Acts of Hospitality

Good teaching is an act of hospitality.
– Parker Palmer, 1998

When you have experienced hospitality at its best, as we have this past winter (our summer) working with colleagues in New Zealand, Australia and Hong Kong, it is something that shapes thinking in new ways. And if good teaching is an act of hospitality, as Palmer tells us (p. 50) then, surely, so is learning when learners become themselves the teachers. It was these reciprocal acts of hospitality that influence this short paper and while much of what we write about is still percolating, it seems appropriate to try and pull our thoughts together as our small welcome to this new journal.

The isolating nature of technology, concerns about safety, and the breakdown of social and cultural traditions, is changing relationships with and within our worlds. Classrooms have now become one of the few places where people can gather together to discover and practice the many skills of social literacy. Yet, at a time when we should know better, most of our classrooms are still organized within a proscenium relationship that has been around in theatre for at least the last three centuries. There are performers (teachers) whose audiences (students) are expected to sit and not speak. (We will ignore who it is that stands in the light and who remains in the dark—we can take a metaphor too far!) This mode of knowing disconnects us “physically and emotionally, from the things we want to know” (Palmer, 1998, p. 51) and, more importantly we would add, it disconnects us from ourselves and those around us.

Drama education is teaching “in the round” and because it is a collective process, it is often hard to spot the teacher. The circle is fluid with participants and teacher moving in and out as they respond to the situations. Part of the act of hospitality, Palmer reminds us, is “an endless reweaving of the social fabric on which all can depend” (p. 50). This metaphor of guests and host, describes a relationship that, in drama, generates opportunities for learning beyond curriculum content and for understanding that content in ways that are contextual, constructive and collaborative because the learning is embodied, enacted and above all, social.

Imagining possibilities for change happens in drama because the form itself creates a “third space” (Mitchell, 1995; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). Greenwood (2005) describes this space as “evolving out of dialogues, confrontations, accommodations, risk taking and unplanned discoveries” (p.4) as a multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities, languages and expectations are brought together in the classroom crucible to create a social democracy. In this coming together, “the aim is not necessarily to come to consensus but to listen to the thinking of others, to get a better sense of your own understanding and, perhaps, most important, to see what meaning others make of your point of view” (Windschitl, 2006, p. 355). This is what, in drama, Neelands (1984) refers to as a “commonality of expression” that conveys the “sense of a synopsis of opinions” that can be woven by the teacher into a shared experience (p. 40):
a “conspectus” that honours the voices of all. For drama students, as well, there is the added opportunity to discover how their physical engagement becomes an embodied conduit for affective and cognitive understanding of who they are in relation to others in a community of learners.

What is being described here is neither the real world, nor the metaphoric one but one that “comes between”, a place where “making possible and making trouble” (Bhabha, cited in Mitchell, 1995) can occur. For Donelan (2007), it is in this third space that participants may engage in a fictive envisioning of possibility or “social dreaming” in co-existent streams of time (Marshall, 2001); the chance to practice life “as if”, to test it in action (present) and, in reflection (past), to consider that action (future) through the lens of “real” life. That testing and reflecting is dependent upon our ability to negotiate challenges and difficulties through the skills of social literacy —skills that are developed in improvisation—accepting, not blocking, listening, respecting, building on, risking, attuning and awareness.

On our recent visit to New Zealand and Australia to work with teachers and pre-service teachers, we explored a number of sources from Into the Story (2004) and discovered that, although designed to be used with young people, they resonated in different ways with experienced teachers. The stories became powerful metaphors through which we could reflect on present conditions of education and how the relationship between teacher and students has an importance beyond the curriculum. Through the structures, we were able to explore the kinds of human qualities that lie beyond knowledge and skills and typical classroom discourse and for which we no longer seem to have the time. The crowded nature of the curriculum, coupled with the new demands of accountability, pressure teachers to teach to the curriculum without allowing time to discover the interrelationships of the material to other areas of the curriculum. In the same way, there is little space for social dreaming: to examine together in conversation and through action, the underlying meanings that text and illustrations may present; to envision together how the world could be.

It is in drama that we have time to uncover those other elements of social literacy, that lie in the hidden curriculum and contextualize all learning: empathy, values, identity, diversity, inclusion, intentionalities, understanding, enthusiasm, good humour and a sense of responsibility. “Knowing,” Palmer (1998) notes, “is always communal and relational” (p. 54) and we recognized the fine-honed sensibilities with which that third space of possibility and trouble was negotiated by our participants. Most significantly, through exploring these story drama structures with our colleagues, we were reminded again of something that we have always known but often overlook: that we who are seasoned classroom teachers are as hungry as our students for the opportunity to engage in the kinds of social dreaming that drama makes possible.

*We are grateful to Kate Donelan who introduced us to the term “social dreaming” re-framed for drama practice, in her 2007 Keynote paper at the IDEA World Congress in Hong Kong.


References


**Biographies**

**Carole Miller** is associate professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Faculty of Education, University of Victoria. A co-author of Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach and recipient of the Faculty of Education Award for Excellence in Teaching, her primary area of research is the relationship of drama to learning across the curriculum.
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Together Carole and Juliana wrote Into the Story: Language in Action Through Drama for generalist teachers. Tested out in classrooms of all levels over six years before being published by Heinemann, the text became the American Alliance for Theatre and Education’s Distinguished Book of 2005. Co-chairs of the Academic Program for the 5th International Drama and Theatre in Education Association (DEA) World Congress, Ottawa 2004, they very much look forward to continuing those associations through sharing their work and learning new perspectives.