The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education

Mary McAvoy, Peter O’Connor

A dramatic approach to appreciating mythological history

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Daniel A. Kelin
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The children expressed surprise as they finally heard the stories depicted at Mahabalipuram in India. Some smiled in recognition as certain characters appeared in the stories, having recently acted out the characters in their own stories. One boy sighed. “How funny we are so different when looking at the same statue. I hear the story and can look at it, but I know my own story idea, too.’ What do children imagine when they observe archaeological figures? How much is a child’s interpretation influenced by adult knowledge? How might a child develop a more personal appreciation of an archaeological site?

Several years prior to that conversation, while working with fifth- and sixth-standard students in Chennai, I asked them to share favorite stories. A significant portion of the students mentioned “Snow White,” “Cinderella,” and “Tom and Jerry.” Local teachers expressed a kind of resignation with how students gained only a simplistic understanding of Indian mythology through cartoon versions of such epics as the Mahabharata.

I framed a Fulbright-Nehru research project proposal in line with Little’s (1983) contention that dramatizing historical events helps students find personal relevance in historical stories, almost as if the stories become their own. I wished to examine the efficacy of using drama with elementary-aged public school students in Chennai, India, to cultivate appreciation of mythological history portrayed in archeological sites. My goal was twofold: first, that students, engaged by devising small performances inspired by spontaneous examinations of architecture, would develop strong personal investment in the myths depicted; and second, that by dramatically interpreting the material, students would identify themes or morals from the mythological histories that they could apply in their contemporary lives.

I selected a qualitative action research approach. The data were collected through (1) field observations using written reflective notes, still photographs, and video recordings; (2) semi-structured student focus group interviews recorded once a week with five students; (3) student written and photographic artifacts produced during our site visit; and (4) student-devised stories and the performance of the stories.

I partnered with two schools, one rural and one urban. In a Chennai primary school, I worked with two groups of 30 fifth-standard students each, including a small percentage of special education students. In the rural school outside of the city, I taught three groups of 30 sixth-standard students each.
My project design included several stages: (1) experiment with drama techniques, to help students become comfortable with expressing themselves creatively; (2) visit Mahabalipuram, an archaeological site, to spontaneously ‘read’ a series of cave carvings; (3) explore interpretations of the carvings through drama; (4) guide students to dramatize their interpretations; (5) guide them to regularly share and evaluate their developing creative work; (6) stage a performance for the school and invited guests; (7) listen to and discuss the mythological stories of the carvings; and (8) discuss and reflect on how the themes or moral of the mythological stories might apply to their daily lives.

We began with simple drama activities to develop commitment to the process, build students’ creative skills, cultivate collaborative working processes, and establish a foundation for our focus on mythological characters and stories. Multiple researchers note that integrating drama into instruction can boost student self-confidence (Wolf, 2005), lead to a “high state of motivation” (Gazzania, 2008), and facilitate the transfer of skills across activities (Chizhik, 2009). Despite initial shyness and constant imitation of each other, students slowly discovered the joy of creatively expressing their own ideas. My teacher partners noticed nuanced reactions of some students that eluded me at first. They mentioned how certain children, often reluctant to participate in class, took part even in small ways.

To prepare for the Mahabalipuram visit, I developed a questionnaire to guide student observation of the carvings. Writing, however, proved challenging as many were not proficient writers or responded only to close-ended questions. So, I devised a practice observation. I created three-dimensional ‘mini-Mahabalipuram caves’ out of cardboard boxes with icon pictures. Students examined the ‘mini-Mahabalipurams’ in having a try at the questionnaires. McNaughton (2004) suggests that with drama children may be participating in fictional contexts, but they employ real knowledge and real skills. This practice proved effective for several reasons. First, the ‘mini-Mahabalipurams’ fascinated the students, building anticipation of our coming visit. Second, I read the questions aloud, which gave students time to discuss their interpretations, developing confidence in their observation skills. Some asked if we could repeat the process with other pictures and find stories in those, too. Teachers noted that some started analyzing images in textbooks more closely after that.

Next, we staged an imagined visit to help students visualize the journey and understand how they might physically interact with the site. Students play-acted both the carvings and themselves visiting. The ‘carving’ students created tableaux that simulated iconic characters they identified. The ‘visiting’ students then walked up to the ‘carvings’ and demonstrated how they might observe them. I guided them to describe the shapes, characters, interactions between characters, and a story they imagined in the carving. With each class session, a growing number of students demonstrated eagerness for the coming journey and expressed a clearer understanding of what they would do during the visit.

The actual visit was full of distractions: monkeys, tourists, vendors, and the odd goat. Despite that, many rose to the occasion, such as one girl who conceived an entire story on the spot based on one of the carvings and the students who begged to stay in one cave to complete detailed drawings of the entire carving. I encouraged some to take close-up pictures of details they might wish to incorporate. According to Sunal and Hass (2005), experiential learning which engages different modes of interaction with content, artifacts, people, and events in an out-of-the-classroom experience is great for making social studies meaningful to students. This kind of learning, they write, leads to better understanding of concepts as well as development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making.

After the visit, small groups each selected specific carvings and recreated the images physically, working from their questionnaires and drawings. The groups then imagined what...
events might have preceded the carvings’ depicted actions and then what the results of those events might have been. Discussions were kept brief so that the students wouldn’t settle on one idea too quickly. I wished to encourage revising ideas through discussion and dramatization. Each group slowly shaped a story. As with each step, some had difficulty getting started, searching for the ‘correct’ story of the carving. Some seemed content to follow the groups’ leaders, who emerged organically through the process, simply offering ideas or feedback as they felt the impulse. One particular group struggled with how to best represent one of their ideas. Noticing their struggle, I suggested an idea they might try. The leader of that fifth-standard group responded with, “No. We thought of an idea that we want to try.” Without being combative, this little girl demonstrated a confidence in her ideas and her group’s ability to move past their temporary struggle. That confidence surprised her classroom teachers, who noted that children are taught explicitly not to challenge adults. Montgomerie and Ferguson (1999) note that through drama learning experiences, students come to recognize how communication works best by balancing sharing ideas and considering the ideas of their peers.

As the groups created, I guided them to continue revising and enhancing ideas. The learning curve arced sharply as we approached the performance, evidenced by the rise in animated discussions. Confidence coalesced as they discovered, through sharing and responding to their work with peers, the satisfaction of having created enjoyable stories. Moving from the exploratory, experimental stage to the building pressure of a performance both encouraged and challenged the students, first giving them the needed time to develop comfort and confidence and then the time and support to build from their interpretations and expand ideas.

Each of the groups’ performances lasted a few minutes only, but their investment was compelling, as evidenced by how the students dressed that day. We never planned for costumes or props, but, allowed to forgo their normal school uniform, the students arrived at school very colorful and formal with no prompting from anyone. The performances met with cheers from fellow students, reflective of the performers’ abundant self-confidence. A 2004 evaluation of the National Theatre’s drama education work with primary schools demonstrated that interactive learning experiences in theater increased children’s confidence and competence in theater and drama, with a democratic learning style allowing children to interpret their own voices as being important, authentic, and acknowledged (Turner et al., 2004).

The students’ interpretations proved to be quite diverse. Out of 20 imagined stories, three-quarters of them reflected a mythological world. The rest chose a contemporary setting, with a few creating fantastical worlds. One story told of a young girl and her two elephant pets who accompanied her to the hospital after she suffered a serious accident. The elephants expressed sadness over her critical state, and great joy when she survived. In another, a farmer lost his land to a great flood only to gain it again through the intervention of a goddess who descended to earth. Several focused on corrupt individuals, such as robbers, evil kings usurping land, or neighbors who stole from neighbors. In each of these last examples, a deity answered prayers and descended to earth to rectify the clash. Movies and television influenced some choices, particularly styles of violence. The one commonality among all of the stories proved to be the setting. All took place in India.

One of my desires with this project was to better understand how students perceive mythological history as represented through architecture. Drama, Morris (2001) writes, can be integrated into academic classrooms as an effective approach for helping students make
connections between historical and contemporary world issues. Authentic assessment is a valuable way to gauge students’ learning, helping educators to consider multiple sources of students’ understanding of content. I confess a surprise, and delight, at the intense focus on Indian myth and life. Despite professed interest in movies such as “Cool Runnings” or “Tom and Jerry” cartoons, given freedom to interpret the carvings as they desired, none mimicked those movie or cartoon storylines.

The most positive result was the students’ expressed interest in hearing the original intent of the carvings. Some pointed out where story points differed from their own, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. Exploration through drama gives meaning to content material, providing powerful opportunities for learning by evoking emotion, simultaneously stimulating affective and cognitive responses to problems and drawing on powerful memories to develop lasting impressions (Dewey, 1934; Egan, 1999). My partner teachers described how many became more communicative in class and contributed to discussions with greater comfort and confidence.

Throughout the project I regularly talked with a focus group of children. At project’s end, I asked them where else they might go to repeat such an experience. They suggested museums, temples, and statues, but also mentioned rock formations, aspects of nature, and their classroom books. We discussed what they most enjoyed, and I was surprised when they talked about the learning rather than the creative freedom. They mentioned working together in groups, making up their own stories, trying to make their dramatizations interesting with both words and actions, having to think each day about what would make their stories make sense. Recently researchers have found that students participating in field trips experienced gains in historical empathy, tolerance, and art knowledge (Greene et al., 2014); critical thinking (Kisida et al., 2016); and an increased desire to be ‘cultural consumers’ (Kisida et al., 2014). My students noted that they would like to return to Mahabalipuram to look more carefully at the carvings so they could create more detailed dramas.

The results of this project seem to support findings that drama and narrative are effective practices for deepening students’ enjoyment of and connection to historical content and concepts (Levstik, 1986; Levstik & Barton, 2001) while simultaneously building essential learning skills such as self-efficacy, critical and creative thinking, observation, and peer communication. For me, however, this is only a start. Having understood how the students interpreted a significant archaeological site in their own, creative ways, returning to the site, as the students suggested, was the missing piece of my project. Had I been able to arrange another visit, I would have liked to witness how the children interacted with the carvings a second time. Would they discover more within the carvings? Might they immediately seek out the characters they portrayed in their own stories? Would they be receptive to learning more about the actual myths that inspired the icons? If students first develop a personal connection to and appreciation of a subject or content support, does that help contribute to a better understanding of the material?

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References


