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MULTIPLE WAYS OF KNOWING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DRAMA AND LITERACY IN A CONTEMPORARY CURRICULUM

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Abstract

Literacy as a performing art refers to the act of representing and interpreting text, the transforming of thought to oral interpretation. This aesthetic perspective of experiencing reading is missing in many classrooms today and thus, reading is becoming a lost art. Students are expected to apply specific literacy techniques rather than use their imagination to enact text. Instead, students must be cultivated in educational atmospheres where their learning becomes enriched through the dramatic reading process, allowing each to develop in meaningful ways and see through multiple perspectives.

Introduction

Multiple ways of knowing open up the door for understanding curriculum as a dramatic process and ultimately redefining what it means to be literate. Drama is a verb for learning and the key to making curriculum connect in an eclectic educational system. Words do not always transfer across cultures and experiential backgrounds, but expression does. Broadening the definition of literacy and thus our perspective on curriculum to include the visual and communicative arts can make school relevant across cultures and various backgrounds (Eisner, 1994, Leland & Harste, 1994, Sweet, 1997). We must "dramatize" so that we may "use language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say" (Eisner, 1991). We align ourselves with Eisner (1991) who believes that we must "broaden our views of what it means to know" (p. 2). To answer the call for diversity in the representation of knowledge, we must acknowledge and celebrate the variance of interpretation and embrace a variety of means to express the learning experience.

Aesthetic Notions Of Knowledge And Literacy

Curriculum as a dramatic process that involves multiple ways of knowing is built upon both an aesthetic and cognitive framework of knowledge. Donmoyer (1991) describes drama as an aesthetic means of "expressing what cannot be expressed in any other way." In illustration, he describes Annie Sullivan's fight to reach the deaf, blind, and dumb Helen Keller: "by giving her a

language, by making words meaningful" (p. 87). In fact, words alone do not open worlds for many students. The aesthetic connection is missing. To the lament of many teachers, reading is fast becoming a lost "art." Students are enacting upon designated applications of literacy techniques (Mosher, 2001) rather than using imagination to enact text. Without the "drama" of literacy, students are limited to reading text instead of reading the world through text.

An aesthetic notion of knowledge and literacy changes the language of curriculum. It demands that we expand our view of the student as learner and education as objective. Within the framework of aesthetics, Huebner (1975) proclaims that the "educational activity can have beauty" "where the possible vitality and significance of life is symbolized by the excitement, fervor, and community of educational activity" (p. 110). Education of a child must not be viewed in terms of symbols or methods required for existence, but rather as a way of introducing a child to geography, chemistry, music, or sculpture as a means of "increasing his ability to respond to the world [and] to partake of the world and become more aware of what he can become, and what man can become" (1975, p. 231).

Learning and thinking may be symbolically mediated processes, but language is not the only form of symbolization. Artistic form, whether it is music, drama, or art, provides an alternative form of knowledge. Berghoff (2000) concurs that literacy develops through multiple sign systems. From this aesthetic view of literacy, literacy develops "as individuals make sense of their lived experience using the full range of human meanings – making systems" (p. 1). What we "know" is not contained or confined by language; some aspects of experience must be addressed through nonlinguistic representation.

Multiple representation in literacy also "dramatically" affects our perspective on educational research. In McMahon's (2001) review of *Vygotskian Perspectives of Literacy*, she expressed how this expanded view of literacy will provide new impetus for literacy research: "Our research inquiry must acknowledge the multiple ways of coming to understanding [and] at the same time, this should not limit us so that we privilege one indication of literate thought over another" (p. 503). Wells (2000) includes the expressivist and designative functions of language in his model of the spiral of knowing, which are also addressed as part of drama in curriculum theory as a way to construct meaning through social inquiry. These expressive functions of language also reflect Vygotsky's interest in Stanislavsky's work in the Moscow Art Theatre, and his lifetime interest in theatre and dramatic interpretation (Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997).

In much agreement with multiple ways of knowing, Sweet (1997) addresses national trends within educational research programs. She justifies a diverse view of literacy as a possible niche for the visual and communication arts. Unfortunately, schools' definitions of literacy are confining, being focused solely on the construction of meaning. Eisner (1994) stresses the possible "handicapping effect" that a narrow definition of literacy can have on children with varying aptitudes by allowing for an unfair status advantage. Broadening the definition of literacy to include the representation of visual and communication arts would allow for a more unbiased rubric of the literacy curriculum.

The inclusion of drama in the literacy curriculum allows for an aesthetic stance, one where affective/cognitive learning takes place. Broudy (1988) suggests that "the capacity to decode aesthetic clues – the elements of an image – is central to the capacity to think" (Pinar, 2000, p. 570). From a phenomenological epistemology, "the cultivation of the intellect – the capacity to generate, analyze, and synthesize concepts – necessarily requires cultivation of the imagination" (p. 569). An aesthetic view of literacy sees reading as the "imagined" text, the construction and interpretation of visual images using the process of inquiry. In an aesthetic sense, the reader has the capacity to

experience meaning. Rather than use drama as an external technique that must provide empirical evidence of improving comprehension, should we not be "raising consciousness" of the inherent aesthetic qualities of dramatization that enable the reader to engage in the comprehension of text, thus experiencing curriculum in the sense that it becomes significant?

Eisner (1991) reminds us that the ability to read and use language is only as adequate as our ability to effectively reveal meaning through terms. The dramatization of text creates meaning and culminates in the visualization of ideas. This imaginary theatre of the mind to which Booth (1985) refers demands an aesthetic education where human beings find "essential meanings in life, through intellectual development and through processes that imply feelings, conscience, and inspiration" (p. 85). In other words there are things that we just have to experience to "know."

The Cognitive Aspects Of Drama In Curriculum

Semiotics, the science of signs based on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, explains how signs acquire meaning through the triadic relationship of sign, object, and interpretant (Wilhelm, 1995). By creating a visual image of a concept, a reader produces a representation, an "object to think with" (p. 355). The image is used in context in order to give form to knowledge so that it can be manipulated, thought about, communicated, and responded to (Broudy, 1988). This same type of representation or mental image can also be an "artistic and dramatic representation" which readers can use to create meaning in text (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994).

According to Courtney (1990) the creation of meaning occurs through creative imagination and dramatic action. Through metaphoric meaning, which is thinking in the dramatic mode, we "symbolically understand reality" (p. 10). McMaster (1998) exclaims, "Drama is thinking out loud" (p. 575). It is truly the "aha!" moment when we acquire knowledge through dramatic action that brings a change in our thought.

The kinds of learning built on dramatic action consist of intrinsic, extrinsic, aesthetic, and artistic learning. Intrinsic learning develops our perception; it empowers our ability to think based on motivation, awareness, and concentration. Nevertheless, extrinsic learning has been the focus of justifying drama in the curriculum. Dramatic activity that is related to literacy such as role play and creative dramatics can also be used as evidence of the transference of learning to other fields. Aesthetic learning is utilized in empathy, where dramatic acting enhances "the learner's feelings, judgment, and choice" (Courtney, 1990, p. 140). These types of learning represent the different sets of practical knowledge that change how we think and act.

Relating drama to literacy, Courtney (1990) draws upon the example of the inner dramatization of the child who imitates the reading of a parent, mouthing the words with repeated readings and following the parent's finger moving from word to word. The child eventually impersonates the parent resulting in "a dramatic act that teaches the child to read" (p. 148). This structuring of knowledge is used to make sense of the world by fitting new experience into the existing schemas. Using Courtney's dramatic action theory, the transformation that occurs in literacy text is an *interaction*. Bakhtin (1981) also describes the dialogic relationship of the reader and the text, and the voices that we hear when we read. As the reader experiences the text, the fictional world in the mind of the reader creates the text. It is much the same process that we experience as members of a theatre audience. Although aware of our real world as participants in the dramatization, we allow ourselves to enter into the dramatic process in order to walk in the shoes of others and experience through their perspectives.

This model for dramatic knowledge coincides with Gardner's ideas that "if we understand the drama process, we will understand the learning process" (Kase–Polisini, 1985, p. XV). Gardner

(1985) in a presentation at Harvard on developing a theory of dramatic intelligence, concurred that intelligence is a variety of mental abilities. His theory of multiple intelligences rejects the idea of a developmental epigenesis of progression that occurs in humans with qualitatively different stages. Gardner's theory opened up new questions about cross cultural cognitive abilities. Do we stress only those cognitive abilities that Western society values? Which type of abilities transfer? Educational institutions as a whole tend to isolate intelligences, which can certainly result in a consequently enhanced or ignored area of potentiality in a child.

Learning comes as students give form to experience, as they construct meaning. Bruner (1986) claims that all theory and interpretation is dependent on the human capacity to imagine a world. In order to use verbal or dramatic expression, the reader becomes the externalized product of the child's internal attitude and feelings about the world, a product of dramatic literacy (Wagner, 1995). The imagined worlds described by Bruner and Bolton were more recently addressed by Mosher (2001) who laments the "impoverishment of children's lives and an impoverishment of reading [occurs] when we ignore its visceral and imaginative textures, the multiplicities and instabilities of what it means to understand" (p. 91).

Transformation Of Curriculum Through Drama

In O'Neill's (1995) book *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*, she describes process drama or drama in education as a complex learning medium. The process she uses, although intended for drama teachers, is also aimed at connecting with curriculum. Her method is not linear, but episodic with the intent of creating a "drama world." This form of creative dramatics does not follow narrative structure but works on the principle of "transformation" of a pre-text (improvised context) and seeks to create a fictional world which "will be inhabited for the insights, interpretations, and understandings it may yield" (p. 12). Transformation occurs as students engage in authentic dialogue, using the real discourses, backgrounds, and experiences that they bring to the reading/learning event. A change or reframing of an old perception occurs, as students are able to arrange or alternate previous assumptions. The imagination works as a stage to play out our roles and juxtapose ideas giving us the ability to see the other side, to weigh alternatives, and use what some refer to as intuition. Rosen (1980) tells us "the imagination can dramatize for our purposes, the exploration of the mind" (p. 161).

The dialogic experience of negotiating between what we can imagine and our existing framework of knowledge is the drama of learning. Bolton (1986) points out that dramatic activity entails a passive reception of experience in the sense of relinquishing the attempt to learn, but it involves an active creation of the "as if" context. Being "as if" is what Courtney (1990) refers to as "the self's fictional mode of operation" (p. 13). This relationship between a child and his/her imagined world denotes what psychologists refer to as symbolic play, what philosophers call self-transcendence, what educators call learning or scaffolding, and what artists call aesthetic experience.

As mentioned earlier, for a term to be meaningful, we must form a personal image of reality, an icon, for that term. The senses, however, are sometimes constraining. We can view with only a single focus, but once the image is in the imagination, it can be recalled and imaginatively manipulated (Eisner, 1981; Turner, 1996). It is this ability to maneuver ideas/images that allow us to take on the perspectives of others, to empathize (Greene, 1995).

John Dewey (1938) understood the need for imagination in educational experience and warned us that students may lose the desire to learn because of the way in which they experience learning. It is the quality of experience that matters. Drama creates a quality experience and demands the ability

to create internal images as a means of learning. According to Heathcote (1983), it is the authenticity of the dramatic moment that causes a transformation. New knowledge is created by "unpacking previously held conclusions" (p. 696). McLauren declares that a pedagogy which elicits dynamic forms of participation will represent "the dream, the desire, voices, and utopian longings" of the students (O'Neill, 1989, p. 59).

One of the keys to transformation in the literacy curriculum is in using the dramatic experience for "reflection." Bolton (1986) refers to the significance of the dramatic event as the powerful form of "reflection," a reflection of the experience and the language used in the "implementation of a dramatic context" (p. 182). Pinciotti (1993) describes the medium of drama as "self in relation to others" reflecting upon "human experience, real or imagined" (p. 24). The benefits of reflection are demonstrated by Heathcote's mode of teaching which utilizes creative drama, improvisation, and reveals commonalities in humans across time and place, promoting understanding of the real world through reflection on an imaginary one.

Bolton's (1986) drama for understanding and Courtney's (1990) transformations are the dynamics that bring about learning and real world literacy. When we watch a great performance we feel as if we have been changed in some way. Prejudice was just a word until viewing *Imitation of Life*. Significance of life took on new meaning after experiencing, "*It's a Wonderful Life*." In *The Miracle Worker*, language became an appreciated life giving tool as I listened to the desperate wishes of Anne Sullivan as she worked to give Helen Keller, "One word- and I can put the world in your hands." The transformation of curriculum through drama involves an increase in the depth of our thinking and not just a change in what we think. Students experience such transformations when allowed to read imaginatively with their own interpretation. Using a "dramatic" literacy curriculum integrating multiple ways of knowing supplies vicarious experiences that help to supplement and nourish the imagination providing a repertoire of the necessary "scripts" needed to navigate meaning and understanding of the world.

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