

# Outraged housewives and sympathetic school children

## Primary drama in digital form

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the delivery of two primary English workshops delivered on the BA Primary (with QTS) degree course to first year trainees studying in the School of Education at University of Brighton. These interactive sessions include practical activity, specifically drama, and are typically delivered on campus. This is a significant point for our first-year students in primary teacher education as they explore challenging texts through drama, positioning themselves as learners in the primary classroom. Transformative learning occurs as aspiring teachers negotiate their previous experiences of drama and develop their understanding of it as a tool for the classroom. This article, a jointly composed reflection upon adapted practice during the Covid 19 pandemic, considers how drama (as a practical, interactive pedagogical tool) was delivered and engaged with in digital form. Feedback was gathered through informal interviews to collate student and tutor perspectives on the experience.

**Keywords:** Initial Teacher Education, process drama, online teaching and learning, literacy development, exemplification workshop

### Introduction

As the academic year of 2020-2021 approached, we in the primary English team were forced, like all educators, to consider how to transfer and adapt our teaching on campus for the digital platform. Key to our pedagogy is the role of drama in developing children's literacy, and central to our practice is the role high quality children's literature plays. Drama within our pedagogy is a tool for learning: process drama (Edmiston, 2014), rather than drama for performance. Within our modules, student teachers experience exemplification workshops in which they participate in dramatic activity to explore children's literature which supports development in understanding, and in applying, the inter-relatedness of reading, writing, speaking and listening. This practice enables our students to experience how drama facilitates deeper understanding of texts and how language is used (Barrs and Cork, 2001), thereby helping our students to develop their own pedagogical tools for primary practice.

Embedded within our teaching is reading of high-quality children's literature and using this as an authentic stimulus for learning. Through dramatic exploration of these texts, participants develop a 'double voicedness' allowing them to understand multiple perspectives of the characters' experiences in the book and readers' interpretation of the text (Dobson and Stephenson, 2019). Participants bring their own experiences to make sense of the challenging themes explored; deepening and extending their understanding of the themes and developing their insight into others' perspectives (Cremin and McDonald, 2013; Barrs and Cork, 2001). The embodied experience of the text enables and motivates learners to write in role. Written pieces tend to demonstrate greater sophistication and language use as the participants employ wider ranging vocabulary and syntax when writing as 'other' in role (Barrs and Cork, 2001; Dobson and Stephenson, 2019).

For the seminars in this study, two texts were selected. *Beegu* (Deacon, 2003) a tale exploring belonging and acceptance, was shared with trainees on the Early Years and KS1 Primary BA degree course and *The Island* (Greder, 2007), a stark depiction of the actions of an island community when a stranger arrives, was used with the KS1 and KS2 Primary BA groups. Both polysemic texts invite discussion and the use of drama to explore and make sense of the challenging themes through perceptual, structural, and ideological readings (Gamble, 2019).

To ensure our student teachers develop the 'graduate attributes' (Boud and Falchichov, 2006; Hunt and Chalmers, 2016) associated with primary teaching, it is essential that teaching and learning are both sustainable and authentic to the profession (Boud, 2010). Therefore, the primary English team felt strongly that, with a shift to teaching online, the rich pedagogical practice of using process drama to explore children's literature, thus supporting literacy development, should not be lost. Aspiring teachers needed to continue to develop the depth of understanding through first-hand experience in order to see the benefits of taking this into the classroom. To develop such appreciation, trainees must position themselves as the learner and experience the pedagogy in practice. Watching video footage would not suitably substitute.

### **Adapting for online participation**

The two sessions in question were workshop-style seminars in which an example of high-quality literature is explored through modelled teaching strategies, including process drama, as an exemplification of primary classroom practice. The lesson is then analysed by students for their final assignment in order to identify the interrelated nature of speaking, listening, reading and writing and its role in primary English (Bearne, 1998, Barrs and Cork, 2001, Medwell & Wray, 2017). The tutor team needed to consider how to transfer what we do on campus to the online environment. Using knowledge already

developed from running seminars via MS Teams, and our understanding of how best to support engagement online (Boyd, 2014, Beetham and Sharpe, 2019, Brennan, 2020), we identified adaptations necessary for providing a welcoming and enabling online learning environment.

Experience of teaching online to this point had shown us there are various and complex reasons why some online participants are unable or reluctant to engage, do not have their camera on or do not actively contribute to the session verbally or via the chat function (Brennan, 2020). Therefore, how to support active student engagement was a prime consideration when adapting to the online environment. The nature of the process drama planned would require students to interact, offer ideas and contribute. This would mean having cameras on and conversing. To support trainees' willingness to do this, reading was set about the drama strategies they would encounter, including *The Reader in the Writer* (Barrs & Cork, 2001), in anticipation that this reading would support pedagogical knowledge to draw upon whilst also providing a theoretical rationale for engagement with the online drama. Further to this, in seminars prior to the exemplification workshop, discussion time was allocated to establish the powerful role drama plays in primary English learning and teaching. We emphasised to students that, in order to understand better what children might experience in the classroom, they would have the opportunity to take part in an English lesson themselves which would include drama.

When teaching this seminar face-to-face, the exemplification workshop would be carried out with groups of thirty students. To adapt for the online environment, we worked with a quarter of the group at a time and with trainees who were familiar with each other. This was planned to support participants, as taking creative risks in process drama requires trust (Cremin, 2013). It was hoped that using existing groupings would be beneficial due to previously established relationships.

To replicate the range of dialogue and interactivity that is inherent in face-to-face teaching using process drama, adapted opportunities were planned to allow students to interact in different ways. For example, when creating freeze-frames on campus, the physical space would be used to work in smaller groups, in role, to discuss and recreate scenarios. However, in the online environment, break-out rooms were used to work in role to discuss character viewpoints and responses as the physicality of the freeze-framing was not possible. Importantly, there was also time for independent reflection when students could have their cameras and microphones off to make notes about the activities engaged with. We predicted it would be important to provide a balance between time spent interacting and time given to private and individual thought and reflection. This time was perceived as providing students with a break from the demands of both the drama and screen-based learning in order to reflect upon their experiences within the seminar.

The minimal use of PowerPoint slides was a deliberate pedagogical decision. These slides were mainly used to provide enlarged images of the picture book as a context for the drama. Beyond this, we planned to engage with students, reading aloud to them from the text, promoting interaction with each other and us using planned prompt questions such as ‘What does it feel like to be lost?’ in reference to *Beegu* (Deacon, 2003) and ‘How has the picture changed your understanding?’ regarding *The Island* (Greder, 2007). The strategies model dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2020) which allows for structured, cumulative discussion which enhances learning and supports trainee understanding of the role of talk in developing understanding (Barnes, 2006; Mercer, 2000). Through discussion about the text and exploration of it through drama, improvising character dialogue in role, students experience first-hand how this dialogic approach facilitates learners to make meaning and progress (Mercer, 2000).

The primary exemplification session was devised to incorporate established strategies for process drama, including creating a group soundscape, paired dialogue improvisation, freeze-framing, thought tracking and conscience alley where, at a pivotal point in the story, a learner in role is exposed to multiple facets of a character’s decision within a specific dilemma (Baldwin & Fleming, 2002). Discussion about the book was to be used several times as a prompt for active discussion and engagement and each of these elements was to be supported by focused tutor modelling (Boyd, 2014). The hope was that by providing models in the form of tutor demonstrations of how to engage in the drama, paired with clear explanations of why these are effective in supporting children’s learning, trainees would feel willing and able to participate in the drama themselves (Boyd, 2014). Again, without the physical space to create the drama, tutor modelling and explanation was essential. For example, when carrying out the conscience alley activity, trainees were unable to create a physical alley for participants of the drama to walk through. Yet, they were still able to share, online, character viewpoints, words and phrases to persuade and inform other participants in the drama and readers of the text, thus developing and deepening their understanding of the book.

### **Tensions between drama and online environment**

Within the teaching team there was some apprehension about teaching drama online. This was attributed to the tutors’ knowledge of drama as a teaching tool; the necessity for it to be an interactive and social context for learning (Lave and Wenger, 2002; Edmiston, 2014) and the importance of the teacher in role to support, probe and steer the dramatic experience, to ‘seize the moment’ (Cremin et al., 2006, p277). Further, as primary English specialists, tutors were conscious of the important role of dialogue and activity in developing a shared understanding of the context (Dunn, 2008). Evidence of

working online with students to this point had not demonstrated a collective willingness to participate interactively/socially through online teaching.

We were mindful that this was a challenging experience for our first-year students. Typically, on campus, the risk taking of drama takes students out of their comfort zone and proves to be a significant moment for transformative learning (Ramsden, 2003) as students negotiate their previous experiences of drama and develop their understanding of it as a tool for the classroom. The teaching team were aware that moving this online was risky for multiple reasons. Knowing and responding to the learners' engagement, the need for well-established trust and familiarity between participants and the loss of the shared physical space were all potential challenges.

In the dramatic space of a campus teaching room, as students converse in role, negotiate meanings and reach shared understanding (Barrs and Cork, 2001; Dunn, 2008), the tutor will often step back to allow the dialogue to take place. Tutors had to work differently on the digital platform. To allow for such dialogue, tutors turned their camera and microphone off to provide groups with opportunities to make meaning through exploratory talk (Barnes, 2006) and to replicate authentic classroom practice whereby the tutor would subtly observe group talk in order to follow the learner's trains of thought and meaning-making about the text. Conversely, there are points within the teaching and learning that the tutor might intervene in role (Cremin, 2013) to support developing understanding. This was achieved by stepping in as a character from the text, from an outraged housewife living on *The Island* (Greder, 2007) to sympathetic school children in the playground with *Beegu* (Deacon, 2003). It was important that we as tutors chose a character who would provide a distinct, often polarising opinion, on the events unfolding in the text, to stimulate a meaningful response from the learners (Cremin, 2013 & Dunn, 2008). When the outraged housewife claimed she was fearful for her children's safety, it prompted others in role to consider their view of the stranger who had arrived on the island, potentially challenging the learners' personal perspectives and extending the unfolding dramatic narratives at play (Dunn, 2008).

## **Student Feedback**

Student feedback was ascertained through informal discussions with a small number of year 1 BA Primary students. These conversations were voluntary and undertaken online. It was evident that the students were aware of the pedagogical decision-making undertaken to support their engagement with drama in the online environment. Further to this, it was identified that participation in online drama that modelled principled English teaching (CLPEa, 2016) was both an enjoyable and an informative experience that developed layered pedagogical awareness (Boyd, 2014).

The use of a high-quality text (CLPEb, 2016) as a stimulus is essential to facilitating process drama in face-to-face contexts (Barrs and Cork, 2001) and this study proposes such texts are also requisite within the online environment. Students identified that the multi-modal nature of a challenging picture book was key in facilitating engagement with the drama:

It allows you to step into the world of a book and make interpretations for yourself so children can discover the meanings themselves.

[T]he book was harrowing.... there was a lot to think about with the stranger.

This evidence is suggestive of the perceptual, structural, and ideological readings (Gamble, 2019) that can be made from picture books which support the students in engaging with themes beyond their lived experience. High quality texts offer complex imagined spaces where readers are able to interact with the text, and it was here that fanciful opportunities were explored through drama (Dunn, 2008) despite the uncertainty of the online environment.

The structured exposure of the text adopted in the seminar was recognised as allowing students the time and space to respond to each page in a meaningful manner. The use of an unknown text and the provision of full screen images of pages from the text were further seen as important strategies in engaging learners:

The structure supported the element of curiosity and what is going to happen next. I enjoyed being read to page by page and having my own conceptions challenged.

These comments highlight how the structured reveal of an unknown text in the digital environment supported engagement with complex readerly behaviours (Benton and Fox, 1988) and reader response (Hughes, 2018). The use of key questions facilitated this dialogic approach to exploring the text and modelling how it can be used in the primary classroom. Furthermore, the student responses suggest that they were motivated to engage with the reading process as it aligned with the endmost degree outcome of qualifying as a primary educator (Beetham & Sharpe, 2020).

Teacher modelling was consistently acknowledged as an important aspect of the lesson. It provided opportunities for students to observe explicit examples of transferable pedagogies. Teacher in role is recognised as a key aspect of process drama (Cremin, 2013 & Dunn, 2008) and this was facilitated in the online environment by tutors modelling character responses:

The way the tutor modelled the teaching helped put me into the shoes of a primary learner and showed the shift of understanding that can happen with learning.

The use of teacher in role allowed for learners to temporarily become 'other' or 'elsewhere' (Dunn, 2008. p.69) and it was this temporary dislocation from the context of

home learning that provided opportunities for students to understand the experience of children within the classroom. For example, one tutor changed their hairstyle to be in role as a child and this, along with a contrasting tone and language register, conjured the shared imagined space of the playground in *Beegu* (Deacon, 2003) where learners were able to respond in role as a child or the alien Beegu. When creating a soundscape of the frenzied crowd environment of *The Island* (Greder, 2007), learners found themselves in the shared space of the village square as they responded in role as concerned citizens.

Additionally, it can be considered that the teacher in role demonstrated the risk taking that is inherent in drama (Cremin, 2013), an aspect further exacerbated by the unknown space of the online environment. A considerable level of emotional investment and trust was required from students during the drama session, and the use of teacher modelling demonstrated tutor willingness to engage with this risky process, providing reassurance for the learners.

It was clear from student feedback that the drama seminar was memorable and had a significant impact in developing the students understanding of layered pedagogical awareness (Boyd, 2014) whereby curriculum expectations and theorised pedagogies came to life in a cohesive manner:

The Island lesson exemplification had the most impact on my learning as I got to experience first-hand how and why the teacher would implement the different teaching strategies and I got to link different teaching strategies we had been learning about.

## **Tutor feedback**

Tutors felt that the exemplification seminars provided genuine classroom practice that modelled Boyd's layered pedagogical awareness (2014). They agreed that the experience aligned with their subject principles, enabling them to use pedagogies with which they felt confident:

It felt like I was teaching in a way that was truthful to my own pedagogical philosophy. It was evident that teaching in a manner genuine and aligned with traditional face to face contexts allowed tutors to confidently facilitate the learning in the online environment. There was a shared belief amongst the tutor team that this session had allowed us 'to do what we do' by holding on to the key elements which are vital in the process: high quality text, drama and talk (Barrs & Cork, 2001, Cremin, 2013). Whilst the team needed to consider adapting modes of delivery, our firm pedagogical approaches and value of principled practice remained the same.

The online environment provided an opportunity for dialogic reflection whereby trainees could analyse the teaching strategies they had engaged with and how the

physical space might be used in a primary classroom. When reflecting upon the drama, tutors drew upon the “double voicedness” which drama experiences provide (Dobson and Stephenson, 2019) by taking on multi-faceted roles to critique the pedagogies modelled, moving between talking as a HE tutor and a primary teacher, as well as a participant in the role play:

Because we weren't in the room together, we ensured we provided space for reflection on the drama. Being online made us more aware of being explicit between theory and practice which we perhaps assume when face to face.

Tutors recognised the valuable opportunity that moving drama online provided. It prompted them to unpick and clearly emphasise aspects of primary classroom practice which in previous years had been assumed in the physical space of the teaching room. Analysing and reflecting upon the direct models of drama were aspects identified by the tutor team as significant and will be taken forward into future practice.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has identified that drama can be effectively used as a teaching tool in a digital environment. By exploring the two seminars in this article, we have identified that engaging in exemplification experiences allows for active pedagogies to be demonstrated effectively despite the limitations of online delivery. Dismissing the exemplification lesson due to the perceived challenges of the online environment would have undermined our passion and commitment to drama, whilst also denying students the opportunity to observe drama and dialogic teaching in practice which was identified as a key attribute to the success of the lesson.

Undertaking the exemplification lesson online has strengthened our resolve to ensure that drama has a leading role within Primary English at the University of Brighton. It has strengthened the assertions of the tutor team of the value of exemplification seminars for trainee teachers. As post pandemic HE teaching migrates back to face to face contexts, this study identifies how tutor modelling, and the professional commitment of the lecturers to drama, were fundamental in demonstrating explicit teaching practices that aided understanding and participation. Ensuring that face to face teaching continues to offer explicit examples of drama informed by dialogical approaches and aligned with high quality literature will remain a central commitment within our modules. Pre seminar communication regarding expectations of the session, and relevant theory, were valuable and will continue to be utilised to support engagement in face-to-face contexts. Looking ahead to campus-based teaching, our resolute commitment to drama and children's literature remains, along with our confidence in these pedagogical approaches and a commitment to inspiring student primary teachers in bringing these into the classroom.



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