Fictional contexts that liberate educational and artistic processes

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This chapter will explore the role of fictional narratives in classroom drama and why their use might be especially important in being able to relate critically to narratives as such in today's narrative-dominated political and social reality.

Narratives and society

Narratives have played a central role in understanding the world around us and defining our relationship to it. Since the 1980s there has been a well documented shift towards the study of the social and personal impact of narratives, which is at times referred to as the "narrative turn" (Vassilieva 2016: 1). The transmission of knowledge and cultural values from generation to generation through stories is a widely accepted notion. Jerome Bruner claims that societies collate their interpretation of the world into the culture that transgresses through generations, many times embodied in narratives (cf. 1990: 12), he also points out that the process of self-making is also a narrative act (cf. 2002: 65) and that "if we lacked the capacity to make stories about ourselves, there would be no such thing as selfhood" (2002: 86).

This narrative nature of human identity is being exploited by consumer culture according to Jayne Raisborough, who examines how material goods play a role "not just as 'props' in the story of self, which can be touched, used and read from and into, but as narrative devices that

shape and give future form to the narrative arc" (Raisborough 2011: 31). Naomi Klein sees the concept of brand building as a process of creating narratives around companies that allows them to sell their products as expression of peoples' selfhood, their values, when they choose a specific brand of shoes for example. Besides marketing, the political field has also relied heavily on narratives. The examination of this phenomena has only gathered momentum in the last fifty years. Nordensvard and Ketola (cf. 2022) offer a detailed analysis of the use of conspiracy theories—a specific form of narrative—in Donald Trump's election campaign and the Brexit vote. They conclude that "populist tropes and plotlines guide people's sensemaking in policy areas characterized by contestation and complexity" (ibid.: 879). Madisson and Ventsel state that "political narratives are often constructed as endangering *our* existence" (Madisson/Ventsel 2021: 110) after examining the political exploitation of narratives related to George Soros in different countries. These examples above show that our consumer/populist social reality is riddled with fictional narratives. We drama practitioners need to examine our own practice and reflect on how 'real' and fictional narratives are used in them, on how we facilitate the participants of our drama/theatre lessons to take a critical relationship to narratives that are surrounding them, and also the ones they form about the world and themselves.

While there are various reasons for engaging in theatre or drama activities in educational contexts this writing is based on the premise that one of the aims of these practices is to create social and/or individual development as part of the artistic process. Different traditions within the field of theatre/drama education use different types of narratives. The use of fictional narratives is a crucial point of the Anglo-Saxon Drama in Education approach. However, it is perhaps in part due to the growing influence of postdramatic theatre and devising that other traditions rely more heavily on autobiographical (self-)narratives. In this article, I argue that working with fictional narratives offers greater liberty to explore them both feelingly and critically; while performing identity- and self-narratives directly carries the danger of reinforcing them rather than being allowed the space to explore and question them critically.

I need to clarify from the onset that I am offering these arguments fully engaged with multiple practices to contextualize their benefits in comparison (not contrast) with each other. As my training and background are primarily in the Anglo-Saxon Drama in Education domain, I will be relying on theory and terminology related mostly to this tradition, starting out by offering some context and then exploring the issue of my paper more directly, first within my main territory of interest and then within a wider sphere.

Narratives and drama in education

The movement of Drama in Education, or Process Drama to which it is now referred nowadays, is based on the idea that students can safely engage with a variety of issues through fictional narratives, often by stepping into role themselves. "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" states Brian Wolland (2010: 2), offering a clear expression of what can be considered the traditional stance on using fictional stories in drama lessons. Gavin Bolton (cf. 1979) locates this mode of meaning making on a spectrum between 'natural' dramatic child play and theatre as performance. While both forms rely on engagement with fiction, there is more emphasis on the performative aspect in the case of the genre of theatre. Bolton explains that "play is not only *being*. It uses the form of being in order to *explore being*" (ibid.: 22) and infusing structures and forms of theatre can enhance this exploration while its fictional nature offers a safe space. The general dynamic of stepping into fictional contexts is expressed by Patrice Baldwin as the following: "Through the taking of roles, drama supports, models and enables active citizenship through the children as a community working in role in imagined contexts that draw from and transfer back to 'real life' contexts" (Baldwin 2009: 8). She also quotes a pupil explaining that drama is different from other school subjects because "you get to really experience real life things and problems" (ibid.).

Of course, the relationship between 'real' and 'fictional' is much more complex.

While Baldwin connects the taking of fictional roles in general to citizenship, Bolton offers very specific long-term objectives that lie behind his drama work. He explains that through facilitating participants into being in a fictional context, he aims to "help the student understand himself and the world he lives in; to help the student know how and when (and when not) to adapt to the world he lives in; to help the student gain understanding of and satisfaction from the medium of drama" (Bolton 1976: 1 quoted in Davis 2014: 22). It is important to highlight that Bolton considers it a central aim for students to gain understanding of the aesthetics of drama as a medium, alongside enhancing personal and social understanding, together with a critical agency that suggests that the learning derived from engaging with the fictional context should influence decisions (concerning what not to adapt to) and actions in real social contexts.

The history of Drama in Education could also be mapped as a series of debates on what sort of fictional context is the most useful to engage in and what sort of role or perspective/frame offered to the participants is the most fruitful in enhancing a shift in understanding. The well-known pioneer of British drama education, Dorothy Heathcote worked well longer than half a century developing a variety of approaches and methodologies. Her early work, referred to as "Living Through Drama" (LTD), or "Man in a Mess", is seen by many (cf. Bolton 1998; cf. Davis 2014) as creating the possibility of engaging in a fictional crisis—the mess—in a role that needs to deal with problems as it were its own. In a well-known example of Heathcote's LTD drama (cf. Bolton 2003), participants make a play about a prisoners of war camp—based on a scenario suggested by the students—and deal with a 'stool pigeon', a traitor amongst their lines. Heathcote's later work, known as the "Mantle of the Expert" (MoE) approach to drama, was described by Bolton[1] (cf. 1998: 170) as a reinterpretation of her earlier LTD approach, frames

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1   Heathcote and Bolton worked in Newcastle and Durham respectively and were in a very close work relationship. Even though Bolton's own work took him in a

participants in a more distant role, as experts of some sort. For example, workers in a recycling unit having to categorize and so to make meaning of the objects and histories left to their care. The position of the expert offers a more distant perspective, a more rational position on the situations and stories examined, but on the other hand opens fantastic opportunities for incorporating situation-based tasks and curriculum learning. Heathcote explains that Mantle of the Expert is an "approach to the whole curriculum, not a matter of isolating just one theme. Any one thing you want to teach must become meshed within broad curriculum knowledge and skills." (Heathcote/Bolton 1995:16) However, Davis argues that while MoE drama constitutes a powerful and human-centred teaching method the perspective offered to the students by the expert frame lacks "questioning the values in the social context" (Davis 2014: 58) and is "too often caught within the present parameters of society and within those parameters we work to develop a positive human ethos and try to move things forward as best we can" (ibid). So, while the participants are busy trying to solve a problem as experts, they are not questioning the social structures and values ingrained in the situation.

Making to explore narratives

It is crucial to note that in both modes of drama the participants are not presented with a pre-written fictional world but take part actively in the creation of the drama world. This allows students to build their own interests, topics, content into the context and the drama itself within the structure offered by the facilitator, especially in the case of LTD where there is great independence from school curriculum. Actually, in his final research exploring the differences between acting behavior on stage (of actors) and in classroom drama (of student participants) Bolton comes to the conclusion that in LTD besides presenting and performing acting behaviors, students are in a "making" mode in the improvisational

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different direction they co-authored several books, including Heathcote's seminal book on the Mantle of the Expert approach to drama (cf. 1995).

moments that are at the center of this type of drama lessons. Bolton describes making as "any dramatic exercise in which participants are free to explore without any sense of preparing for showing to someone else. It is not rehearsable nor directly repeatable." (Bolton 1998: 274) He clarifies that because of their previous investment in creating elements of the dramatic world participants take on the functions of dramatists besides that of actors in these improvised sections of the narrative as they are consciously forming their own and the group's experience within the dramatic constraints, while also being in the fictional situation. I tend to use 'making' to describe the tripartite process of working for those moments of 'living through' that form the key moments of the experience: I am making it happen (the role building in the drama event); it is happening to me (the living through experience); I am conscious of it happening to me (producing the metaxis effect) (Davis 2014: 53), explains David Davis (2014) in relation to his own form of Process Drama that is connected strongly to Bolton's approach. The concept of metaxis refers to "recognising that one is in two social contexts at the same time" (Davis 2014: 52). It is considered a central component of the social developmental strength of Process Drama as participants can actively test out their (real world) values within the safety of the fictional world that they have been actively creating. It is useful to note that participants are not just stepping into the shoes of others, as could be the case with performing a role from a written script but are actually taking part in making the fictional shoes that they then step into.

Real life versus fictional narratives

Let us open our focus to the wider field of drama and theatre education. Because of its strong connection to the theatre form Drama in Education incorporated new developments in the field of performative arts, (perhaps sometimes even influenced it in a participatory direction) and the movements that were later defined as postdramatic (cf. Lehmann 2006) have created—within the wider field of drama education—a shift towards the performative. This shift has brought about changes in emphasis within the field. One among these is the move towards engage-

ment is autobiographical narratives rather than fictional. Devised performances based on real-life experiences can offer a lot to both those creating it and their audiences. Just like the creators of professional devised performances, the drama teacher can also ask: why use fictional narratives when there are so many exciting real-life stories in the room? Working with these experiences artistically offers evident educational benefits as well. They validate the students' lived experiences by taking their reality seriously and empower participants to articulate their subjective perspective. This way of working might also offer space for the critical examination of social structures and narratives connected to the specific incidents that are drawn into the process of creation. These are truly valuable components of powerful educational and also artistic processes. However, the autobiographical nature of the content might also create additional pressures with its closeness to reality. The fact that the content is part of the participants' actual life raises the stakes of what and how can be questioned around it and to what extent can the perspective of examination be changed. Perhaps the primary aim of the aesthetic work with the content shifts from exploration to expression, the performative representation of the participants' reality that needs to represent their reality truthfully. This description is far too general perhaps, but it incorporates some of the strengths and issues I have encountered when working with autobiographical narratives. When the work moves towards celebrating rather than exploring the self-narratives of the participants, it becomes more difficult to facilitate a safe space for examing the impact of socio-political narratives on our narrated identity.

Fictional narratives elevate these kinds of pressures and also open space for a different kind of exploration that builds powerfully on the imagination. In an interview with Peter Billingham, the dramatist Edward Bond points out that "we think that imagination is somehow an escape from, a relaxation from, reality. But fiction to perform its function has to have an 'extra reality', an 'extra device' that we don't have in real life. So Hamlet's death is nobody's death (the actor doesn't die) yet it is everyone's death." (Billingham 2007: 8) Using fictional stories allows more space to engage with universal human questions and examine these, it also allows extreme situations that represent the burning

questions of our times to be incorporated safely into an educational setting. But mostly the stakes of (self-) questioning are elated, especially in Process Drama where the participants are offered space to incorporate their knowledge of the world into the fiction. This provides the opportunity to explore these actively from within a role as the fictional narrative is developed through improvisations. The created narrative also allows participants to take on the stance in relation to the scenario in their role-play that could be very different from the position they hold in reality.

Extreme fictional narratives

I will offer a practical example from my own practice to illustrate this. I was facilitating a Process Drama lesson with nine/ten-year-olds inspired by a play by Edward Bond as part of an action research process (cf. Bethlenfalvy 2020). We had created and stepped into our roles (following a lengthy process) as a community of children who created their own playground besides an unused rail track escaping from a deprived city. In this community and whole group improvisation that I shared with my friends, I played the role of one community member whose mother had asked that I burn down a house on the rich New Estate that was on the other side of the rail track. This created heated debate in the group of course, with a variety of opinions on the issue ranging from whether a parent has a right to ask such things from their child to the subject of vengeance and social injustice. I developed the narrative further in the lesson and asked the participants to imagine that the characters they had played in the group heard the sirens of fire-engines that night and could see flames lighting up the dark of the night as they peeped out of their windows. The improvisation continued later, but in the focus group discussion conducted as part of my research I was especially interested in how the participants related to this moment. Interestingly, they agreed that (as I am remembering) "It was needed", "Because otherwise it would be boring" and "Exciting things need to happen". They also reflected on the difference between extreme events happening in fiction and in reality, the difference between being in the fiction and watching it from out-

side, and also the difference between the point of view of children and adults: "When we are in the story we feel that it is completely fine for us. But if you are an adult watching it from the outside you might think it is too heavy", "If it happened in reality then it would be too much, but if we are playing it and imagining ourselves into it then it is not a problem". The powerful image of the burning house also allowed one participant to make connections with images from the wider reality, he said: "Terrorists come and burn houses down, Putin drops bombs". When probed further about this thought, he continued: "I just said it because of the burning house, that is what they do these days, burn down houses. Blow them up". The clearly fictional nature of the narrative liberated the participants to engage with the narrative on multiple levels.

Linking fictional and real-world narratives

Cecily O'Neill offers some useful remarks on the process of making a productive fictional context. She states

> that the successful creation of an imagined world depends to a considerable extent on the degree to which participants can make links between the world of illusion and their understanding of the real world. They will not be attempting a mere imitation of real life. Rather, like children at play, they will be rearranging and transforming the components of the world they know in actuality into, at the least, fresh patterns and, at best, the kind of abstraction and generalization which approaches art. For them, the value of this abstraction may be to reduce reality to manageable proportions. (in Taylor/Warner, eds. 2006: 84–85)

As I have remarked before, the discussion on the content of the fictional narrative and especially the structure that facilitates the participants into creating it and being in it is ongoing; however, some of the continuing sharp debates stem from the commitment of those using these approaches. There are many useful and engaging questions that allow

different methods and approaches to flourish in the field of Drama in Education. In the end, it is undeniable that there is value in sing fictional narratives, situation as an approach to enhance exploring safely how constructed narratives of consumer and political reality burrow into our very identities.

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