

Drama Education for Student Empowerment: The Impact of the Humanities' Disciplinary Values on Practice

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For millennia, dramatic writing and performance have allowed people and communities to share stories across the full range of human experiences and emotions. Drama is powerful literary and psychological tool for critically understanding the lives and perspectives of others while reflecting on what it means to live in society. In this paper, we will argue that drama education constitutes an ideal vehicle for both transmitting key values of the humanities and developing a student's sense of personal empowerment.

A Brief History of the Humanities as a Discipline

Use of the term "humanities" in reference to a disciplinary inquiry binding various interests of literature, philosophy, history, art, and music was "intermittent and inconsistent" until the 1930s (Marcus, 2006, p.18). The individual inheritances of the discipline extend back to antiquity - grammar, rhetoric, and logic were taught in ancient Greece, though the three were not formally grouped as the trivium until the Middle Ages. In combination with the medieval quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy), these subjects became the seven "ideal and interlocking" pillars of the liberal arts (Russell, 1989, p.210).

Early Renaissance humanists advocated for the study of classical histories and literature for their academic and moralizing values. Petrarch, traditionally credited as the father of humanism, was a 14th Century Italian scholar and collector of Greek and Latin literary and historical manuscripts. His poetry and letters frequently engaged in fictional communication with classical figures such as Cicero, Virgil, and Seneca (Highet, 1985; Russel, 1989). Petrarch's study of human thought and secular action through metaphorically "speak[ing] with the dead" in an academic era otherwise preoccupied with scholarship in mathematics, natural sciences, and theology represented a major

axiological shift (Harpham, 2013, p. 523). Many would point to Petrarch's work as the formal beginning of the Renaissance because of a new focus on cultural and historical texts (Highet, 1985; Russel, 1989).

Petrarch's work would largely inspire Leonardo Bruni, whose *Historiae florentini populi* would serve as a fundamental model for the modern approach to writing history (Yoran, 2007, p. 327). Instead of relying on theology and wondrous historical tales, Bruni realistically appraised historical events by "postulating causal relationships among [discrete historical facts]" (Yoran, 2007, p. 327). For Bruni, these causal relationships could then be employed to contemplate contemporary social or political problems through an informed historical perspective. Renewed interest in *libertas*, or "the liberty of the political body from external domination, as well as the liberty of each citizen," gave rise to system of civic humanism (Yoran, 2007, p. 329). In civic humanism, citizens were encouraged to live an active and mindful political life that rejected medieval explanations of social and political inequalities anchored in an immutable "natural or divine order of things" (Yoran, 2007, p. 333). Civic humanists drew upon the collective and historical understandings of the humanities to delegitimize older political rhetoric which supported power structures simply because they had "always" been that way. The subjects we now group as the humanities were, as a result of the work of civic humanists, conceived of as modes of inquiry into examining presuppositions of a nation's sociopolitical status quo.

Scholarship in the individual fields of literature, philosophy, history, art, and music would flourish over the coming centuries, but each was considered independent and formally organized as its own department of knowledge (Marcus, 2006). Marcus argued that a combination of the decline in

the teaching of moral philosophy at traditionally religious institutions and the increased popularity of college courses integrating free electives in the early 20th Century produced an educational void. This void resulted in a “widely felt need for some secular substitute for the religion-based moral education” (Marcus, 2006, p.16) that had been central to the ideologies of many colleges. The humanities as a conjoined approach to a new moralizing education emerged to fill this void.

Contemporary Views of the Humanities in the United States

In 1945, Harvard University’s Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society authored a report in response to the totalitarian regimes of World War II that investigated what sort of education was appropriate for a free society. Though originally an internal publication, it would later be widely disseminated as a defense of general education. Concerning the humanities, the committee found that the humanities enabled “man to understand man in relation to himself” (Harvard University, 1950, p.58). Literature was highlighted in the report for providing “indirect access to the potentialities and norms of living as they are presented to the mental eye by the best authors” (Harvard University, 1950, p. 107). Marcus (2006) argued that the publication of this report in combination with an influx of European refugee scholars allowed the humanities to be understood as an “imperiled but essential bulwark against barbarism” (p. 19) by the 1950s.

Contrary to the efforts of Harvard’s report, social anxieties surrounding the potential for global nuclear war in the 1950s and 1960s led to increased emphasis on science education in the United States. The National Commission on the Humanities authored a report in 1963 regarding the state of the humanities in America. The Commission found that “emphasis placed on science endangered the study of the humanities” (National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH], 2013). The end result of the Commission was the founding of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965. Today, their mission continues to rely on a strong association between a successful democratic society

and the humanities: “Because democracy demands wisdom, NEH serves and strengthens our republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans” (NEH, 2014).

Harpham’s Disciplinary Values of the Humanities

Establishing a clear link between the values of the humanities and the values of drama education is a critical aspect of this paper. Harpham’s (2013) characteristics of the humanities include resistance to strong disciplinary divisions of knowledge, the importance of the subjective, and the tendency to create suspicion instead of certainty. Harpham claimed that the humanities allow for an “extraordinary prominence given to subjective actions such as judgments, intentions, understandings, evaluations, and interpretations. In the humanities, but not in other disciplines, mental acts such as these are both the object and the end of scholarship” (Harpham, 2013, p. 519). A cornerstone of arts education is rejection of objective interpretation – a piece’s intention may be understood in one way by the artist, but public evaluation and interpretation will not necessarily align with this. Producers and consumers of artistic products are free to subjectively glean individual value from any piece, and this democratic access to meaning is perhaps even more valuable than the art itself.

A hallmark of the dramatic arts, especially as they manifested in the 20th Century, is the power to create new perspectives and subvert audience expectations. Harpham (2013) juxtaposed the humanities’ approach to knowledge with those of the hard sciences: “in contrast to science, which seeks to establish certainty where doubt or confusion had been, the humanities often advance by introducing crevices, fault lines, or pockets of doubt, conjecture, or suspicion into what had seemed to be slabs of certainty” (p. 522). Successful or effective theatre demonstrates this juxtaposition by having audience members leave the performance with a new interpretation or destabilizing perspective that was absent in them before the performance.

Prominent Drama Practitioners

A variety of 20th century dramatists and educational theatre advocates developed systems of practice rooted in the disciplinary values of the humanities. Drama is seen as an effective mode of turning a mirror to society, allowing the audience and artists to critically self-reflect on their position relative to the narrative. For many practitioners, this critical reflection on a performed dramatic text will lead to a deeper understanding of society and human social interaction, ultimately resulting in empowerment inspired by consideration of a variety of social viewpoints. We will specifically engage Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and Dorothy Heathcote as prominent practitioners that embody this approach.

Bertolt Brecht. Bertolt Brecht (1898- 1956) was a Marxist-German poet and dramatist who is best known for his approach to theatre as a forum for truth. Brecht's plays reflected the political atmosphere of Europe during the World Wars. When interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee while in exile he underscored the importance of the arts in society: "art which must be free in order to be art" (Simkin, 2013, para. 8). His approach to educational theatre was rooted in the concept of gesture as a social phenomenon. Precise gestures in scenes illustrate the sociocultural contradictions of the characters. For Brecht, it is the role of the director to create the theatrical image that facilitates reproduction of this gesture on the stage. It is the actor's role to use gesture to demonstrate their own personal learning experience of critically analyzing sociocultural situations.

Humanistic learning occurs as actors explore themselves and their characters through the rehearsal process. As actors explore ways to embody their character, they are they are able to access and inhabit a persona previously unfamiliar to them. Fischer (1996) characterized the realization of a gesture-based approach as "the exemplary moment within the theatrical process, achieved through precise observation, arrangement, acting and speech, when the sociohistorical place and background of the stage characters beyond their immediate individual, psychological reality [is revealed]" (p.209). In this approach, physical

embodiment becomes a form of engagement equivalent to Petrarch's mental engagement with people and characters from a shared past.

Brecht's *lehrstücke* (learning plays) were created to be a revolutionary model of educational theatre that led to an active transition to a socialist society. Brecht intended for the audience to participate directly with the performance, and believed that this participation would lead to empowerment for social revolution (Kellner, 2003). Brecht believed that students, workers, and political groups could use *lehrstücke* to create a socialized culture by educating individuals of socialist values. This is not to say that *lehrstücke* was intended to teach for assimilation or to spread propaganda; much like Bruni and the civic humanists believed that informed inquiry could lead to change in political thought, Brecht believed that *lehrstücke* were political empowerment exercises for the audience and would revolutionize society through experiential learning (Kellner, 2003). Applying the new knowledge for revolutionary purposes becomes a demonstration of empowerment for change in the audience.

Augusto Boal. Brecht's idea of revolutionary theatre played a major role in influencing Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal (1931 – 2009). Boal believed that most human actions are fundamentally political (Burgoyne, 2003). Boal believed that since theatre is a part of human culture, it is inherently political. Boal created the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a community-based education that uses theatre as a tool for change largely inspired by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1993). TO requires active participation in analyzing and questioning social institutions, rituals, and other conventions that are often oppressive. "The oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them. Until this occurs, they will continue disheartened, fearful, and beaten" (Freire, 2000, p.64). Boal uses drama and theatre to empower participants to actively pursue social action. TO is used all over the world for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building, therapy, and government legislation.

Boal's (1996) text *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* demonstrates the use of TO through games, exercises and techniques. He used activities to demonstrate various forms of oppression that may not be recognizable in their natural context. Boal believed that "theatre is a form of knowledge - it should be a means of transforming society and building a future rather than simply waiting for it" (Boal, 1993, p.xxxi).

TO can be used as a classroom approach to allow students to critically examine and inquire about their social context and the contexts of others, and how they can actively change institutionalized modes of oppression. Boal believed that theatre can be used as a tool for empowerment by breaking down the separation between actor and audience. The audience "spectator" becomes a participatory audience member: the "spect-actor" (Burgoyne, 2003, p. 5). The audience (as participants) have control over the action; this leads to the actors and spect-actors engaging in the same process of trying to understand reality. Boal created an "arsenal" of games and activities that utilize games and exercises used to explore sociocultural issues (Boal, 1996, p. 60). Through these games and activities, participants explore the body's relationship to the senses, making the familiar unfamiliar through specific gesturing and movement, and using imagery to explore cultural situations. These activities harken back to Harpham's (2013) proposition that the effectiveness and power of humanities lies in their ability to create doubts where there once was certainty.

These techniques are also a key part of Boal's Image Theatre. In Image Theatre, the bodies of the spect-actors are arranged to "show in a visual form a collective perspective on a given theme" (Boal, 1996, p.2). The image can be anything abstract or concrete – a feeling, an issue, a moment. The spect-actors are involved in the sculpting and adjusting until a final image is mutually agreed upon, called the *real image*, is always representative of oppression. After the collective creation of the real image, spect-actors are asked to transform the collection of bodies and create the *ideal image* - one that represents the disappearance of oppression and enables the potential for progress. By using only

imagery, the expression of the group's meaning has a greater impact, and is not biased or misrepresented through language (Boal, 1996, p. 6). These activities underscore the importance of the subjective and connect with the humanities' goal of "persuading [people] to accept a different understanding than the one they had" rather than simply producing new factual knowledge (Harpham, 2013, p. 524).

Dorothy Heathcote. The practice of using drama in education *and* as an empowerment tool is indebted to the work of Dr. Dorothy Heathcote (1926-2011). Heathcote developed a process called "mantle of the expert" where children were empowered as experts to explore a subject or task. In this approach, the teacher is no longer the deliverer of information, but the children are experts and are expected gather information to further the learning experience. The process of mantle of the expert includes selecting a dramatic metaphor in which the experience is set, establishing tasks and roles, framing the imaginary setting, and empowering the student (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985). The teacher becomes a member of the community by creating opportunities for the *experts* to discover knowledge throughout the drama. The teacher does not provide the information directly, as that would perpetuate the positioning of the educator as the source of knowledge. Through dramatic imagination and interaction, the students make discoveries that inform the investigation through natural placement in the pretend setting and metaphor.

The selection of the dramatic metaphor depends on the group understanding of a social system. The dramatic metaphor dictates the roles and responsibilities that the students will need to represent to process the problem. The teacher may change behavior, voice, and attitude to introduce a problem to the participants. This immediately assigns the power to solve the problem with the students, thus empowering them to further the drama. The unique process of mantle of the expert is that the situation and roles unfold as the drama occurs, and the students make discoveries throughout the framework instead of being told ahead of time in a more traditional use of theatre.

Through the use of questioning, the students as experts are empowered to continue to pursue a solution to the original dramatic metaphor.

As experts, the students call upon their prior knowledge and the resources provided in the learning environment to move the drama forward. Heathcote (2009) believed that for a drama to be successful it must demonstrate change: “if you want to use drama as education, you have to train people to understand how to negotiate so that the people go through a process of change” (Chapter 29, para. 1). In addition to change, drama needs interactions of people and forces, and an established framework that the participants must negotiate the change. Within the drama the participants will contribute to the processes of change and of inquiry.

Heathcote called for three rules that teachers must follow. The first is that the teacher must agree that the framework is based on “the human condition of [the] students, their attitudes, their philosophy, their ideas, and [the teacher] has got to use them as they really are” (2009, Chapter 29, para. 10). The teacher cannot pretend that the students are fictional beings, as it disconnects the participant from the impact of empowerment of choice and change. Second, the teacher must be a participant in the drama. This implies that the teacher is no longer a source of information, or a manager of the room; the teacher is a member of the on-going dramatic metaphor. The third rule is that the teacher must resist the impulse to define and frame the drama to fit a preferred format or specific outcome. The teacher must not interfere with the direction the students are taking the drama, as this will detach the power from the participants. The objective of using drama for learning is that the students work as a group to resolve a realistic problem through inquiry and imagination. As problem solvers, the students are empowered to take an active role in the resolution of a conflict.

Drama as a Tool of Empowerment

Just as Dorothy Heathcote viewed change as being a necessary outcome of drama in education, Lord and Hutchinson (1993) describe empowerment as a process of change from being powerless to

having power. The empowerment movement in the United States has been primarily focused on marginalized groups such as those with disabilities or those with healthcare needs. Heljä Antola Robinson (1994) in her text, *The Ethnography of Empowerment: The Transformative Power of Classroom Interaction*, defined empowerment as a:

Personal and social process, a liberating sense of one’s own strengths, competence, creativity and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people and from inside specifically the power to act and grow, to become, in Paolo Freire’s terms, ‘more fully human’. (p. 7)

Empowerment in the classroom acknowledges that education is not limited to academic and cognitive pursuits. When empowerment is accomplished, it goes beyond the walls of the classroom and is applied to other areas of the student’s lives (Lord & Hutchinson, 1993). Empowerment allows students to take control of their environment and actively pursue positive change.

Kronenberg (2007) defined empowerment as when students feel “capable of having an impact” (p. 130). The arts provide settings where students can explore, make choices, experience opportunities for failure, become autonomous, take risks, and have control over their learning (Kronenberg, 2007). The arts require an ability to communicate different messages in a variety of modes. Students exercise critical thinking and analytical skills to explore multiple viewpoints. According to Kronenberg, “self-efficacy in the arts can lead to self-efficacy in the daily lives of young people” (p. 132).

Jonathan Neelands, a British drama educator and theatre in education specialist, illustrated the various modes of empowerment in drama (see Appendix). Neelands’ (1996) “personal” mode illustrates the humanities’ value of learning about histories and forming personal choices from the newly attained knowledge. The “cultural” mode illustrates how drama reflects the cultural identity of a society. The “communal” mode illustrates the sense of group membership that the humanities explore. Most importantly, Neelands described

“theatre as a rehearsal for change and as an arena for radical dialogue” (p. 27). To demonstrate empowerment, an individual needs to feel compelled to bring about positive change; the use of drama is an opportunity for students to explore issues and cause positive change (Neelands, 1996).

Conclusions

Early Renaissance thinkers first proposed the idea that mankind could benefit intellectually from the study of our shared human inheritance – our history and our culture. Work in the humanities in the centuries since have proven that the individual experience of a person is enriched when they are able to communicate with the minds of people who are not directly accessible to them by engaging the artistic or creative products of their life’s work. Dramatic performance and drama education facilitates this process while offering the opportunity for critical social reflections. Twentieth century drama practitioners such as Brecht, Boal, and Heathcote used a variety of drama education techniques to invigorate social consciousness in participants while inspiring a sense of intellectual and political efficacy, resulting in empowerment. These lessons can help create a wiser and more civically robust citizenry – the most essential component of a free and democratic society.

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