

The Wild Things Go to School

CECILY O'NEILL

Conclusion by [DAVID ALLEN](#)

ABSTRACT

Dorothy Heathcote's approach to drama in education redefines teaching as the creation of shared learning experiences rather than the transmission of knowledge. Drama serves as a process-oriented method that engages students in meaningful, collaborative tasks, encouraging inquiry, reflection, problem-solving, and personal growth. In this article, these principles are illustrated through the work of Sylvia Walton Jackson, an elementary teacher who embraced Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach. In a literacy unit based on Where the Wild Things Are, students became "experts" responsible for teaching fictional Wild Things how to read. Through role-play, research, writing, planning, and collaboration, they developed stronger reading skills while gaining confidence, responsibility, and a deeper understanding of themselves as learners. Sylvia's use of teacher-in-role transformed traditional classroom relationships, positioning students as capable contributors rather than passive recipients of instruction. The project demonstrates how drama can reorganize authority, foster agency, and

make learning socially meaningful.

The teacher's task in any classroom is to serve the learner, and the aim of all classroom interactions is to provide conditions in which learning can take place. The drama teacher has the same purpose, although in drama the interactions which occur may be unusual in their nature, unpredictable in their development and unexpected in their learning outcomes. Drama is likely to produce changes in the existing skills, relationships and social structures of the classroom. Dorothy Heathcote has defined the teacher's function as the creation of shared learning situations. In everything she has said or written about drama and education, she stressed that it is necessary for teachers to become process-oriented so that fruitful encounters between self, students, ideas, knowledge can develop.

Process-orientation means devising programs and tasks which induct through first intriguing, then engaging and interesting our pupils. (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984)

As Jerome Bruner (1986) makes clear in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, an ideal education partakes of the spirit of a forum, with negotiation and recreation of meaning at its heart. He suggests that teachers can aim to become more than mere transmission devices. They can become Human Events.

While I was working at The Ohio State University, I encountered several gifted African-American teachers who clearly operated in their classrooms as Human Events. My colleague Anita Manley and I edited *Dreamseekers* (Manley and O'Neill, 1997) in order to capture a sense of the practice and philosophy of these teachers. The book was published in the USA by Heinemann and received the Distinguished Book Award from AATE, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. It is now out of print.

The late Sylvia A. Walton Jackson was among the contributors. Sylvia was a Kindergarten and Grade One teacher at Indianola Alternative Elementary School in Columbus. She was a teacher of considerable sensitivity, skill and experience who encouraged her students to accept responsibility, make discoveries and see

themselves as learners. When she began to include drama in her work, she immediately realized its possibilities. Each of the following possibilities offers an intriguing starting point for a worthwhile learning experience and suggests the depth of learning that will follow.

Drama is the next best thing to being there.

Drama is not a performance,

Not closure to practiced lines.

It is a process

It is walking in the shoes of Abraham Lincoln's wife

It is being an African American child on the bus in Mississippi in the 1960's

It is a dialogue between neighbours who witnessed the crime at the house next door.

An interview with Geronimo

Diaries and journals

Letters found in pockets of soldiers from the civil war or the old lady next door

It is a detective studying the trash to collect clues to a mystery

Drama is helping the Three Bears get over the trauma of having their house broken into.

Or creating a solution to an energy crisis

Or being oil executives considering proposals for cleaning up an oil spill,

Or building a society on another planet, a new government,

And developing uses for its natural resources.

Drama is using background knowledge,

Researching new information and applying it to narrative

It is traveling through time and returning with an artifact

It is keeping a diary of your experiences

Drama allows you to go where you will never go,

See what you will never see,

Do what you have never done

It requires cooperation, communication, problem solving.

Research, creativity and reflection

Reflection that allows for making concrete the abstraction

Finding closure after the drama

Finding the life application

Making connections to life

to literature
to connect to big ideas
Life lessons

When she encountered the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Sylvia immediately realised the learning opportunities suggested by Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach, which gains commitment from the students, provides a task-oriented approach and sets up a framework where discipline is implicit and self-generated. The roles the students adopt raise their status and affirm their competence even as they work towards acquiring it. Like Heathcote, Sylvia understood that she must limit her own expertise so that the expertise of her students is increased.

She writes,

My primary instructional strategy is Mantle of the Expert. I use it as a kind of umbrella that covers a whole unit of study. It allows me not only to teach the subject externally but to get the students to internalise the ideas and concepts as well as the feelings and beliefs that are part of that learning situation. The students become 'experts' so they must deal with the same kind of issues and problems as real experts. (Walton Jackson, 1997, p. 26)

In other words, she creates shared learning situations.

Sylvia was excited by the possibility of using drama across the curriculum. She was interested in exploring ways in which drama could illuminate and enrich her broader purposes as a teacher. One of her continuing concerns was finding ways to improve her students' reading skills. *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) was one of her student's favourite books so she devised a simple but most effective drama framework to address these essential teacher concerns.

The key strategy Sylvia used was to take on a role in the drama. The willingness of the teacher to enter and build the fictional world is a powerful means of altering the balance of power in the classroom and changing student/teacher relationships. The purpose of taking on a role is to invite students to enter the fictional world and help to extend, oppose or transform what is happening. Contributions from both teacher and students are equally valid.

Sylvia created a large medallion, carrying the label 'MAX', which

she wore on a ribbon around her neck. She told her students that when she's wearing the medallion, she will be in role as 'Max', who is now an adult. She will be their teacher, Mrs. Jackson, when she is not wearing the medallion. It was remarkable to watch Sylvia moving smoothly in and out of role, as she switched from 'Max' to Mrs. Jackson, and back again, in response to her students' needs.

'Max' tells the class that he is very concerned about the Wild Things. Ever since the first time he had sailed to their island to meet the Wild Things, Max has been writing them letters, postcards and Christmas cards, but has never received a reply. So Max decided to set sail to once more. When he reached the island, he could see from a distance the Wild Things sitting dejectedly in a circle. In the middle of the circle was a huge heap of all the letters and cards he had written them. Suddenly, Max realised the truth. The Wild Things could not read. Now Max had come to the children to ask their help with this problem. Grown-ups were no use, since they couldn't see the Wild Things. Would the students help him to teach the creatures to read?

The children eagerly accepted the challenge. They spent time in finding out where the Wild Things lived, and planning how to travel there so they could transport the creatures back to the classroom. Mapping, designing, problem-solving and decision-making were all part of this phase of the work. The students took great pains to prepare the classroom to receive the Wild Things. They considered the kind of environment which would be comfortable for the creatures, so the classroom was transformed to look as much like a jungle as possible. Every item in the room was labelled by the children to assist the Wild Things as they began to acquire reading skills. Then they created large Wild Things out of construction paper and arranged them around the room. Sylvia paired the students so that they could support each other in their reading. The children were able to call upon her in the role of "Max" to resource and assist them in their teaching task.

The children made Big Books for the creatures, and prepared other reading materials which they hoped would appeal to them. They found clever ways of pretending that their Wild Things did the work which they had done themselves. The Wild Things wrote several books, and some students read their stories aloud to the class in squeaky voices. Each child kept a Project Record Book for their Wild Thing, in which the creatures wrote about what they did each day. Lessons in classroom behaviour, morality, and even appropriate

cuisine for the Wild Things were included as the work progressed. At one point, Sylvia invited the Reading Consultant for the area to come and work with the children to re-enforce their instructional strategies as they taught their Wild Things how to read.

At the beginning of this unit, Sylvia had asked the children to list the strategies they used to help themselves read. At the end of the work, she did the same, and the children's list of strategies was more extensive, much more creative and clearly demonstrated an understanding of the reading/writing connection. They had acquired a considerable number of new strategies to improve their own reading skills.

It seems clear that the children had explored their sense of themselves as Learners. The process of learning to read had been brought into explicit focus, but the activity remained one in which they possessed both status and competence. They actively promoted their own learning as well as that of the imaginary Wild Things, and both inside and outside the drama they grew in skills and confidence.

As Bloome (1983) points out, "the cognitive skills that people learn through their participation in reading events depend on the nature of the reading events themselves". Clearly the "reading event" in which Sylvia's students took part was a co-operative enterprise, a shared learning experience.

Through the drama they had achieved a perspective on the reading process from which they could reflect positively on their own learning. The tasks required of them by the drama and the roles in which they operated altered the social structure of the event, which, as Tierney and Rogers (1986) found, influences the extent to which students are involved in the processes of reading and writing and the extent to which they collaborate with others and use various cognitive strategies. In John Dewey's words, Sylvia had "secured the active co-operation of the pupils in construction of the purposes involved in their studying. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey suggests that purpose in education is above all a co-operative enterprise between teacher and students. It develops through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process, and through reciprocal give and take, "the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give".

Dewey is describing the kind of learning situation in which the quality of teachers as individuals is as important as their professional

function. This is something that Dorothy Heathcote had always known. She wanted teachers to be centred in self, so that they would truly understand their own needs, the needs of the work and the needs of the students. In *Of These Seeds Becoming*, an account of her work presented as a poetic essay, Heathcote writes:

Our work need fit no mould given it by others.
If it makes a change in people of some worthy kind—
And not all our work can be perfectly judged to bring about this
change—
then we can call it work and leave the labelling on one side.
The work of all teachers is unique. (1978, p. 20)

Sylvia, in reflecting on the first drama course she took, also chose to express herself outside the constraints of prose. She writes of the discoveries she made about herself and her students through using drama in her classroom. Sylvia and her students are engaged in a dynamic, reciprocal learning process.

I realise that through drama I know
Them as they are better
I know who I am better
And I know who we are together—better.
I resist my needs to control the direction of the drama
and find it takes shapes I could never have planned for
and will never forget
I have found in drama an opportunity
to be part of their world without force
I'm invited in
sharing rules
where no one loses.
listening to how they think
allows me to know
where to start teaching
I have found that it's when
I don't know all the answers
is when they become involved and
I am most effective because
they are in charge and it is theirs

and they know that I am like them
playing inventing enjoying
creating appreciating growing,
being me.

CONCLUSION by David Allen

Cecily O'Neill's account reminds us of what is at stake in Heathcote's work when it is understood not as technique, but as a reorganisation of the social and imaginative conditions of learning. The "Wild Things" project did not simply use drama to "engage" children in reading. Rather, it established a long-term fictional world that redistributed responsibility, reconfigures authority, and gives literacy an urgent social purpose. The children did not practise reading in preparation for some future application; they became responsible for teaching others to read. In doing so, they encountered themselves differently—not merely as pupils completing tasks, but as competent agents within a shared enterprise.

What the "Wild Things" project demonstrates particularly clearly is the way Mantle of the Expert reverses the usual relationship to knowledge. The children were not positioned as deficient learners who must improve their reading because adults have determined it necessary. Instead, they became responsible for helping others to learn. The "Wild Things" cannot read; therefore the children must develop the knowledge, strategies, and understanding needed to teach them. In the process of becoming teachers of reading, they themselves become more reflective, capable, and self-aware readers. Learning emerges through the obligation to make knowledge usable for someone else. This reversal was central to Heathcote's thinking. Rather than positioning young people primarily through lack—what they cannot yet do—she sought to place them within frames of competence, agency, and social usefulness. I was reminded of this when working with Dorothy on a transitions project. Rather than framing the students as young people anxiously "going through transitions," she positioned them as Life Coaches responsible for helping others navigate periods of change. Again, the shift was profound. Students were no longer cast as problems to be managed or recipients of guidance, but as thoughtful agents capable of supporting and advising others. In both cases, Mantle reorganised the learner's

relation to knowledge by relocating them from the position of need to the position of responsibility.

In some contemporary interpretations, Mantle of the Expert has been adopted primarily as a strategy for curriculum engagement, often compressed into short-term activities that leave the underlying structures of schooling untouched. Cecily's article returns us to a more radical understanding. Here, the dramatic fiction reorganises time itself, allowing for sustained inquiry, revisiting, reflection, and elaboration. Knowledge emerges relationally, through problem-solving, collaboration, and negotiated action, rather than through transmission alone. Authority is not abolished, but redistributed. Sylvia Walton Jackson deliberately withheld her own knowledge and expertise, so that the expertise of the children could grow.

Equally significant is the transformation of the teacher-student relationship. Sylvia's reflections reveal a teacher willing to relinquish mastery in order to enter a reciprocal process of learning. "I'm invited in," she writes. This is not the language of control, nor even of facilitation in the narrow sense. It signals openness to a new educational relation in which teacher and students become co-participants in the construction of meaning. The teacher remains responsible for shaping the conditions of the work, but no longer stands outside it as the sole owner of knowledge or direction.

What emerges through Cecily's account is therefore not simply a model for curriculum delivery, but a proposition about the kind of social world schooling might become. Heathcote's legacy lies not only in dramatic method, but in her insistence that classrooms can function as spaces where responsibility, reciprocity, attentiveness, and collective agency are practised. Drama was the medium, but the larger concern was always the organisation of learning, responsibility, and community; and how education itself might be based in more participatory and humane forms of relation. This work depends not upon technique alone, but upon teachers willing, as Sylvia was, to become participants in a common enterprise of meaning-making.

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