

Using Drama to Enhance Literacy: The *School Drama* Initiative

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Literacy Learning:
the Middle Years

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Setting the Scene

Decades of research show strong and consistent links between high-quality arts education and a wide range of impressive educational outcomes. This is true even though, as in most areas where learning is complex, the research base does not yet establish causal proof. Arts integration models ... have been yielding some particularly promising results in school reform and closing the achievement gap. Most recently, cutting-edge studies in neuroscience have been further developing our understanding of how arts strategies support crucial brain development in learning.

(President's Committee on the Arts & Humanities, 2011, vi)

Despite growing international research evidence that quality arts experiences enhance students' learning outcomes in all Key Learning Areas (e.g., Ewing, 2010; Catterall, 2009; Bamford, 2006; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999) the Arts often remain on the fringes of the formal curriculum in New South Wales schools. The second phase of the Australian curriculum includes the Arts and mandates at least two hours a week for all students in years K-10 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010). Nevertheless many primary and middle school teachers do not feel confident in their knowledge of and expertise to embed the Arts in what is often regarded as an already overcrowded curriculum. In addition, the Arts disciplines have been poorly resourced in schools.

More specifically, strong research evidence over more than four decades has demonstrated the effectiveness of process drama as critical, quality pedagogy especially in improving English and literacy outcomes (e.g., Ewing, 2009; Ewing and Simons, 2004; Miller and Saxton, 2004; Baldwin and Fleming, 2003; O'Toole and Dunn, 2002). An increasing regulatory, high stakes national testing regime in Australia, however, has the potential to encourage teachers to narrow their curriculum by teaching to these tests and to feel they must concentrate on transmissive approaches to the teaching of literacy and numeracy. As a result, drama is often undervalued and underused, both as a discipline in its own right and as pedagogy across the curriculum.

This paper reports the findings of the first two years of *School Drama* (SD), a program developed in 2009 through a partnership with the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) and the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney in response to the above concerns. SD focuses specifically on developing primary teachers' professional knowledge of and expertise in the use of process drama with literature to enhance children's English and literacy outcomes. Actors work in a co-mentoring relationship alongside classroom teachers

once a week for up to seven weeks in either term two or three of the school year. They model the use of drama strategies with authentic literary texts to address a particular literacy or English outcome that the class teacher has identified. The intention is that the teachers' will continue to use their new-found expertise in drama and that the creative and literacy skills of their students will be enhanced.

The School Drama program

In 2009 the SD pilot study involved 11 classroom teachers in 9 classes in five inner city Sydney schools, approximately 250 primary students across stages 1–3 and 2 professional actors. In 2010 the success of the initial pilot program led to its extension with 26 teachers participating in 15 diverse Sydney school contexts across all three school sectors. More than 600 primary students from Early Stage 1 to Stage 3 and one intensive English class (1–18-year-olds) were included. Four of the schools had also been part of the initial pilot in 2009. The 2010 iteration also involved 4 professional actors, two of whom participated in the 2009 pilot program. In 2011 eighteen schools and 6 actors are currently engaging in the SD program.

The initiative is dependent on the co-mentoring partnership that develops between an educator and an actor working through drama towards student academic achievement in this instance, English and literacy outcomes. They must therefore develop trust, respect and appreciation of each others' 'skills set' (Upitis, 2005) if such a partnership is to be truly effective. All teachers undertake an initial workshop in which they engage in drama strategies with contemporary picture books. This enables them to experience similar drama processes the actor will model with their students.

Quality literary texts and specific literacy outcomes are selected in an initial planning session undertaken by the teacher and actor. After the initial planning session the teacher benchmarks and analyses the students' abilities in the identified area. The actor develops and subsequently shares the planning with the teacher. The teacher and artist then work together once a week for 7 weeks. The actor models the use of various drama strategies with the chosen authentic texts in the sixty to ninety minute sessions. Over the duration of the program, the teacher will take increasing responsibility for some of the drama and often models the processes for other teachers in the school. Benchmarking and analysis is repeated at the end of the sequence.

The SD partnership between STC and the Faculty of Education & Social Work, University of Sydney thus aims to:

- support participant teachers to engage with drama within their classrooms;
- provide quality professional learning experiences through STC performers/ artists modeling the use of drama strategies and techniques as pedagogical tools, particularly in English and literacy learning;
- improve students' learning outcomes in English and literacy;
- foster teachers' enthusiasm and confidence in being associated with a working theatre which would thereby enhance the creative processes of their students; &
- create a sustainable model for artists and teachers to work together in schools to enhance curriculum outcomes rather than the traditional 'artist-in-residence' approach.

A summary of the classes involved with their English or literacy focus and chosen literary appears in Table 1 below.

Table 1: 2010 SD Summary of desired literacy outcomes/selected texts

1. KW:K-2 (14 students)	Talking & listening	Text: <i>Piggybook</i> by Anthony Brown & <i>Come by Chance</i> by Madeline Winch
2. JC/MR:Yrs 3-6 (22 students)	Narrative writing	Text: <i>Boy Overboard</i> by Morris Gleitzman
3. LW:Yr2 (18 students)	Talking & listening	Text: <i>The Lorax</i> by Dr Seuss
4. BW:Yrs 3/4 (28 students)	Descriptive writing	Text: <i>The Arrival</i> by Shaun Tan
5. TS:K/1 (18 students)	Talking & listening and expressive language	Text: <i>Where the Forest Meets the Sea</i> by Jeannie Baker
6. MK:Yr3/4 (25 students)	Visual literacy	Text: <i>The Wolf</i> by Margaret Barbalet & Jane Tanner
7. RR:Yrs2/3 (25 students)	Descriptive language	Text: <i>Come by Chance</i> by Madeline Winch & <i>Two Summers</i> by John Heffernan
8. BP:Yrs 4/5	Narrative writing	Text: <i>Misery Guts</i> by Morris Gleitzman
9. RW:Yrs3/4 (30 students)	Oral skills & purposeful communication	Text: <i>The Island</i> by John Heffernan & Peter Sheehan
10. EV:Yrs4/5 (31 students)	Descriptive writing ie mood, atmosphere, feelings & empathic responses in writing	Text: <i>The Dragon Keeper</i> by Carole Wilkinson
11. GW:Yrs1/2 (25 students)	Oral narratives	Text: <i>The Hairy Toe</i> & various oral stories developed by Victoria Campbell & Gretel Watson
12. KJ:Yr3 (27 students)	Descriptive language including increased vocabulary	Text: <i>My Place</i> by Nadia Wheatley
13. LS:Yr2 (24 students)	Talking & listening	Text: <i>The Last Alchemist</i> by Colin Thompson
14. AO:Yr2/3 (25 students)	Talking & listening	Texts: <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> by Lewis Carroll
15. CK:Yr3 (25 students)	Other's perspective & working in groups	Text: <i>Charlie & the Chocolate Factory</i> by Roald Dahl
16. MT:Yr4-6 (23 students)	Author's intention & reading aloud	Text: <i>My Place</i> by Nadia Wheatley
17. AS:K/1 (20 students)	Narrative structure	Text: <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> by Maurice Sendak
18. KH:Yr3/4 (24 students)	Narratives	Text: <i>The Incredible Book Eating Boy</i> by Oliver Jeffers
19. SH:Yr3 (24 students)	Narrative writing	Texts: <i>Two Summers</i> by John Heffernan & <i>Voices in the Park</i> by Anthony Browne
20. CB:Yr6 (29 students)	Character analysis & critical thinking	Texts: <i>Rabbit Proof Fence</i> by Doris Pilkington Garimara & <i>The Burnt Stick</i> by Anthony Hill
21. LJ:Yr4 (27 students)	Narrative & development of characterisation	Text: <i>The Last Clown</i> by Colin Thompson & Penelope Gamble
22. KS:Yr6 (28 students)	Narrative/ plot development & characterisation	Text: <i>The Alchemist</i> by Paulo Coelho
23. JR:Yr3 (19 students)	Oral reading – reading with expression	Text: <i>Storm Boy</i> by Colin Thiele
24. KR/KM:Yr 6 (38 students)	Writing structure – improving description, dialogue & character	Text: 'Space' – Mary Ellery pretext in Morgan and Saxton (1987) <i>Teaching Drama: A Mind of Meaning Wonders</i> .
25. MS: 13-18 yr olds (13 students)	Descriptive writing	Text: <i>Mario</i> (extensive English reader) & the <i>Seal Wife</i> (Celtic Myth) and <i>Arachne</i> (Greek Myth)

In evaluating both completed years of the program Campbell, Ewing and Gibson (2010) and Gibson (2011) have interviewed the teachers and actors both before and after the class programs. In some cases, principals and individual students have also been interviewed.

Robertson (2010) also undertook an in-depth case study documenting the journey of a teacher, actor and the class over the seven week time frame. Where possible, student benchmarking has also been reviewed.

Findings

Overwhelmingly, the participant teachers reported a range of positive outcomes both in terms of their students' literacy development and their own professional learning. The actors and students also expressed their belief that the SDP had been beneficial for them.

Teacher Professional Learning

The in-class professional learning that occurred during the SDP developed the teachers' confidence to embed drama strategies in English and literacy programming using authentic literacy texts. It was most effective where teachers were able to demonstrate the drama strategies to other classes or to trial the activities in between the actor's visits.

Typical responses highlighted both the teachers' professional and personal development. Others acknowledged the crucial role of an experienced theatre professional in this process.

This was an absolutely fabulous project to be involved in. Professionally I learnt an incredible amount and will easily be able to use many drama activities and techniques in teaching literacy, giving students the opportunities to develop their understanding of text through drama. Personally, I enjoyed being involved in the activities with the students and [the actor] and was able to see for myself how valuable the experience was.

The SDP was very enjoyable for both myself and my students. I enjoyed working with [the actor] and I found all the activities interesting and engaging. I was reminded of the importance of drama as a tool for building relationships with students. The students also found it a worthwhile experience as they were challenged each week.

I was extremely grateful to be given the opportunity to participate in this project. Professionally from the first teachers' workshop to the last class lesson I was engaged and enthusiastic which left me motivated to plan more innovative and inclusive lessons. From a personal perspective, I found this a bit of a 'comfort zone' push for me ... [but] my lack of 'drama confidence' gave me better insight ...

Several teachers, however, commented that a longer timeframe for the program would be desirable, especially when examining student literacy learning.

Improvement in students' literacy/English

Many teachers were enthusiastic about improvements in their students' literacy development. One Year 6 teacher reflected on the changes within her class:

The students benefited in many ways. Firstly they had the opportunity to work with an actor of a high standard. They improved tremendously in the use of a higher level of language in dialogue activities. They were able to discuss in more depth the key issues in the text. They were given a great variety of activities that helped them develop confidence in front of the whole class ... students really took on the whole performance side of the drama activities and most could become highly interactive with the activity they were working on. They were keen to develop their skills in performance and improved in this area consistently.

Likewise another teacher witnessed vast improvements in her Year 6 class as a result of the program:

It is difficult to encapsulate in words what I saw in my classroom but I really believe that my class experienced a complete overhaul of attitude towards and understanding of literacy. Children who were reluctant to even answer questions in front of the class were, by the end, able to take a role and not feel self-conscious. They also developed a sense of importance and team work as they were the only ones who got to do interactive literacy.

In her report, Gibson (2011) notes that not all teachers followed through on the benchmarking analysis and she recommended that this was an important part of the program that needed to be improved. Those teachers who were able to complete the pre and post benchmarking made important observations. For example, after the final benchmarking task one teacher observed that:

1. the tone of the students' writing had altered;
2. there was greater knowledge of character focus when writing; and
3. the students were able to demonstrate the emotions associated with one or more of the following – the character in a particular setting (past or present); the growth of the character throughout the text and/or the determination of the character to resolve the situation and thereby create empathy.

One Year 3/4 class worked with the Shaun Tan text, *The Arrival* in order to 'investigate the effects that drama can have in equipping students with strategies to promote their writing development'. By exposing the students to a variety of dramatic techniques and allowing them to take on the role of an active text participant, it was hoped that their writing, in particular descriptive writing could be improved. In linking syllabus outcomes to pre and post program observations, the class teacher detailed the following post-program outcomes:

- Students are spending more time when planning their writing.
- They are using increased vocabulary and world building more proficiently.
- Students are taking the time to build information, which is related to a specific topic
- They are able to find themed vocabulary lists
- Students are beginning to segment their ideas into clear sections, usually with a topic sentence/s/
- Due to having increased confidence, students are now paying closer attention to their choices as a writer. In particular, students are more conscientious of their grammatical choices. (Adapted from Gibson, 2011)

Other outcomes for students

The teachers also noted affective outcomes for their students. Many comments referred to improved confidence and/or social skills especially related to those students who were perceived as 'shy', 'disengaged' or marginalised by ability with language and/or other disabilities. For example:

We've certainly noticed an increase in their tolerance for each other ... I, personally have been fairly proud and quite surprised about their self esteem ... They've all got up and had a go. No-one's really backed out or faded away.

At the start of the program, about 5-6 students were often reluctant to speak or engage in any of the planned activities. For one, it was a language issue as he had only arrived from overseas this year (the school is 96% NESB). For one, it was a cultural reason and for the others it was confidence. Throughout the program, [the actor's] expert guidance and gentle persuasion enveloped the students and quite quickly all were willing participants in the designed activities.

But it was not just the teachers who identified the affective outcomes gained from the program. Below are a number of student letters to the actor involved in the SDP in their class:

I enjoyed every second and I think the rest have to. You have brightened our school days, lifted burdens in our personalities and let us totally express our emotions.

I have enjoyed drama with and without you in class. Drama is about using your imagination and acting it out. It has helped me to be more and more confident when talking and acting in front of the class. I have learnt not to laugh in front of an audience ... That all, but I still have one question to ask and that is: Can we have you again next year?

Thank you for giving us confidence to act in front of an audience. I have enjoyed drama. It has shown our teacher what drama is about and how you can't be wrong. I have learnt to use my voice in different ways. I never used to be able to speak in front of an audience until you came.

In the focus discussion undertaken by Roberston (2010) in the case study school several students asked that the drama program continue until they finished school!

Actor perspectives

While the majority of the teachers acknowledged the expertise of the actors working in their classrooms, the actors also made mention of the benefits they themselves gained from the experience. For example:

In terms of my own professional learning, I have learned that one size does not fit all. No matter how well one drama strategy works with a group of students, it may not be as effective with another ... It is not until we are in the classroom with the students that we become aware of what is needed .

I gained as much from the experience as the classroom teacher did ... a deeper understanding specifically of what I am doing.

Where to from here?

As mentioned above the professional learning was most successful when participating teachers were able to revisit the newly acquired drama strategies with other classes. In 2011 the pre and post benchmarking are being emphasized as a requirement of involvement in the program. Examples of past benchmarking with teachers' analyses has been made available to teachers beginning the SDP. Specific units will form the basis of an online resource that both the teachers and the actors can access. More funding will be needed if the Sydney Theatre Company is to continue to expand the initiative across educational contexts especially those in remote and rural areas..

Conclusion

Thus far it appears that the School Drama program is an innovative way of improving students' learning outcomes through teacher professional learning. Over both completed years of the project the participant teachers reported a range of positive outcomes enabled by the implementation of drama strategies in their classroom English program. Participant teachers also believe that the in-classroom professional learning that occurs during SD develops their confidence to use drama strategies as effective tools for learning and teaching particularly in English and literacy but in addition more generally across the curriculum. Despite the short time frame, it is their belief that student literacy outcomes are enhanced.

The initial findings thus demonstrate that co-mentoring between teachers and artists are beneficial. The STC plans the development of online resources to enable teachers to both refresh their understanding of drama strategies they have experienced and to be able to access other units of work. It will be crucial to continue to monitor the effectiveness of such an initiative over an extended time frame to investigate its ongoing sustainability.

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