

Process Drama as a Liberatory Practice

[JOSHUA RASHON STREETER](#)

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

How do we prepare future educators and artists to interrogate and promote social and racial justice in the classroom? *This article considers process drama as a liberatory practice to reposition theatre educators as critical pedagogues. Responding to the need for educational reform, the author argues that drama should be included in PK-12 theatre classrooms and therefore taught in pre-service education and teaching artist training programs at the university level. While a complex artistic form, the author provides suggestions for planning a process drama through the lens of story-making and social justice education.*

INTRODUCTION

As an artist and educator of color, I recognize the complex systems I am working within. I see the field continue to train white educators and

artists to enter into diverse spaces, with little effort to recruit and retain artists and educators of color. I also acknowledge my contribution to this system-wide issue, as I teach future educators at a historically and predominately white institution. For this reason, I challenge myself to adopt anti-racist pedagogies that push back against long-held practices in PK-16 education.

In my current position, I serve as the coordinator for the PK-12 theatre education licensure and teaching artist concentration. These two tracks of study live within the undergraduate (B.A.) theatre major and each course is rooted in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is best defined as a collection of “radical principles, beliefs, and practices that contribute to an emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 2). Therefore, aspects of culturally responsive practice (Ladson-Billings, 1994), social justice education (Bell, 2016), and critically oriented drama education (Gonzales, 2013) are central to each theatre education class. As the teacher of six theatre education courses (not including student teaching), I use the tools of theatre, specifically drama pedagogy, to support our work together as adult learners *and* more effectively explore, experience, dialogue, question, and reflect.

This article considers what a critical theatre educator offers to the exploration of story in a classroom. I advocate for process drama to be a form taught within pre-service theatre teacher and teaching artist training programs. I position process drama as a liberatory pedagogy and provide a critical reflection on ways it can be more easily implemented by considering the tools and skills available to theatre artists.

ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION & PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

Anti-racist education pulls upon critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and anti-oppressive education (Lynch et al, 2017) to acknowledge, unpack, and analyze systems of power and oppression embedded in social, political, and cultural structures. As a way to prompt change, these practices are often an essential aspect of pre-service teacher training programs (Boyd et al 2016; Lawrence & Tatum, 1998; Howard & Milner, 2014). Noting that much of the teaching force is white, many studies have focused on whiteness studies as a critical aspect of

teacher identity development (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ohito, 2016; Stachowiak & Dell, Utt & Tochluk, 2020).

There is often a disconnect between theory and practice in pre-service theatre teacher training. With a heavy focus on production and performance, theatre educators are trained to hone in on *what* is being taught, not *how* it is being taught (Kishimoto, 2018). I am interested in ways the field can shift focus to *how* theatre is being taught. This includes moving past multicultural education as diversity and forward into troubled histories and stories of the past with an “attempt to teach about race and racism in a way that fosters critical analytical skills” (Kishimoto, 2018, p. 541).

As a “teacher of teachers”, it is my responsibility to model ethical, creative, and evidence-based practices that challenge the educational systems the university students I teach grew up in. Though drama pedagogy remains “historically marginalized” (van de Water et al., 2015, p. 10), process drama, a specific form of the work, equips teachers and teaching artists with a mechanism to create change from within the systems they inhabit. Thus, developing a personal social justice and anti-racist teaching practice to be used with youth in PK-12 classrooms.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN A PK-12 THEATRE EDUCATION PROGRAM

The courses I teach serve as “methods courses”, a university class that illustrates teaching practices for applications in the field. It is not lost on me the power of pedagogy to shape the practice of future educators, artists, and activists. Critical pedagogy in a methods course asks pre-service teachers and teaching artists-in-training to:

Recognize how schools have historically embraced theories and practices that function to unite knowledge and power in ways that sustain asymmetrical relations of power under the guise of neutral and apolitical views of education—views that are intimately linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history, culture, and economics. (Darder et al., 2003, p. 11)

The intentional use of critical pedagogy allows college students to reflect on the education system and make sense of it in relation to

power, privilege, dominance, and exclusion. As a modality for learning in the academy, college students start to recognize how a particular pedagogical approach can develop a more equitable and justice PK-12 classroom. Unlike the almost 200 theatre majors at James Madison University, the few students enrolled in the theatre education licensure program and teaching artist concentration will more frequently work “directly and dialogically” with young people in classroom and community settings, thus “contribut[ing] actively to local communities’ discourses through critically... [and] socially engaged principals” (Omatsa & Chappell, 2015, p. 192).

In an education program, it is essential to demonstrate artistic pedagogies and theatrical forms that expand entry points of theatre for young people. While James Madison University exists as a historically and predominately white institution, the college students I work with will enter diverse classrooms in the local community, as Harrisonburg, VA, is a refugee resettlement area and over 50 languages are spoken in the public schools (HCPS). Making theatre accessible to all is a key element of public education. To connect theory to practice, I model active and dramatic strategies (Dawson & Lee, 2018; Edmiston, 2014) and various artistic forms of drama through the six methods courses.¹ Pre-service teachers and teaching artists-in-training draw upon these strategies, conventions, and theatrical approaches when leading classes on their own in the field. For undergraduate theatre majors, inquiry-based work that utilizes one's own body, voice, and imagination is a radical departure from the product-based and text-based work that they were exposed to in middle and high school theatre. Consequently, the use of drama pedagogy within the university curriculum is an intentional choice to disrupt and challenge the “traditional”, or the established and widely used, practices within the field of theatre education at large.

To shift the pedagogies of the field, change must begin in pre-service teacher training programs. Lee, Cawthon, and Dawson (2013) argue that to influence educational reform, training in pedagogical conceptual change should be the focus of pre-service teacher education. The use of critical pedagogy in the university program ideally creates a cycle of change-making or at the very least, an

¹ Terminology for the various forms of educational drama is discussed by Gatt (2009), noting that there is “no national or international consensus as to the terminology of drama in schools” (p. 167).

attempt towards widening the lens of awareness to positively impact the self and others. If a teacher education program works to utilize critical pedagogies consistently and pervasively within the college classroom, it sets the stage for university students to wrestle with such theories and practices within the theatre major. The translation of critical pedagogy from a university methods course to a PK-12 theatre classroom “take[s] young people beyond the world they are familiar with and makes clear how classroom knowledge, values, desires, and social relations are always implicated in power” (Giroux, 2020, p. 5). This illustrates the direct relationship between teacher education and the young people it serves, while also highlighting the disconnect between our field’s current practices and responsive educational models.

PROCESS DRAMA AS A LIBERATORY PEDAGOGY

Process drama is a non-linear, multi-day form of dramatic exploration through story. This specific form of drama uses a range of theatre and drama strategies and focuses on “creative expression through the key performing arts skills of ensemble, imagination, embodiment, and narrative/story” (Dawson & Lee, 2018, p. 341).² To benefit young people and their learning, participants are asked to “imagine, enact, and reflect upon the human experience” (Davis & Bemh, 1978). One of the most notable characteristics of drama is that the teacher “works from *inside* the drama, functioning as [a] in-role facilitator” and participants become “co-collaborators with the facilitator to help shape the drama” (van de Water et al., 2015, p. 50).

Process drama can transform spaces, communities, and curriculum. As Dawson and Lee (2018) state, “[drama-based pedagogy] offers educators tools and a structure to activate their pedagogical beliefs that align with sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and critical theories of learning (Friere, 2007; hooks, 1994)” (p. 17). In a time where the need for social justice practice in educational theatre is more present than ever, drama pedagogy combines “creative and critical inquiry and expression” (van de Water et al., 2015, p. 8). As young people work to navigate in and out of role, a student

² A codified system for these strategies exists by Neelands & Goode (2015) and Dawson & Lee (2018).

“metaxically negotiates their individual history, their character's individual history, and the temporal relationships of role, a complex temporal relationship between character, individual and classroom community” (Munday et al., 2016, p. 78).

This liminal space holds the potential for personal and social development. Meaningful exploration is contingent upon an engaging story that holds dramatic potential—the opportunity for expandable moments and perspective-taking—while maintaining the ability to question and critique the fictional structures and analyze outside forces that shape a character's world views, values, thoughts, and actions. The non-linear, extended drama structure “allows the participants to explore [the] notion of belonging, of family and community relationships, of caring, or revenge, of absence and banishment, all from within the process [drama]” (O'Neill, 1995, p. 3). Therefore, learning through and around the narrative “may change [young people's] understanding of who they are, and who[m] they might become, both in the classroom and the world beyond the school” (Edmiston, 2014, p. 4).

AN ARTISTIC APPROACH TO PLANNING PROCESS DRAMA

When intentionally planned and skillfully facilitated, storytelling experiences invite individuals to a critically reflective recognition of their identities and power (Bell & Roberts, 2010; Bell, 2010). As a “teacher of teachers”, I believe a lesson planning process around a social issue allows pre-service educators and teaching artists-in-training the opportunity to reflect and unpack their own educational and cultural experiences related to the topic before working with young people. Therefore, offering the opportunity to explore social, cultural, and political systems that shape individual knowledge of an issue and reflect on experience learning (or not learning) about the topic in their own PK-12 education.

The planning of process drama is widely discussed in our field (Bowell & Heap, 2013; Edmiston, 2014; O'Neill, 1995) and scholars of color, such as Johnny Saldaña (1995) and Carmen Medina (2004), have built upon these frameworks, considering how drama supports a young person's development from a critical and cultural perspective. However, process drama is an extremely challenging and complex

form of drama to teach at the undergraduate level compared to the study of story drama, creative drama, and arts integration. The fluidity of the work, as modeled by Heathcote, Edmiston, O'Neill, and other key practitioners, does not support emerging drama educators who are working to interweave theatre practice with educational methods and concepts. To combat this challenge, I re-imagined how to plan a process drama with college students, specifically thinking about the aesthetic conventions available to undergraduate theatre majors.

Theatre educators possess skills, knowledge, and abilities in a range of areas within performing arts. If drama is planned with a specific set of dramaturgical tools in mind, it more feasibly provides an artist the means to use process drama in the PK-12 classroom. I considered what the artist knows, specifically the twenty-first-century theatre-maker, and how that knowledge can be co-opted to develop a story-making framework. As theatre-makers *and* drama specialists, we use story—we build stories, inhabit stories, tell stories, and reflect on stories to understand ourselves, each other, and the world around us. So, the elements of story-making become the essential components of planning a process drama.

Story to Content / Content to Story

Using an arts-integration planning framework, I applied Dawson and Lee's (2018) "story to content inquiry" and "content inquiry to story" approach (p. 224-225) to process drama. I ask the university students to fill in the following sentence frame: "The story of _____ to explore _____." They begin with either the historical event/individual or a social issue. I intentionally ask students to leave the other "blank" blank. For example, "The story of _____ to explore immigration." or "The story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah to explore _____." Students then brainstorm ideas to fill in the other side of the blank—what kind of story (fictional or real) could be used to explore this social issue or what social issue could be explored using this individual or group's story. Once they have filled both sides of the sentence stem, students complete some research and create a web of all the people, locations, and events that can be explored in the drama, intentionally pushing past what knowledge they know from their own schooling.

Developing a Narrative Arc

To begin mapping the “story” of the process drama, I reference a narrative arc and discuss each of the terms with the class. For planning purposes, I use the following terms: stasis, inciting incident, rising action, complications, climax, falling action, and new stasis. Together we map out the arc with yarn and large index cards on the floor. Then, I add a different color string to the map to note the difference between the “play” and the “story”. A character in a play often has experiences before and after, noting how the story extends past what we see on stage. Rather than positioning these moments before stasis and after new stasis as an epilogue or prologue, I ask the pre-service educators and teaching artists-in-training to think about these as out-of-role opportunities to build into and out of the drama. Before stepping into the story and beginning role work (identified as the stasis of the play), I ask students to think about how they can (1) develop a community contract with the young people they are working with, (2) use a theatre game as metaphor to build ensemble and link to the theme of the drama, and (3) use an activating dialogue strategy to allow young people to express their opinions, prior knowledge, or relevant thoughts on the social issue or event.³

Plotting Episodic Time Structure

As the university students identify the events for exploration within their process drama, I ask them to recall dramatic (performance) structures that use flashbacks or other non-linear narrative forms for story-making. Here we begin to delineate between the “story” and the “plot”, noting that a plot refers to how the story is told within the play. Connecting the non-linear and episodic format of a process drama to plot structures of dramatic literature helps theatre majors contextualize curricular planning as a playwriting process. This allows students the freedom to use conventions of drama pedagogy to explore character, setting, situation, conflict, theme, or social issue. As they move between the episodes within the story, I ask the pre-service teachers and teaching artists-in-training to consider what information moves the story forward or complicates the drama, intentionally building to the climax. In a drama based on a historical figure or event, the climax is

³ Theatre Game as Metaphor and Activating Dialogue are specific categories of Drama-Based Pedagogy as codified and theorized by Dawson and Lee (2018).

often the aspect of the story we know, which extends the ability to question and complicate previously held knowledge by identifying what we know, how we know it, who knows it, and what perspectives are left out of the story. To develop a cohesive process drama, college students deeply research the people, events, time period, and social issue by engaging critically in the topic themselves.

Why Here? Why Now?

Thinking dramaturgically, the fluid movement between in- and out-of-role experiences where young people are both “the player” and “the audience” allows meaning to be made through creating, participating, reflecting, and witnessing. An embodied experience means that young people will carry the drama experience with them as they move out of the classroom and into the world. As the process drama comes to a close and the new stasis is explored, I ask the students to connect to the current moment through the curricular plan. *How does this event (real or fictional) and social issue relate to 2020?* Through drama strategies, like headlines or writing-in-role, teachers can shift the level of activity (Dawson & Lee, 2018) while also connecting back to the unit’s enduring understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Unpacking the quintessential dramaturgical question “Why here? Why now?” (a truncation of the expanded question by Brockett, 1997; Lang, 2017; Brown, 2011) makes the historical event or social issue more relevant to young people.

CONCLUSION

This intentional story-making process considers how artists might be positioned to develop engaging, multi-dimensional experiences for young people to explore, inhabit, and reflect on. Through an anti-racist positioning and critical dramaturgical lens, this specialized form of drama works towards social change. The interrogation of a facilitators privilege and positionality as it relates to a teaching and learning context is essential to developing social justice educators.

Now is the time to adopt drama pedagogies as liberatory practices in PK-12 theatre education training programs in the United States. Within a changing world categorized by an interest in educational practices that depart from “traditional”, “standard”, or white-centered

models, teacher and artist training programs must adapt and shift to meet the needs of students at all levels—from primary to college. While one method or approach to theatre education alone will not create educational reform, intentional approaches to practice shift the field towards student-centered and dialogic ways of knowing. Process drama provides a platform to explore social issues and interrogate histories through embodied story-making, for both the facilitator and participant. This art form and teaching method is long overdue for inclusion in the field of theatre education at-large.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joshua Rashon Streeter, MFA, is an Assistant Professor of Theatre Education at James Madison University, where he heads the theatre education licensure program and the teaching artist concentration. Joshua's work centers around drama pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and embodied learning. As a practice-based researcher, Joshua analyzes the pedagogies used in rehearsals and classrooms and explores the relationship between process and product in a creative learning experience. He continues to work as a theatre practitioner, specifically focusing on theatre for young audiences, youth theatre, and musical theatre. Joshua was named the 2015 Winifred Ward Scholar by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) and served on the twelve-person committee to write the 2014 National Theatre Standards.