recognized for their heroic efforts. They had completely transformed the town to the most peaceful place on earth and came to the rescue of a fictional character called River who brought her family there to safety. Using TiR, I entered as River to meet the community who invited her to the anniversary ceremony of the reformed town. River reflected on the memories of those who helped her, acknowledging the roles the students came up with in the previous session. In this instance, TiR provided a bridge between the dramatic world the students originally created and their role in the newly formed context. This took the pressure off the students to come up with a role immediately and allowed them to ask me questions while defining who they are. It provided frame distance and space to dive into the fiction (Heathcote 1991, 168).

While I acknowledged their former roles, I felt I had negated the ideas they came up with which began our drama. Yet, through TiR, I did my best to honor those ideas and move onto something new, expanding thinking. Some of the students were attaching themselves to associated violent and popular roles and struggling to go beyond these, contradicting the role of the imagination to exceed what we are exposed to and access possibility (Greene 1995, 26). While some students wanted to emulate violent roles, would those roles allow them to see what is possible outside of what they know? I wanted to take their contribution
and push them further by introducing other characters in the process drama through TiR. They then began to create the context of a reformed town through group scene work, which still included a bank robbery, but this time the students made the connection to how they were helping another person and solving a problem.

These sessions taught me that the pace of introducing conventions is very important and dependent on the students. I was able to better understand how drama conventions offer an opportunity to ‘fracture and distort a natural sequence’ in the story to find meaning through manipulating time (Neelands and Goode 2008, 95). Furthermore, exploring imagination is a benefit of this practice, but students must be given the space to do so and to be heard. These students have experience doing scripted drama, but process-based drama is a new concept for them. While some jumped in, others showed hesitancy. The students often referred to the role I took and expressed enthusiasm when I referenced the roles they originally came up with. At first, I felt I was retracting everything they had contributed, but then I realized that process drama must be facilitated in a way that still accepts, develops, and values the students’ imaginative contributions.

Conclusion

What does this moment of transition in a drama mean for the field of extended performance engagement? The necessary flexibility and the listening inherent to process drama affect the way post-performance sessions are crafted. Rather than basing a drama on the same themes as the performance, the drama must be a facilitated response to the deeper concepts that resonate with the young people experiencing TYA. DiE conventions taught me to slow down and listen, that time and space are necessary for providing a rich experience that reflects the students’ perspectives. In that way, we are one step closer to valuing their imaginations. Often students experience a performance and rush back to school. Providing a space for children to contribute and discuss is not always offered but essential to help them make meaning from the arts to their lives.

While I wrestled with taking over and leading the drama in a non-violent direction, I learned the importance of letting the students discover why I did this, continuing to acknowledge their former and continuous contributions, without being tokenistic. This choice offered a different and perhaps unexpected perspective on time and sequencing in the drama: an opportunity for these young people to see what it is to ‘re-arrange the otherwise unalterable rhythm and pace of reality’ through theatre and the imagination (Neelands and Goode 2008, 104). Importantly, I realized that to provide a deeper experience for students, it is crucial for the drama facilitator to use their imaginations, for ‘any encounter with actual human beings who are trying to learn how to learn requires imagination on the part of the teachers’ (Greene 1995, 14). As teachers and DiE practitioners, we are humans teaching other humans. We are all learners needing to tap into imagination to go beyond where we thought we could when planning and delivering lessons.

Notes

1 All resources were available online and were developed for classrooms in Scotland and the UK curriculum, and therefore had to be adapted to the Irish curriculum.
2 This project considers both Cecily O’Neill’s definition of process drama as an improvised event and Neelands and Goode’s definition of dramatic conventions as ‘indicators of the way in which time, space and presence can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meanings in theatre’ (1995, 3).
3 A rumor mill, also referred to as a gossip circle, is a dramatic convention which generates imagined ideas (gossip) from participants and voices aloud gossip heard coming from others in the community. It is used to further develop the fictional context of the world of the drama and to identify conflict for further exploration (Neelands and Goode 2008, 42).

4 A clearly defined context is ‘crucial to the quality of involvement in the experience’ (Neelands and Goode 2008, 5).

5 When the teacher takes a role alongside the participants of the drama, to help develop the fictional context (Heathcote 1991, 50).

References


Field notes. 4 November 2019.


