4

DRAMA IN EDUCATION AND
THE VALUE OF PROCESS

Eva Hallgren

Expectagency – a capability to handle uncertainty and change

Negotiation is a central concept in previous research about drama pedagogy, and process drama is the form of drama described as entirely based on negotiation to create as good a learning situation as possible for students. The negotiations concern the room students have to manoeuvre to influence the drama’s outcome as well as how their roles are created and framed (O’Connor, 2003; O’Toole, 1992). Research has also put forward the learning potential associated with using process drama (among many: Piazzoli, 2018; Winner et al., 2013), and that was where my curiosity started as both a teacher and a drama pedagogue. Questions about role-taking and role as a tool for developing and exploring thematic content became a base for my doctoral studies (Hallgren, 2018). In this chapter, I discuss what characterises actions between students and teacher-in-role, the use of role to develop and explore content in a process drama, and what implication the form of the process has on learning. I also suggest a new concept for this special form of agency developed through collective in-role actions: expectagency.

The excerpt below, which I use as an empirical base for the chapter, comes from a process drama with a group of secondary school students in England (aged 14–16) attending a voluntary day of drama on a Saturday. None were specialised in drama. The process drama focused on in this chapter is based on the famous pre-text, ‘The Seal Wife’, by Cecily O’Neill and David Booth (1992), adapted by one of the drama teachers in the study.

The students in role as villagers are spreading out on the floor in the empty drama studio. Their task is to find out as much as they can about a particular family in the village. They cluster in small groups, talk a little and then move on a bit aimlessly. One of the students moves behind the curtains and returns with a blue hoodie in his hand. He holds it in front of him and moves towards one group telling the others in a Scottish accent:

*It’s a seal skin!* His movements are deliberately slow and serious when he carefully examines the seal skin with two other students trying to figure out what to do with it. They move on with the seal skin/hoodie to another group, and the same procedure repeats a couple of times while the story develops and new layers of meaning are co-created through joint actions. Once a student in role as a villager receives the seal skin, she/he
also becomes serious even if out-of-role giggle was close just before. The seal skin works as a baton in a relay in a prolonged but meticulous growing process.

Later in the same sequence, the improvisation comes to a bit of a halt. One of the students is not responding to the invitations he gets from his fellow students and stays quiet when handed the seal skin, which now becomes a hoodie again hanging from his hand. The air is sipping out of the fictional bubble. Everybody gets a bit uneasy. However, suddenly after a few seconds of hesitation, the villagers’ voices are lowered in a wordless mumble, the group pulls close, close together, and they all look intensely at each other listening with their bodies. Out of the group, one of the students slowly pulls backwards while the voices of the others are rising and become words: *That’s him over there! That’s Patric, the fisherman!* Her body transforms into a fisherman’s by changing posture and movement. The improvisation takes off again and continues in a new direction for some time. The student who introduced the seal skin takes it back, but when he realises the story moves on in a different direction, he throws what is now only a hoodie back behind the curtain and then he engages in what happens right now instead. Through this, the drama teacher, out of role, followed what happened from ‘the baseline’ by the wall. She moved along the movements on the floor, listening to what was happening, giving focus but not interfering, not even when the drama came to a halt at some time.

Observations from several process dramas in Sweden and England with students aged 6–16 constitute the base of the study in this chapter. I filmed the process dramas and conducted interviews. However, in this chapter, I only analyse the filmed material and observation notes, and the excerpts that serve as illustrations come from only one process drama. The process dramas had a similar structure with an introductory phase in which the drama teachers introduced a myth or story. This was then opened for interpretation before the process drama took off, using different drama conventions (cf. Bowell & Heap, 2013, 2017; O’Neill, 1995). The focus in this text is mainly on the in-role-sequences.

The analyses draws on activity theory (Leontiev, 1977/1986) and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1991, 1993). A motive to act arises when people identify opportunities to create something, such as an object/motive, that satisfies their needs, and this gives the activity its direction. By identifying the object/motive, one activity can be distinguished from another (Eriksson, 2017; Leontiev, 1977/1986). Dialogism puts a focus on the relationship between language, interaction, and transformation; in authentic dialogue, the person asking the question does not have the answer and the answer/meaning is co-created (Bakhtin, 1991, 1993).

The analysis of the process dramas began tentatively by me drawing different coloured threads for each person’s actions in the process drama, trying to understand how the process developed. The drawings resulted in graphic patterns, which I articulated as macramé and used as a metaphoric framework to map and analyse data out of activity theory perspective (Hallgren, 2018).

The macramé patterns for the out-of-role sequences and the in-role sequences differed considerably, and, analysing them from an activity theory perspective, I concluded that process drama could be understood as two activities with two different motives/objects (Hallgren, 2018). The actions in the two different activities aimed at achieving different things. The main activity, the educational activity, includes a motive/object of learning drama (or another subject). When analysing the macramés from the educational activity, I noticed the teacher’s actions/threads dominated, not surprisingly, since a drama lesson often includes a teacher-led introduction of the pre-text and a summing-up after an in-role sequence. There were hardly any negotiations conducted, except when students were invited to interpret the
pre-texts and the students’ space and agency were minimal. With the help of the macramés, I discerned that the students were tied to the teacher’s thread by the teacher through direct questions, and that the students rarely took any initiative themselves and never towards any fellow students.

Generally included in the educational activity is the temporary fictional activity that comes into existence as soon as participants enter their roles. The critical difference between the educational and the temporary fictional activities is that a new motive/object is under construction in the temporary fictional activity through a playful format (Hallgren, 2018). The temporary fictional activity can occur in what has previously been described as ‘safe space’ and the ‘penalty-free zone of drama’ (cf. Heathcote in Johnson & O’Neill, 1984; Hunter, 2008). However, by clarifying what the playful format implies, like a high degree of possibility to negotiate rules, tools, goals, and degree of participation (cf. van Oers, 2012, 2013), it also clarifies how this can enable the handling of uncertainty (Hallgren, 2018). This is exemplified in the moment in the excerpt when one of the students did not respond to an invitation and the process came to a halt. The group showed an awareness of what the playful format entailed, and they negotiated content, roles, and outcome in a very subtle way, relying entirely on movements and glances, and took the drama further. This also indicated reciprocal trust between the students and the teacher, who showed trust by giving the students time.

The analysis of macramés of actions from in-role sequences in the fictional activity discerned variations concerning the process. All in-role sequences (from 2–3 to 25–30 minutes) generally capture similar processes, all characterised by flows of tentative, creative actions that take different paths towards a more or less unknown goal that is continuously negotiated and renegotiated (Hallgren, 2018). Since motives/objects in the temporary fictional activity are tentative, including interpretation and creation, it also explains that the actions in this fictional activity must assume a different character, which I, with the help of Bakhtin (1993) and Marjanovic-Shane (2010; Marjanovic-Shane & White, 2014), understand as postupaks. When I refer to the notion of postupaks, I mean goal-oriented actions that contain open, not completely defined, offers directed towards someone else with both the expectation and anticipation of an answer, an invitation to co-interpret and co-create an object. The actions are understood as responsible and serious but at the same time playful, and take place in a context where nothing is decided from the beginning (Bakhtin, 1993; Marjanovic-Shane & White, 2014). The sequence from the excerpt in which the seal skin works as a baton in a relay is an example of how the group, through postupaks, explores and expands the original pre-text. The first student picking up the hoodie must trust that the others will receive and develop what he gives them, both according to object and idea, and he is prepared to get something back which is then further developed. Both the postupaks and the seal skin/hoodie become important in mediating the role-taking of each participating individual.

Macramés created from only students’ in-role actions were considerably broader (see Figure 4.1, below) in flux, growing and closing in, in irregular patterns. A broad, flowing macramé indicates the students’ tentative actions forming temporary goals, transforming and renegotiating them through joint actions. The students’ in-role actions were qualitatively different compared to their actions out of role. The ideas of individual students took shape in interaction with the other students, who, through this unique type of joint action, the postupaks, continued exploring through improvisation. There was no apparent direction or pattern to follow; something new was created. This was exemplified when the drama took another direction and Patric the fisherman appeared; the seal skin had played out its role and was removed.
Through the flow of postupaks, a dialogue emerged that grew out of close but open interaction. No single voice had precedence. What happened was created between the students, characterised by curiosity, risk-taking, and, at the same time, enormous fragility. The situation required that every decision made, every action taken, was performed as if it was the only thing that could be done, while at the same time, the drama could change immediately afterwards through the interaction (cf. Kanellopoulos, 2011). The students created the content of the fictional activity framed by the pre-text. With their motive-developing actions, they were driven to create a forward movement, by seeing how the drama developed and how it might end, their curiosity aroused by the openness. An emotional motive was discerned; curiosity and desire became a driving force to move on (Leontiev, 1977/1986). Again, I refer to the same situation above when it was apparent the students wanted the drama to continue; they used all their willpower to make it work and tried to identify new motives, shown in the macramés as entanglements. Instead of giving up the fiction, coming out of role, the whole group focused on each other, communicating with their entire beings: ‘We have to sort this’. Every little gesture, every sound was met with another small gesture or sound, and it all grew into something that started to open a new path for the story (see Figure 4.1).

The macramés developed from in-role sequences in which teacher-in-role was used had significantly narrower patterns (see example in Figure 4.2). Of course, there is always an overarching learning motive/object in an educational setting and a motive for the teacher grounded in the educational activity when using teacher-in-role. However, when entering the fictional activity, the motive for the actions must be found in the role itself. Teachers’

![Figure 4.1](image-url) The sequence with the seal skin, only students in role – a broad, billowing macramé. A fish indicates the seal skin in the macramé
in-role actions moved the drama forward, but it turned out students mostly tied their actions on to the teacher-threads and not so much on each other’s, as long as the teachers were involved in the fictional activity. The teachers’ threads in these macramés became more warp-like and stretched, even though the teacher was in role. Indeed, the process was not so tentative and forming, and when the motive/object from the educational activity ‘shone through’, the fictional activity faded away and the students, no longer in role, became passive. The following excerpt reveals the focus on the teacher’s actions:

A gossiping woman, teacher-in-role, comes running into the village totally out of breath and, with a hoarse voice, gathers the villagers (students-in-role) because she has something to tell everybody. She has seen the fisherman’s family, and the situation is all chaotic, and it is all due to the wife. Teacher-in-role asks the villagers if they know anything about this. One of the students picks up the thread and starts telling a story, adding to the teacher’s initial idea, and then the others continue, all adding to the same thread, such that the teacher’s idea and the story grows in one direction.

After a while, another student, in role as an adult man, adds a conflicting idea which intends to defend the fisherman’s wife. Abruptly, the gossiping woman breaks in and literally pours out evil things about the fisherman’s wife, and then the teacher steps out of role. The student who had the conflicting idea stays in role and uses the status of the role with suitable voice and body language, and tries to meet the teacher on an equivalent level as two adult villagers. The teacher does not respond in role at all; instead, she continues out of role according to her plan.
Students’ opportunities to negotiate their relationships are created and how students’ interactions lead to agency (Marjanovic-Shane & Bbljanski-Ristic, 2008; Marjanovic-Shane & White, 2014; Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2018). Once students have agency as co-authors (Bakhtin, 1990), this leads to more social and diverse in-role improvisations (Edminston, 2010). Agentic students in diverse improvisations were evident in the observed process dramas in the study. When teachers stepped out from the in-role situation, the students’ space increased significantly and what they created became more open and unpredictable. This happened no matter what status the teacher-in-role had when in the drama. Another thing noticed was the qualitative difference in the emotional commitment when the students experienced agency in role. This corresponds with previous research showing that when students can exercise agency through negotiation, mainly in role but also out of role, the balance of power changes and a difference can be noted in their emotional commitment (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Piazzoli, 2014; Rothwell, 2011).

Involvement is prompted by motives for engaging with actions aimed at goals or, as in the process drama case, with motive-developing actions. This requires the student to see herself capable of participating in and contributing to the development of the activity, and it is easily lost, as in this example above. The student in the sequence about the gossip used the in-role actions as an adult man with the (assumed) right to stand against a gossiping woman (teacher-in-role). The student’s use of the role could be perceived as a powerful protest against the teacher’s input, but was created entirely in accordance with the aesthetic expression and performed in several rounds and added new layers of content. The teacher-in-role did not meet these actions, and, instead, ignored the in-role actions and went out of role. The student’s actions lost their agentic power. The teacher’s blocking of the student’s postupaks served as a reprimand instead. It is essential to continue to study situations like these further. Students who feel overwhelmed when the playful format suddenly does not apply can deliberately refrain from developing new motives for continued role-playing, and this can block the entire process. One can only speculate about the teacher’s way of acting, not receiving the postupaks. Maybe the teacher felt she was losing control or simply wanted to take the process further (cf. Rainio, 2008).

However, unless the students have agency, understand that their contribution has value, and have insight that others’ contributions have the same value, no postupaks are likely to be initiated. In the macramés, entanglements appeared, symbolising intensive joint action work, where students using their agency were building on each other’s postupaks, and it became impossible to discern who had initiated what. Then suddenly, the entanglement detangled, and the drama went on smoothly in a new and unpredictable direction (cf. the fisherman appears). These agentic actions resemble Waermö’s (2017) expansion of the concept of agency into negotiagency, in which agency and negotiation appear dialectically. Waermö focuses on children’s negotiation and agency during break activities. Negotiagency implies being part of a playfully executed activity, including an agentic negotiation ability, connecting oneself and involving others (Waermö, 2017).

The question is whether the concept of negotiagency is sufficient to describe the potential of postupak actions in a fictional activity. I emphasise that another dimension of agency appears in the macramés, performed by in-role postupaks, that is qualitatively different from actions out of role (not included here due to space limitation). The in-role postupaks imply the involvement of oneself and others, shown in the broader, flowing macramés and in the detangling of the entanglements. Being in a temporal fictional activity with a playful format includes a reciprocity agreement about doing this together that is sometimes pronounced but often unspoken.
However, the most crucial thing about a postupak action in a fictional activity is its forward direction, including both the expectation and hope that the contribution given will be received and that it will also be reciprocated, but in a new form. By doing this, a form of ‘expectation and hope agency’, expectagency, is developed. It is not about negotiations that concern either this or that. Instead, it means that everyone is prepared for the fact that what they contribute will change and develop, which involves a capability to handle both uncertainty and change. Such a capability, which has a collective dimension, should be of great importance for how we will be able to handle uncertainty and change together. This capability is crucial in the world right now, given the challenges we face.

Tauritz (2016) writes that we know very little about how teachers can help students develop abilities to deal with uncertainty concerning sustainability and the climate crisis. The form of education that drama educators can offer through in-role improvisations of temporary fictional activities in process drama enables the development of a unique agentic ability that can be part of the answer to Tauritz’s questions. The collective capability to deal with uncertainty and change, expectagency, is required of those living in a rapidly changing world. For that capability to be developed, the macramé patterns showed that it requires students in process drama to have a chance to be in in-role improvisations and have time to move on in their motive-creating work. When the process was not disturbed, when students went on with their joint postupak actions, something happened: a pride and a curiosity arose among them about what they were creating together – something which no one could have imagined beforehand.

References

Marjanovic-Shane, A. (2010). From yes and no to me and you: A playful change in relationships and meanings. In M. C. Connery, V. P. John-Steiner & A. Marjanovic-Shane (Eds.), *Vygotsky and creativity: A cultural-historical approach to play, meaning making and the arts.* (pp. 41–59). Peter Lang Publishing.


