

Teaching in Four Positions across Worlds

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ABSTRACT

*In this companion to Tim Taylor's insightful article, *Between Worlds: The Function of Twilight Role*, I turn to Positioning Theory to understand in more complexity how and why as teachers we can use twilight role alongside full role to deepen and extend teaching and learning with drama particularly when using the mantle of the expert approach. I outline four positions that a teacher can adopt when interacting with the students both in the world of the classroom and as if engaging in a fictional or story world. I analyze an example of my teaching when alongside a class of five- and six-year-old children we imagined we were a team of firefighters. I chose the example to complement Tim's so that readers could compare teaching about similar themes though in different contexts.*

For over a century dramatic approaches have been used in education to support learning and teaching in all content areas. Since the leading practitioner and scholar Dorothy Heathcote applied Role Theory to the use of drama in education (1984), we've understood that when teachers and students are talking and moving as if they are in the world of a story they can imagine from the viewpoints of people in that story world. In doing so, teachers and young people are usually referred to as being in a role. Significantly, all can have meaningful dialogue from and with perspectives beyond the typical viewpoints adopted in the roles of teacher and students in the everyday world of a classroom.

When a teacher or students are for a brief or extended time fully representing another person in a story world, they can be thought of being in **full role**. Recently, working with children in kindergarten, I was in full role whenever I represented a fire chief having put on a fire chief's ball cap to speak with the authority of a person in charge a fire station to a team of firefighters. The children were in full role as if they were the team of firefighters. As Gavin Bolton stresses, for most of the time when using drama, "The teacher is neither fully in role nor fully out of role but occupies a '**twilight**' **position** between the two" (1992). Significantly, Bolton refers to the position of the teacher in that liminal space. In this paper I turn to Positioning Theory to understand in more complexity how and why we can use **twilight role** in addition to **full role** intending to deepen and extend learning when using any of the dramatic approaches developed by Heathcote, including mantle of the expert, which collectively I have called dramatic inquiry (Edmiston & Towler-Evans, 2022).

Learning is more than acquiring knowledge and skills while over time becoming more competent and developing understanding. Central to Heathcote's pedagogy is the belief that the young people in our care are always in the process of becoming. When we engage in humanizing dialogue and inquiry as we use drama with students, they may become more humanizing in their understanding of the world as well as in their attitude toward other people, themselves, and whatever content we explore with them.

In my recent classroom teaching in the project that I led one

morning with a class of twenty-five 6- and 7-year-olds, the children gained knowledge about firefighting while practicing social skills such as collaboration. The young children all imagined they were in the role of firefighters. I took on two full roles as the fire chief and in the role of a distraught Mr. Green who had called for help because his cat at the top of a tree looked like it might fall. The full roles of a fire chief and a cat owner had different authority from my role as teacher. As a fire chief I was responsible for the safe operations of firefighters at work. As Mr. Green I cared about the life of my cat. At the same time, as a guest, though still in the role of teacher, I was responsible for organizing whatever happened in the classroom. In addition, I repeatedly used twilight role in the space between those full roles and my role as teacher. In other words, I was aware of being and interacting with the children both in the classroom world and in a fictional story world being built with the students as we collectively imagined events in the life of a team of firefighters. Under my direction, we moved back-and-forth between imagining we were interacting “inside” the story world and “outside” yet looking into the story world from the classroom world.

POSITIONING THEORY

The idea and social practice of **positioning** extend the concept of role. Applying Positioning Theory to social interactions people are always understood as positioning one another. Now we can conceptualize people not only as taking on a role but always in relation to the people they are interacting with. Rom Harré, one of the early positioning theorists, proposes the idea of a positioning triangle (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). When a person takes up a **position**, they are using the **social force** of their language to position themselves and others with rights and obligations within a **storyline**. For example, using verbal and non-verbal language as a teacher I was positioning myself with the right for over two hours to lead the students and manage activities that I was obliged to tie to the curriculum. And all the students accepted their position of being led and managed by me while interacting with one another all within the ongoing storyline of a morning in school. Though different from their usual experience of schooling the storyline was similar. We were in their classroom with their teacher who was present and supportive of what I as a visitor was doing. Over time, the

children embraced a position of having the right to move and dialogue with me and with one another to devise and make sense of events in the world of firefighting while developing some understanding of the responsibilities of a team of firefighters preparing for and carrying out rescue missions. The activities contextualized goals of literacy learning as students created and later documented stories as well as decoding some related printed texts. They also contextualized social and emotional goals of learning to collaborate in ways that included their peers. Nikki Slocum-Bradley extends the positioning triangle to a positioning diamond to include how positioning is always affecting people's **social identities** (2010). This parallels Heathcote's notion of who the students in our care are becoming as students and as people. For example, becoming more collaborative storytellers.

POSITIONING THEORY AND DRAMA

Applying Positioning Theory to drama as education makes visible a doubling in our own and our students' experiences (Edmiston, 2003). What may be happening in a person's individual imagination can become embodied for all students when we use social imagination (Edmiston, 2014). Now there are **two storylines**. A firefighter storyline created collaboratively with the children in imagination extended the ongoing classroom storyline. And there are **two positions** each with different **social forces**. As teacher, as always, I was positioning students as having agency as they interacted in the **classroom world**. Yet, at any time I could shift to position students with different agency and social force as if they were other people elsewhere in an imagined **story world**. We can think of this as fictional positioning. For example, with the authority of a fire chief positioning responsible firefighters at work. Teacher and students in effect move in imagination between these **two worlds** because at any moment as teacher I could shift back-and-forth between positioning the children as students in the classroom world and a fictionalized positioning of them framed as a team of firefighters in a story world. Further, there is a doubling of **social identities**. If the project had extended over time, the children's identities as collaborative storytellers could have deepened. Further, their imagined identities as a team of firefighters could have begun to shape their identities as students and as people who collaborate to take calculated risks in caring for others.

This doubling of positions, storylines, social forces, social identities, and worlds becomes significant for learning when the meaning created in humanizing dialogue with and among students becomes more complex as it can do when dialogue is responsive to perspectives from multiple positions.

Accepting fictional positioning means teachers and children can use language and move to interact with more (or less) **social force** than in their everyday lives within activities that are likely very different from typical school tasks. Why is this significant? Because how children learn with you and with one another as well as what they may learn is extended. In that other world we may imagine with students how life might be different if we lived in a world where the norms, rules, and expectations were very different from their everyday lives. Where the students could have more power, more responsibilities, more duties, more rights, than in everyday life. Or less. For example, some children talked with and showed their peers how to climb a ladder safely and showed what might happen if they fell off. One group of boys practiced swinging a toy axe as if it was sharp enough to cut into a door. Positioning the children as we interacted I could both extend and limit learning possibilities because of imagined rights and obligations that extended and limited their agency. For example, in role with the authority of a fire chief I could introduce professional safety guidelines that we read together. I could also use a twilight role, for example, to remind firefighters of the need to collaborate or to demonstrate how to hold an axe.

The experience and outcomes for students of learning across the classroom world and a fictional story world is made more complex when we pay attention to which world is being foregrounded for whom. Taking a position that we intend to use our authority to share power as much as possible with students can be thought of as really four positions. I have come to conceptualize this aspect of the pedagogy in terms of moving among four positions for teacher and students.

The four positions are not in a hierarchy though they can be thought of as requiring increasingly complex teaching. All four are important and provide us with four different though complementary ways of positioning ourselves in relation to students to engage in more complex humanizing dialogue and inquiry over time. As we're teaching one position is likely to be foregrounded, yet we may choose to shift back-and-forth as needed from one way of positioning the students to

another.

1st POSITION

When you are in 1st Position it's as if collectively with the students **you are looking into and beginning to project in imagination into life in a story world**. You're interacting in the classroom world of teacher and students, yet you are also beginning to imagine with the children that you're in that other imagined world. You're in the classroom world positioning students within the accepted rules, rights, duties, and responsibilities of school storylines. When your positioning is humanizing, you will have negotiated (not imposed) rules and expectations. For example, sitting on a rug and taking turns. When we begin to use drama, we intend to share responsibility with the students in story building. You introduce, manage, and reflect on activities from 1st Position. Our classroom storyline now includes embarking on a collaborative journey of inquiry in a story world that we begin to build collectively as we imagine what it might be like to enter events in that imagined world.

I began work on the Firefighters project by introducing a large toy fire truck. The children seemed instantly attracted as I passed it around so that each child could touch and talk about it in response to questions like, "What do you notice? What do you know about fire trucks and firefighters? What are you wondering about?" The children were paying close attention as they noticed the ladder, the hose, and the number of wheels. Children knew about fire stations and fire drills. One boy made the sound of a siren. Another wondered how the sound was made and why it was so loud.

The significance of twilight role in 1st Position is that as teacher you may briefly speak, gesture, and may move as if you are anyone or anywhere in that other world that you are beginning to conjure in imagination. From this position you are inviting the students to do the same and activate their dialogic imagination whenever they respond to you and/or one another as if they too are momentarily located in the imagined world. When one boy talked about climbing ladders I stood up. As I enacting climbing, I gestured for him to join in. He did so along with most of the children when I spoke to them with urgency "We need to get to that window. Can you see the person trying to open it?" After a few seconds I wondered how firefighters would learn how to use

ladders and hoses and how to drive firetrucks safely. As one boy moved his hands as if he was turning a steering wheel, I invited the children on to their feet again to imagine they were driving to a rescue. I asked the children if they'd like to imagine that we were a team of firefighters. The eagerness in their faces demonstrated that they had begun to imagine being in a world of firefighters.

2nd POSITION

You are in 2nd Position when you're positioning students from within a storyline of a story world **as if you are a person in that imagined world**. You're playing with how students could be positioned if they were to meet that person who can use power and address them in very different ways from your position in the role of teacher. Rather than largely hinting at places and people in a story world as you do when looking in on the imagined world from 1st Position, now from 2nd Position you may embody and enact some of the concerns, thoughts, feelings, and actions of a particular person in relation to other people in that fictional world intending to invite responses from the children and engage in some dialogue.

In 2nd Position you can inhabit the position of a person in a storyline without requiring the students to do the same. You can take up emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of that position. You can use different conventions to make clear that you are going to represent a person in an imagined place. You might say, "When I sit on this chair I'm going to represent a person in the story world. You can ask her anything you want to know." Or as I did, "When I put on this cap, I'm going to represent a fire chief. He needs some help." Behind me I had grouped some small toy fire trucks, blue fabric twisted and taped to represent a hose, and a foam life-like axe. I had also used masking tape to represent a ladder on the floor and had spread out some photographs of firefighters at work.

Addressing the students collectively I said, "Tomorrow we'll have a group of trainee firefighters. They need to learn how to use equipment safely and how to work together as a team. Any ideas what to work on first with them?" In a twilight role I was briefly both speaking in role and with the authority of a fire chief. I was positioning the children as people whom he believed might be able to help him. A couple of children wanted to know what a trainee was. Most were eager to use

the iconic representations on the floor. I invited the children to self-select what they wanted to focus on. As 4-5 children gathered round each icon I invited them to show us anything they felt the trainees would need to learn. I was positioning them as having the right to join me as if we were in the imagined world, but I was not “putting them in role.” Within seconds different children were imagining driving firetrucks, climbing the ladder, putting out a fire with a hose, and swinging an axe. Many of the children were clearly imagining they were firefighters. In doing so they were showing their peers the ease of stepping into the world in imagination.

Using twilight role in 2nd Position you may briefly address the students from a more generic position in that hybrid space. Talking to the children in each group I was less in the position of a fire chief and more in the position of a colleague for example, when I made a comment to a boy speeding a toy firetruck on the floor. “I wonder how you drive firetrucks so fast yet stay safe.” I picked up a toy car and as I pushed it forward, he responded, “Keep your foot on the brakes!”

Whether you use full role or twilight role, at any moment you can transition back to 1st Position to reflect on what has happened in 2nd Position as well as to consider what they’ve learned, anything they’re wondering, who they now might want to meet, or what might happen next.

A few minutes after the children had begun to play with the materials I had laid out, I gathered them together again. As well as reminding the students of the fictional and constructed nature of our interactions in the imagined space, I posed a significant what-if inquiry question. I reminded them of what the fire chief had said about the group of trainee firefighters who would be coming and added, “If we were those firefighters responsible for teaching the trainees what do you think they’d need to know about how we work together safely?”

3rd POSITION

When students position one another as they interact **as if they are people with duties and responsibilities within a storyline in a story world** then they are in role in 3rd Position. In this position you can manage and organize in your role as teacher in the classroom world. And you may shift into a twilight role as needed.

I had brought the children together in 1st Position. I asked the

children if they wanted to imagine that we were that team of firefighters. Together we read the mission statement I'd written out on computer paper: We work together safely as a team to help whoever is in need. All nodded when I asked if they thought that was what firefighters would need to do. Briefly I put on the fire chief's cap as I addressed the children. I returned to the question of what people new to firefighting might need to know about working together safely when using a ladder, a hose, an axe, or when driving a fire truck. Positioning them as the fire chief I could add social force and weight to the goal of the activity as I asked the children to focus on collaborating and being safe as they returned to using the iconic representations.

As I observed what the children were doing in 3rd Position in the story world I was in 1st Position in the classroom world. With older children, or younger children I had known longer, I could have left them to work in small groups with minimal input. With these young children, listening in to what they were doing and saying I frequently moved into a twilight role when I felt they needed help to show and talk with one another about their ideas as if I was also a person in the story world. I could promote more meaningful dialogue. For example, the children working in pairs as if they were climbing a ladder were having fun imagining that the ladder wasn't steady. So, I suggested they could show both what not to do because they might fall off as well as how to help each other stay safe when climbing. One child said you should hold on to the ladder to keep it steady. Having laid out a long sheet of computer paper and markers for each group all were eager to record their ideas and share what they had drawn with one another.

4th POSITION

When you are interacting with the students **as if you are all people in the story world** you are in 4th Position. As a teacher in full role, you can deepen and extend dialogue with students from the positions of different people in the story world. You can explore more of the implications for what it might be like to have more (or less) rights, duties, and responsibilities that those people have in relation to other people within the story world. At the same time, just as you can in 3rd Position you may shift to interact in a twilight role rather than taking up a specific fictional role. Toward the end of my time working with the children, I introduced a storyline that could have been one of the

stories used in training new recruits.

When I took up the full role of Mr. Green, I put on a green hat and sat down on a chair with my head in my hands and a despondent look. I adopted a position of needing help. By now for over an hour the children had imagined that they had acted with the duties and responsibilities of firefighters whose mission was to work together to help anyone in need. They were attentive when in role as Mr. Green I narrated what had happened to my cat who had been chased up a tree by a dog. I'd attached to the wall behind me a representation of a tree that I had drawn on chart paper. I'd placed a cat puppet on top of the door frame to look like it was at the top of the tree. Some children sat close asking me to clarify what had happened. Most began to talk among themselves about how as firefighters they might rescue the cat.

Coming out of the role of Mr. Green I left the hat on the chair as I joined the children and addressed them in a twilight role as if time had stopped. "What do you think we might do?" I didn't take on the fire chief role because then I would have had too much authority. I wanted to support the children as they came up with possible rescue plans not turn to their boss for ideas or approval. As needed, I helped each group begin to think through how they might use the equipment they had previously worked with to explore how they might rescue the cat: the ladder, the hose, and the axe. We had all imagined speeding in fire trucks to find Mr. Green. The children who had been working with the toy fire trucks now joined one of the other small groups. In that twilight role I managed children working in twos or threes helping them to try out and then agree on what ideas they wanted to show to the whole group. I asked the children which we rescue approach we might try first.

I was surprised that the boys with the axe wanted to chop down the tree! None of the children disagreed. So, I stood tall with arms raised as I took on the role of the tree. As one of the boys imagined swinging the axe I narrated what might happen. Showing a falling tree, I again took up a twilight role asking, "What might the tree feel?" Many children shook their heads. One girl said, "It would die." Another added, "So might the cat." The boys agreed that though an option, cutting down the tree was not the first approach we should use.

Before we could try out the other ideas, I switched focus to include a boy who had just arrived from tutoring. He'd noticed the wooden helicopter I had brought in. He wanted to imagine he was a police

officer. A few minutes later with me in a twilight role and him imagining he was flying the helicopter he assisted me in narrating the story of how the cat was rescued. With the other children we agreed that because of the wind from the helicopter the cat might have fallen. One child knew about rescue nets. I introduced a large piece of fabric that everyone held on to as I used the cat puppet to represent Mr. Green's pet falling but being caught.

Returning to take on the role of Mr. Green I cradled the cat that one of the girls brought to me. And switching briefly to the role of the Fire Chief I led us in a celebratory cheer.

MOVING BETWEEN THE FOUR POSITIONS

You can't use drama with students unless you are comfortable being in role. And switching between different roles as needed. Recognizing that when you are teaching with drama you can interact with the students across the four positions outlined above provides you with extensive flexibility in how you may position students as you interact and dialogue with them in and out of the different roles you may take up. In addition to using full role, using a twilight role allows you to explore more nuance in the understandings and competencies you're developing with the students.

Useful though Role Theory has been, it does not provide us with a framework for understanding the power relationships between and among teachers and students and thus how we and they may act, relate to one another, and dialogue to make sense and create meaning. Using Positioning Theory, we may conceptualize how, as we and the students interact, all are positioning one another with different social forces in terms of duties and responsibilities in relation to one another within the events of different storylines in a story world. Positioning Theory helps us understand more of the significance of how and why we might use drama in teaching and learning.

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received the CHOICE award. His 2022 book co-authored with Iona Towler-Evans also published by Routledge is *Humanizing Education with Dramatic Inquiry: In Dialogue with the Transformative Pedagogy of Dorothy Heathcote*.