

Drama Games: Establishing Equilibrium in Education

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the usefulness of drama games in educational settings and how they can be utilised for learning purposes. Despite the prescribed manner of the National Curriculum in England, the findings of this paper show how carefully structured and targeted drama games can benefit learners' experiences and support teachers in understanding a dramatic pedagogical approach that can work for them. Discussions around learning agency and creative ownership are crucial to understand how the practice contributes to both. Through an autoethnographic lens, the research model carefully documents with plans of the conducted workshops and reflections from the author of how the games have affected learning and engagement. Employing the use of Chris Johnston's (2005) Six Polarities, the research is narrowed to prove how drama games offer an equal opportunity for students to engage in learning material whilst developing skills such as teamwork, confidence in communication and

problem solving.

INTRODUCTION

I often get into a rut of playing the same games and am guilty of not utilising the full potential of the games in the wider context of my lesson... instead of tacking them on to the start or end of a lesson. (Holcombe, 2023)

At the time of writing, there is an astronomical shift taking place in the UK within the National Curricula of England and Wales. As the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) established a National Curriculum that squeezed out so many of the arts within the ten core subjects of the time. Recent critiques highlight that, “Internationally the PISA (Programme for International Teacher Assessment) introduction of a creative thinking framework from 2022 has suggested to some UK observers that England is out of step in its approach to its National Curriculum” (Tambling & Bacon, 2022, p. 20). In 2022, Wales took the final step of their educational reformation and introduced a curriculum of their own, where for the first time since 1988, the Area of Learning and Experience for the Expressive Arts was created, including dance and drama as subjects. So, between the two nations, there is a slow, but positive recognition of how drama and theatre can be incorporated as a tool for teaching. But in England, this requires the formal recognition of it rather than as subservient to the subject, English. But for those without an arts background, what is drama? The notions of the West End, of scripts, a rehearsed performance perhaps come to mind of those teachers. For those of us from a theatrical background, it is worth reminding it is difficult to define:

Too often, teachers have been given only very vague definitions, such as ‘Drama is Life!’ or ‘Drama is as intangible as personality itself...’ Alternatively there have been disarmingly simple statements, such as this one; ‘Drama is action, movement, a form of physical, including vocal, expression. Therefore it has a near relationship with physical education...’... The rigidity of these

positions not merely divided drama teachers from each other, but also cut them off from a recognition of the real needs of their pupils. (Watkins, 1981, p. 16)

As drama practitioners, it is worth reminding ourselves what a privileged position we are in, finding our own connection and meaning of what an art form is. This understanding allows us to translate for people of all ages and all backgrounds through our unique perspectives. But, as *The Arts in Schools Report* by Tambling & Bacon (2022) demonstrates, the implementation of arts-based approaches must not be limited to external practitioners (which then ultimately becomes a question of which schools' finances and affordability), but that teachers and their training must incorporate awareness of the arts. One of the key findings of the report is as follows:

The Report claims that to see education mainly as preparation for work would be to assume that the arts within education are unimportant unless children intend to make a career in them; this would be a mistake – they provide many benefits for children in terms of their creativity, empathy, understanding, achievement and capacity to innovate, and provide a natural and important means of exploring emotions, feelings, and values. (Tambling & Bacon, 2022, p. 8)

Recent research by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the Oracy Education Committee (OEC) have both now published findings that push forward the placement of drama as a tool for improving reading, writing and speaking skills. However, whilst both publications create a robust case for the implementation of dramatic approaches, I am more concerned how the repetitive nature of drama games can be a consistent, accessible and simpler way for non-specialist teachers to integrate the arts, therefore acknowledging how “Using drama in the classroom can be a challenging teaching strategy because teachers may not have the proper methods of managing the students” (Kasbary & Novak, 2024, p. 317).

Therefore, in this paper, using the writings of practitioners who place an importance in drama games, this paper aims to highlight how these approaches can actually make huge differences to the classroom environment to ensure inclusivity, promotes agency and can

work towards emboldening students; once these three foundations are laid, then perhaps empowerment and ownership of learning will be more likely. Whilst Samantha Marsden's *Teach Drama; How to make a living as a freelance drama teacher* (2016) suggests that whilst "drama games are great do be careful not to play drama games for your whole lesson" (2016, p. 43), I am going to argue that it is possible to do this and by doing so, creates a much more succinct approach for teachers to use, that becomes accessible and simple to facilitate.

For this paper, I will be using the reading of Chris Johnston, Jessica Swale, Geese Theatre and Brian Watkins. Many theatre practitioners' practice will be more advanced than games-based approaches, but complexity does not necessarily mean better. For teachers, promoting play through the game of drama might just offer a simpler approach that allows educational settings to begin to scratch the surface of implementing arts education. I will be referring to my own experiences as a facilitator for Liverpool based company, Altru Drama, and the readings of the above to pull together a critical reflection of how drama games can establish an equilibrium in educational spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From my practice and theoretical framework, one of the key readings used in this paper will be Chris Johnston's *House of Games; Making theatre from everyday life* (2005). A biblical publication that demonstrates the beauty of games that evoke the nature of human beings connecting and bouncing off each other. His work of the *Six Polarities* (which inspires the analytical approach) gives rise to an approach that encourages practitioners to carefully think about how the chosen game impacts the workshop and questions the purpose of a game at a given time. This particular book "deals with the drama workshop experience, how a group works together privately behind closed doors, rather than how it meets an audience" (Johnston, 2005, p. xiii) and offers both theoretical and practical solutions to how a drama facilitator can manage a room of individuals and to bring a communal experience. Within classrooms, just as there are in community groups, there must be an awareness for how conflict can disrupt the space and flow of a lesson. From Johnston's time working with prisoners, young people at risk and those on the edges of society,

his theory can inform classroom practice. Drama can be used “to improve their social and communication skills, express themselves and perhaps learn better how to managed emotions” (2005, p. 10). This aspect of drama goes hand in hand nicely with the idea of celebration. Even the smaller successes require celebration to achieve the larger aims. In my experience, games enable the opportunities for young people to play and create in imagined worlds. Whilst as a facilitator I can bring my own stories, the magic happens “When the group makes up its own stories, they begin to celebrate what is culturally distinctive and unique about their world” (2005, p. 11). Influence of Johnston’s other significant work, *The Improvisation Game* (2006), will offer further clarity to Johnston’s philosophy that can influence the workshop leader and the importance of sacrificing control to offer agency in the creative room. Therefore, Johnston’s understanding of how to curate invested, and meaningful drama workshop sessions is incredibly important to underline the practice of others.

Whilst many of the drama games I use may be common practice for many theatre practitioners, for those who are unfamiliar, Jessica Swale’s *Drama Games for Classrooms and Workshops* (2009) is an excellent source of games appropriate for educational settings. The book is introduced with a clear justification for why drama games are so useful in the classroom. This publication, like Johnston’s and Watkins’s, can also contribute to justifying the difference between drama and theatre, which from my professional experience in the field is still not completely understood. Other views of Swale’s publication suggest she “has written an extraordinarily helpful compendium and guide to drama games that will be a valuable help to directors, teachers and workshop leaders” (Swale, 2009, p. vii), showing a wider acknowledgment of the use of games within the industry. Swale has divided her games “into sections that enable you to see the specific focus of each game easily, allowing you to plan where it might be best suited in a workshop” (Swale, 2009, p. xviii) which demonstrates the potency and power these games possess, challenging the perceptions they are simply a nicety or add-on. Finally, the inclusion of the publication will offer readers a pinpointed source for the games I refer to throughout this paper.

The final author that will prove crucial to this paper is Brian Watkins (1981) with his views on the relationship between *Drama and Education* which will offer some context as to the potential strains in

the relationship between the two elements. Whilst the publication is 44 years old, I encourage to remind readers that with the 1988 ERA putting the brakes on compulsory drama education for ages 3-16, I would argue that many of Watkins' observations are reflective of the opposing stances and prejudices seen back in the 1980's. The aim of this publication is quite simple:

... an attempt to turn this tide of indifference by advocating that Drama is an indispensably powerful learning experience. Its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning enjoyable, rigorous and obviously relevant to the whole realm of social life from which it takes its model. (1981, p. 11)

Watkins clearly sets out a path of definition and clarity within his publication and it is the lack of clarity that still exists within the education system of how drama, and I should say the wider arts practices, are more than a mere nicety. I have started to see some drama games used by teachers or teachers recognising the activities I am using; this paper aims to push those teachers further. In Wales, the shift to a "child-centred approach is a rarity, for the norm is reflects training that stresses for the need for the teacher to always be in control of everything that happens in the classroom" (Watkins, 1981, p. 28). The latter still happens in England; the fear of children's noise and demands for silence are aspects for some teachers where control is grasped too much, resulting in control being misplaced. This means, that within the room, there is not an equilibrium between everyone, for those who are silenced may actually be co-operating. But noise is perceived as defiance. Later, I will example a very simple game that explores this complexity. But for there to be equilibrium, there must be a democratic model, of which drama can deliver on. Before introducing some key considerations for the reader, let us take forward Watkins' last point on how "drama serves truly as a democratic model, for it is above all else consensual. It both celebrates social values and challenges them, thereby assisting the process of social change" (1981, pp. 30-31). This can only happen when the prescription of the current curriculum in England explicitly emphasises "the lesson plans are teacher-centres, authoritarian models posing as open-ended lessons" that focuses more so on "what should be done but not how to do it" (Watkins, 1981, p. 31).

DEFINING DEFINITIONS

Before divulging my findings, briefly, a discussion around key words should be considered when discussing what drama can do for young people's learning experiences. The two key areas explored for contextual purposes are *Agency to Occupation* and *Emboldenment before Empowerment*. For readers, this will just frame where my thinking behind the use of games stems from.

Agency to Occupation

Tim Prentki & Nicola Abraham (2021) offer a succinct and clear definition of agency.

To be in a position of agency means to be able to act to alter the circumstances of one's life, rather than being dependent upon the actions of others. One of the benefits of applied theatre is that it can confer agency upon participants by opening a space where the individual can rehearse an action to test whether it does, indeed, lead to change. (2021, p. 43)

However, *how* we reach the position where young people can choose to take agency within creative practices is this paper's focus. As Chris Johnston (2005) suggests, if a workshop leader simply sacrifices the space to their participants without any structure, the risk that "Some in the group may feel upset or taken advantage of" (2005, p. 25) increases. The latter half of Prentki & Abraham's definition is often forgot, in that agency is only fulfilled when that freedom to participate leads to a change. This could be in understanding, in knowledge, of awareness, of attitudes and in empathy. This fulfilment of meaning making derives from "the successful implementation of an idea or project that has achieved its end-goals" (Prentki & Abraham, 2021, p. 45).

But is agency a result or is there more? Fixed boundaries ensure that the opportunity is fair but, more importantly, rules can contribute to the creation of a collective as the facilitator and other members of the groups continuously challenge them. What must then evolve from agency is occupation. Johnston (2017) argues how drama in theatrical spaces could be seen as "'theatreing it all down'...[whereby] Visitors to the theatre expect to be surprised and are happy to be so" (2017, p.

115) potentially suggesting a sense, upon entering a venue, of complicity and causality. But for drama to work effectively, where questions are posed and challenges are presented, agency must in some sense feel like a protest. The presence of drama within a school classroom works against what is currently there, which is a curated lump of sameness, as Watkins (1981) observes:

‘Crowds, praise and power’ make the environment in which learning takes place and are themselves a major part of what is learned. They represent areas of social control to which we learn to respond and comply, and in the process we lose our individuality and the significance of the individual experience. (p. 27)

Watkins eloquently argues how the broad approach to ensure productiveness is achieved results in “an-all pervasive lethargy” (1981, p. 27) which creates a sense of apathy towards learning. However, taking Johnston’s approach, the encouragement of occupation – of the classroom, of their learning, of useful knowledge – will “rightfully return an emphasis on the agency dimension of performance, provoking reflection, conversation and a celebration of dissident thought” (2017, p. 117).

But this transition from agency to occupation must be nurtured and facilitated very carefully. If the teacher attempts this from a dictatorial position, then “a profound and affective learning experience can be experienced as ‘bad’ or troublesome to children not familiar with learning paradigms other than cognitive absorption and consumption of factual information” (Rasmussen, 2000). The global outlook, suggested by Benjamin Bolden, Sean Corcoran, Tiina Kukkonen, Jeffrey Newberry, Nathan Rickey (2024), wishes to reflect “UNESCO’s concept of transformative education unites education initiatives that advance peace, support human rights and promote sustainable development” (2024, p. 11). This aim is best achieved through an “arts education [that] can invite humanistic approaches to being, contributing and flourishing as transformed citizens of the future” (2024, p. 13). Therefore, the arts are the way forward, but how can teachers use the arts using simple methods? First, we must consider the pedagogy of a facilitator versus a teacher.

Pedagogical Shifts: Facilitator vs Teacher

Blair (2020) identifies pedagogical approaches, highlighting that in most educational establishments is 'Leading from the Front' is most common practice. In this approach, "students are shown the 'right' way to do something and then asked to follow this process in their own learning" and to this end, a predictable outcome means that "the teacher, who knows what the end point looks like, provides them with the necessary skills in order for them to be successful" (Blair, 2020, p. 51). However, this approach restricts agency and potential choice. If the teacher, instead, is 'Directing from the rear', then potentially this shift of role can allow for more fruitful arts-based education. To many teachers, this sacrifice may be difficult, but that is where drama games come into their own. The rules of a drama game are similar to the establishing of parameters of an assessment. In both instances, the role of teacher must evolve into "a shepherding role – keeping an overview and nudging the students back on track when they stray too far. This is often best done through questioning individuals" (Blair, 2020, p. 52). This way, students can individually explore and try to solve problems whilst their focus is maintained within a workable boundary. Analysis of the facilitator's pedagogy will return later in discussions.

Emboldenment before Empowerment

The next comparative definition I want to establish is this idea of *Emboldenment before Empowerment*. This aim to *empower* children, I believe, has in some sense lost its meaning. Repetition of the word has relegated it to a passive verb in informal discussions and thrown around in policies. For example, embedding the word in a list of jargon for policy on transformative education from UNESCO:

...involves co-created teaching and learning that recognizes and valorises the dignity and diversity of learners in educational settings, eliminates all barriers to their learning and motivates and **empowers** them to reflect critically, become agents of change and protagonists of their own future, enabling informed decision-making and actions at the individual, community, local, national, regional and global levels, including through approaches such as global citizenship education, education for sustainable

development and human rights education, among others, that support the building of peaceful, just, inclusive, equal, equitable, healthy and sustainable societies. (Bolden et al, 2024, p. 11)

Whilst 'empowers' can mean to give the ability, I often wonder whether there are steps prior to this aim of empowerment. In terms of language, perhaps the Welsh Government have used enable:

The Curriculum for Wales guidance promotes collaboration and cross-disciplinary planning, learning and teaching, both within and across Areas. This will enable learners to build connections across their learning and combine different experiences, knowledge and skills. (Welsh Government, 2024)

The teachers' role, in Wales, is now about allowing freedom for learners to construct relationships with subjects in their own subjective way. However, this leniency has brought some criticism, which the then Welsh Education Minister, Mr Jeremy Miles responded:

What it does is provide a way for teachers to be able to provide a curriculum which works for the group of young people in front of them in the classroom and is much more bespoke and puts trust in the hands of teachers and what we do know from the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] is the key difference is excellent teaching. (Williams, 2023)

So, whilst in one part of the UK, the curriculum has opened up for opportunities of enabling, there is not yet the realisation in how to transition from enablement to empowerment. To feel empowered is to take risks. Artistic practices can encourage risks, helping participants to learn and become familiar with the mantra that "In order to be a creative artist you must risk failure", and 'Go out and fail, not succeed. Efficiency is the death of theatre'" (Barker, 2010, p. 3).

METHODOLOGY

For this small-scale research paper, I will be using my own personal reflections in the field, working in mainstream primary school settings where I have been conducting workshops using drama games-based

approaches to explore a variety of topics with young people. For the reader, the workshop plans can be seen in the appendices:

- 17.01.2025 - Shang Dynasty workshops delivered for pupils in year 4 in Quinton, West Midlands (Duration: 130 minutes, 2 sessions) – Appendix A.
- 16.01.2025 - Poetry workshop delivered for pupils in years 1-2 in Hoylake, Wirral (Duration: 75 minutes, 3 sessions) – Appendix B.

By selecting these two examples, readers will see the strengths of drama games in various settings for different participants: varying ages, geographical locations and social contexts in both cases. Whilst data from children and/or staff is absent, the autoethnographical approach incorporates my practice, impact of activities and reflections. Therefore, readers will be able to see how the use of:

... “storytelling, showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice to produce accessible texts that describe [...] patterns, with the aim to reach a more diverse mass audience than the traditional research readership.” [49:766]. Attention to detail in the writing and a focus on the authorial voice are central to conveying the meaning of what is uncovered during a first-person method study. (Desjardins et al, 2021, p. 4)

As the paper disseminates how teachers can use this approach, then I believe the storytelling nature will support the dissection of the workshops into digestible chunks. There will be sceptical views of this approach, but it is important that more researchers’ experiences and other practices are heard and encourage readers “to acknowledge the value of subjectivity and diversity of practices that first-person research entails” (Desjardins et al, 2021, p. 7).

The methodology will aim to highlight the strengths of this approach, but I am also aware of the bias that could arise. But the aim of the research is to prove how this methodological approach shows how “the line between the personal and the professional gets blurred. Our opinion, point of view, decisions, and mistakes can be seen as a valuable starting point for learning” (Desjardins et al, 2021, p. 8).

ANALYSIS

For this analysis, the application of three of Chris Johnston's (2005) *Six Polarities* will be applied:

- The Fixed and the Free
- The Centre and the Edge
- The Individual and the Collective

Firstly, by shifting rules and boundaries, new freedoms can be found within the activities. Both sessions comprise of a combination games and exercises that constantly keeps participants engaged and challenged. These aspects of a workshop may fall in the Fixed and the Free polarity. Johnston's warning of approaching the commencement of a workshop rings with my practice since I began my academic journey:

At the beginning of a project, there is an apparent freedom. Nothing has been set. We can do what we like... But this freedom has no meaning... It's probably quite good fun but after the initial excitement has worn off we may to start to feel bored... So, we need to introduce some fixed elements to regulate the activities. (Johnston, 2005, pp. 24-25)

As a drama practitioner, I am extremely aware how children have the right "to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations, 1990) and to do so freely. But for children to engage in meaningful play, "Maintaining structures enables the group to dive, and safely return" (Johnston, 2005, p. 28). To introduce these structures, a behaviour management tool is extremely useful.

Curating Playful Spaces; Agreeing to Rules

A behaviour management tool is not simply about bringing about silence so that my voice can be heard. It is instead bringing the temperatures down to a manageable level. As the workshop plans in the appendices highlight, my main two are *Frogs in the Pond* and *Don't clap this one back!* Both are drama games that encourage listening. *Frogs in the Pond*, once explained, often has one or two children

making the connection to the classic, *Simon Says*... but the familiarity with the structure is crucial. But what is established is a dramatic dialogue, which this becomes a part of. Similarly, with *Don't Clap this one back*, I have seen the group become cohesive to my individual rhythm. When the rhythm of the game's namesake is clapped out, the most remarkable reactions take place. There are those moments when the whole class respond at once, recognising the rhythm. This results in a communal coming together that they were not caught out by the stranger. However, on other occasions, this game results in a long and slow realisation when the forbidden rhythm is repeated. Those who have realised, as they did in Quinton, notice my wry smile, heightening their awareness beyond their self. Those oblivious soon begin to realise and become attentive to their peers. This occurrence is better than achievement of the exercise, providing laughter at mistakes. This latter scenario is an example of "an act of emotional generosity. It can't be done without warmth, affection and good feeling" (Johnston, 2005, p. 72) whereby failure is laughed at early on. What emerges "from *within* the group rather than from the leadership" signifies "they may be more powerful in building a group identity" (Johnston, 2005, p. 75). Some group members are keen to ensure their peers are not made a fool of.

Creative Collectives Formed, Play Begins

A sense of collectivity is ignited, and the first part of the methodology is established. As Johnston suggests, "Without an appropriate methodology, there is always the danger of the workshop being hijacked" (2005, p. 68) and these tools become agreements moving forward. The next step, pending on time, is the Name Game/Ice Breaker. Whilst Name Games are incredibly useful, they do not always contribute to the workshop in prompt manner. As you can see from Appendix A, for the year 4's, I have adapted the game, *Name Tag* to ensure that the game "demands quick thinking and excellent awareness skills" (Swale, 2009, p. 36). However, taking from Clark Baim, Sally Brookes and Alun Mountford (2002), this game places focus upon an individual. As Geese Theatre allude, "In general, groups work best starting with a low focus, gradually moving toward higher focus work in moderate stages" (Baim et al, 2002, p. 31). But in this year 4 class, there was a clear sense of excitement, so what was needed was a game where someone was 'it', harnessing that energy

from the off. That first volunteer sparks something amazing... foolery. They have modelled how to step away from the circle, from the herd. As Johnston argues, the “vision of the fool is that individual who is emotionally committed to the process of play within theatre... an individual cannot progress without abandoning the critical ego” (2005, p. 33). This is supported by the fact that the children are aware that the role of Di Xin can be passed. Baim et al note how it is important “to consider whether the focus is Passing, meaning that it briefly passes from one person to the next” (2002, p. 31). Even that small commitment from the start already suggests that by “coming into the centre always involves some element of emotional risk. It’s. About saying ‘Yes, I will make myself vulnerable’” (Johnston, 2005, p. 35). This also welcomed the idea of losing not being a catastrophe, and that sometimes failing was good. A simple adaptation of *The Egg Game* (Johnston, 2010, p. 37) allows for knowledge to be shared—the myth of Jiandi—which demonstrates how as a group, we are now beginning to dig deeper into the theme, but once more, challenges the “meritocratic social system” (Johnston, 2010, p. 37) as the idea of power coming from merit is reduced to insignificance. This again helps students to move on from failure quickly.

In contrast, with the Poetry participants, the approach still aims to access foolery. However, using low focus activities “means that the whole group is not looking at any particular group member for longer than a brief moment” (Baim et al, 2002, p. 31). Instead, the Ice breakers are more focused on physical exercises. The use of games to warm up creates a collective focal and committal point: me. With much younger participants (5–7-year-olds), the facilitator must show their foolery.

Games like *Rubber Chicken* (Swale, 2009, p. 4), a version of *Ooey, Goey, Chewy Gum* (Swale, 2009, p. 18) and *Boom Chick-a Boom* (Swale, 2009, p. 22), encourage the facilitator to teach by modelling, “In other words, acting yourself, joining in as an equal but relying on students to watch you and to learn by watching” (Johnston, 2006, p. 288). One of the key advantages is that it “lessens the sense of fearfulness and anxiety in the room through embodying the playful spirit in their own contributions” (Johnston, 2006, p. 290) which then unlocks a collective acceptance of playfulness.

Play Pushes the Boundaries

In both workshops, the shift of focus returns to the facilitator. In those first 30 minutes, behavioural parameters are agreed and play is sparked. *Commands*—which will have varying names such as Johnston’s *Walk, Clap, Freeze* (2005, p. 119)—is about now freeing that built up energy. Freedom is offered when the exercise “involves the facilitator giving instructions to the group to move freely about the room” (Johnston, 2005, p. 118). The introduction of actions as listed in both workshop plans, then introduce those fixed elements and re-establishes the role of THE COACH (Johnston, 2006, p. 290). The game then seeks to up the stakes by reversing the orders, like Geese Theatre’s *Walk means Run* (Baim et al, 2002, p. 85). Whilst simple, the aims of these games are to heighten awareness of thinking processes and of others in the room. Participants may start questioning their self-control; “How easy or difficult is it to control automatic thinking or automatic actions?” (Baim et al, 2002, p. 85). For participants of all ages, this is necessary because when the time comes for activities with more lenient boundaries, where they are creating as a team, we need our participants to be aware of how their actions affect others.

The workshop now progresses to develop Knowledge and introduce Performative activities that begin the handover of agency. Participants are now buzzing, have shown commitment and taken direction; now be generous and offer that enthusiasm back. In the Shang Dynasty workshop (Appendix A), you will see how *Shaky Shaky High Five, 3,2,1, Character* (both of which are Altru Drama inspired games) and *Tableaux* (Swale, 2009, pp. 80-81) offer some freedoms in choices and suggestions. Both Altru Drama games shift the facilitator to the sidelines now, and teaching is conducted “By explanation—by using words to outline the hypotheses, instructions and critiques. It could involve ‘side-coaching’ —advising while the [game] is in progress” (Johnston, 2006, p. 288). As such, as a facilitator, I have shifted from the centre and now respond “to signals from the edge [which] is part of holistic awareness. In a way, peripheral vision is emblematic of awareness itself” (Johnston, 2005, p. 36). Structures remain and competition against countdowns or each other still spur the participants to commit. But the participants are now occupying the centre of the workshop, it is from them that the workshop moves forward. This is where we see how the Centre and the Edge speak to one another; one cannot exist without the other. In Figure 1, readers

can see how the use of games effects the idea of the Centre and the Edge.

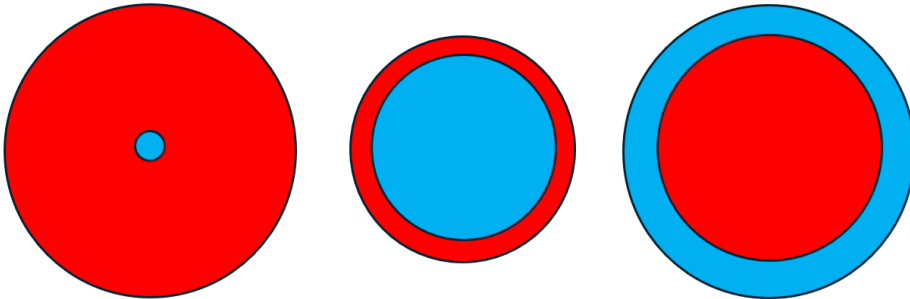


Figure 7: Image represents the three stages of how the Centre and the Edge works in my practice. Red indicates the participants, blue indicates the facilitator.

The facilitator, marked in blue, begins by occupying the centre, knowing the plan and working with suppositions of how the games will provoke participants.

After the ice breakers, children are moving towards the centre, as games free up their minds to the idea of drama. This can encourage them to take greater, creative risks. As the workshop progresses, the facilitator can allow the rules to take effect, meaning they are slowly moving to the edge, rather than gripping to the role of leader. By the time the workshop has reached Knowledge or Performance stages, the workshop is now far more occupied by the participants, without them, there is no substance. But structure of the workshop is continuously supported by the facilitator on the edge, who is now in that coach-like role.

Relaxed Performative Outputs

The class now have occupied the creative space, they understand it is up to them to perform. The workshop can shift into the final performance activities, where a test of their emboldenment arrives. Over the course of the workshop, through competition, through risk taking, through teamwork, they have built their confidence to engage and make small choices. In these workshops, the last section often thinks about how a stimulus can provoke creation. Once more returning to Johnston, the final stage of teaching is now “By provocation—this means joining in sporadically around the edge of the

[activity]... to motor the action in the way you want it to go” (2006, p. 288). Both workshops used texts for participants to respond to. Both developed on the practice of *Tableaux*; repetition of the exercise increases its value as a useful dramatic tool. The only difference were the texts they responded to; Year 4’s responded to the events leading to the Downfall of the Shang Dynasty, Year 1’s & 2’s responded to the poem, *A Dark Dark House*. Here, I conclude on the Fixed and the Free. The stories are the rules of the dramatic world that the participants respond to. The continued focus on *Tableaux* (whether as a *Whoosh* in-the-round or in the guise of *Illustration Station* (Swale, 2009, p. 132)), what can be seen is how “The imposition of rules has meant the group can stop worrying about certain tasks. If words are banned – now I can have fun with movement. If planning is disallowed, now I can be spontaneous” (Johnston, 2005, p. 26). These boundaries do not restrict but can tear back the onus on performance, which may trigger unnecessary anxiety. In the Shang Dynasty workshop, that extra layer of the *Soundscape* (Swale, 2009, pp. 28-29) is introduced to show how performance is made up of layers and it is carefully constructed. The final aspect of this “encourages the group to create a composition as a group, and often results in impressive work. It can also be a creative starting point for building improvisation scenes, and a useful tool for devising” (Swale, 2009, p. 29). Here, I use it towards the end because I want the children to achieve a sense of performance but want them to achieve something simple well. This avoids:

Disappointment and confusion [that] can arise when objectives are set beyond the abilities of the group. You run out of time trying to achieve them. Similar disappointment happens when dramatic styles are adopted which the group are unfamiliar with and cannot quickly learn. (Johnston, 2005, p. 69)

These are the implications when drama is used ‘behind close doors’ —starting from where the participants are, the construction of a creative group produces learners who want to attend schools and want to learn in their learning environment. These games-based approaches deliver for the individuals and the collective as “there are rewards. They lie in complicity which is achieved in teamwork. And the paradox is, if teamwork is put first participants discover a new, stronger individuality for themselves” (Johnston, 2005, p. 37).

CONCLUSION

Reflective analysis shows the use of games, carefully chosen and slightly adapted, can make for a strong cross-curricular design that deliver on the subject and on student development. Of course, I have had the experience of using these tools and have seen how other theatre practitioners use games to engage and embolden children in community and theatrical spaces. But the games must constantly shift; in my experience, 'out' games or a series of competitive games simply stir up that meritocratic society once more. If teachers are not familiar with arts, then perhaps with the idea of games with rules they may find familiarity. As you can see, games on average last for 10-20 minutes each. A games-based workshop allows a practitioner to keep changing the boundaries for which participants can bounce from. As a facilitator, different games require different roles from us as leaders; be it the 'participant who knows', the director or the coach. But by being able to shift our position pedagogically, we can first spark the commitment to take risks and shed any fear or anxiety, thus removing egos and eventually, find ourselves on the sidelines as the players play. I shall leave you with Watkins' definition of drama games and what they do. My experience and reflections should show how drama games are far more than an attachment at top or tale of a lesson; they are meaningful and offer development:

... the operation of individual skills and the unity of group purpose. In the drama game, as perhaps in any game, the skills are exercised within the sanction of the group's agreement to play that game. This is because the game is essentially a social experience, and the drama, relying as it does upon 'the willing suspension of disbelief', is perhaps the most social of games. And though we may talk of the individual and his development through drama, we have to bear in mind that the social context of the experience will affect the freedom of that individuality. (Watkins, 1981, p. 22)

Appendices

Appendix A – Shang Dynasty Workshop Plan

(Plans represent what was conducted, not initially planned)

| EXPLORE WORKSHOP PLAN | | | |
|---|--|--|---------|
| Year group / class: Year 4 | | Workshop length: 130 minutes x 2 | |
| Theme or topic: Shang Dynasty | | Beginning / Middle / End of topic: Beginning | |
| Type of activity | Title of activity / Name of game: | Description (if required) | Time |
| Introduction <i>(Please include behaviour management info here)</i> | Hi, I'm Dave. I'm a director from Altru Drama... Today we're going to look at the history and important events of the Shang Dynasty, which began in 1600 BC and lasted for over 500 years, coming to an end in 1046 BC. | Introducing of Behaviour Management Tool: Don't clap this one back! | 5 mins |
| Name Game | Name x3 | Say your name 3 times, nice and loud. | 2 mins |
| | Name Tag | Instead of the zombie, it is Di Xin, the | 10 mins |

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| | | evil emperor looking for his next slaves to build his tower. If Di Xin tags you, you're in. The only way to save yourself is to nominate someone else, Di Xin will begin walking towards them. If they are tagged, then they become the new Di Xin. | |
| | The Egg Game | <p>Players will find a random partner. They will then play a game of rock, papers, scissors, shoot! Each time they win, they are promoted. Losing results in relegation.</p> <p>To reflect the myth of Jiandi who:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Egg – the lowest level, she swallowed an egg. 2. Blackbird – the egg was of a blackbird. 3. Baby – Jiandi had a baby, called Xie. 4. Emperor – Xie would be the first ancestor of the Shang. | 10 mins |

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| | | 5. Shan Di – the winners, the supreme god in the Shang Belief system. | |
| Scene Setter | Commands | Go, Stop, Reach High, Reach Low, Clap, Jump. Reverse orders. | 5 mins |
| | Stage Directions and Actions | <p>Introducing Stage Directions, ensuring theatre skills are learnt as well as subject focus. Having established the stage directions, they must create images representing:</p> <p>Centre Stage – Dynasty – powerful family pose</p> <p>Upstage – Yellow River</p> <p>Downstage – Tomb of Fu Hao</p> <p>Stage Left – Soldiers at the Battle of Mingtao</p> <p>Stage Right – Festivals for the gods</p> | 10 mins |
| Knowledge | Shaky Shaky High Five | Learning a sequence to remember | 10 – 15 |

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--|--------------|
| Games | | the different gods, the sequence always begins Shaky Shaky (2 handshakes) and High Five. Suggestions of movements from children incorporated into sequence. | mins |
| | 3,2,1 Character | <p>Participants stood in a circle facing away from the practitioner. The practitioner describes a character, physically and emotionally, and the participant take on this role. When the practitioner counts down from 3 to 1, they reveal their characters to everyone else and the practitioner.</p> <p>For the Shang dynasty topic:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emperor 2. Wealthy Powerful Ruling classes 3. Soldiers 4. Priests 5. Traders 6. Craftsman 7. Farmers | 10 – 15 mins |

| | | | |
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| | | <p>8. Slaves 9. Prisoners</p> | |
| | Tableaux | <p>After participants have found their groups using huggy bear, in groups of 4/5, they must demonstrate the 4 key aspects of tableaux/freeze frames:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facial Expressions 2. Use of body 3. Levels 4. Stillness <p>Initially starting with shapes, modern objects and settings before delving into Shang dynasty settings: royal palace, farmers, blacksmiths, marketplaces, prisons, battlefield.</p> | 10-15 mins |
| Performance Activity 1 | Whoosh | <p>Participants sit in a circle. In the circle, they are audience. In the centre, is our stage. I will invite actors up on stage to create freeze frames of the scenes I am describing. When</p> | 15-20 mins |

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| | | I say whoosh, clear the stage. | |
| Performance Activity 2 | Archaeologists' scene – soundscape | Brush, brush, brush, brush. Dig, dig. (Long blow) Ooooooooooooo! (On clap, everyone together:) FOUND IT! | 20 – 30 mins |

Appendix B – Poetry Workshop Plan

(Plans represent what was conducted, not initially planned)

| EXPLORE WORKSHOP PLAN | | | |
|--|---|---|-------------|
| Year group / class: Year 1/2 | | Workshop length: 75 mins x 3 sessions | |
| Theme or topic: Poetry | | Beginning / Middle / End of topic: N/A | |
| Type of activity | Title of activity / Name of game: | Description (if required) | Time |
| Introduction <i>(Please include behaviour management info here)</i> | <p>Good morning/afternoon, my name is Dave, and I'm a theatre director from Altru Drama, who are based over in Liverpool.</p> <p>At Altru, we use drama games, exercises and techniques to explore many topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. History 2. Plays 3. Us and the World around us | <p>Introduction of Behaviour management tool:</p> <p>Frogs in the Pond (Hands on the floor)</p> <p>Frogs on lily pads (Hands on laps)</p> <p>Frogs on the Rocks (Hands on shoulders)</p> <p>Frogs in Space (Hands in the air)</p> | 5 mins |

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|--------------------|--|--|--------|
| | But today, we are looking at Poetry and how to perform poetry. | | |
| Ice Breaker | Warm Up | <p>As actors, we have to warm up three very important tools:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Face – Stretch/Scrunch, Ooey Chewy Gum, Jaw Shake 2. Voice – BDG/GDB, Unique New York, New York Unique, Irish wristwatch. 3. Body – Rubber Chicken, Penguin Race | 5 mins |
| Ice Breaker | Warm up songs | <p>I like the flowers, I like the daffodils.</p> <p>I like the mountains, I love the rolling hills.</p> <p>I like the fireside when the lights are low,</p> <p>Singing a doo-wop, a doo-wop, a doo-wop, a doo doo doo doo.</p> | 5 mins |

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|-------------------------------|---|--|---------|
| Scene Setter | Commands | Go, Stop, Reach High, Reach Low, Clap, Jump. Reverse orders. | 5 mins |
| | The Bears Are Coming | Happy lumberjacks, chop, chop, chop. When the bears enter, they must freeze. | 10 mins |
| Performance Activity 1 | Tiffy, taffy, toffee by Michael Rosen | Use a poem with repeated structures and add actions which we performed together in a circle. | 15 mins |
| Performance Activity 2 | Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat with Makaton Actions | This time introducing how poetry can be told using different languages | 10 mins |
| Performance Activity 3 | Illustration Station to A Dark Dark House | By using 10 seconds to make..., introduce the rules of Freeze Frames and what is expected. Then begin to shift from silly freezes (shapes, toasters, on the beach) into images seen within the poem. Once they have created these, ask them to create them when they hear them in the poem | 15 mins |

SUGGESTED CITATION

Humphreys, D. (2025). Drama games: Establishing equilibrium in education. *ArtsPraxis*, 12 (1), pp. 62-90.

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Based in North Wales, Dave Humphreys is currently carrying out research for his PhD at Edge Hill University. The focus of that current research is into the relationship between Theatre-in-Education (TiE) and the Welsh Curriculum. The research involves up to eight theatre companies in Wales whose work will create a series of sturdy case studies in order create blueprint for England and the UK Labour Government and to persuade Arts Council of Wales to reconsider funding for this artform. Having studied BA (Hons) Drama and Theatre Studies and MA Drama at the University of Chester, he has since narrowed his focus on Applied Theatre practices and TiE in Wales. Humphreys has worked with companies such as Theatr Clwyd, Altru Drama and Hijinx Theatre as a facilitator and tutor.