30
DRAMATIC APPROACHES IN
THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM
Embodied, agentic and aesthetic learning

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Introduction
Can you recall the most engaging English lesson you ever experienced as a secondary student? If so, can you recall why that lesson was so memorable? Was it because of the literature you were studying – the novel, the play, the poem? Were you excited and engaged because the literature you were exploring was drawing you in, taking you to new and exciting places or introducing you to challenging ideas or forms of expression? Alternatively, was it the teacher you recall, possibly because of their deep knowledge of the content or, perhaps, their artistry? Were they able to bring the written word off the page in a lively and exciting manner or, alternatively, help you to express your ideas in spoken or written modes that made you feel more confident or willing to take a risk? Perhaps they connected with you in some unique way, or connected you to other students in the class or even to new ways of thinking about the English language? Were you sitting down – reading, writing, viewing, listening – or were you on your feet, moving?

As the authors of this chapter, we decided to engage in some self-reflection about our own experiences as learners and came up with some interesting findings. For Julie, two quite contrasting moments leapt out from her memory banks, with both experiences occurring when she was a 16-year old. One involved taking role as Romeo in an improvised version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, whilst the second was a moment of sheer joy as a passionate English teacher awakened in her a love of poetry. The former involved an embodied and active experience, one in which, somewhat unusually for that period of time in education, Julie had the chance to be playful and to exercise agency, where she was free to explore the character of Romeo from her own perspective and to use her own language to understand, imagine and, indeed, re-imagine the events of the play. The second experience contrasted strongly, for in this lesson, she was seated and silent. Nonetheless, Julie became deeply engrossed as she listened to her teacher deliver, with great artistry and beauty, the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Adrianne also had some strong memories, including of her keen engagement as her class studied Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, including through physical enactment and a theatre visit. Interestingly, the language of the play has stayed with her ever since, enabling her to instantly recall key lines such as: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods”. As part of her reflection,
Dramatic approaches in English classroom

she admits to being somewhat surprised by how clear her recollections of this play are, as she has never studied or taught this play since then. Adrianne suspects that her strong memories may be due to the challenge of the play, together with the passion and skill of her English teacher. Finally, she notes that the chance to witness a live performance by expert actors (including Geoffrey Rush as the Fool) left a strong mark on her as a learner.

What is clear from considering these two sets of memories is that none involved analysis of a text’s literary devices, comprehension exercises or decontextualised language activities, approaches which Manuel (2008) argues serve only to “reduce the numinous of literature to the easily explained, nicely categorized and easily assessable”, such that a text is “regarded merely as the sum of its parts” (p. 41). Rather, the memories we offer above reveal that deep engagement occurred for us when we were actively participating, our teachers revealed their passion and artistry, we had opportunities to develop empathy for key characters, the work was challenging and of interest to us or we had the chance to engage through embodied enactment.

Interestingly, these are some of the same characteristics which a group of students from one Australian secondary school identified as positively impacting upon their engagement in the secondary English classroom. Importantly, in the context of this volume, their responses were gathered as part of an extended project where dramatic pedagogies were employed, where actors and playwrights worked in partnership with their English teachers and where opportunities to attend live theatre were expanded.

Supported by the Queensland Government through its Collaboration and Innovation Fund, the Y Connect Project was conducted in a culturally diverse Brisbane secondary school. In this chapter, which is focused on the benefits of employing dramatic approaches in the English classroom, we draw upon the responses of the young people who participated in this project, as we believe that the views of students should inform all discussions around learning and teaching. This position is supported by Baroutsis and her colleagues (2016), who note that the act of listening to young people’s views on learning, and then acting on them, provides young people with a pedagogic voice, a voice which is too often silenced in educational discourses.

Drama in the English classroom

Dramatic approaches applied to support learning and teaching in the English classroom are diverse and varied. We may, for example, see educators, including both teachers and artists, employing embodied and collaborative activities like freeze frames to provide students with the chance to explore complex language and build vocabulary. For instance, they may invite a group of Year 7 students to use their collective bodies to create an interpretation of the word “ominous”. Educators might also use improvised approaches such as process drama or story drama to introduce a class or group to a poem, play or novel. Alternatively, these same approaches might be used later in a unit of work to deepen knowledge of a text’s characters, its narrative structure or the thematic concerns. They may also be used to check for comprehension or used to support the development of written and oral responses to texts, including the creation of new material beyond the original work. Of course, dramatic approaches have long been used to support the development of students’ self-expression, while theatre visits and associated workshops are essential for providing learners with opportunities to engage more deeply with plays as a key form of literature.

Dawson and Lee (2018) and Lee et al. (2014, 2020) have chosen to use the term “drama-based pedagogy” (DBP) to capture this range of strategies and approaches. Lee et al. (2020)
suggest that these characteristics help to define DBP: (1) DBP is facilitated and directed by a classroom teacher, teaching artist and/or other facilitator trained in DBP; (2) DBP works towards academic and/or other academic-related outcomes for the students involved; (3) DBP focuses on a process-oriented and reflective experience; and (4) DBP draws from a range of theatre/drama approaches (p. 3). Whilst this is not a definitive list, it nevertheless serves as a useful starting point for this chapter.

In the last 20 years, there has been a rapid growth in the number of publications designed to support the use of dramatic approaches in English classrooms (Anderson et al., 2008; Dawson & Lee, 2018; Fleming & Stevens, 2015; O’Toole & Dunn, 2020). For example, Anderson et al. (2008) have offered a comprehensive edited volume which outlines the dramatic approaches used by more than a dozen experts and also provides a useful summary (p. 2) of why the interplay between drama and English is so important for learning:

- Both disciplines value and promote imagination, creativity, story and the search for meaning in human experience.
- Both offer opportunities to create and explore alternate worlds through language and symbol.
- By incorporating reflection and enactment, both disciplines support young people to understand and critique their worlds.

In the same volume, Helen Nicholson (2008) notes that, when teachers use dramatic approaches to explore stories with students, they are able to collectively “explore different visual images, roles, dramatic atmospheres and attitudes and, in the process of this physical activity, find ways to embody and identify with the situations presented” (p. 111). Meanwhile, Manuel et al. (2008) argue that the power of drama in the English classroom arises from the “expression of the unconscious” through embodied enactment. They explain this notion by claiming that, through drama, what was “formerly concealed is revealed, what was unspoken is now spoken and what was ‘unembodied’ in the unconscious is now embodied in enactment” (p. 9).

More recently, O’Toole and Dunn (2020) have suggested that drama is an animating agent for introducing, exploring, deepening engagement with and even transforming literary texts including poetry, prose and plays. They offer the view that there are two dimensions of drama that are responsible for its effectiveness as a pedagogy in the English classroom: that its basic instruments of expression are language and the body, and that it is a group art which is highly collaborative in nature. They go on to claim that a further aspect of drama which contributes to its value for the teaching of English is the role played by the elements of drama. These elements work together to support dramatic worlds where space and place are given three-dimensional qualities, where time, narrative and language are brought to life, where bodies move, where mood is generated and where the different forms of tension drive the action.

Research studies designed to identify the impact of dramatic pedagogies in the English classroom have also been conducted. However, the overwhelming majority of these are associated with the teaching of English in the primary years (see, for example: Dunn, 2008; Dunn et al., 2013; Ewing, 2019; Ewing et al. 2011; Ewing & Saunders, 2019; Gibson, 2015; Saunders, 2019). A further well-researched area is that of using dramatic approaches for the teaching of English as an additional language or dialect (Bundy et al., 2015; Piazzoli, 2018; Rothwell, 2017). Across both these bodies of work, emphasis has been placed on the use of drama to improve writing and speaking (Cremin et al., 2006; Crumpler & Schneider, 2002; Dunn et al., 2013; Schneider & Jackson, 2000; O’Toole & Stinson, 2013).
The Y Connect study

The Y Connect Project included six case studies, with one of these focused on dramatic approaches in the English classroom. It involved students from across all of the secondary years, but here we mostly draw on the responses of participants in their middle years of schooling. The overall project extended across a period of two and a half years and was designed to identify the impact on learning, well-being and pathway perceptions of secondary students resulting from a heightened application of arts-based pedagogies and partnerships between artists and teachers (Dunn et al., 2019). With an average enrolment of 750, the focus secondary school is culturally rich. At the time of the study, it included students with family backgrounds from 70 different countries. Of the participants, 76% had English as an additional language or dialect (EALD), while 51% were either seeking asylum or had a refugee background. Given this diversity of experience with English, the case study participants were enrolled in both mainstream English and EALD classes.

Across the two-year duration of the Y Connect English case study, many teachers within the school community transformed their pedagogical approaches by developing skills in DBP and by engaging in ongoing partnerships with artists. These partnerships provided opportunities for the students of these teachers to engage in the creative processes of scriptwriting with playwrights, to explore character, write monologues and then polish their skills in performing them by working with actors. In EALD classes, students were supported by experts in improvised forms of drama to develop their language fluency, vocabulary and confidence. Within these workshops, emphasis was placed on building fictional contexts in which students could employ spontaneous and context-specific language in a risk-free environment. Finally, the number of visits to theatre events, which also involved participation in pre- and post-performance workshops, was increased.

Student perceptions shared here were drawn from more than 20 individual and focus group interviews with students who participated in these activities. These interviews mostly involved students in Years 7 to 9 and were conducted by members of the research team.

The benefits of dramatic approaches in the secondary English classroom

In this section, we draw upon key literature, our experiences as educators and the pedagogical voices of the Y Connect students. We argue that, when implemented with artistry, skill and understanding in classroom environments supportive of creativity and collaboration, dramatic approaches have two important benefits in the English classroom: they enhance learner engagement and support improved achievement across a wide range of areas associated with and beyond the English curriculum, including confidence.

Engagement

While we would like to think that most secondary students are engaged by the learning experiences they participate in within the English classroom, this is often not the case. For some students, disengagement may be due to complex family issues which hinder their ability to commit, low levels of confidence in one or more of the skills required for English learning or a lack of connection to the ideas explored within the literature or other texts they are working with. This latter reason is clearly exemplified by one of the Year 9 Y Connect participants, who noted: *I don’t like reading. Books are terrible… I’d rather watch a movie.* A further reason for disengagement is teacher pedagogy.
A key Australian study (Angus et al., 2010) found that nearly 57% of Year 10 English students showed unproductive behaviour in class. This finding was both nearly twice the percentage reported in Year 8 and significantly higher than the level of unproductive behaviour identified in Year 10 mathematics classes (42%). The term “unproductive” is a useful one; it is used by Angus and colleagues to describe the collective set of behaviours that reduce a student's capacity to engage in academic learning. A recent Grattan Institute Report (Goss et al., 2017) draws upon the study by Angus and colleagues, together with others recently concluded in the Australian context, to suggest that passive disengagement is a major issue in schools, affecting up to 20% of all secondary students.

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that, while educators almost unanimously agree that student engagement is critical for learning, there are currently quite diverse understandings of this term. For example, while Fredricks et al. (2004) suggest that engagement has three dimensions – behavioural, affective and cognitive – Marks (2000) offers the narrower view that engagement is “a psychological process involving the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning”. By contrast, Kress (2009) defines engagement as the “meaning-maker’s interested, energetic and sustained involvement with a framed segment of the world which is at issue in an interaction” (p. 38). This definition foregrounds meaning-making while also suggesting that it relates to specific moments, segments or “frames” of learning. Finally, Schernoff et al. (2014), whose study was keenly informed by Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, suggest that optimal engagement in secondary classrooms occurs when students experience both academic intensity and positive emotional responses. These authors include a student’s concentration, interest, attention and autonomy in their definition of this term. They propose that, in many classrooms, students experience either academic intensity or positive emotional responses but not both, and argue that it is this situation which leads to a loss of engagement (p. 491).

Across the Y Connect English case study data, the two components of engagement identified by Schernoff and colleagues – academic intensity and positive emotional responses – are evident, with students making it clear that dramatic approaches influenced both the emotional responses and the academic intensity they experienced. For example, in terms of positive emotional responses, one Year 7 participant noted, You can have fun, you can act... and it’s a good way to interact with your friends, while an EALD student from the same class simply observed: It helps us learn easier and funner. A similar comment was offered by a further EALD student who justified their claim that they were more engaged when dramatic pedagogies were employed in this way: Because it’s fun and we learn more about each other – and ourselves. However, it was not just EALD students who noted the engagement value of dramatic approaches; one high-achieving Year 9 English student noted: It just engages people. Gives them a different view on learning. Just gets you out of your chair. It just makes studying interesting, I guess.

When asked about the use of dramatic approaches to support the study of novels, one Year 8 student reflected that these pedagogies were useful as a means of overcoming a sense of boredom:

[Drama] helps more because you’re not just reading something, ‘cause you actually get to experience what is going on. It’s not completely boring ... you get to experience the book and then you get a bit curious about what else could come off the book and how else you could act it out.

Importantly, in relation to the Schernoff et al.’s findings of the need to balance both positive affect and academic intensity in order to achieve engagement, the case study students also
identified that dramatic pedagogies provided opportunities for deeper learning to occur, learning which extended beyond the basic demands of the assessment task. For example, this comment was offered by a Year 9 student: *I think if you do drama, it makes you more focused. It makes me more … really know about the character.*

**Achievement**

For many students, a flow-on effect from higher level of engagement is a higher level of achievement, with the term “achievement” used here not only to reflect the results gained by the student within formal assessment tasks, but also to encompass the student’s sense of achievement associated with improved confidence as a learner. In the English classroom, a growth in confidence can occur when a young person is able to overcome their fears about expressing themselves verbally in public presentations, the blockages which make a blank page seem like a huge hurdle and the reading process, especially in relation to complex texts, that can seem impenetrable.

In justifying this claim, we draw once again on the responses of the Y Connect students, who repeatedly told us that dramatic approaches supported them to be more successful in their assessment work. They told us that by working with their teachers and the visiting artists and using dramatic pedagogies, they were able to write more, write more fluently, speak more confidently, engage more deeply and achieve greater depth of understanding of characters. They wanted to read on, to find out more and to explore. The following three comments are indicative:

*It (dramatic approaches) helped me to think more about how the characters would be thinking, and in my speech, I just kept on imagining what Isabelle [a story character] was feeling at the time.*

*First of all, role playing and putting yourself in a character’s situation makes you understand their situation better instead of just writing as a third person party, you get into the character. And then, since the assessment was in first person, you kind of understand your character way more and how they would think, and how they would react and stuff like that.*

*I’m not a good reader, so, yeah, like, having the teachers teach me how to improvise … usually I’d be in English, doing an assignment, and I’d be reading everything word for word, and it’d take me forever to actually read that through before writing the assignment or something like that. And it really trips me up. But having the teachers teach me that improvisation skill really makes it easier, because I’m not really struggling with the reading anymore. It’s helping me improve more in class, trying to get better marks.*

**Dramatic approaches in the English classroom: Why do they work?**

In the previous section, we claimed that dramatic approaches create higher levels of student engagement, and that this heightened engagement can lead to enhanced achievement, including in the area of confidence. In this section, we suggest four reasons why dramatic approaches are beneficial for learning and teaching in the secondary English classroom, followed by a statement from a Y Connect student which exemplifies this:

1. Dramatic approaches provide opportunities for students to engage in embodied and collaborative experiences that help to overcome their passivity, enhance their agency as
learners and support meaning-making through the creative and playful exploration of ideas.

If you learn [English] in a normal way, you usually sit down and write, or read, or watch a couple videos, but doing it with drama, you get to actually do what you are learning about, and you get to be active about it. It just becomes more interesting.

Dramatic approaches require artistry at both the planning and implementation stages. To be successful, teachers, artists and, indeed, the students themselves must manage the aesthetic dimension through the explicit and skilled application of dramatic elements and strategies.

[Drama] just helps you understand the play or novel you’re doing on a deeper level. Because instead of just sitting there reading it like a regular English class, you get engaged and you dig deep in the characters … and it makes you understand it better.

In response to teacher artistry and the power of the aesthetic, heightened emotional responses to literary and other texts are provoked, including, for example, greater empathy in relation to characters and their situations.

It showed us what the character would actually think and their emotions, so when we were writing our own story, we can actually tell the people who are reading the story what the character actually feels.

By its very nature, drama is about expression, and, as such, dramatic approaches create opportunities for enhanced self-expression. Across a range of modes, including spoken and written ones, dramatic approaches nourish creative ideas, enabling students to imagine new possibilities.

In drama, I always come up with more ideas than I can when I sit there by myself and try to think of something to write.

Importantly, while we have listed these four features of dramatic approaches as separate, in action, they are inextricably linked and mutually dependent. For example, it can be argued that, while it is the embodied nature of dramatic experience that generates emotion, artistry is at the heart of expression. Winston (2015) provides a useful example of these connections by offering an account of a workshop led by Cicely Berry designed to explore Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Winston recounts that, within the workshop, Berry was frustrated by the senior secondary participants’ lack of emotional engagement with this text. She responded to this situation by drawing on her artistry and skill as a facilitator to develop and then lead a task in which the young people were asked to link arms and pull forcefully against each other as they spoke the words within Shakespeare’s text. The outcome was powerful, with Winston suggesting that it was the embodied nature of this activity which allowed the students to “understand through emotional connection” (p. 9).

In spite of their connectivity, we will now explore each of these features in turn.

**Embodied, collaborative and agentic experience**

Perhaps the most obvious feature of drama which separates it from more mainstream approaches to the teaching of English is that it provides opportunities for students to engage with texts through embodied experience. The oft-cited notion that drama allows you to step into the shoes of others is therefore highly appropriate, not just in a figurative sense, but
Dramatic approaches in English classroom

a literal one, as well, for it is reflective of the embodied nature of this art form. However, embodied approaches are not as well appreciated or employed in English classrooms as they might be – a situation which Peter Freebody (2020) laments results in a situation in which “too many of the special gifts of an education in English language and literature are unnecessarily, almost carelessly forfeited in the confined spaces built with the disembodied words of schooling” (p. viii). He goes on to suggest that the teaching of English can be re-energised through the use of dramatic approaches.

Unfortunately, while the notion of re-energising is an appropriate claim, it can be somewhat problematic if it is misinterpreted as suggesting that dramatic approaches are simply a convenient means of activating the brain as the site of learning. It is therefore important to note, as Piazzoli (2018) does, in a recently published volume focused on the application of process drama in second language learning contexts, that dramatic approaches play a far more fundamental role. She argues that they enable learners to use their bodies to mediate meaning (p. 28). Wright (2011) extends upon this idea by suggesting that the embodied actions made possible through the arts not only support the creation of meaning, but also enable meanings to be conveyed to others.

Collaboration and agency are additional features of dramatic approaches that are linked to embodiment, for drama is a collaborative and spontaneous art form that provides opportunities for young people to express their perspectives. This is particularly the case within improvisations designed to support student understanding of literature, for it is within these activities that students must draw upon their knowledge of the characters, their motivations and relationships, together with their own personal experiences and ideas, in order to build new texts. This is important, for, as van Haren (2016) reminds us, student engagement is nurtured when young people are provided with opportunities to express their “individual and collective voices”.

The following student responses from the Y Connect Project are once again useful as they provide insights into what young people think about learning in embodied, collaborative and agentic ways within the English classroom:

You get to experience the book and then you get a bit curious about what else could come off the book.

[By doing drama] we were actually encouraged to be the character – how would they react when this stuff happened? And, when doing that, you have more understanding, so you can write how the character’s feeling, and it’s just really helpful.

In our [everyday] English class … sometimes there’s no way to imaginate stuff. Because you’re only going to be sitting on your chair and doing writing. It’s not going to help you think.

So, the main difference is in class you don’t really get to move around a lot and you don’t really get to have much say … in Drama, you move around, you’re free.

… it beats just sitting down and being lazy about it.

Educator artistry through management of the aesthetic

Clearly, there is insufficient space within this chapter to explore the complexities of educator artistry and management of the aesthetic at the level they deserve. However, it is important to clarify what we mean when we suggest these as the reasons why dramatic approaches are effective in the English classroom.
In relation to the first notion, that of educator artistry, several studies, including those in the context of drama for additional language learning, have highlighted its critical importance. For example, in their work, Dunn and Stinson (2011) argue that it is only when educators “hold both the artistry of the form and the intended learning in one hand, as it were, that the full promise of working with drama and additional language learning can be realised”. They suggest that artistry needs to be evident at both the macro and micro levels, with the “macro” level referring to the planning phases, while the term “micro” refers to the implementation of these plans (p. 618). In the same context, Piazzoli (2018) takes the notion of artistry further, claiming that the teacher/artist “engages students as co-artists in a process involving not only cognition, but also affect, imagery, sensation, different forms of memory, emotion and embodiment”. She goes on to claim that “the dynamic relation between teacher and students’ artistry and engagement is the work of art” (p. 8).

A key component of this artistry is an understanding of and ability to manage the aesthetic, which includes managing the relationship between form and content. In terms of the English classroom, educators who wish to employ the aesthetic dimension must intentionally and carefully manage and manipulate symbol, space, mood and language as they draw upon deep understanding of the content. For example, they need to consider how they could employ sound or lighting in ways that establish a particular mood, how to use props in symbolic ways to deepen student responses or perhaps how to use their voices in artful ways to heighten student engagement with the language included in poems, prose and plays. In addition, educators may utilise their artistry within strategies like teacher-in-role, within process drama units or as a stand-alone activity. To work effectively in relation to this strategy and others associated with process drama, they must have an understanding of and ability to manage role (status, purpose and attitude), how the various forms of tension work and how to create and communicate a sense of place and time. Ideally, they should also be able to support their students to engage with, understand and manipulate these elements for themselves – not only for the purpose of performing or presenting, but also to support other tasks within the English classroom, including writing.

Interestingly, while we see teacher artistry as one of the key reasons why dramatic approaches are effective in the English classroom, none of our Y Connect participants referred specifically to teacher artistry in their comments. However, one group of Year 9 English students was impressed by opportunities to learn about the elements of drama, and in particular about the various forms of tension. They noted that the understanding they developed resulted in some highly positive outcomes in terms of writing. In this case, the students were given the chance to participate in storytelling activities associated with the novel they were studying, including the spontaneous development of new scenes that involved one form of tension. Following this oral work, the students were then invited to transform their oral stories into written texts.

When asked to recall particular sessions or activities that were useful, several students referred to this session, with the following response being typical:

The drama activity with the tension …. it helped me know there is tension, of surprise, mystery. That helped us think of whether we’re going to put a surprise [in our written story], or how we want the story to go.

Here we see that an explicit understanding of dramatic form helped these students engage more easily in the writing process.
Dramatic approaches in English classroom

**The provocation of heightened emotional responses**

One of the key reasons that dramatic approaches are so effective in the English classroom is that they have the potential to bring words and characters off the page, creating opportunities for the development of empathy for characters and their situations. A range of emotions can also be provoked by dramatic strategies (Dunn et al., 2015), including when students engage in process drama experiences based on literature. In their work in the early childhood classroom, Dunn and Stinson (2012) considered the provocation of emotion through drama and argue that what is significant about these emotions is not the emotions themselves, but the impact they have on “children’s thinking, speaking and writing” (p. 216).

Emotion and empathy may also be developed when students have the opportunity to experience the beauty of literature, such as when teachers or professional actors perform extracts from novels or plays in their classrooms, or when students attend live theatre performances. The emotions can then be channelled by the students to enhance their own writing and speaking.

Saunders (2019) provides a useful summary of the interconnected nature of emotion and empathy in relation to drama pedagogies in the English classroom:

Through the activation of emotion within the drama, students can develop empathy and this strong sense of the character leads to stronger connections to characters which enables students to have a deeper understanding of the characters and a greater ability to infer about them.

For the Y Connect students, empathy was built by meeting characters via strategies such as teacher-in-role or by them taking role as one of the characters. The following comments provide some very useful insights into what the students saw as the value of these role-playing strategies in relation to building deeper connections with characters:

*Role playing and putting yourself in a character’s situation makes you understand their situation better … you get into the character … you kind of understand the character way more and how they would think, and how they would react … it’s more like you explore it, and then you find your own kind of understanding of the character. Being the character gave us more ideas about the characters.*

*[Drama] gives us more clues about what the characters might think or do. Instead of just reading the book and just reading what the book is saying, you can act and just try to feel what the character is going through. It showed us what the character would actually think and the emotions, so when we were writing our story, we can actually tell the people who are reading the story what the character actually feels.*

Finally, one student offered the following observations relating to developing closer connections with characters, whilst also including a comparison between the activities normally offered to them in the English classroom and those made possible through drama:

*YEAR 9 STUDENT: When we’re doing this [drama], you get to know this character on a personal level, what they did, what they eat and stuff, so you know more about them, and what they would act…*

*RESEARCHER: But can’t you do that in a normal English class? Why can’t you do that? What’s different about doing it this way?*
YEARS 9 STUDENT Most of the time, the teachers … they’re not taught to teach you like that, so they kind of just stick to the book, give you criteria, make you do that work, and that’s it. You don’t go on a deeper level.

Opportunities to enhance self-expression

Confidence with written or spoken expression can be challenging for students in the secondary English classroom. Some struggle with fluency, while others lack confidence, including in terms of their creativity. Fluency and creativity are two key building blocks of expression, so dramatic approaches in the English classroom are critical, as they not only prompt students to speak and write but also nurture creative ideas.

In relation to the use of drama to support students’ written expression, the work of both Winston and Cremin et al. is particularly influential. For example, Winston (2004) proposes the following as the positive outcomes of linking drama and writing: improved motivation to write; the provision of ideas and experiences to support writing; increased output in a shorter period of time; richer vocabulary and sentence structures; a stronger sense of audience; and improved empathy for the characters being written about (p. 26). The work of Cremin et al. (2006) is also important, as it focuses on the features of drama that support these positive outcomes. They suggest that these are the presence of tension; the degree of engagement; time for incubations which the extended experiences in the drama and writing allowed; and the sense of stance and purpose gained through role adoption (pp. 8–15). In other words, Cremin and colleagues suggest that dramatic approaches create opportunities for students to explore words, ideas or situations with others, and that when they are offered first, the writing process becomes far easier. This sense of ease occurs, in part, because the dramatic context, together with the students’ experience of being in role, has helped them to determine “what” they want to say, leaving them to focus on written expression.

One of the Y Connect students offers a useful description of this process:

You know what you’re thinking, but you’re not writing it down, so, it’s going to get lost… so [drama] helps by moving from the action to the writing, and then back to the action again.

In relation to the role of drama in the development of spoken expression, the work of O’Toole and Stinson (2013) is useful. They remind us that, in drama, the activators of learning are role and dramatic context, with both being critical for helping young people develop the skills required to express themselves effectively in a range of social situations. Importantly, they argue, it is the low-risk drama environment which provides the conditions for students to experiment with language – shift registers, try out new vocabulary, vary intonation. Teacher modelling is a key support mechanism in this process, especially when teachers are willing to be playful with language and oral expression themselves. Too often, we believe, the beauty of literature can be lost when young people have not had sufficient opportunities to hear it delivered with artistry and passion. Dramatic techniques can also be used to help students express their own words with more power, supporting them to use gesture, pitch, pace, tone, volume and even silence to be more successful in communicating their ideas.

Within the Y Connect Project, oral expression was supported by actors who worked in partnership with the students’ English teachers. Student responses to these opportunities, which were often delivered one-on-one, were overwhelmingly positive. Two Year 8 students explained the benefits this way:
Dramatic approaches in English classroom

[Actor] showed us ways to improve the way we said it and how to use our bodies to act it out instead of just standing there and just talking.

[Actor] gave us examples of how to be confident to an audience, and say some words using your body language, moving around. He also told some people to get up, and other people had to watch them while they act as the character in the story. And I think that this gave us more confidence to actually do it during our speeches.

Conclusion

While there are many aspects of the English curriculum that require specialised approaches that are non-dramatic in nature, this chapter has offered the view that key opportunities are missed when dramatic approaches are not employed in the teaching of English. We have argued that when delivered with a deep understanding of the content being delivered, together with an understanding of and ability to manage the aesthetic dimension, dramatic approaches have the capacity to boost student engagement and achievement.

In support of these claims, we have drawn on the ideas shared by the Y Connect student participants. Their pedagogic voices have told us that many of them are passive or bored in the English classroom, but that, through the employment of dramatic approaches, they have experienced a boost in engagement. By drawing on the ideas offered by Shernoff et al. (2014), we have noted that this boost was most likely achieved because dramatic pedagogies offered them learning that generated both positive emotional responses and academic intensity.

We have also learnt that some students are not working to their full potential in the English classroom, and as such are not experiencing the levels of achievement they might otherwise experience. Given that the stakes are high when it comes to developing young people’s English skills, not just in relation to national benchmark testing or international competitive rankings, but, rather, for young people’s confidence as learners, a greater level of understanding of the potential which dramatic approaches offer English learners would seem to be critical. Given the increasing levels of passivity in the lives of 21st-century teenagers, it is becoming increasingly important to employ visceral, intense and challenging pedagogies that can capture students’ attention and hook them into texts, characters and narratives. Young people also deserve pedagogies that connect them to each other and build their confidence.

Set against this backdrop then, the question remains, especially for readers of this volume, of how best to encourage English teachers to draw on the power of drama to nurture thinking, speaking and writing in the secondary classroom. The partial response lies with advocacy, but this alone will be insufficient. What is actually required is action – with one kind of action being professional learning, while another could be stronger support for the extended use of artist/teacher partnerships, and, indeed, partnerships between drama educators and English teachers.

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