

Guiding the Noticing: Using a Dramatic Performance Experience to Promote Tellability in Narrative Writing

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Abstract: In this article, the author describes her use of dramatic performance to promote tellability in narrative writing within a seventh and eighth grade English and language arts classroom. By experiencing dramatic performance, the students were able to actively and physically perform the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Furthermore, the students promoted classroom community and collaboration. This article expounds how classroom teachers could facilitate these dramatic performances so that their students would make visible their decisions as writers. Infusing dramatic performance throughout the writing process advanced both the quality and the positive attitudes about writing.

Keywords: aesthetic education, adolescents, critical thinking, writing, creative arts

Teaching students to recognize and exhibit the qualities of good writing and to form positive attitudes about writing has challenged English and language arts teachers for decades. Writing pedagogy scholars have urged teachers to help guide their students to both *notice* and *act on* their process, which, in turn, will lead to a stronger product (Dean 2006; Elbow 1973; Fletcher 2010). As philosopher Maxine Greene (2001) describes, noticing “is an *active* probing of wholes as they become visible. . . . It requires a mental and imaginative participation. . . , a consciousness of a work as something there to be achieved, depending for its full emergence on the way it is attended to and grasped” (13, emphasis added). Thus, the act of noticing illuminates

the critical and energetic spaces among the creator, audience, and the text.

In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA) standards (1996) and the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations standards (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 2010) state that students’ authentic experiences with reading, writing, and representing texts must increase. A popular method many English and language arts teachers employ in order for their students to become strategic writers, ones who “are prepared to write in all situations and in multiple genres” (Dean 2006, 5), is the writing workshop. The writing workshop makes visible the strategies of inquiry, drafting, and product (Dean 2006, 7–10).

This article describes an action research I implemented with middle school students who engaged in dramatic performance as a springboard for a narrative writing unit. Dramatic performances illuminate on-task student talk and physical movement. This type of talk and movement allow for students to create new meanings, new texts, and ultimately a stronger literacy community. By considering dramatic performance as a strategy for inquiry and/or for drafting, students become better speakers and language users.

First, I describe the classroom context in which I utilized dramatic performance as a platform for both inquiry and revision for a narrative writing unit. Next, I share the “Four Ts” of implementing dramatic performance within the writing process. To conclude, I discuss what my students and I learned from the action research.

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Classroom

As a teacher educator I have been invited to area classrooms to model lessons and units. For example, on separate occasions during the 2009–2010 academic year, I demonstrated an extended lesson (mini-unit) for the 7th- and 8th-grade English and language arts classes of all levels and academic abilities at a school close to my university. It served as a springboard for an active study of narrative writing.

Prior to my arrival, the teachers introduced narratives to the students; they read many mentor texts, exploring their vivid language and categorizing their qualities that designate narrative writing. Unfortunately, the transference from reading and unpacking of characteristics to rich writing had proved difficult for the students. The students' drafts were dull and flat; they were the stale "bed to bed stories," ones that lacked the robustness achieved through sensory details and strong verbs. After my discussions with the classroom teachers, I concluded that the students struggled with transferring the vivid, active sensory details. Therefore, utilizing dramatic performance as a vehicle to make inquiry, drafting, and revising public proved crucial in building their narratives. Through the idea of *tellability* (Beach et al. 2006, 127), students are able to transact their new texts "into something visible, palpable, and accessible to persons willing to pay heed" (Greene 2001, 18).

Drama and Tellability

What makes a story tellable? Beach and colleagues (2006) posit that "a story's tellability—what makes it worth telling—is that its 'point' is not 'in' the story, but is socially constructed by the teller and the audience in the story telling event" (128). Moreover, they advance the position that effective narratives dramatize, usually, "extraordinary events by emphasizing violations of the norm—the fact that the event was out of the ordinary" (127). The fusion of the core tenets of tellability and the scholarship of Dewey and Rosenblatt anchor the inclusion of dramatic performance within the writing process. Dewey (1934) stated that "in every integral experience there is form because that is dynamic organization. . . . There is inception, development, fulfillment. . . . Experience like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings" (55–56). Further, Rosenblatt (1968) explained that "this process of reflection leads the student to seek additional information concerning the work, the author, and their social setting as a basis for the understanding of himself and of literature" (225). By emphasizing tellability in their narratives, students moved beyond the surface "bed-to-bed" stories. The use of role play enabled students to physically and socially constructs their stories and notice which areas needed more details.

The execution of the tellability lesson is arranged around Daniel Pink's (2009, 92–108) framework of motivation. Pink notes that one's intrinsic motivation increases with choice. The 7th and 8th graders had as much latitude as possible within each domain: team, task, time, and technique (the Four Ts). They created their own teams for writing and presenting their dramatic narrative performances. Then, given a liberal framework of oral and written expectations, teams chose their topic and texts. They managed time for both work and presentation. And, in order to share with peers, each team selected a presentation technique. The following section describes the tellability lesson arranged around the (re)visioned text and the Four Ts.

The Lesson

To start the lesson, I invited the students to brainstorm what makes a story tellable. Even though they may not have been familiar with the term *tellable*, both the 7th and 8th graders could list characteristics of memorable stories, such as relatable characters, an intense setting, and a strong plot and conflict. With this list, we generated a working definition of tellability.

To model developing a tellable narrative, we wrote a new tellable text together. I prefaced by encouraging the students to step out of their comfort zones and put on their "acting hats." (Middle school students love to talk and to perform!) The students wrote an idea for a basic skit on an index card; for example, I wrote, "I dropped my pencil." Next, a student volunteered to perform the basic scene of "I dropped my pencil." He took a few steps and literally dropped his yellow No. 2 pencil on the floor.

Next, this student called up a classmate to help him make the scene more tellable. To revise the narrative draft, I continuously asked: "How can we make this more tellable? What do we need to add? Take away?" I intentionally guided the noticing regarding the choices that the class—the writers—were making. The class built on the narrative by adding more characters, pieces of the setting (i.e., props), and the emotional energy needed to enhance the original dialogue. In other words, the dramatic performances welcomed students to draw on, as Beach et al. (2006) proclaim, "their own ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and understandings to employ dialogue, define their roles, make decisions, adopt certain stances, or recognize the consequences of their actions. They need[ed] to activate relevant schema and relate their personal experiences to create and sustain a drama world" (73). We continued until we were satisfied with our revised and more full-bodied narrative.

Team

Building a literacy community came as a result of positive social interaction and collaboration. For this lesson, the standard continued. After the sample

tellability experience was completed, the students divided themselves into small groups. Each team member shared a skit idea, which could be as simple as a noun and a verb. With the awareness of the overall goal of creating a new tellable text, each team remained engaged. The “primary purpose for responding to students’ writing is to help students improve the quality of their writing” (Beach and Friedrich 2008, 22). The groups, by building on a skeletal story, demonstrated a collaborative and visible way for students to respond to writing during the peer workshop.

Task

The 7th and 8th graders had freedom in determining the presentation style of the dramatic performance. Because each group had multiple possibilities, the task called for the members to negotiate and consider which idea was the most viable. Again, teams revised their narrative by keeping the guiding question—“What makes a story tellable?”—at the forefront. Beach et al. (2006) surmised: “The drama work had helped [the groups] create knowledge and had made their knowledge visible and accountable to each other, their teachers, and now the community” (71). At the end of the lesson, every student had a firmer understanding of tellability, and how to bring that same tellability into their written narrative drafts. The writing process, specifically revising, was now seen “more than simply making textual changes. It involves entertaining alternative perspectives and testing out tentative theories or hypotheses about the world” (Beach and Friedrich 2008).

Time

As all teachers know, time is cherished. Within the confines of the class period, each group had the freedom of organizing that time. For instance, some groups spent more time deciding on which skit to present. They drafted and rehearsed a dramatic performance, saw that the ways to build on that original idea were not forthcoming, and then chose another one. Being able to recognize that one idea was not as robust as another and moving on are components of self-governance. Other groups used the majority of their time creating new drafts of the performance. Overall, the students negotiated among themselves; they were cognizant of what constitutes “substantive revision and critical self-assessment, processes central to improving quality writing” (Beach and Friedrich 2008, 222).

Technique

Dramatic performances assist students “in developing the ability to use sophisticated strategies of reading [and writing] visible and available . . . in powerful ways that help them internalize these strategies” (Beach et al. 2006, 69). Therefore, the 7th and 8th graders had the freedom to present their dramatic performances

in the way they saw fit. The only requirement was that everyone must participate. Each group decided who would play the particular parts. Those who were apprehensive and did not want a speaking role served as props. Others decided to have a narrator do the majority of the speaking. Classroom desks and, most importantly, students’ imaginations supplemented the setting. Following the allotted time to plan, each group presented their new tellable text to the entire class.

One group’s dramatic performance took place on a cliff in the Grand Canyon. Michael Jackson—from the *Thriller* era (the group emphasized this point)—had “moonwalked” off the ledge and an eagle swooped in, caught him, and brought him to safety. This group had a narrator, Michael Jackson, the eagle, the wind that pushed the moonwalking Michael Jackson off the cliff, and the tree on the cliff. Each role was integral to the audience experiencing the performance. (Imagine a 12-year-old boy flailing his arms around, puffing air out of his cheeks, and saying, “Whoosh! I am the wind!” He was doing this while another was moonwalking around the classroom. Absolutely hilarious!)

Guiding the Noticing

Shifting from the collective, dramatic performance to individual writing was seamless. The students were able to then attempt to capture the “emotional heat” of the dramatic narrative. To guide their noticing or engage in metacognition, I invited the students to unpack their experience.

First, as the classroom teacher/facilitator, it was most imperative that I acknowledge and value their choices within the Four Ts. By enabling each group to exercise choice, students’ motivation increased immensely. Group members were deeply engaged in the experience of creating a new text, for all were deliberate in their selection of topic, technique, and timing of the skits. Instances of group negotiation served to heighten the noticing for they prompted attention among each other and with the audience.

To make public their experience, the students and I responded to questions in our writer’s notebooks or journals. Questions included the following:

- What did you discover?
- What parts stood out within your performance? Other teams’ performances?
- What did the actor(s) do or say that helped make the story more tellable?
- What part of the plot was extraordinary?
- What did you notice?

It is important to afford students the time for quiet reflection in their notebooks before conferring with their peer. Later, during the reciprocal peer sharing, inquiry is strengthened because one partner may have noticed

TABLE 1. Additional Guiding the Noticing Categories

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| Monitoring for meaning | Knowing when you know, knowing when you don't. |
| Using and creating schemata | Making connections between the new and the known, creating schemata when necessary. |
| Asking questions | Generating questions to lead the reader/writer deeper into the text. |
| Determining importance | Deciding what matters most, what is worth remembering. |
| Inferring | Combining background knowledge with information from the text to predict, conclude, make judgments, and interpret. |
| Using sensory and emotional images | Using images to deepen and stretch meaning. |
| Synthesis | Creating an evolution of meaning, combining understanding with knowledge from other texts and sources. |

Adapted from Keene (2007).

something in the dramatic performance. Additionally, a significant aspect of these questions highlighted specific vocabulary of the dramatic performances. For example, the students utilized terms of the dramatic (theater) arts and writing fields, such as *actor*, *actress*, and *center stage*. The rehearsal provided a space for drafting and revision in a physical form; their bodies served as the platform on which to build their public thinking. See table 1 for additional categories to guide the noticing.

Next, the students wrote a draft of a new text based on the dramatic performance. The classroom teachers and I joined in writing the draft as well. Again, students were given autonomy in terms of what to write. Some chose to simply retell the chosen dramatic performance, being sure to add vivid details and imagery. Some, who were more visual, created comic strips, while others chose to write from the perspective of a particular character. Others were inspired by the popular Six-Word memoirs (SMITH Magazine 2008) and wrote small collections.

Finally to bring the lesson to a close, the class and I revisited the question that anchored the entire dramatic performance and writing experiences: What makes a story tellable? Taking a moment to reflect on the process of creating and presenting the collective dramatic performance, as well as the individual written pieces, caused the classroom community to *pause*. The "circles of quietness" allowed the class to place great value on "the desire to articulate what has been made visible" (Greene 2001, 21).

Discussion

The facilitation of guiding the noticing before, during, and after the dramatic performances proved beneficial. The active noticing made visible decisions that the students made in creating and portraying their roles. Paramount to the infusing of the dramatic performances and narrative writing were the "aesthetic questions [which heighten] awareness of what is demanded of us as listeners [or as readers or viewers]" (Greene 2001, 21). This deliberate attention to both types of texts honored the aesthetic experiences of both the creator and the audience.

The tellability exercise propelled all to participate in the literacy community. The classroom transformed into a safe dialogic space where the teams' revisions were public and not intimidating. Students were more open to peer workshops as they revisited their original narrative writing. Students who initially had flat drafts recalled what made their dramatic performances tellable; they returned to their frame of reference for tellable narratives. Like these dramatic performances that relied on showing rather than on telling what happened, their print-based narratives needed to follow.

Final Thoughts

The interconnectedness among creator, audience, and text undergirded the power of noticing. This tellability lesson epitomized the notion of not knowing the story until it was performed. Discoveries during the dramatic performance were possible due to the purposeful active engagement and praxis between the creator and the audience. The groups, in essence, workshoped their narratives as they kept the audience (their peers) and the purpose (creating a tellable story) at the forefront. They essentially were guiding their own noticing, and the whole class identified and described what they noticed within each dramatic performance. Infusing dramatic performance throughout the writing process advanced both the quality and the positive attitudes about writing.

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