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*TRANSMITTING TRANSACTIVE PEDAGOGY: A DILEMMA OF
PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION IN DRAMA*

Optimal conditions for teaching drama include a transactive orientation to pedagogy; however, factors associated with the structure of the pre-service teacher education program hamper the implementation of transactive methods in my teacher education classrooms. This self-reflective article describes the problem from the author's perspective as an Ontario pre-service teacher educator.

Les conditions optimales d'enseignement en art dramatique comportent un caractère pédagogique. Pourtant, certains facteurs associés à la structure de formation des étudiants en enseignement gênent l'implantation de méthodes de transfert des connaissances dans la salle de classe. Cet article décrit une auto-réflexion du problème rencontré par l'auteure dans une perspective de formation des enseignants en Ontario.



Introduction to the Problem

Before becoming a pre-service teacher educator, I taught high-school drama for over a decade, often using process drama techniques to encourage student explorations of universal themes and human problems (Bolton, "It's all Theatre"; Bowell and Heap; O'Neill). I anchored class investigations with theatrical structures that supplied form to the expression of student ideas. I provided models from both classical and modern plays, and regularly assigned diverse working groups to encourage the practice of collaborative creation (McLauchlan, "Collaborative"). My aim was for students not only to learn *to do* drama, but also to learn *about* drama and *through* drama (Hundert 4-5) in order to embrace Bolton's claim that drama helps students "to face facts and to interpret them without prejudice; so that they develop a range and degree of identification with other people; so that they develop a set of principles [...] by which they are going to live" ("Drama and Theatre" 8). For each grade, I was assigned 90 classes of 75 minutes in which to accomplish this task.

When I began to work full-time at Brock University, my focus became post-graduate students in the Faculty of Education's eight-

month teacher pre-service program. There I met—and continue to grapple with—pedagogical problems more daunting than those in the secondary school setting. My situation immediately became more restrictive and constrained than any I had taught in before.

A tenure-track position in drama was created within Brock University's Faculty of Education in response to an initiative from the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. In 1998, drama became a mandatory component of Ontario's elementary school curriculum. Schools received Ministry expectations for student learning in drama at each grade level in terms of (a) knowledge of drama elements, (b) original creative work in drama, and (c) critical thinking about students' own and others' performance. In drama, as in all the arts, teachers were directed "to give all students the opportunity to discover and develop their ability in different artistic forms and media and to learn to appreciate works of art" (Ontario Ministry 5).

Although all Ontario teachers received the Ministry documents, few had studied drama in teacher education programs, and school boards rarely provided in-service sessions to familiarize teachers with the new directives. A slot for a drama mark had been created on elementary school report cards, but not many teachers were skilled in drama pedagogy (Clark and Short; McLauchlan, "Teacher"). To help ensure that pre-service teacher candidates became acquainted with the Ministry guidelines, Brock University added a full-time position in drama to its education faculty in 2000. The fact that other Ontario universities did not similarly respond is reflected in literature on pre-service teacher training. Focusing on teacher preparation in drama, Anderson found that teachers undergo mixed experiences of teacher training and the teacher induction process, and Tate asserted that in-depth exposure to arts and drama methodologies are rarely a part of teacher education programs (153). In more general terms, Louis Volante and Lorna Earl discovered that "teacher education programs are characterized by a variety of structural models" (420).

In my specific setting, pre-service teacher education is an intensive eight-month program in which twenty weeks are devoted to university-based coursework and the remaining time spent in field-based practicum placements. At the generalist elementary teacher level, coursework is divided into two strands. Foundation courses provide cross-disciplinary underpinnings in such topics as educational psychology, educational law, special education, and student assessment and evaluation. Curriculum courses focus on preparing teacher candidates to implement Ontario Ministry of

Education and Training guidelines for specific and discrete subject areas, including language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts. The arts course is itself divided into three equal segments—visual arts, music, and drama—each one assigned six classes of 2.5 hours. A culminating five-hour segment on integrated arts is offered in the final two weeks of the course. Currently, Brock University is the only Ontario institution that requires all elementary pre-service teachers to study all three arts subjects listed in the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training guidelines.

As professor of the drama segment of the arts course, the problem I continuously wrestle with is four-pronged. First, elementary teacher candidates come from extremely varied backgrounds. Very few have degrees in drama or theatre, while several have never attended live theatre, and some dread the idea of anything related to drama. Carole Miller, Juliana Saxton, and Norah Morgan similarly discovered that most elementary pre-service candidates have scant knowledge of or experience with drama. Secondly, candidates are grouped generically into curriculum courses that prepare them to teach either Primary-Junior (kindergarten to grade six) or Junior-Intermediate (grade four to grade ten) divisions. Each curriculum-based course must thus introduce candidates from all backgrounds to subject disciplines at seven different grade levels. Thirdly, the time assigned for drama is a total of fifteen hours, during which my task is to make drama pedagogy both accessible and non-threatening to teacher candidates who, for the most part, have no prior knowledge of the subject. Finally, when candidates embark on their teaching practica, they rarely encounter teachers who are adept at implementing drama in their classrooms. It thus becomes important for me to provide candidates with relatively failsafe strategies to attempt in their initial teaching experiences.

Optimal conditions in the drama classroom are transactive and exploratory in nature, with the teacher providing structure and psychological safety, and the students engaging in rich dialogue, experimentation, and reflection. Yet, because of the factors listed in the previous paragraph, I find it impossible to foster this kind of environment in my present teaching assignment. In the brief time devoted to preparing the diverse population of my students to teach drama, I feel compelled to adopt a highly transmissive stance in the classroom. And I find this situation unsatisfactory.

Transmission and Transaction Approaches to Pedagogy

The transmission approach to pedagogy presupposes that the function of education is to transmit facts, skills, and values from a knowledgeable source (teacher or textbook, for example) to a relatively unknowledgeable recipient.

[The transmission orientation] stresses mastery of traditional school subjects through traditional teaching methodologies, particularly textbook learning; [...] acquisition by students of basic skills and certain cultural values and mores that are necessary in order to function in society; [...] and the application of a mechanistic view of human behavior to curriculum planning, whereby student skills are developed through specific instructional strategies. (Miller and Sellar 5-6)

Transmissive methods tend to dominate classroom instructional strategies for several reasons, many of which relate to the demands of government accountability through standardized testing (Taylor). In the transmissive model of pedagogy, the teacher remains in firm control of knowledge that is delivered to students, and students demonstrate their acquisition of this knowledge through some form of testing. The fact that students are increasingly expected to retain more and more information makes transmissive approaches appear efficient. The teacher's task becomes one of devising activities that provide students with as much knowledge as possible in the time available, while students are treated as generic knowledge consumers, largely in terms of their similarities as learners.

In the transaction orientation—more compatible with the aims of drama pedagogy—students are viewed as uniquely rational problem-solvers who construct both individual and collective knowledge through interactions with the teacher, the curriculum, and each other:

The central elements in the transaction position are an emphasis on curriculum strategies that facilitate problem solving; [...] application of problem-solving skills within social contexts in general and within the context of the democratic process; [...] and development of cognitive skills within the academic disciplines. (Miller and Sellar 6-7)

Transactive strategies are directly linked to constructivist pedagogy. Shedding the notion that knowledge is a transferable world-

in-itself, independent of the knower, constructivism replaces it with the proposition that knowledge is a subjective construction of reality. From the social constructivist perspective, learners understand the world through interaction, using existing cognitive frameworks to make sense of perceptions and experiences (see Vygotsky). In this way, new knowledge is assimilated, cultural norms adopted, and more mature cognitive tools developed (Bruner, "Models").

Wells and Chang-Wells outlined major transactive principles. First, learning entails an active process of sense-making in which understanding is shaped through interaction with the environment, rather than through the transmission of objective and enduring truths. Secondly, knowledge is a cultural artefact, produced by human beings and shared among communities. Thirdly, the process of education involves more than the transmission of knowledge from informed sources to naïve participants. Teachers are not living textbooks; students not sponges, clean slates, or empty vessels (Morgan and Saxton 6). Rather, both teachers and students are participants in the social construction of shared understandings and awareness. "In other words, education must be thought of in terms not of transmission of knowledge but of transaction and transformation" (Chang-Wells and Wells 59).

Many theorists have discussed the role of the teacher in facilitating student learning in drama. Several have contrasted methods of teaching in drama with more traditional or transmissive models. Bolton, for example, recognized that teaching drama entails a deviation from conventional notions of learners and the learning process (*Drama* 153-64). Traditional perspectives are derived from the reification of knowledge as a set of facts, external to the learner and transmitted by the authority of teachers and textbooks to relatively passive recipients. In contrast, drama entails the co-construction of meaning through transactive student-student, student-teacher, and student-curriculum relationships. As Neelands succinctly expressed, "Drama is a dialectical, rather than didactic, form of learning" (*Making Sense* 56). Teachers of drama must not assume the stance of omnipotent experts, but rather should assist students in discovering their own voices. Accordingly, the successful teaching of drama creates educational contexts that help learners achieve personally relevant meaning.

Day outlined fundamental differences between what he termed "transmission" and "interpretation" perspectives toward teaching and learning in drama (86). The transmission perspective views knowledge as a set of facts extracted from public disciplines,

students as uninformed acolytes, and teachers as both curriculum dispensers and judges of student progress. The interpretation perspective, in contrast, regards knowledge as a subjective construct, learners as interpreters of reality, and teachers as facilitators of students' self-achieved understandings. According to Day, drama demands that teachers adopt an interpretation rather than transmission approach. In the drama classroom, where the aim is for students to learn not only *about* drama but also *through* drama into areas of social, moral, and personal growth, the transmissive instructional approach is inadequate, while the transactive approach is vitally necessary. If students are expected to learn more than factual information and mechanical skills, then constructivist principles should surely be guiding the drama teacher's pedagogical decision making.

When I taught 100-hour secondary school drama courses, I was able to embrace transactive methods and witness their holistic benefits to hundreds of students. However, in my present situation of preparing generalist pre-service elementary teachers to teach drama, I find it impossible to model these same approaches in the fifteen hours at my disposal. Instead, as all other arts instructors in my faculty, I use a workshop plus assigned reading approach. In two and a half hours per class, I demonstrate a series of lessons applicable to the elementary classroom at various grade levels, with the teacher candidates serving as reflective participants. Although my pre-service students are actively engaged in the process, although they have freedom to determine certain aspects of the work they generate, and although they work largely in groups, they do not truly experience a transactive environment. Rather they learn from me, in a highly transmissive way, a series of strategies to replicate in their beginning teaching practice. Course readings add a further transmissive component to their experience in my drama class.

Reactions from Pre-Service Candidates

My discomfort with using a transmissive approach to pre-service drama teaching is not at all echoed in the responses of my students to the course. In fact, my course evaluations are always extremely high. Rather than alleviate my concerns, this fact only exacerbates them, making me wonder precisely what understandings pre-service candidates take from the class about the potential uses of drama in the elementary classroom.

My students tend to praise the pre-service drama course for various reasons. In their written responses, a surprisingly large

number reveal initial apprehensions about entering the drama room, fearful of being forced into theatrical performance in front of their peers and judged on their acting ability. Almost all report that these fears are dispelled by the end of the first session. I am pleased to learn this information. Dissolving barriers of anxiety and negative expectations is a necessary antecedent to creating an enabling learning environment for any curriculum area.

My approach to dissolving anxiety invokes drama pioneer Brian Way's mantra, "Begin where they are." I purposely start the first session in a very traditional professor stance at the front of the room, where I explain to teacher candidates the similarities and differences between theatrical performance and non-performance creative drama as it is used in the elementary classroom. I then ease the class into a few non-threatening activities that invite participation and ensure group safety. I also make assurance that performance ability is not a criterion for success in the course. In these ways, I gradually attempt to facilitate an atmosphere that will motivate pre-service educators not only to learn more about drama, but also to teach it, voluntarily and eagerly, in their own classrooms.

A second feature of the course that candidates find useful is its modeling of curriculum integration strategies. Several have observed in their written reflections that it is impossible to teach separately all Ontario expectations for all subject areas in a single school year. Pre-service teachers value participating in sessions wherein, for example, Ontario Ministry expectations for grade-five science, language arts, and physical education are seamlessly coordinated within a cohesive structure that also meets grade-five expectations for drama.

Many pre-service teachers believe, however, that they will neither be encouraged nor even permitted to integrate curriculum in their practicum schools, where subjects are usually taught discretely in forty-minute periods assigned by prescribed weekly timetables. Although I model the capacity of drama to serve as a teaching methodology across the curriculum, expectations of school-based procedural obstacles minimize the opportunity for my students to experience this aspect of drama pedagogy. Thus, teacher candidates claim to value learning about a technique they believe will remain unavailable to them until they have enough job security to challenge the stringency of existing school timetables.

What my students appreciate most about the fifteen-hour drama module is its demonstration of strategies identified in the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training curriculum expectations for the arts. And here lies the core of my dissatisfaction with

my course. To the extent that the Ontario curriculum guidelines list dramatic techniques, conventions, and terminology that youngsters are expected to learn (examples include tableau, choral speaking, and writing-in-role, among a host of others), my students are minimally prepared to teach drama at the elementary level. More precisely, they are prepared to transmit an atomized series of mechanical strategies that will introduce their pupils to basic dramatic forms. And because the Ministry guidelines emphasize the learning of dramatic forms, pre-service candidates are satisfied with a workshop format that fills their meagre drama teaching tool-kit with a few serviceable devices.

The Continuing Dilemma

Here in summary is my dilemma. On one hand, Brock University has made drama a mandatory component of pre-service education for all elementary teacher candidates—the only Ontario faculty of education to do so. Through their written evaluations, teacher candidates have endorsed the drama module as a valuable course. On the other hand, in a fifteen-hour program that encompasses seven grade levels and includes candidates from widely diverse backgrounds, the most that I have been able to accomplish is a cursory introduction to the simplest of dramatic forms and techniques identified in the 1998 Ontario Ministry of Education and Training curriculum guidelines. That these guidelines themselves are presented as discrete checklist items that teachers are expected to “cover” during the school year invites teacher candidates to learn primarily how *to do* drama, a modicum *about* drama, and very little *through* drama to the heart of the human condition.

Jonathan Neelands claims that schools shape teachers as much as teachers shape schools (“Re-imagining” 26). I believe that pre-service experiences initiate this shaping process as teachers begin their complex professional journeys. Heather Smiegel and Pam Shaw similarly describe the “follow me” mentality of novice teachers, while Jerome Bruner labels initial learners as imitative apprentices (*Culture*). According to Beth Murray, at the level of imitative apprentice, teachers begin with the utilitarian purpose of borrowing and copying from an experienced guide or mentor. By emphasizing form, both the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training guidelines and my fifteen-hour drama module encourage teacher candidates, as imitative apprentices, to treat drama as an inventory of discrete curriculum expectations that might be achieved through transmissive instructional methods. “Content knowledge influences the level and quality of discourse in the classroom and

how we critique and use the materials of our disciplines” (McKean 12). If teachers perceive the content knowledge of drama to be mastery of basic theatrical structures or forms (how *to do* drama), they are unlikely to investigate ways in which drama might become a vehicle for rich exploration of universal human themes.

According to Michael Anderson, while there is currently some international momentum that recognizes the educative value of the arts, this energy “will not be successful unless the educational systems train and induct beginning teachers effectively” (14). We must listen to Max Van Manen’s important assertion that pedagogy is more than “a set of specific skills or competencies” (149). However, in a paper originally presented in 1970, Gavin Bolton posed the question, “How can the student in a College of Education acquire more than a few useful how-to-begin exercises in a curriculum crash course [in drama]?” (“Drama” 11). I continue to ponder that question daily, more than three decades later. ❁

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