Teaching Primary Drama

Brian Woolland

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Brian Woolland

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Preface

A new edition

This book is a new and comprehensively reworked edition of *The Teaching of Drama in the Primary School*. While I hope that most of the strengths of the original book have been retained, this is more than a revised edition. I have consulted widely with practising teachers and lecturers about the changes and have tried to rework the book in a way which reflects the generous observations, recommendations and comments made to me, and which will I hope meet the needs of teachers and students for several years to come. The book has been reorganised and contains several wholly new chapters; those chapters retained from the original edition have all been revised.

Given the substantial amount of new material, something from the original had to go; and I decided to remove chapters about performance. This is not because I have changed my thinking about school plays and performances in primary schools, but because in discussions about these revisions, I realised that including them would have resulted in a book that would have been trying to do too many different things. It may be that the performance material also deserves expanding – but if so, it will be in another book.

Many people commented about the original book that one of its strengths was the way that practical examples were embedded in chapters discussing ideas and approaches. I have retained this feature, adding further examples, and also taking five projects to which brief reference was made in the original and presenting them as expanded case studies in Part 4, 'Extended examples', which also includes two wholly new examples for use with younger children. Where appropriate, I went back into schools and worked on the material with children and teachers. The practical examples and suggestions are all based on extensive work in schools.

When the original edition of this book was published in 1993, schools in England and Wales were in a state of considerable upheaval, the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 being just one of many changes taking place within the education system. As the 2009 Cambridge Primary Review recognises, 'Since 1989 . . . (teachers) have struggled to contain a large and expanding national curriculum within a finite school day, week or year . . . .' (Alexander 2009), with the curriculum effectively divided into 'the basics' and the rest. Even teachers who were wholly convinced of the value of drama found it difficult to make time for it in school days which became increasingly prescribed by the rigid frameworks and testing regimes.

In recent years, however, major changes and developments have been taking place at every level in education. The paradigm of a curriculum driven by attainment testing and separated 'basics' is being challenged by pedagogical models which place greater emphasis on creativity, integration and how children learn – with the result that drama, the arts and creativity are likely to be valued more highly in future.

Specific developments, discussed below in greater detail, include:

- *All our Futures: Creativity, culture and education*, the National Advisory Committee's report (DfEE 1999).
- From September 2007 all primary schools in the UK started working to the *Revised Primary Framework for Literacy*, which has given greater emphasis to drama.
- In the National Curriculum for England 2008, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority published documentation specifically designed to promote creativity in teaching and learning across the curriculum.
- At the time of writing, in early 2009, *The Cambridge Primary Review* has just been published. Whether its recommendations will be accepted by government remains to be seen; but it is quite unequivocal in arguing that the 'case for art, music, drama, history and geography needs to be vigorously reasserted; so too does the case for that reflective and interactive pedagogy on which the advancement of children's understanding in large part depends' (Alexander 2009).

It is in the context of these changes that this book has been reworked.

The aims of the book

1. To champion the importance of drama in the primary school, both as a subject in its own right and as a means of motivating and enhancing learning in other curriculum areas.

2. To suggest a lively and coherent approach to the teaching and use of drama in primary schools.
3. To propose ways in which drama can be integrated with and can complement the demands of the National Curriculum, working within the context of the Primary Framework, taking into account recent developments in Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), PSHE & Citizenship, and reflecting current thinking about the importance of creativity.
4. To offer a wide range of examples of good practice.
5. To suggest ways of planning drama lessons and projects and adapting those presented here.

The book is designed for teachers and prospective teachers in primary and middle schools. The approaches to teaching drama suggested here hold good with whatever age group is being taught. I have, however, included a specific chapter on working with children in the early years to show how many of the ideas described elsewhere in the book (which might otherwise appear either too sophisticated or inaccessible) can be adapted for use with younger children.

I hope it will be of use not only to teachers who have never taught drama and who, perhaps, feel a little anxious about making a start, but also to those with experience and expertise. The book asserts that drama is an important subject in its own right and should be taught as such, while arguing that it has a vitally important part to play in developing the whole school curriculum. It also aims to demonstrate that drama has extraordinary power in motivating children's learning and in developing creativity, social skills and emotional intelligence.

Using the book

The book is organised into five parts. Each of these contains regular cross-referencing, with many of the practical examples revisited and developed from a different perspective in different chapters.

Part 1, 'Drama in practice', looks in detail at the practice and processes of teaching drama. Here, and throughout the book, there are numerous examples given of work in practice. These are all genuine examples of work with children in primary schools in a wide variety of different types of catchment areas throughout the country. The examples are given with the intention of providing a stimulus or a framework, as jumping-off points from which it should be easy to develop your own work. Chapter 4, 'Drama with children in the early years' picks out a number of activities which are particularly useful for teachers of children in

Reception classes and Years 1 and 2. It suggests ways of adapting some of the techniques and strategies suggested elsewhere which might at first seem more appropriate for use with older children.

Part 2, 'Drama in an integrated curriculum', explores ways of using drama at the centre of the curriculum, examining how drama can motivate and provide focus for children's learning in other subject areas. In addition to examining drama and topic work, there are detailed discussions of writing in role, drama and literacy and the importance of exploring *meanings beyond the literal*.

Part 3 focuses on 'Planning and assessment', offering a way of planning drama work which enables you to think ahead while avoiding the problem of making the work overly prescriptive. It contains an account of the planning that might go into an extended drama-based, cross-curricular project and a section on evaluation and assessment in drama – including self-assessment.

Part 4 contains seven 'Extended examples', each of them with its own focus, and each designed for use with different ages throughout the primary range. The examples can be used in their own right – they all contain a range of practical activities – or can be used in conjunction with Chapter 6, 'Planning and assessment'. Five of the seven examples discuss planning considerations and alternative approaches. Each project is prefaced by reference to possible links to the *Primary Framework for Literacy* and/or the *National Curriculum*.

Part 5, 'Resources', includes lists of recommended books, film, television and DVD material, online resources and Internet links. The book ends with a Bibliography and Index.

Drama, the National Curriculum and recent developments in primary education

Teachers who regularly use drama in primary schools do not need specific clauses in curriculum documents or educational reports to convince them of the rich and profound learning opportunities that drama can create, of its great value in delivering other aspects of the curriculum, of the ways it can deepen understanding, develop emotional literacy and engage and raise the self-esteem of even the most disaffected pupils. However, it is worth taking stock and offering a brief overview of some significant recent developments which are changing the emphasis of learning in primary schools.

Even in the years immediately after the introduction of the National Curriculum, when drama was placed within English (which many experienced

drama practitioners found limiting), the value of using drama to motivate and enhance work in other curriculum areas was underlined by the curriculum documents for Maths, Science, Technology, History, RE and Geography, all of which referred directly or indirectly to the usefulness of role play or drama.

In 1999 the NACCCE published *All Our Futures*. The report called for 'new priorities in education . . . including a much stronger emphasis on creative and cultural Education'. It asserted that 'Creative and cultural education are not subjects in the curriculum, they are general functions of education.' Of particular relevance to the pedagogy proposed in this book, which stresses the importance of collaborative work, it argues that 'creativity can be expressed in collaborative and collective as well as individual activities' and specifically that drama

> can be a powerful way of promoting skills in reading, writing and in speech. . . . (It) is essentially concerned with exploring social behaviour and the values that underpin it, . . . (enabling) young people (to) investigate a wide range of real and imagined social issues through the safety of assumed roles or situations. This process can generate powerful insights into the values and dynamics of groups and communities.
>
> (NACCCE 1999)

Although there is much in the report that has yet to be implemented, the importance of creativity in education has been recognised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which has now published documentation specifically designed to promote creativity in teaching and learning across the curriculum. Under the heading 'Why is creativity so important?', the documentation suggests that 'When pupils are thinking and behaving creatively in the classroom, you are likely to see them:

- questioning and challenging;
- making connections and seeing relationships;
- envisaging what might be;
- exploring ideas, keeping options open;
- reflecting critically on ideas, actions and outcomes.'

The *Creativity* documentation recognises, above all, that 'Creative pupils lead richer lives and, in the longer term, make a valuable contribution to society' (QCA 2008, website).

The *Revised Primary Framework for Literacy* (2007, website) also recognises the importance of creativity and acknowledges the importance of the kind of cross-curricular work so central to good drama: 'Making links between curriculum

subjects and areas of learning deepens children's understanding by providing opportunities to reinforce and enhance learning.' Drama is recognised in the Primary Framework as essential in the development of literacy, where it has its own strand of learning objectives; but, as demonstrated in the 'Extended examples' in Part 4 of this book, drama also creates rich and powerful learning opportunities in other strands, notably:

- speaking;
- listening and responding;
- group discussion and interaction;
- understanding and interpreting texts;
- engaging with and responding to texts;
- text structure and organisation;
- creating and shaping texts.

Furthermore, drama is an immensely effective resource for personal, social and health education (PSHE) and citizenship. The key here is in the methodology rather than the subject itself. Drama can be taught in a way which privileges children who are good at showing off – which is probably why some adults are anxious and suspicious about the subject – but the methodology I propose in this book attaches great importance to collaborative work, emotional literacy and responsiveness to others. In short, this kind of drama is essentially a collective meaning-making process; collaborative not only between children, but between teacher and children.

Although the *Cambridge Primary Review* has only just been published at the time of writing, and there is no guarantee that it will be implemented, one of its central arguments is that the

> most conspicuous casualties [of a narrowly conceived 'standards' agenda] have been the arts, the humanities and those generic kinds of learning, across the entire curriculum, which require time for thinking, talking, problem-solving and that depth of exploration which engages children and makes their learning meaningful and rewarding.
>
> (Alexander 2009)

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Brian Woolland

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Introduction

'I don't know what it is, but I know it's tickly'

Drama as a subject

Some experienced drama practitioners have suggested that there is a danger in promoting drama as a learning medium, arguing that doing so undervalues it by reducing drama in schools to little more than a service tool. I strongly resist this argument. Drama is an important subject in its own right, but it cannot be taught in a vacuum. As a subject it demands content. The best way to learn about *how* drama works is by using it. Dramatising any subject (whether a traditional story such as *Cinderella*, a moment in history as in The Coming of the Railways or a contemporary social drama such as *The Tunnel*) is a way of exploring the individual's relationship with society. As *All Our Futures* argues,

> Drama is essentially concerned with exploring social behaviour and the values that underpin it. Through improvised drama, and through work on texts young people can investigate a wide range of real and imagined social issues through the safety of assumed roles or situations.
>
> (NACCCE 1999)

In educational contexts drama should be seen as a subject in its own right *at the same time* as being a powerful learning medium. *Dramatic fiction* is the form of fiction with which children are most familiar. Some children may come to school without having ever been read to, but almost all arrive with a wealth of experience of drama on television. We may regret it, but for many children, their vernacular knowledge of drama and dramatic fiction is far greater than of written forms – even if it is largely uncritical. Given that drama, in one form or another, is such an important part of children's lives, it is part of the drama teacher's job to create opportunities which enable them to manipulate the form for themselves, thereby understanding it better.

What do we mean by drama?

So, if we want to teach drama as a subject, if we are to argue for drama to be given its place in the curriculum, it is essential to ask the question, 'What makes drama *uniquely* drama?' If the 'building blocks' of music are Pitch, Melody, Harmony, Tempo, Rhythm and Texture, what are the raw materials of Drama? The following is offered as one possible set of such building blocks:

Role or character

- acting *as if* you were someone else; or
- as if you were yourself in another situation.

Narrative

- ordering a sequence of events or images in such a way that their *order* creates meaning. This is not necessarily the same as storytelling and story plotting, which are examples of the ways in which narrative can be used.

Language

- verbal
- non-verbal (including body language, facial expression, use of space).

There is a danger of over-simplification, but by seeing these as the basic building blocks we get a clearer sense of dramatic activity as a continuum from pre-school play to professional theatrical performance. When a young child says: 'This is my shop', she is pretending to be a shopkeeper, turning a chair upside down to become the counter, making part of the kitchen into a shop and playing with a narrative sequence. The grasp of cause and effect narrative may be only tentative (a young child might well pay the customer for the bag of sugar!), but part of the purpose of the child's dramatic play is to work out possible sequences of events and their consequences. Whether the specific dramatic activity is imaginative pre-school play about shopping, performing at the National Theatre or watching that same performance, the drama is primarily dependent upon all parties agreeing to the pretence. The dramatised, fictional world of make-believe drama draws our attention to aspects of the 'real' world; it helps us to recognise a sense of our own reality, and to understand it better.

Drama is essentially a social art form; it is concerned with how individuals relate to the world they live in; how individuals interact with each other and with society in a wider sense. It therefore becomes the drama teacher's central task to find ways and means by which she can encourage as broad an understanding as possible of these various interactions – between the fictional world of the drama and the actual world; between the personal and the social.

In any dramatic activity there is some shared, tacit understanding of the rules of the make-believe, although there is of course enormous variation in the way these rules are set up. The child playing shops declares the rules simply by saying 'This is my shop . . .'; in the school hall during a drama lesson the teacher might explain 'I shall be playing a part in what we are going to do today . . .'; and in the Globe Theatre, the Battle of Agincourt is represented without a drop of blood being shed. We learn to 'read' the rules, to understand the conventions remarkably quickly.

In educational drama with children we have to consider Role, Narrative and Language; but all of these are dependent on *Context*:

- Where does the action of the drama occur?
- In which historical period?
- What are the relevant social and political conditions?
- What is the setting, the specific *situation* prevailing at the time of the action, the 'back story'?

Context is crucial in understanding the interactions which take place in the imagined world. It may sound absurd to take into account 'social and political conditions' if we're working with young children, but consider the example of a drama with Reception children, in which we're trying to find out if a dragon is friendly. If the drama is going to be successful we will need answers to these questions:

- *When and where*. Does the action take place today, in the here and now, a dragon hiding somewhere in 'Our Town'? Or is our story set long ago with Knights in Camelot?
- *Political and social conditions*. Who makes the decisions? The local Mayor, the townspeople, the children, King Arthur? Who do we go to for help – or who comes to us for help?
- *The back story*. And how did this dragon get here? Has it woken from a long sleep or hatched from an egg discovered in the school pond?

Narrative

The means by which the drama is propelled forward. In a drama lesson the teacher uses various devices to create *dramatic tension* (see Chapter 3), effectively holding the children's attention and interest by ordering events, enactments, meetings, scenes, etc. in such a way that information is withheld or released to tantalise and intrigue as well as to inform. As children learn about drama as a subject, they learn to manipulate dramatic tension for themselves.

The narrative of a drama lesson can function in all the same ways that it can in the theatre; and the range of possible narrative effects is just as diverse. As events are revealed and explored (not necessarily in chronological order – drama lessons frequently have most unusual time structures) so understanding deepens: of the fictional world, of the characters which populate it, of the 'real' world, of ourselves; and of dramatic form itself .

Language

In drama we use a variety of different and varying forms of language – both verbal and non-verbal. Even very young children recognise that different dramatic situations require different modes of speech, different vocal registers – from every day vernacular to something more formal. This playful spoken use of tone, register and vocabulary is a vitally important step in developing literacy, not only in acquiring language, but learning to use it skilfully.

Non-verbal language

In drama, as in our daily lives, we communicate through body language at the same time as we use the spoken word. In addition to the more formal uses of non-verbal language in drama – such as mime, masks, sign language – we also use props and costume (however simple, perhaps a letter and a cloak), sets (a bench, perhaps to stand in for a gangway to a ship setting off for the New World), and perhaps lighting and music. They are all part of what might be defined as non-verbal sign systems; using them effectively is part of the language of drama. In any dramatic activity the spaces in which events take place, the spaces between people and between objects, are themselves significant and meaningful. Any movement-based activity uses space as one of the elements to explore, create and communicate meaning. Simply ordering the space in the school hall during a drama lesson – so that one side of the hall represents the dockside of the Old Country, the other side a ship bound for the New World –