

Drama, school and social change: Theoretical approaches to learning in history and culture

by

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Abstract

As a cultural mode, in its diverse styles and forms and presented to audiences in various ways, drama is pervasive and prevalent in contemporary life. In some education, it is now embedded in the school curriculum and is increasingly popular with students. What are the theories that can be used to describe and analyse cultural and historical effects on the learning of drama? An example is taken from a drama lesson in school, analysed from a cultural and historical perspective and drawing from the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky and the cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Working with ideas drawn from Vygotsky's work on drama and the development of mind and Williams' view of the place of drama in contemporary culture, this paper makes an argument for historical and cultural approaches to drama and learning. It is an approach that is particularly applicable to schooling and has implications for the exploration and explication of the relation between drama, learning and social change in wider domains.

Abrégé

En tant que mode culturel, dans ses styles et formes divers et présentés à des audiences de différentes manières, l'art dramatique est pénétrant et dominant dans la vie contemporaine. Dans certaines éducations, il est maintenant intégré dans le programme scolaire et devient de plus en plus populaire avec les étudiants. Quelles sont les théories qui peuvent être utilisées pour décrire et analyser les effets culturels et historiques sur l'apprentissage de l'art dramatique ? Un exemple est pris dans une leçon d'art dramatique dans une école, analysé selon une perspective culturelle et historique et issue du travail du psychologue russe Vygotsky et du théoricien culturel Raymond Williams. Cet article utilise des idées tirées du travail de Vygotsky sur l'art dramatique et le développement de l'esprit, et de l'opinion de Williams sur la place de l'art dramatique dans la culture contemporaine, et défend l'idée d'utiliser des approches historiques et culturelles pour l'art dramatique et l'apprentissage. Cette approche s'applique tout particulièrement à l'école et a des conséquences pour l'exploration et l'explication de la relation entre l'art dramatique, l'apprentissage et le changement social dans des domaines plus vastes.

Sumario

Siendo una modalidad cultural presentada al público con estilos y formas diferentes, el teatro es penetrante y predominante en la vida contemporánea. En algunos procesos educativos, el teatro ha sido incorporado a los planes de estudio y se ha propuesto como muy popular entre los educandos. ¿Cuáles son las teorías que pueden ser usadas para describir y analizar los efectos históricos y culturales del aprendizaje del drama teatral? Un ejemplo es tomado de una lección de drama en una escuela. Este ejemplo es analizado desde una perspectiva histórica y cultural que se basa sobre el trabajo del psicólogo Ruso Vygotsky y sobre las teorías culturales de Raymond Williams. Al trabajar con las ideas de Vygotsky relacionadas con el drama y el desarrollo mental y asimismo con los puntos de vista de Williams sobre el lugar que posee el drama en la cultura

contemporánea, este artículo argumenta los enfoques históricos y culturales del drama como fuente de aprendizaje. Se trata de un enfoque que tiene una aplicación particular en las escuelas y tiene implicaciones hacia la exploración y explicación de la relación entre el teatro, el aprendizaje y el cambio social dentro de una amplia gama de coyunturas.

Author's biography

Anton Franks was a teacher of drama and English in London schools, and now teaches, researches and writes on drama and English in education at the Institute of Education, University of London. Publications include 'Lessons from Brecht ...' (with Ken Jones), *Research in Drama Education* 4(2), 'Teoría del aprendizaje y educación dramática: una perspectiva Vygotskiana, histórico-cultural y semiótica' ['Learning theory and drama education: a Vygotskian, historical cultural and semiotic approach'], *Cultura y Educación* 16/1-2 and 'Stories of the three-legged stool: English, media, drama from critique to production' (with A. Burn and J. Durran), *English in Education* 40(1).

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When we have grasped the fundamental relation between meanings arrived at by creative interpretation and description, and meanings embodied in conventions and institutions, we are in a position to reconcile the meanings of culture as 'creative activity' and 'a whole way of life', and this reconciliation is then a real extension of our powers to understand ourselves and our societies. (Williams 1965: 56)

Theorising and practising teaching and learning drama

In this paper, I am concerned in a small way with the large question of how instruction and learning in drama relate and contribute to social and cultural change. The focus is on drama education in schools, and the intention is to define a particular way of seeing, or a theoretical starting point from which to describe drama and dramatic learning. Theory, in this instance, is intended to do more than provide a perspective as a means of description and analysis: it is also to inform the practice and pedagogy of doing drama with learners. This is to treat theory not merely as a means of describing the world, but (to paraphrase Marx) as a tool for bringing about social and cultural change — in other words, to speak as others have done before of the *praxis* of drama education (Taylor 1996, 2000). School is a specific location for doing drama, and drama instruction in this location has its particularities and peculiarities that mark it out as quite a specific 'genre' (O'Toole 1992). The generic features of school drama might be seen to 'encapsulate' and separate it from the way that drama is practised in wider culture (Engeström & Kallinen 1988; Engeström 1996). Alternatively, although there might be perceived degrees of separation between school drama and drama in wider culture, there are several points of contact between school drama and drama in the wider world. Schooling and school culture — however much they are bounded by particular institutional structures — are deeply implicated in access to and distribution of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1993). Schooling, and school drama within it, are not merely receptive to, or reflective of, drama in wider contextual cultural domains; drama in school is an activity of generating and transforming drama. There is tension and contradiction held in this relation between creative activity and institutional and conventional structures — creativity pushes outwards and convention presses in and contains creativity, and out of this a dynamic of change is generated. Children come to drama lessons and are asked to draw on direct experience and knowledge mediated to them by various means in and out of school. They are

required to shape, frame and pattern these sources of knowledge and experience into particular forms of drama, using their bodies as the material and means of inscription. They are guided in these enterprises by teachers who adopt particular patterns of instruction, and underlying these patterns are ideas, or theories, about the direction and purposes of drama education.

Drama always encapsulates and represents something of wider social relations in a particular time and place. Of all cultural modes — through speech, face, gesture, movement, relation to others and to objects — drama is closest to the ways we have of communicating in everyday life. The apparent discontinuities and contradictions of everyday life, action located in different places at different times, action immediately experienced or mediated through television and film, for example, are given instance and substance, are shaped, framed and patterned in dramatic scenes. In drama lessons in school, the work involved in making drama is work of imagination made physical in action. Choices are made about topic, action, forms and modes of presentation, and these choices are, to greater or lesser extents, limited by general and particular techniques of drama education. These techniques may derive from different sources, have particular purposes and ideologies behind them, but they are constituted and patterned in particular formations of pedagogic practices and patterns of instruction.

Two short papers but big ideas: A critical and cultural approach to drama education

I have been helped in thinking about a critical and cultural approach to drama education by reading two short papers by two different writers. One, ‘Drama in a dramatized society’, by Raymond Williams, is quite well known and concerns the place of drama in culture and the force of the dramatising process in contemporary culture (Williams 1983; Hornbrook 1989). The other, less well known, is by Lev Vygotsky on the psychology of actors’ creative work (Vygotsky 1997). Both, I think, were penned as lectures and therefore encapsulate and recapitulate on a larger corpus of work. The idea that a small paper is connected to the large idea is attractive in this instance because this relation of the small and particular to the large and more general is one way of characterising the relation between particular pieces of drama and wider society — see, for example, ‘From the particular to the universal’ on drama education (Heathcote 1984: 103–10). In terms of perspective, both take historically situated, historically sensitive and culturally orientated standpoints, and both are concerned in various ways with the relation of drama in culture to the learning and development of individuals and social groups. Williams is interested from the perspective of a cultural critic, one who believes that culture always has something to teach, a ‘permanent education’ within which a critical perspective is fundamental to individuals’ and groups’ active participation in democracy (Williams 1968). Vygotsky began his academic career as a literary scholar, maintaining his interests in literature and drama throughout, but his main focus was to develop a social, cultural and historical approach to learning and the development of mind. There are four broad themes, or headings, that I want to draw out of Vygotsky’s and Williams’ work:

- definitions of culture and drama’s place in culture;
- the historic situation and sensitivity to the role of history in approaches to learning and development;
- the role of instruction, especially of the relation between patterns of instruction to processes of learning and the role of learning in development and change;
- the importance of the integration of physical, intellectual and affective dimensions of learning.

The best way of elaborating on these strands of a theoretical approach to drama education is perhaps to try them out as categories in application to and analysis of a drama lesson.

A sketch of a lesson

The following description is taken from detailed notes made when I visited a student teacher of drama. She was a committed student who had previous experience of teaching English as a foreign language and working with children in the Horn of Africa after completing a degree in English and Drama. She was on her first teaching placement in a popular mixed inner-city school in South London, and was doing well — except that she had very little support in the teaching of drama. For this reason, I arranged to observe her teach drama. I have chosen to write about this lesson not because it is exemplary in the sense of relative excellence (although I did think that it was a satisfactory lesson, especially for a relatively inexperienced teacher with little support in drama), but it is an exemplar in that it represents something typical in terms of drama practice.

It is early afternoon on an icy day in mid-January and I wait for the teacher to bring a class of 13-year-olds into a large, grey and gloomy room, in a separate block from most classrooms, empty but for a circle of 30 or so chairs in the middle of the room. The walls are bare, the windows are high and, under stark strip lighting it is not a hospitable space. The teacher has had to collect the class from a building on the other side of the road, lining them up outside the studio before allowing them to flow in. They leave bags and coats at the edge of the space and settle in the circle. It is a large class of boys and girls in school uniform. I hold a lesson plan that tells me the topic of the sequence of lessons is to explore old age, and in this lesson the teacher wants the class to explore the contrasts between the realities of old age and the fantasies of old people.

Now the teacher asks about what they did in the last lesson and gets the answer ‘old people’. She encourages them to be more specific and is told ‘the difference between young and old’. The teacher moves the focus on to the difficulties that old people might face and tells the class that all should have their hands up. She is told that old people might be worried about death, that they might have arthritis which slows them down, that they may become more susceptible to disease and that they might be more at risk of poverty. The teacher confirms these contributions and extends the speculation, suggesting that old people’s infirmities might mean that they have to go into nursing homes. What might it be like for old people in care homes? The students think that it might be depressing, sitting around all day and being told what to do. So what, asks the teacher, would old people do in that situation? One student offers that that they might be thinking about the past.

T: Perhaps fantasising about the past. What do I mean by fantasising?

S: Dreaming in your head

T: That’s what we’ll focus on today — old age and fantasy. I want you to include narration.

Here the teacher elicits and lists different types of narration.

T: I want you to create a two-part scene. The first part is going to be reality ... the difficulty that old people experience at a nursing home [she recaps on examples given earlier in the discussion]. The other part is going to be a memory, a fantasy, and that part will have a narrator and the others will act that out. It

could be something pleasant in their past. I want you to freeze it before you go into that part of the scene. Why do you think I want you to freeze it?

S: [indistinct]

T: It's an effective way to show difference between the first and second part.

S: Can an old person be the narrator?

T: Yes, of course ... I'm going to be looking at how clear the change between reality and fantasy is, at character and at clear transitions. Any questions?

The teacher divides the class into groups, breaking up the friendship groups they have placed themselves in around the circle, and the groups quickly move to their allotted space for devising their scenes distributed around the studio. Every one of the groups appears to divide its rehearsal space into two distinct areas. The students arrange chairs in different formations to depict a dayroom where the 'old people' watch television (another chair), or a dining room with imaginary tables and this marks off one area — the 'reality' area 'in the nursing home'. Another part of the 'stage' is made — sometimes in an adjacent space, sometimes by moving chairs offstage — and this space is more open and not defined by the placing of furniture. They move between the two areas, some practising the stereotypical gait of elders, bent over with shaking hands clutching imaginary walking sticks. When they move into the open area, their movements become transformed, more flowing and 'youthful'. Whatever way they play it, changing the space marks the scene change between the present reality and the move into the fantasised past. After about fifteen minutes, the teacher calls the group back into the circle in the middle of the room and chooses groups to take the 'stage' in the middle of the circle of chairs.

The first group to perform sets four chairs in a square arrangement, with students sitting limply in each and two students standing, 'posted' at opposite corners on the diagonal.

S1: (as old person in a chair) I really want to go outside.

S2: (as carer standing at corner) I can't supervise you.

S1: I haven't been out for a year.

S2: No. [pause] Sorry.

All freeze and chairs are rearranged in a horseshoe to look as if they are around a table.

S1: 1947, my first birthday [observer raises his eyebrows and smiles].

S3: Right everyone, let's sing 'Happy Birthday'.

'Candles' are blown out.

All freeze position.

There is some commentary and reflection. One student finds it incredible that someone would not go outside in a year — that that does not happen, even in prison. Others like the simplicity and the contrast.

The second group sets up a horseshoe of four chairs and four students become 'old people' facing another student who is standing by the back of a chair 'looking' at something in his hand. He calls numbers:

S1: Oh! Bingo! (All freeze and S1 gets up) Back in the old days ...

S2 runs in slow motion to another area outside the chairs. Three other students have moved to frozen positions, two facing each other with hands held up and the third with hands raised in a similar gesture. The slow-motion runner adopts a position opposite this student to form a pair.

S1: Back in the old days, things were so peaceful and quiet.

At this signal from the narrator, the four frozen actors come to life, playing ‘pat-a-cake’ with their hands, establishing a ‘playground’. The game continues for a few beats and then action is frozen for the end of the scene. In the commentary that follows, one student wonders how the scene was meant to be sad, another thought that it showed how tensions build up, and the last points out the way that scene showed contrast by showing each game as emblematic of old age and youth respectively.

Drama in culture

So how does this lesson signify something about contemporary or historical culture and drama’s place within it? Well, for me there was something striking about the spontaneity with which the children became involved and engaged in thinking about, making and responding to drama. There was not a strong convention of drama established in this school, but they were given time and a place, and the teacher provided a clear structure for doing drama in this instance. The students took to the task with alacrity. This points to the currency and availability of drama in culture as a way of presenting and representing, doing and making sense of social relations and social interests. There are social and cultural as well as psychological and personal aspects of life that the students represent in their dramas of old age and youth, reality and fantasy. With the direction and clear structure provided by the teacher, the small dramas encapsulate quite large concepts. In its episodic quality, and the use of flashback and voice-over narration, this form of drama can be seen to owe more to television drama documentary than it does to theatre. The drab and empty space in which they were working was somehow suited to this pared-down improvisation. Through their activity, the teacher and children transformed the space. The settings of nursing home and playground or birthday party were easily evoked, generated by the children’s action. And yet there remains something profoundly theatrical about the relationship between actors and audience in an empty space defined by dramatic action.

Williams uses a three-sided definition of culture which surfaces in much of his writing: first, an ‘idealistic’ and conventional view of culture as a general description for artistic, literary and intellectual work; second, a broadly sociological view of culture including literature, arts and learning, but also more general practices and behaviour that constitute a distinctive way of life; and third, the signifying or semiotic systems by which particular and distinctive ways of life are represented. In this lesson, the ‘idea’ of culture remained implicit, but the notion of culture as a complete way of life was implicitly woven into the fabric of the drama, in terms of both content and form. There was scope to analyse the drama at a textual level, comparing their drama to other forms of drama that circulate in wider culture (intertextual relations) and at a more specific level of how the modes of speech, gesture and action over time and in space were articulated to construct the scenes, characters and so forth. In this lesson, however, there was not space or time for this kind of explicit and detailed semiotic analysis (Franks 1996).

At another level, the relation of drama to everyday life is something that was explicitly discussed to frame the lesson at its opening and towards the end when pieces of drama were enacted and there was room for response and reflection. Drama, Williams writes, ‘in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life’ and now we have drama ‘as habitual experience’, with most people seeing ‘more [drama] in a week than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime’ (Williams 1983). Drama is no longer co-extensive with theatre, as this lesson illustrates, yet its mass mediation via television brings about the prevalence, power and influence of drama in contemporary culture. If drama is habitual in culture, therefore, it also becomes a habit of mind: drama ‘is a way of speaking and listening, a specific rhythm of particular consciousness; in the end a form of unfinished, transient, anxious relationship, which is there on the stage or in the text but which is also, pervasively, a structure of feeling in a precise contemporary world, in a period of history which has that familiar and complex transience’ (Williams 1983). The lesson illustrates concerns with the ‘problems’ of old age and with the boundaries between reality, fantasy and memory.

Drama, learning and history

Vygotsky’s work did not lead him explicitly to consider the place of drama in culture. Nonetheless, he had a lifelong interest in drama as providing particular insight into the learning and development of higher mental processes in relation to prevailing historical and cultural conditions. Put another way, he was interested in how individual histories, or trajectories of learning and development, relate to wider culture history. So, in early work on the psychology of art, he points to ‘a psychological kinship between art and play’ (Vygotsky & Ivanov 1971). In terms of the history of individual development, play can be seen to be ‘imagination in action’ that is internalised through the processes of learning and development (Barrs 1996). In the paper on the psychology of the actor’s creative work, he writes that ‘the psychology of the actor expresses the social ideology of his epoch and ... it also changes in the process of the historical development of man just as the external forms of theatre and its style and content change’ (Vygotsky 1997: 240). Williams, in definitions of culture and drama’s place within it, also sees active reciprocity between drama and life, one feeding from the other. He goes further when reflecting on the dominance of naturalism: ‘It was by looking both ways, at a stage and a text, and at a society active, enacted in them, that I thought I saw the significance of the enclosed room — the room on the stage, with its new metaphor of the fourth wall lifted — as at once a dramatic and a social fact.’ (Williams 1983) Williams meditates on the relation between drama and everyday lives, positing the notion of the dramatised society that comes into being at its most obvious level ‘by the inclusion of constant dramatic representation as a daily habit and need’, but also in that drama actively feeds back into social, cultural and individual sensibilities and habits of living. This ‘cultural’ perspective on drama clearly has sociological and social-historical dimensions, and is moving towards a form of cultural psychology of learning through a binocular focus on drama through one lens and a ‘society active’ through another. Three aspects of this lesson can be picked out from this. First, drama is relatively new on the curriculum, and this in many ways feeds from and feeds into the newly pervasive position for drama in culture. It allows a new space for adolescents to play out their imaginations but with particular reference to available cultural forms. Leading from this, the second aspect is that a focus on the forms of the lesson and the drama produced from a historical perspective allows one to speculate about the provenance and transformations of dramatic forms in the lesson. And this is a main aspect of a critical perspective. It is pointed to in this paper, but not fully elaborated — it did not enter the plan of the lesson, but it could have. Last, the content of the drama was in and of itself a

representation of history — a putative history of characters (despite a somewhat stereotypical and anachronistic view of ageing) that might have been developed in subsequent lessons. It is a history with social and cultural, psychological and personal facets, and in this way it might be seen as compatible with, and complementary to, Brecht's insistence on the recognition of the role of drama in revealing the processes of history to audiences (Franks and Jones 1999).

The role of instruction in drama education

The lesson was thoughtfully planned, carefully managed and thought-provoking. With relatively little experience and without the support of a mentor in drama, the teacher had done well in orientating the class to the topic, articulating it with previous lessons in the opening discussion, and setting clear parameters and boundaries which served as well as evaluation criteria for the work. This provided a structure within which the group was asked to draw on and share resources of experience (both direct and mediated). The framing of the lesson directed their choices of forms while allowing them scope to develop the work in different ways to meet their particular interests and capacities. In her work with this class, there was a balanced and binocular focus on the relation of particular contexts and contents to particular forms and a regard for how the private sphere relates to public domains.

I have already referred to Williams' take on the role of culture in 'permanent' education, and in particular his motivation in looking two ways — from dramatic text and performance to a 'society active' to learn both about drama and about social interests. For Williams, cultural criticism ought not to be seen as passive and receptive, but as actively and constructively feeding back into culture. The emphasis on actors' training in Vygotsky's work connects with notions of instruction. He was very interested in the processes and practices of instruction, their relation to patterns of learning and the power of formal learning (that is to say, patterns of learning in institutional contexts) to lead development both in individual and social spheres. Here space permits only a broad but emphatic gesture indicating two specific and brief points that can be drawn out of current approaches to Vygotsky's work on instruction. First, there are various areas of work on: 'situated learning' and 'communities of practice' are developed from his concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), and are salient in thinking about drama instruction in schools and its relation to drama in wider culture (Vygotsky & Kozulin 1986; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). From another angle, recent work stresses how the making of artefacts — texts, drama and so forth — is important in learning and instruction. There is a need to make space in which to reflect on artefacts or productions in their own right, and in intertextual relation to other dramas and other kinds of text in the world. In improvised and devised drama in particular, there is an opportunity for students to insert and represent their own voices alongside, and perhaps against, other voices that are represented in drama that circulates in culture — in other words, to create 'polyphonic' texts (Carpay & Van Oers 1999; Daniels 2001).

Action, intellect and emotion

The techniques of actor training were especially significant for Vygotsky because the training mobilises, engages and involves a complex integration of physical action, intellect and emotion in the construction of drama. For Vygotsky, the point of fascination is that historically orientated studies of actor training reveal how an actor portrays an emotion that they do not feel but which nonetheless is designed to evoke emotional responses in an audience. The study of the contribution of affect in the development of thought was one of Vygotsky's main areas of inquiry left largely unresolved before his death: 'Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there

is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the last “why” in the analysis of thinking.’ (Vygotsky & Kozulin 1986) In this late paper, Vygotsky makes a comparative examination of the training and directorial techniques of Stanislavsky and the lesser known Vakhtangov, and comes to the conclusion that an actor’s mastery of emotion is ‘not based on direct interference of our will in the sphere of sensations in the way that this occurs in the area of thinking and movement’ but that the ‘path is much more tortuous and, as Stanislavsky correctly notes, more like coaxing than direct arousal of the required feeling. Only indirectly, creating a complex system of ideas, concepts, and images of which emotions is a part, can we arouse the required feelings.’ (Vygotsky 1997) Again from his perspective, Williams works less on the specificities of the patterning of emotion and the relation of emotion to physical and intellectual action. Yet it is clear from his preoccupation with ‘structures of feeling’ that he sees drama’s facility for encapsulating, representing and synthesising action, intellect and emotion as highly significant — particularly in an age characterised by ‘transient and anxious relationship[s]’. For both writers, the representation of affect in drama clearly is as historically situated as anything else.

There was much in this lesson that was about the dramatic representation of emotion and the use of particular dramatic techniques of acting out emotion, gesture, movement and so forth. Freeze-frame and split-focus staging gave structural form to the pieces. At one end of the spectrum, the portrayal of emotion here could be said to be stereotypical; towards the other end, there were moments when children appeared to be engaged, involved and making subtle and nuanced connections between patterns of action, thought and feeling.

By way of a conclusion ...

I have wanted here to make an argument about the ordinariness, the peculiarities and the contemporary salience of drama in culture. This positions the learning and teaching of drama in a particular place within schooling. An alertness and sensitivity to the role of drama in culture and history means that there are two complementary aspects of drama as a subject that require foregrounding. On one side, the drama lesson is space in which cultural making is permitted and encouraged, a productive space in which young people can work on and strive towards representing social relations and cultural life to others in forms that are more or less appropriate. The example of this lesson is not one of exemplary cultural or artistic achievement — indeed, in many respects it can justifiably be labelled as mundane and banal, but it does mark moments, action and movement towards finding appropriate dramatic forms to encapsulate particular ideas. On the other side — and because drama is precisely about the representation of human relations, and the learning of drama works towards understanding and representation — onlookers (teachers, teacher educators, researchers, etc.) should regard thoughtfully the drama that young people make. However mundane — or rather, precisely because of its mundane character, its connectedness to the world — a close and considerate view of drama made by young people will always tell us something about cultural and historical situations, both on larger (the culture and histories of the world) and smaller scales (the particular trajectories of growth and change in groups and individuals). Close observation and consideration of these dramas will be helped by removal to a more distant point of observation, and here I have wanted to suggest that theory and particular theories provide a suitable place for reflective, analytical and evaluative thought. From a more distant place of reflection, we may gain an ‘extension of our powers to understand’ more about the learners in their particular contexts, more about drama and, ultimately, more about how to teach.

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