

1 Describing Drama

'True drama for discovery ... is about journeys and not knowing how the journeys may end.' (Heathcote 1975)

Drama traditions

Concept Box 1.1

Drama traditions: From classic plays to children's theatre



Figure 1.1 The chorus comforts Antigone in the Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles



Figure 1.2 Strega Nona, her cat and Antonio in *A Celebration of Italian Folktales*



Figure 1.3 Witches foresee the future in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Within human consciousness there is an impulse for **drama**—that urge that the classical writer, Aristotle, called an instinct 'lying deep in our nature' (Aristotle 1961, p. 55). From the earliest times, indigenous peoples throughout the world performed cyclical rituals for the propagation of crops and the regeneration of life using song, dance and re-enactment. Remains of theatres at Delphi, Aspendos, Pergamon, Ephesus, Myra and other ancient sites attest to the central role that dramatic ritual and recreation played for ancient cultures. These special-purpose community spaces nestled into steep hillsides were the places where tragedies, which dramatised the rise and fall of heroes and their relation to the gods, and satiric comedies, which held a mirror to society and its foibles, were once enacted. To spark the imagination, provoke thought, inform, challenge, persuade and educate are all functions of the dramatic traditions passed down to us from diverse times and cultures that now form part of our human heritage.

In contemporary society, however, the understanding of what constitutes drama extends well beyond the bounds of formal theatrical performance. Recent developments in drama theory (e.g. **performativity**) hold that ‘drama pervades life’ (Courtney 1990, p. 4); in fact, life itself is regarded as a drama to be performed (Conrad 2004). In a range of fields, from theatre studies to philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and folklore, drama terms and concepts have been used to explain social and cultural phenomena; for example, ‘social drama’ (Turner 1982) and ‘cultural performance’ (Singer 1959) are terms used in social anthropology to describe types of life events. Drama terminology is not only used in the area of drama itself, but has ‘slipped into common parlance’ (Courtney 1990, p. 5) in other specialised fields of study and in the ‘performativities’ of daily life (Watson 2000).

Perhaps one reason why drama is so often used as a ‘**metaphor** for non-theatrical manifestations’ (Carlson 1996, p. 21) is that human values expressed through emotions and actions are central to both drama and life. Drama mirrors the human condition, reflecting what people feel and the ways in which they express these feelings. No matter how, where or in what ways drama is experienced, enacted or used, this central element is the linchpin that connects the dramatic endeavours of the present with those of the past; the performances on the world stage with those in the professional theatre; and the dramas that take place on a busy street corner with those in the school classroom. Although the ways in which drama can be approached and the contexts in which it can be used are unlimited, this book focuses on approaches for helping children learn through drama in educational settings.

Drama and learning

In the Australian Curriculum, drama is one of five learning areas in the Arts regarded as essential to every student’s development (ACARA 2011a). Drama, an expressive and creative art, is an important way of knowing that can illuminate children’s learning (Board of Studies NSW 2000; Cattanach 1996; Courtney 1990; Heathcote 1975; Henry 2000; McCaslin 1974). Drama, seen as ‘basic’ and ‘central’ to the curriculum (Bolton 1986, p. 230), cuts across subject boundaries, enabling students to delve into issues in depth and to integrate their learning. Educators place particular significance on the ‘change of attitude and understanding’ that can result as students participate in drama (Fleming 2000, p. 39).

Despite general agreement about drama’s educational value, there is still ongoing discussion about the most appropriate terminology to use. Over the years a number of terms have competed for acceptance, including: child drama, creative drama or dramatics, educational drama, developmental drama, drama in education, process drama, participatory drama and the more general term drama that is used in this book and in *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts* (ACARA 2011b).

How this term is viewed in this book is explained in Drama Description (Concept Box 1.2).

Concept Box 1.2

Drama description

Drama is a collaborative process of sense making in which participants engage in imagined, yet authentic experiences using their creative and critical thinking abilities, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and empathic responses. Participants reflect on these shared experiences during or after these interactions in order to grow in their understandings of themselves, others and their world. As children involve themselves in learning through drama they assume various **roles** that can include: character-in-role, expert, storyteller, communicator, performer, puppeteer, listener, group participant and audience member. They also create, perform and respond.

Drama is both an interactive process and an area of study in its own right.

Drama can be **integrated** with the other arts (e.g. dance, media arts, music, visual arts) and also integrated with other areas in the curriculum (e.g. human society, literature, maths, science).

Underlying this drama description is the view that what governs the approach to drama needs to be what is appropriate for the students and their learning. At any one time, drama can be viewed as an art form, a learning medium, a developmental process or a product. As Nicholson (1995) states, 'to accept that there is one, unitary vision of reality is to marginalise others' (p. 36). This book is consistent both with Bolton's claim that drama is 'multi-faceted' (1986, p. 235) and with Simons's view (1992) that, in drama education, there need to be 'interactive' **paradigms** rather than 'oppositional' ones (Arnold & Taylor 1995, p. 22). Based on these premises, this book links a range of dramatic elements, forms and problem-solving processes to form an integrated view of drama.

Benefits of drama for students

Within educational settings, drama has numerous benefits for the child who participates as explained in Benefits of Drama for Students (Concept Box 1.3).

Concept Box 1.3

Benefits of drama for students

Drama is:

- *Self-affirming*: Students gain positive self-concepts of themselves as they build confidence in their knowledge and communication skills and have their ideas valued by others.
- *Social*: Students gain competence in interacting and communicating with others as together the group builds a 'community of imaginers' (Cremin 1998, p. 223).
- *Empathic*: Students learn to understand and respect other people's perspectives and feelings, including their 'emotions, intuitions, judgments and values' (Abbs 1989, p. 43). Bolton (1986) calls these 'feeling-values' (p. 66) and Cremin (1998) contends that it is through 'empathetic engagement' that 'significance is found' (p. 224).

- *Symbolic*: Students develop higher order thinking skills as they employ double vision—what Henry (2000) calls ‘double awareness’ (p. 51) and what Boal (1995) and Bolton (1984) refer to as **metaxis**. In the case of drama this means that participants belong to two worlds at the same time, one the actual here-and-now, and the other imaginary.
- *Transformative*: In the context of drama, students experience situations in drama that in their actual lives would not be possible. These meaningful interactions engage their cognitive, affective and aesthetic selves. Through participating in the drama process and reflecting on it, they ‘come to know’ (Courtney 1990, p. 25), become ‘empowered’ (Bayliss & Dodwell 2002, p. 47) and, as Woods (1993) suggests, they experience ‘significant changes in the way they regard themselves and others’ (Bayliss & Dodwell 2002, p. 46).

Increasing confidence, developing awareness, deepening understanding and becoming empowered are all benefits that children can gain from drama participation.

Benefits of drama as a learning medium

In addition to the benefits that flow to children from their participation in drama experiences, there are benefits for the educational program. This is because drama by its nature has characteristics that promote learning. Drama is engaging and motivating, holistic and integrating, and inclusive and community building. Each of these complementary concepts will be discussed in turn.

Engaging and motivating

The medium of drama has the potential to captivate learners because it builds on the spontaneity and make-believe action of dramatic play. As young children play they often pretend, taking on various roles (e.g. shopkeeper, fire fighter, parent) that help them learn about their world. The ‘now-ness’ of the situations (Bolton 1986, p. 264) and the active imaginative involvement that characterise children’s symbolic play are also evident in drama. The ‘make-believe’ of play provides a direct link to the ‘**as if**’ of drama.

Another reason why drama is motivating is because it focuses on concrete particulars rather than on abstractions (Bolton 1986, p. 36). Drama gives children the opportunity to understand an idea by seeing and experiencing how it works within an imagined situation. To understand what is meant by lack of freedom, for example, students may take on the roles of First Fleet convicts transported to Australia. As they identify with and reflect on the plight of these individuals, they personally come to appreciate what lack of freedom means. Through direct participation and follow-up **reflection**, children engage in ‘critical learning by doing’ (McCullough 1998, p. 173). The engagement and motivation brought about by such personal involvement fosters broader understanding through ‘generalising and making connections’ (Fleming 2000, p. 40).

Holistic and integrating

When drama is used as an approach to learning, the child's whole development (i.e. cognitive, affective, social and aesthetic) becomes the focus. As children participate in the problem-solving processes that are at the heart of drama, they make use of their **multiple intelligences**. Gardner (1983, 1985) describes intelligence as 'the ability to solve problems or to create problems that are within one or more cultural settings' (p. x) and enumerates these abilities as: linguistic (verbal); logical-mathematical (using number and pattern); musical (using rhythm, melody, pitch, tone through music and dance); visual/spatial (using images and pictures); bodily-kinaesthetic (using the body to express ideas); interpersonal (understanding and working with others); intrapersonal (capacity to understand one's self); naturalistic (having a strong connection with the environment); and existential (having a concern for universal truth) (Gardner 1993, 1999). Children may draw on any or all of their intelligences as they integrate their learning through drama experiences.

When drama is used as a learning medium, not only is the child viewed holistically but so, too, is knowledge. The process of considering alternatives, communicating and empathising with others, making decisions and assessing the consequences of their actions within the 'communal imaginative' context of drama (Cremin 1998, p. 216) depends on children being able to see situations from multiple perspectives and being able to integrate ideas, understandings and knowledge in order to gain a holistic picture of the problem. As Bolton (1986) points out, the concepts explored in drama 'are more fundamental than subject classification will allow' (p. 239). Students draw on whatever will help them fill the gaps in their sense making. In doing this they cut across subject boundaries as they attempt to consolidate knowledge, rather than to compartmentalise it.

When teachers begin where 'children are' in an educational sense, motivating them through drama to learn for themselves, there is an immediacy and relevance to their learning. Through 'as if' activities, such as **role play** and **improvisation**, augmented by the mentor's skilful questions and guided reflection, children discover what they already know and learn how to extend this knowledge in meaningful and integrative ways. When mentors provide guidance through **scaffolding**, they assist children to extend their learning beyond where they started and to reach their own level of understanding, what Vygotsky (1978) calls the **zone of proximal development**.

Inclusive and community building

'Developing people' is at the core of a drama approach to learning (Way 1967, p. 7). Because in this medium students can engage at their own levels and from their own perspectives, drama has value for all learners including second language learners, disadvantaged students and those with other special needs (Cattanach 1996; Hoyt 1992). Drama employs a range of communication systems that draw on children's verbal and non-verbal abilities and skills, and

so students are able to experience information through several different channels and, in this way, reinforce their learning.

There is also a sense in which drama develops a community among all learners (Bayliss & Dodwell 2002, p. 46), what social anthropologists (e.g. Turner 1982) call ‘communitas’ (Courtney 1990, p. 59). As children work together they learn about each other and develop the understanding and **empathy** that enables them to move forward in a ‘communal imaginative direction’ and to interact meaningfully in ‘a shared fictitious world’ (Cremin 1998, pp. 216, 212).

In summary, the use of drama in the learning environment has many benefits both for the children who participate and for the educational programs in which they are involved. The developmental process of drama enables learners to find out more about themselves and others, and to acquire knowledge in a motivating, integrating and communal way.

Making connections

Participant roles, drama structures and contextual characteristics are all factors that shape the drama experience for participants. These interconnecting factors will be discussed in turn.

Participant roles

In drama, the child’s interests and developmental needs are paramount. Pioneer dramatists, including Peter Slade (1954) and Brian Way (1967), emphasised that the child’s self-development was the main reason for doing drama. Contemporary drama educators also emphasise the child, who is now usually described as a learner, while the process of drama is described as learner-centred. In drama’s student-based approach, the classroom teacher takes on the role of a ‘facilitator’ who provides a scaffold for learning; a ‘coach’ who supports and encourages, but does not direct (Hoyt 1992, p. 582); and a ‘mentor’ who provides input and guidance when appropriate, but must ultimately ‘let go’ (Prior 2001). **Mentor** is the main term that is used in this book for the person who works with children in drama.

To achieve and maintain these learner and mentor roles, power sharing becomes a necessary component of drama interactions. A central question becomes: Who owns the drama? If it is not the children, a lack of commitment on their part can result in surface rather than deep learning. As Prior (2001, p. 27) points out, ‘for participants to fully benefit from process drama, students must be endowed with decision-making roles within the work’. Drama educator Dorothy Heathcote (1984) demonstrated one effective way of achieving this by empowering students using the **mantle of the expert** technique. In other words, students ‘took on’ the role of ‘experts’ and shared this expert knowledge within the context of the drama. Such empowerment is regarded as one of the ‘strengths of process drama’ (Prior 2001, p. 23).

During drama sessions, then, the students and the mentor become co-participants. Sometimes the mentor steps into role alongside the students, which is called **teacher-in-role** (Heathcote 1984). This shared role playing, during which participants frequently shift between actual and ‘as if’ worlds, builds strong interpersonal relationships that result in a partnership in which children and adults interact, cooperate and share power (Warren 1993).

Drama structures

Choices about how to structure drama for learning are influenced by the underlying **metaphors** for drama that the mentor (who is usually the one who does the structuring) holds, either consciously or unconsciously. Metaphors that ‘combine two thoughts in order to create a new meaning’ (Courtney 1990, p. 65) are important because they affect thinking and action (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). In Definitional Metaphors for Drama (Concept Box 1.4) some metaphors that have been used to describe drama are listed and explained.

Concept Box 1.4

Definitional metaphors for drama

Drama as:

A grab-bag

Drama is seen as a collection of unrelated activities that can be used at a moment’s notice to motivate children, fill in a gap between lessons, build group rapport and/or have fun. These activities are viewed as having little or marginal relationship to the rest of the educational program and are usually regarded as ‘one-off’ experiences.

A performance

Drama involves a presentation for an audience. Presenters, called actors (individually or as part of a group), use their verbal and non-verbal skills to enact a prepared dramatic piece (e.g. play, musical, **dance drama**). The artistic product that results can be assessed according to criteria ranging from personal preference to set standards.

A language

Drama has a grammar and a structure of its own consisting of elements (e.g. dramatic **tension**, **space**, **time**), physical forms (e.g. **mime**, puppetry) and contexts (i.e. social and cultural) that can be combined in different ways to make meaning. For this reason, drama is sometimes described as another ‘literacy’ (Pascoe 1999).

A catalyst

Drama is a stimulus that brings about change in the participants’ cognitive and affective understandings; it ‘unearths knowledge and understanding which will be of use to its owners’ (Warren 1992).

In **Structural Metaphors for Drama** (Concept Box 1.5) some ways that have been used to visualise drama and its structure are presented.

Concept Box 1.5

Structural metaphors for drama

Drama as:

A continuum

Drama consists of dramatic forms that can be grouped along a line from the more unstructured, process-oriented, such as dramatic play, role play and improvisation, to the more structured, product-oriented, such as **readers' theatre** and play performance.

A process

Drama consists of planned developmental activities, sometimes organised by stages or phases, which help children grow in their understandings of self, others and the world.

A cycle

Drama consists of procedures that flow in a circular pattern from preparation and initiation through to implementation and **evaluation**. Reflection may occur at any point, with the final evaluation having the potential to stimulate the start of the cycle again.

A spiral

Drama centres on concepts and techniques that are first introduced at a basic level. As the child's understandings and skills increase, there is a return to these concepts and techniques at ever-increasing levels of detail and depth to match the child's development and extend his or her learning.

A network

Drama consists of an interconnecting web of elements, forms and processes set within a socio-cultural context. Connections can be made with other areas of the creative arts, across the curriculum and with key resources (e.g. people, places, materials) within and outside the school community.

These underlying metaphors provide insight into the perceptions people have of drama. By considering these definitional and structural metaphors, drama mentors can more fully understand where they position themselves in the discussion about what constitutes drama. Also, knowing the types of metaphor associated with drama will help a mentor make appropriate choices about which metaphors and drama methods to use in order to meet both student and curricular needs.

In addition to metaphors that reveal underlying beliefs about drama, educators have developed several different orientations towards drama that can help mentors make decisions

about how to structure drama programs. The two types of orientation presented here focus on: (1) what the mentor's intentions for drama are and (2) what the child does during drama.

The first orientation in Drama Intentions (Concept Box 1.6) relates to how a mentor intends to use drama in the learning process (Bolton 1979, p. 11; 1986, p. 213). Each intention makes use of a recognised 'type of drama', namely, exercises, dramatic playing and theatre.

Concept Box 1.6

Drama intentions

The intent is to isolate a skill.

'Exercises' isolate skills and these exercises can be grouped as those that are: experiential, drama skill practice, drama exercises, games and use of other art forms, such as **story**, song and dance.

The intent is to experience.

'Dramatic playing' involves living through an experience in a make-believe setting that is 'fixed' by: place, situation, anticipation of conflict (e.g. gang-fighting), anticipation of elemental disaster (e.g. flood), storyline and character study.

The intent is to demonstrate experience.

Experience is demonstrated through 'theatre' skills and processes through which participants create a drama product to be shared with an audience.

O'Neill and Lambert (1982) use a similar framework, but refer to the 'types of drama' as 'modes of dramatic activity' (p. 22), suggesting that each mode will require different classroom organisation.

The second orientation in Drama Process (Concept Box 1.7) focuses on what the child does during drama. Two complementary approaches that emphasise drama process are presented.

Concept Box 1.7

Drama process

- 1 *Making, Performing and Appreciating* is the overview used in the syllabus, *Creative Arts K-6* (Board of Studies NSW 2000). Here the emphasis is on the child who uses the elements of dramatic interpretation (i.e. space, **contrast**, **focus**, **mood**, time, **symbol**, tension) and dramatic forms (e.g. mime, puppetry) to *make* his or her own drama and/or to *perform*, that is, to become an 'interpreter of dramatic art' (Nicholson 1995, p. 36). The child, in the role of spectator or audience member, learns to *appreciate* the drama that he or she makes and performs, and also the artistic work of others. The paper *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts* emphasises 'making' and 'responding' for all arts areas (ACARA 2011b, p. 5).

- 2 *Identification, Commitment, Engagement and Reflection* are stages of dramatic involvement aimed at deepening a child's participation and learning. Pioneered by Heathcote (1984) and developed by others (e.g. Bolton 1979), children's meaningful reflection on drama work is an ultimate goal.

A complementary approach to these stages is Neelands's model for drama involvement (1990) that has the following phases:

- Phase 1 Building the Context—Getting Them Interested, which contains initial activities to build motivation and define the context.
- Phase 2 Developing the Narrative—Deepening the Commitment, which consists of a range of group activities.
- Phase 3 Introducing the Problem—Testing the Commitment and Getting Engagement.
- Phase 4 Reflecting and Reviewing—Relating Fiction to Reality.

Related to each phase is a range of drama 'conventions' (e.g. exercises, activities, group work, visualisations) that can be used to deepen the drama for participants at each stage of the model.

Mentors can make use of drama metaphors and orientations developed by others as a starting point for clarifying their own positions in relation to how they view drama. Thinking about drama and its structures lays the groundwork for the mentor to develop a more in-depth philosophy related to drama in education.

Contextual characteristics

Children learn through drama as they solve problems by empathising and using their critical thinking skills (Cockett 1997). However, far from happening in a vacuum, this learning takes place in space. In drama this space consists of both an imaginary space and a physical, tangible space. To participate within the imaginary 'inner frame' of the drama (Courtney 1990, p. 73) requires that participants suspend disbelief and commit themselves to engaging in a make-believe experience that parallels and simulates the here-and-now experience. Learning becomes real within the **situated context** of the drama that has as its aim 'understanding human situations' (Fleming 2000, p. 39). Creating a positive make-believe space for group imagining is important because young people need to feel safe to participate in drama activities without criticism or outside interference. A non-judgmental environment that recognises the value of each participant's contribution is crucial, then, in bridging the imaginary and actual worlds of the drama.

The physical setting in which the drama takes place, known as the **contextual frame** (Courtney 1990, p. 75), is an important factor, too. Having an enclosed space that sets boundaries for the activity contributes to participant focus and well-being. The ways in which physical space is used can reinforce interpersonal and role relationships; for example, sitting participants in a circle makes them feel part of a group while arranging the drama space so there is no definite front or back encourages power sharing. Where the mentor is placed—in the centre or on the periphery—also can encourage or discourage the participants to take more or less responsibility for the drama.

Participant roles, drama structures and contextual characteristics shape drama interactions. When mentors understand the synergy that can result from interconnecting these factors in diverse ways, they are better able to develop and facilitate relevant and meaningful drama programs for their students.

Summary

Educators, researchers and educational authorities have recognised that drama is a valid way of knowing and a beneficial way of learning. The aim of this chapter has been to support this view by demonstrating that drama is a long-standing cultural tradition; explaining how drama can be described in the learning environment; outlining drama's benefits for learners and as a learning medium; discussing the important interconnections among participant role, structure and setting when implementing drama; and presenting an integrative approach towards drama grounded in a social constructivist pedagogy.

For further study

- 1 What is meant by drama as a process or a product? How can each concept be used as an approach to drama in educational settings?
- 2 Consider the definitional and structural metaphors given for drama. What are the advantages and disadvantages of modelling an approach to drama based on metaphors?
- 3 What strategies can be used to promote drama as a learning medium in an educational environment?

For reflection

Analyse and discuss your own views of drama. How are these influenced by your background and prior experience? What benefits do you believe drama has for students in learning environments?

Preview

Chapter 2: The Drama Mentor Prepares considers the basic knowledge and skills a teacher needs to function as a drama mentor.