

Joseph M. Shosh

Wrighting: Crafting Critical Literacy through Drama

Joseph M. Shosh shows how he made writing central in a drama class to build critical literacy. He describes writing tasks such as creating scenes from personal observations and using acting journals as well as writing projects necessarily involved with play production.



Writing in school can be so much more than canned assignments or end-of-chapter questions, and it has a vital role to play at the center of theater studies. If I want students to learn more about theater arts and more about themselves in the process, I must provide a wide array of theatrical experiences and meaningful writing opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of those experiences. Students deserve multiple opportunities to write *as if* they were professional actors, directors, production designers, stage technicians, and critics. Just as playwrights study the world around them to create a certain verisimilitude in the characters they write, students can begin to make purposeful inquiries through the eyes of theater artists to craft their increasingly complex understanding of the theater arts and themselves.

Most students who sign up for my drama classes tell me that they don't like to write, at least not in school. Required assignments, they readily concede, must have an introduction with a three-pronged thesis, a body paragraph to support each of the prongs, and a concluding paragraph to summarize their thoughts. So ingrained is this model that students are somewhat baffled when they can't locate any real-world examples in all the essays we read about plays and playwrights or even in the critiques we read of plays in performance. They tell me all about attention-getters, transitional devices, and even MLA documentation style, but they confide that despite what they have

been taught about writing, they don't like it and they aren't very good at it. Some even confess that their voices sound phony to them in the school assignments they're required to submit. Why would I want to take a fun class like drama, they want to know, and spoil it with something as boring as writing?

"Well, think about Shakespeare, Chekhov, Williams, and Miller," I reply. "Aren't these playwrights special writers, since they must think *as if* they are each of the characters they bring to life through their dialogue? Great writing lies at the heart of the theater."

"We're not here to write the plays, Mr. Shosh. We just wanna act them out."

"Fair enough, but you do want to be good actors, right?"

"That's what you're here to teach us."

"OK. Then look at it this way. You're all going to be writers this semester. That's spelled w-r-i-g-h-t-e-r-s. A *wright* is someone who builds or constructs something. Just as a playwright crafts a play, you're going to craft great theater. Did you know that in the Old English days of *Beowulf*, at least five hundred years before Shakespeare, there were all kinds of wrights or builders—wheelwrights, millwrights, tilewrights? Writers, spelled w-r-i-t-e-r-s, on the other hand, were basically copiers of letters. Personally, I'd rather build something for myself than copy something that someone else has created. Actors need to observe carefully to create a role, but they don't just copy or mimic what they see."

Finding Purpose and Inquiry on the Boards

Stage director and acting teacher Kurt Daw notes that “[t]he greatest difficulty most beginning actors face is coming to understand what they are supposed to do” (7). He goes on to add that acting is not synonymous with explaining, or indicating, or merely using the good diction, posture, and other tools of his training but rather “creating a sense of life” (9). It may be tempting at first to teach a drama class somewhat like a series of traditional grammar lessons, where students are led through exercises designed to teach them the fundamental parts that we hope they will learn to put together correctly. Of course this model of teaching skills devoid of meaningful context is no more likely to lead to masterful acting than is an isolated study of parts of speech likely to yield inspired prose.

Rather than telling students what to do or how to create a sense of life, I ask them to begin by visiting a public place such as a shopping mall and to record some of their observations in their acting

It is the desire to create a more effective scene that motivates the writing, and it is the writing that most often provides the opportunity to slow down the action of play production enough to allow for conscious reflection.

journal. They describe the setting and why they chose it. They record what they observe people doing and jot down bits of speech they can't help overhearing. Back in class, students enjoy talking about what they observed, and I ask questions that help them to recall facial expressions; body movements; and vocal intonation, inflection, and intensity. Students

use their raw data to draft monologues for performance. Invariably, some students will speak too softly or too quickly or will emphasize words in ways that seem to detract from the character's meaning. The student as author is ultimately the expert on textual meaning as we continue to explore how different acting choices, both physical and vocal, convey different meanings. Hence, the students' acting journal observations and subsequent writing create an authentic context within which to explore the techniques of their craft.

When students are interested in creating characters removed in time and space from their contemporary experience, I often find it helpful to

deepen the level of their work by attempting to immerse them in another time and place. In one incarnation of this unit of study, Civil War fife-and-drum music plays as students arrive to class, and together we discuss projected Mathew Brady battlefield photos. Then we analyze the lyrics of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” followed by a read-aloud of the children's book *Red Legs: A Drummer Boy of the Civil War* (Lewin). I share the startling statistic from *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* that at least 250,000 boys ages sixteen and under served as soldiers (Murphy 2), and I read some of the letters home written by those boy soldiers. Students then create still-image tableaux to show each boy's respective family at home reading the correspondence. Through thought-tracking (Neelands and Goode), the students in role as family members share one example of how life has changed since the boy went off to war and then write a letter in role.

In their introduction to *Writing in Role: Classroom Projects Connecting Writing and Drama*, which provided the philosophical impetus for this activity, David Booth and Jonothan Neelands note, “The best drama, and the most effective opportunities for linking writing with it, emerge over extended periods, during which children have time and incentive to work their way into the themes, to refocus and change direction, and to edit and present their creations to trusted and understanding others” (v). Usually these “others” are members of the drama class, but sometimes our in-role writing leads to larger pieces that we reshape for an outside audience. One introductory drama class exploring fairy tales in this way continued to rework individual student contributions to create an original piece aptly titled “A Fairy's Tale,” which they then rehearsed and took on tour to a half dozen elementary schools within our district. Another class wrote an adaptation of a single Grimm Brothers' story and added a vocal participation component to delight the primary children who would constitute their audience.

Eliciting Intelligent Activity from the Production Team

While students and I take great delight in exploring our *as if* thinking through our incarnation of what David Booth and Cecily O'Neill might term

story drama and *process drama*, respectively, I find that most of my high school students want to take on roles within dramatic texts created by others and ultimately to perform these roles for the benefit of others. Students often come into class talking about their favorite television shows, the latest Hollywood blockbusters, and even the hottest new Broadway musicals. Most, however, have never seen a live drama or comedy in a theater and are a bit incredulous to find that play scripts can be found in both their school and local public libraries. To prove my point and to help them find a text with which to work I engage students in a drama-script rendition of a book pass. Janet Allen turned me on to the idea of a book pass in her *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12*. Of course, in this instance, I bring dozens of copies of play scripts for students to pass to one another and peruse. As they review the title, author, cast of characters, dialogue, original scenic designs, properties lists, and any other features that capture their attention, they complete a graphic organizer that they will use to help them select a play to read within their production team and from which they will stage one or more scenes.

These production teams form the drama-class equivalent of literature circles as students conduct an initial read-through of their self-selected plays within their groups. Harvey Daniels's suggested roles of discussion director, passage picker, artful illustrator, and others yield to theatrical production roles of director; dramaturg; and scenic, costume, and lighting designers. Hence, as they read, students explore the text both through the eyes of the character they might like to play and from the vantage point of a theater artist besides the actor. When the read-through is complete, each member of the production team takes responsibility for a written project that the team will use to stage its selection. The director breaks the script into French scenes, thereby taking note of each character's entrance and exit and creating a preliminary blocking pattern. The dramaturg reads at least three reviews of the play written by professional critics and designs a chart to record similarities and differences among the reviews. The scenic and costume designers research the play's period, offering both original sketches and clippings from Web sites and magazines. All complete a character

analysis graphic organizer to begin to look more closely at what their respective character says, does, and desires from others.

It is important to note that the students' collective staging of their scenes is concurrent with their respective research and writing. It is the desire to create a more effective scene that motivates the writing, and it is the writing that most often provides the opportunity to slow down the action of play production enough to allow for conscious reflection. John Dewey calls for such reflection to be embedded in educative experiences, noting, "Overemphasis upon activity as an end, instead of upon *intelligent* activity, leads to identification of freedom with immediate execution of impulses and desires" (81; italics in original). True freedom, Dewey goes on to explain, is only found when students engage in the thinking that postpones acting on impulse.

Only by engaging in a dialogue with one another, with their imagined audience, and with their performance text, however, are they able to make rhetorical decisions that will allow them to create public documents to enhance their performance of their production.

Fostering Ownership and Voice Backstage

On more than one occasion, my principal pulled me aside and wanted to know why so many of the students who seemed to have trouble controlling their immediate impulses and desires in some academic classes ended up on the drama class roster and on the stage crew. "Why," he asked, "do some of the same kids who get detentions that force them to stay after school want to come back on their own time and build sets?" Many of these students found an outlet for their talents and an acceptance among the theater students that simply may have eluded them in some of their other classes, where, I suspect, they often felt marginalized and expendable. In the theater, they were central to the group's collaborative success. Each semester, for example, we would need to prepare our backstage "Crew Room" to support a series of main stage productions; band, orchestra, and choral concerts; drama class scenes, one-act plays, and original works; and occasional student-directed touring productions. We were thankful to those who willingly kept track of our inventory

of power tools, lumber, nails, screws, and white-wash and searched stage supply houses, online catalogs, and the local Home Depot sales fliers to keep our theater shop operating.

Some of the same students who balked at having to write another five-paragraph persuasive essay in English class jumped at the opportunity to write memos to the principal on multiple occasions to persuade him to authorize funds to buy new lighting instruments,

body microphones, and other audio equipment for the school auditorium. So impressed was the principal with the expert knowledge that these students began to develop that he called on them to review plans for a new computer-controlled dimmer system before sending specs out to bid. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose work is often used in support of constructivist learning theory, offers the best rationale I can think of when he suggests that “teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something” (117).

When students know that they are writing real-world texts to genuine audiences for true communicative purposes, they develop a sense of ownership in their work and want their voices to be heard.

Encouraging Epistemic Literacy to Prepare for an Audience

Clearly, audience is a central feature for both the writer and the theater artist. Cecily O’Neill cites a key passage from Sarcey’s “A Theory of the Theatre”:

It is an indisputable fact that a dramatic work, whatever it may be, is designed to be listened to by a number of persons united and forming an audience, that this is its very essence, that this is a necessary condition to its existence. . . . This then we can insist on: No audience, no play. The audience is the necessary and inevitable condition to which dramatic art must accommodate its means. (111)

When I directed my first high school drama, Lucille Fletcher’s radio plays *The Hitch-Hiker* and *Sorry, Wrong Number*, I was so focused on the players

and the production crew that I forgot to plan to invite the audience. I assumed that if we performed, they would come. Some family and friends did, but from this point on, I never again failed to think about that audience every step of the way—from play selection to publicity to reserved seats and ushers on opening night. Of course, an audience in the theater is ultimately visible and interacts with the performers to create a theatrical event. In writing, we must imagine the audience and write *as if* we know who they are and why they are reading. I can think of no place where these audiences merge more clearly in the arena of play production than in the front-of-house preparation that begins at least as soon as the play has been cast.

Whether students are preparing to present scenes to their classmates or we are gearing up for the school’s spring musical theater production, students must write in a variety of forms for the audience. First, they anticipate who is likely to be interested in attending, and they design a poster to attract this target audience to come to the theater at the specified time and date. Next, they must determine what information the audience is likely to need presented in a program to maximize enjoyment of the performance. Normally, students create a program cover, a scene synopsis, and company profiles, and they share salient director’s notes. Students nearly always word process their text, revise and edit with their audience in mind, and use desktop publishing software to create camera-ready copy that is then forwarded to students in the print shop for duplication.

My hope is that students will engage in what various authors refer to as critical, powerful, or epistemic literacy. Building on the classroom research of Jean Anyon and the conceptual literacy framework of Gordon Wells, Patrick J. Finn in *Literacy with an Attitude* identifies four levels of literacy learning. At the “performative” or lowest level, students have the ability to sound out words and write basic expressions. At the “functional” level, they are able to follow directions, read a basic newspaper, and fill out standard application forms. At the “informational” level, students are able to apply learned facts to school tasks. Finally, “Powerful literacy involves creativity and reason—the ability to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize what is read” (124). Of course, students can and do look at the posters and programs generated by students and

The student as author is ultimately the expert on textual meaning as we continue to explore how different acting choices, both physical and vocal, convey different meanings. Hence, the students’ acting journal observations and subsequent writing create an authentic context within which to explore the techniques of their craft.

theater professionals before them and from these samples inductively generate a list of common features. Only by engaging in a dialogue with one another, with their imagined audience, and with their performance text, however, are they able to make rhetorical decisions that will allow them to create public documents to enhance *their* performance of *their* production.

Reflecting on Our Performance

After students have had the opportunity to write wearing a variety of theatrical masks, I ask them to evaluate in writing their own and their peers' performances with a critical eye. By *critical* I mean careful, thoughtful, and learned rather than disposed to find fault. I prepare students to write a critique of a live theater performance, not by providing a list of carefully crafted criteria or a rubric for evaluation but rather by asking students to read a wide array of theater reviews that they find in newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet. In groups, students determine what information each critic opted to include, and they compare and contrast the rhetorical choices each writer made. We study how reviews of new plays often differ from those of plays that are better known. We predict how reviews of musicals will differ from reviews of other plays, and then we check to see how accurate our predictions happened to be. We examine how the style and period of the play may impact what needs to be explained to the reader within the review.

Once we have determined the criteria for evaluation that real critics have applied to authentic performances, we decide what additional elements we may want to consider that are well suited to us as student performers. We often find that professional reviewers do not mention anything about staying in character, knowing lines well, or projecting one's voice, to name a few. Hence we augment what we have learned about performance through reading with our own reflection on past work to create the criteria that guide evaluation of our performance and our writing about performance.

Crafting the Play Way

Through the recursive process of observation, reflection, and action, I have attempted to create

a purposeful, inquiry-based theater arts curriculum that immerses students in intelligent activities designed to foster ownership and voice and that leads them to use literacy powerfully or epistemically. Writing researcher and teacher George Hillocks Jr. argues that in epistemic classrooms, "truth must be argued through dialectical processes" (24). In such classrooms, truth may not be delivered ready-made from the mind of the more-experienced teacher and simply given to the less-experienced student. Hillocks defines epistemic classrooms as places where students regularly engage in discussion of complex problems, which mirrors the complexity of writing tasks. Students in epistemic classrooms deliberately explore a variety of choices, and rhetorical forms emerge from the ideas to be expressed (27).

Caldwell Cook, a British schoolmaster, published *The Play Way* in 1917. Educational drama and theater scholar Richard Courtney identifies three key principles on which Cook's work was based:

1. Proficiency and learning come not from reading and listening but from action, from *doing*, and from experience.
2. Good work is more often the result of spontaneous effort and free interest than of compulsion and forced application.
3. The natural means of study in youth is play. (Cook, qtd. in Courtney 45; italics in original)

To craft critical literacy the play way, what I call wrighting, requires students to examine complex problems from a multiplicity of perspectives and to imagine *as if* something were other than what it is. When students wright knowledge in a classroom, they embark on a journey to search for truth. Their inquiry leads them to try on different masks as they examine characters, actions, and obstacles and, in turn, they learn more about themselves. They wrestle with real problems and find their voices emerge as they develop solutions to those problems. They become aware of the dialectic between the roles they play and the roles that society expects to see portrayed. Through conscious reflection and struggle, they construct new understandings that lead to new rounds of inquiry and new rounds of wrighting.

Works Cited

- Allen, Janet. *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2000.
- Booth, David, and Jonothan Neelands. Introduction. *Writing in Role: Classroom Projects Connecting Writing and Drama*. Ed. David Booth and Jonothan Neelands. Hamilton, Ont.: Caliburn, 1998. v–vi.
- Courtney, Richard. *Play, Drama and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Drama in Education*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1974.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. Portland: Stenhouse, 2002.
- Daw, Kurt. *Acting: Thought into Action*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997.
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938.
- Finn, Patrick J. *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1999.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. New York: Teachers College, 2002.
- Lewin, Ted. *Red Legs: A Drummer Boy of the Civil War*. New York: Harper, 2001.
- Murphy, Jim. *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War*. New York: Clarion, 1990.
- Neelands, Jonothan, and Tony Goode. *Structuring Drama Work: A Handbook of Available Forms in Theatre and Drama*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- O'Neill, Cecily. *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995.
- Vygotsky, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.

Joseph M. Shosh is assistant professor of education and director of the Master of Education program at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses in literacy education and teacher action research. Professor Shosh would like to acknowledge his MA advisor, Professor Lowell Swortzell (1930–2004), cofounder of New York University's Program in Educational Theatre. *email*: jshosh@moravian.edu.

EJ 10 Years Ago

Theatre Makes Us Better Than Ourselves

Perhaps most importantly, we have our students participating in a tradition older than Chaucer's English teacher, a tradition that, like that of the younger newspaper, is self-motivating. Anyone who has worked on student productions knows that something takes over and wrenches efforts from everyone involved beyond what the individuals ever dreamed was possible. Theatre makes us better than ourselves. Here is the only place where English teachers experience what coaches of athletic teams are always remarking about—that motivation beyond what seems possible. Theatre is nothing but living, breathing, painful, wonderful life.

Anthony Backes. "On Sponsorship of Real Language Activities." *EJ* 84.7 (1995): 17–20.