

# “Doing” literature: Using drama to build literacy

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*This article explores the use of drama as a teaching tool to promote students' interest in literacy.*

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The students in Adele Toney's third-grade class at Roberts Elementary School in Syracuse, New York, USA, are learning about Frederick Douglass. Ms. Toney reads aloud from a biography about this famous American, which discusses his childhood as a slave in Baltimore and mentions that Frederick was not permitted to learn to read or write. “Why do you think slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write?” Ms. Toney asks the class. The students aren't sure.

Ms. Toney asks a student for a scrap of paper. She scribbles something on the paper, folds it, and surreptitiously hands it to a student, Patrina, whispering, “Read this and pass it on.” The entire class pays rapt attention as Patrina reads the note and hands it to another student who also reads it and passes it on. Then Patrina and several others quietly get up from their desks and sneak out the door following Ms. Toney, while the rest of the class watches in wondering silence. Seconds later the group reappears and Ms. Toney asks Patrina to read aloud from the piece of paper. Patrina unfolds the note and reads, “Let's escape tonight!”

Then Ms. Toney repeats her earlier question, “Why do you think slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write?” This time

the students are full of answers: “So the slaves couldn't plan an escape!” “So they couldn't communicate!” “Because if they could read they could learn how to get away!” This drama activity, observed during a clinical practicum experience, lasted for less than 5 minutes, but created a vivid mental representation that the teacher and students were able to draw upon for future classroom discussion.

The use of drama as a teaching tool is based on the simple premise that an involved child is an interested child, an interested child will learn, and drama directly involves the child (Smith, 1972). However, a study by Bolton (1985) showed that in North American schools, students and teachers overwhelmingly thought classroom drama was the equivalent of “doing a play,” a project usually associated with an elaborate production. Thus, teachers may avoid using drama in the classroom because they fear it will involve tedious, time-consuming preparations. Unfortunately, this view can cause educators to overlook what is an important tool for teaching in general, and for the teaching of reading and language arts in particular.

Drama is an invaluable tool for educators because it is one of the few vehicles of instruction that can support every aspect of literacy development. Drama encompasses all four of the language arts modalities and is an effective medium for building decoding, vocabulary, syntactic, discourse, and metacognitive knowledge. Drama activities encourage the affective aspects of reading and emergent literacy, accomplishing this within a valuable social context. Drama begins with the concept of meaningful communication and provides

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multiple opportunities for social interaction and feedback. These interactions offer the kind of support Vygotsky (1978) deems necessary for internalizing new knowledge. Above all, drama activities are extremely effective in fostering a community of learners who choose to participate in independent reading activities.

One of the important features of drama is the variety of communication experiences it offers to children. Drama is thinking out loud; it develops oral language skills as the child defines, articulates, expresses, and verbalizes thoughts in the context of improvised activities. By participating in drama activities, children develop listening skills on two levels: (a) the basic listening skills that are required in order for the sessions to continue, such as listening for cues; and (b) the evaluative listening skills that develop as children act as audience members, considering how the activities are progressing and what they would do differently if they were performing (Stewig, 1974).

Children experience the chance to improve their speaking skills as they take on different roles, selecting the language most appropriate to the situation. Oral language development has a crucial impact on learning to read, as "a solid oral language foundation allows [children] to generalize from what they already do well" (Leu & Kinzer, 1995, p. 241). Children engaged in dramatic play use literate language. This language use, which includes defining references to pronouns, clarifying ambiguous terms, choosing objects to symbolize other objects, and clearly introducing topics, will later transfer into their learning of written language (Pellegrini, 1980, 1982, 1984).

Drama activities can be used to develop writing skills by expanding on students' oral language development. Yaffe (1989) used dramatic improvisation to capture the interest of his students and allow them to experience success in creating scenes orally before attempting to do so in writing. The students were then led to the realization that improvising was really just "writing on their feet" and that they were good at it; they were subsequently able to transfer their words to paper.

Finally, drama activities can focus students directly on print and can expand their receptive written language skills. This article will focus on how drama activities can specifically develop central components of literacy acquisi-

tion: affective aspects; emergent literacy and automaticity; and syntactic, decoding, vocabulary, discourse, and metacognitive knowledge.

### **Developing affect through drama**

One of the most agreed-upon uses for drama in the reading program is as a means of developing affect in learners. Drama creates interest and motivation, which are crucial factors in facilitating students' understanding and response. "Drama has a positive effect on personal attitudes often associated with language growth: self-confidence, self-concept, self-actualization, empathy, helping behavior and cooperation" (Wagner, 1988, p. 48). The students involved in Yaffe's (1989) writing activity

learned a valuable lesson—that they had something to say, that they could say it well, that other people were interested in hearing it. For the at-risk student with a history of failure, this was a startling revelation. Self-esteem and self-confidence grew. These pupils became learners because they came to think of themselves as capable of learning. (p. 30)

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Heinig (1987) pointed out the value of drama as a way to let children experience a role that is new to them, such as "a powerful king, a hero, or a brave person. They see themselves in a new light, with a strength they never knew they had within them. Sometimes they discover talents they never had a chance to express before" (p. 4). A student involved in a drama program in Toronto eloquently stated the impact drama had on her affect:

When I started drama three years ago, I was very shy and didn't say much in a group. I didn't think anybody would listen or care. In drama you realize nobody will criticize. I can now talk in a group even if others disagree with me and I've learned how to listen to others. (Yau, 1992, p. 5)

Drama can be a major force in boosting a child's self-concept and desire to be an active part of the learning community. However, dra-

ma is also a direct motivator for reading. When dramatizing books is a regular activity in the classroom, children naturally desire to act out more stories, which encourages them to seek out more reading experiences. They are inspired to find the "perfect" story to dramatize and may read several selections to find the best one (Ross & Roe, 1977).

Miccinati and Phelps (1980), reading instructors and dramatists, found drama to be a strong motivator on many levels. First, the students must read to find the story they wish to dramatize. They then read further to pick the best parts to act out. Additional reading is required to understand the characters and actions more completely. Even more reading is motivated if the students are engaged in script writing or in dramatizing nonfiction, as they do further research about their characters, setting, and props. When the students subsequently act out the stories they've read, they see for themselves that the words on the page have meaning, both for them and for others.

The excitement of performing scenes for an audience, whether their class, school, or parents, adds another level of motivation for drama participants. Bidwell (1990), a reading teacher who regularly employs drama in her classroom, elaborated:

Students know that eventually they will be performing, so they want to do it right as soon as possible. Repeated readings and modelings help them know they can do it right. The more they perform successfully, the greater their self-concept—and the downward spiral starts moving up. (p. 40)

Teachers DeRita and Weaver (1991) used drama to increase motivation when they paired their fourth-grade reading class with kindergarten drama partners. This pairing resulted in extremely positive attitudes in the fourth graders, who "looked forward to doing their work because they had a real purpose for doing it and a real audience to appreciate it" (p. 247). Students' excitement about performing leads to increased motivation to read their parts well, which in turn creates successful drama experiences. Successful experiences allow students to perceive themselves as good readers, thus continuing the cycle.

Drama builds on something children do naturally—pretending. By building on a natural ability, all students can experience success from the start. These initial successes may not involve any actual reading; in fact, they may

be chiefly pantomime. However, with each success, the child is more willing to take risks, allowing script work to be introduced. Bordan's work (1970) using drama to motivate poor readers led her to comment,

I know of no faster way of getting a class...to read, than to present each child with his own personal mimeographed copy of a play he feels he has had a hand in creating.... Children, who for three years have never realized the purpose of reading and have considered it dreary, frustrating drudgery suddenly acquire an inner motivation. (p. 22)

Successful participation in a drama after learning one or two lines of dialogue by reading and repeating them over and over can change a child's entire view toward reading. Reading is suddenly something the child can succeed in and is self-fulfilling as well. The knowledge that reading can be its own reward comes to many as a complete surprise and becomes a source of increased motivation for reading (Bordan, 1970).

Above all else, the reason drama is cited again and again as an effective method for building interest and motivation in reading is that children enjoy it. Drama is just plain fun. It allows learners to use their feelings, their thoughts, and their imaginations to express themselves to and with others, all the time growing in language ability (Flennoy, 1992).

### **Developing emergent literacy through drama**

Drama can be an important source of scaffolding for the emergent reader, especially by providing children with rich background experiences to draw upon in future reading. Story enactments in the kindergarten and pre-K classrooms can create curiosity about literature before independent reading begins. These experiences allow children to take on the role of storyteller long before they can read or write. Teacher Adele Toney, whose classroom was described at the beginning of the article, chooses action-filled stories such as *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* (Kimmel, 1988) for her class to dramatize while she slowly reads aloud. The students pay close attention to her reading as they know they will be acting out the story. They listen intently as they pantomime or wait for their opportunity to act. In places where dialogue occurs, the students repeat it after their teacher. In subsequent group discussions, students reveal a deep un-

derstanding of the events and sequence of the story. This type of activity is easy to carry out and provides emergent readers with a valuable model of story form and book language. It allows nonreaders to participate fully in a literary event with their reading peers and encourages further exploration of books as students look for more stories to dramatize.

Dramatizations can also provide students with vicarious experiences that they can draw upon when learning to read. Although direct experiences such as field trips are the strongest source of background knowledge, drama experiences can be a viable alternative (May, 1990). When students participate in dramatization, they “become” whatever it is they are enacting. Nonfiction dramatizations in particular become event representations for the children, transforming facts, vocabulary, and concepts into scenarios that the children experience and thus retain (Putnam, 1991).

Students can experience an event, such as a trip to the zoo, through a drama framework that begins with the class members sharing their own personal knowledge of what a zoo is like, with the teacher acting as facilitator. This is followed by a dramatization during which students assume the roles present at the event, such as animals, zookeepers, and visitors. The enactment is followed by a discussion of their experience (Schickedanz, 1978). Finally, the class may read a story about the zoo. In this way, students can experience what they read, rather than simply experience the act of reading (DuPont, 1992). Use of dramatizations in the early grades can successfully build students’ background knowledge:

Key incidents in the lives of famous people, important historical events, customs practiced in other cultures, animal behavior, natural phenomenon like the growth of plants, biological processes like the movement of blood through the body—all these can be made accessible through the descriptions and explanations of nonfiction. Those descriptions and explanations can, in turn, be made more accessible to young children through dramatization. (Putnam, 1991, pp. 468–469)

As we know from watching children at play, they are natural dramatists who use make-believe as a way of understanding life around them. The goal of drama in emergent literacy is to capitalize on something children already do naturally, by using dramatization to build a reservoir of experiences that can be connected to new information encountered in later learning.

## Developing decoding knowledge through drama

Vygotsky (1978) indicated the significance of dramatic play as a foundation for literacy. Dramatization leads to the development of skill in symbolic representation and the use of decontextualized language. In order to act out a scene, children must be able to indicate who they are portraying and where they are in space (and/or time), as well as what they are doing in the fictitious world they have established. Meaning is attached to symbols or signs, used to represent objects that are not present (Wagner, 1988). The awareness of symbolic representation and the ability to manipulate symbols in dramatic play is the same basic understanding children require in order to grasp the alphabetic principle. This concept that symbols (letters) represent sounds, which have meaning, must be internalized before children can make sense of printed material. The child’s development of representational skills in drama can thus serve as a basis for development of the representational skills required for literacy (Schickedanz, 1978).

Later in the reading process, the teacher can use drama activities to address specific decoding challenges directly. For example, to work on consonant blends, the teacher might play “What’s my word?” In this activity, a blend is written on the blackboard (e.g., *gr*). The teacher has a grab bag filled with word endings, such as *in*, *ab*, *oan*, and *ow*. The student picks an ending, holds it up to the blend written on the board, and the entire group reads the resulting word aloud. The group then acts out the word, thus providing a visual, aural, and kinesthetic memory cue for the word.

Bordan (1970) experienced positive results using drama to teach her second-grade nonreaders sight words. She began with simple verbs such as *jump* and the students’ names, which were often the only words they could read. At different points during the day she would write a student’s name on the board, followed by an action verb (e.g., “Jack, jump!”). The student would then read the phrase and perform the action. The students looked forward to learning each new verb and became actively engaged in remembering words in the hopes that they would get to perform them.



## Developing fluency through drama

In order for children to extract meaning from print, they must move beyond plodding word-by-word decoding and achieve fluency in reading. Research shows that in order to develop fluency, students need opportunities for repeated reading of the same material (Bidwell, 1990). Repetition and practice are inherent in many drama activities, with the added incentive that the repetition is meaningful for students. Students read and reread with the purpose of selecting a piece of literature for performance, choosing the parts to dramatize, practicing and switching roles, trying different line readings, underlining words for emphasis, and discussing different interpretations in a small-group setting (Wolf, 1993). According to Bidwell (1990):

Reading something over and over may sound good to the researchers, but youngsters hate to do it unless we can "trick" them into wanting to reread. In Grades 1 through 8, I haven't found anyone who has minded rehearsing a part many times for the purpose of performing in front of a real audience. (p. 40)

In Flennoy's (1992) study with low-achieving first graders, drama activities led to the students reading with more expression, enthusiasm, and fluency. Hoyt (1992) found that participating in choral readings of Readers Theatre resulted in improved fluency among third-grade students in a Chapter 1 program. Much like repeated practice of a piece of music allows a young violinist to develop playing proficiency, repetitious work with a script in drama activities allows a new reader to develop fluency in reading.

## Developing vocabulary knowledge through drama

New vocabulary presented in the drama context has the benefit of being acted out, thus providing students with a strong mental image of the word, one that has been experienced visually, aurally, and kinesthetically. When new words are defined and then reinforced through a drama activity, students have concrete examples in multiple modalities to complete their understanding of the word.

A good example of using drama to develop vocabulary can be seen in the following excerpt from a kindergarten class. The teacher, Pat Thompson, reads aloud to her class from a book about rodeo star Bill Pickett. She uses dramati-

zation to teach her class the new word *bulldogging*, which she has just read from the text:

Let's act this part out. All right, stand up. All right, you're Bill Pickett on your horse, Spradley. Look at the way you're on your horses. Okay, now, what do you have to do? Leap, leap out of your saddle. Oh, that's right. That's the way you leap. Good, good.... Here's your pretend steer. Grab him by those what? Horns. Now, take those hands and twist his head sideways. Now roll him on the ground. Excellent. You're great Bill Picketts. And what you did is called bulldogging. (Putnam, 1991, p. 466)

By pausing for this brief activity during the reading of a nonfiction text, the teacher provides the students with a strong association for their new vocabulary word. Vocabulary words can also be reinforced during an extended improvisation. Adele Toney uses this technique while teaching her class about the water cycle. As the class acts out "a day in the life of a drop of water," she integrates the new terms they have encountered in their reading, giving directions such as: "All right, now you are meeting up with some other *molecules* of water up in the sky.... Now join together with them...okay, you are getting too heavy to stay in the sky, so start to *precipitate*..." As the class acts out her descriptions, she can easily monitor if any students are having difficulty with the vocabulary and, if so, can immediately expand upon the problematic word (e.g., "Remember, *evaporation* happens when the liquid water gets so much energy it turns into a gas...show me your energy!").

By tying word meanings to experience, drama activities help students acquire definitions for new words that go beyond surface verbalizations (Duffelmeyer & Duffelmeyer, 1979). A sample activity might include introducing a new word list to the class, then assigning one or two words from the list to small groups. Each group must create a skit that uses the word and then perform it for the class. For example, after the "mule" refuses to plow for the "farmer," the child playing the farmer might say, "My mule, Sam, sure is acting *obstinate* today," while Sam holds up his group's word, *obstinate*, on a card (Reuse, 1977). The entire class benefits from the representation of the word.

Children can be led to differentiate between similar vocabulary words by acting out the distinctions, such as portraying the actions of the various animals in the poem "The Sandhill Crane" as they *scuttle*, *hide*, *stalk*, and *whisper* (Stewig, 1974). Vocabulary gains are

also made as students act out favorite stories and must represent the distinction between various character traits (e.g., a greedy giant vs. a dejected giant vs. an angry giant) (Ross & Roe, 1977). Another vocabulary-oriented drama activity involves writing vocabulary words on cards that students then select and act out for their team to guess—a variation on charades.

Finally, drama activities can be successfully used to help define new concepts, such as “civil rights.” Justine Winslow introduced this term to her kindergarten class by leading them through a reenactment of the story of Rosa Parks, providing them with a deeper understanding of the concept than a verbal definition alone could give (Putnam, 1991).

### **Developing syntactic knowledge through drama**

Drama can help students become more aware of syntactic structure, or the knowledge that word order, phrasing, and punctuation all contribute to the meaning of a written selection. Pellegrini (1980) found a significant correlation between dramatic play used with kindergartners and their understanding of syntactic structures. This relationship may be due to the fact that children involved in drama activities are constantly experimenting with different ways of talking, which leads to a higher awareness of the variations in language they encounter during reading experiences.

Teachers can use drama activities to direct students’ attention to syntactic patterns and punctuation. One has to attend to details of punctuation and phrasing in order to give a good acting performance, which makes paying attention to these details purposeful for students. Group discussion of how a certain character should sound when speaking can lead to valuable insights into syntactic clues about meaning. Ross and Roe (1977) found students’ oral reading skills improved as a result of “thinking the dialogue” as they read. Once the students are guided to the character insights they can find in punctuation cues, they attend more strongly to them while reading. Teachers can start with very basic ideas, such as pointing out that the actors’ words are found inside quotation marks. A simple line reading activity can be developed by placing a sentence on the chalkboard, changing the ending punctuation from a period to a question mark to an excla-

mation point, and having different students demonstrate how this would change the way a character would say the line.

Another effective beginning strategy is to photocopy story pages and let the students highlight the dialogue with colored markers, locating these sections by paying attention to quotation marks (Bidwell, 1992). This lesson can be further elaborated by marking different punctuation with different symbols, for example, underlining exclamatory sentences and circling questions. The students then read the selections aloud, exaggerating the clues they have discovered. In this way students can become “drama detectives” who attempt to find as many “clues” about their characters as possible within the text.

Students dramatizing text often work as a group, writing down the main events their scene should include and in what order, thus reinforcing event-sequencing skills. If students attempt to act out a scene that is not correctly sequenced, their error will quickly come to their attention, and they can self-correct by inserting the missing event or rearranging the sequence.

In the DeRita and Weaver (1991) cross-age literacy program, teachers used playwriting to reinforce syntactic knowledge. After several experiences working with scripts written by adults, groups of older children selected a simple story to rewrite in script form for the younger children to perform. Each group wrote one part of the script, which they edited for sentence structure and spelling. Then the groups assembled all of the parts into one script, an activity that reinforced their sequential knowledge. This activity also provides a meaningful opportunity to reinforce punctuation skills with questions such as “How do you want the children to say that line?” and “How can you let them know that by how you write it?” The playwriting aspect of drama can thus reinforce syntactic knowledge on several levels simultaneously.

### **Developing discourse knowledge through drama**

Drama activities can be used to help students learn what to expect when reading different forms of discourse. It is especially useful as a way to familiarize children with nonfiction works early in their reading careers. The teachers in Putnam’s (1991) review used dramatiza-

tions to introduce kindergarten students to such diverse nonfiction topics as thunderstorms, dinosaurs, volcanoes, photosynthesis, and the earth's rotation. In order to help the students process the new organizational structures in expository text, the teachers stopped their nonfiction read-alouds frequently to dramatize important information. For example, in a lesson about the Pilgrims' journey to North America, one teacher paused in her reading to let the class experience what it felt like to be crowded onto the *Mayflower*; the children briefly became Pilgrims, squashed together into a small section of the classroom as their teacher described the experience. The use of such dramatizations gives nonfiction texts more of the excitement inherent in fiction. Students have a meaningful frame for the concepts and vocabulary of nonfiction, thus increasing retention of new information (Dewey, 1994).

Drama activities are also useful in helping children acquire knowledge about narrative structure. By reading and rereading a story to prepare to act it out, students "sharpen their sense of how a story 'works,' how the elements of character, plot, action and setting work together" (Miccinati & Phelps, 1980, p. 270). For example, a useful way to reinforce the idea that narratives include problems that need to be solved is to read aloud from a narrative, stopping at a high point and having students work in small groups to create their own ending, which must resolve the conflict. The groups perform for the class, and the class discusses which ending they think the author might choose. The teacher then reads the author's ending. On a more basic level, Cooper (1993) found that pantomiming stories as they are read aloud provides kindergarten students with a clear model of story form that they can draw upon for understanding in later reading.

Teachers can also direct their students to compare and contrast plays and stories. After reading a story, the class can discuss the main ideas that should be present in a dramatization—the "play version" of the story. They can generate a list of the characters, the setting, and the major actions. The class can also discuss what will be left out of the play version and why this is necessary, thus exploring the differences in the two discourse types.

Stewig (1974) advocates teaching the features inherent in "good stories for drama." His

students' written stories are used as the basis for class improvisations, but only those stories containing his four requirements of a good drama can be selected. Students are careful to include active characters, an arresting beginning and logical form, a clear storyline, and a climax and satisfying conclusion so that their work can be considered for performance. Stewig uses this activity not only to make his students aware of the elements that make up a good drama, but also to create in them a desire to produce these elements in their own writing.

### **Developing metacognitive knowledge through drama**

Drama can be a strong vehicle for developing metacognitive knowledge, both in the area of comprehension monitoring and in developing strategies for more effective reading. The very act of portraying a character leads to analyzing one's part—asking "Am I convincing?" and "If not, why, and how can I change?" Teachers can further this tendency by providing students with self-questioning worksheets to complete as they work on drama activities that extend over longer periods of time. These sheets ask students to respond to questions such as "Am I pleased with how I am doing in the play so far? Why or why not?" "What can I do during this class time to make the play better?" "What needs to happen before next week to make the play better?" (Bidwell, 1990, p. 40).

Drama can also teach specific strategic knowledge. Jacob (1976) found a strong link between good readers and mental imaging, the process of creating clear pictures in one's mind of what has been read. Mental imaging is a comprehension strategy that aids readers in storing information for retrieval. Students gain valuable practice in this strategy when they are called upon to act out material they have read. Studies by Gambrell and Bales (1986, as cited in DuPont, 1992) found that students taught to use mental imaging were "more successful at monitoring their own comprehension" (p. 51) than those readers unfamiliar with this skill. DuPont's (1992) study of 11-year-olds involved a control group, which read and discussed children's literature, and a treatment group, which read the same literature but participated in drama activities following the readings rather than in group discussion. The students in the treatment group scored signifi-



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cantly higher than the control group on a standardized comprehension test at the completion of the 6-week program, which DuPont attributes to the valuable practice the students gained in creating mental images of written materials as they were called upon to act it out. The most important aspect of this study is that the reading material tested was not related to the content of instruction, so students were able to transfer their newly acquired strategy, mental imaging, to the comprehension of unrelated reading materials that they did not have the opportunity to dramatize.

Ross and Roe (1977) similarly found mental imaging (in their words "visualization") to enhance comprehension. Their study used a drama game called "Stretching the Imagination" to specifically build students' mental imaging ability. The students were later able to apply the strategy to entire story selections. During the game, students were given a list of items that they had to imagine and then react to appropriately. The list included items such as a lemon, a skunk, and a seashore, and the students were encouraged to make use of all their senses in their visualization. A more story-specific mental imaging activity, "Who am I?", requires students to take turns portraying a character from their current reading—demonstrating the character's walk, talk, and any other important details. The rest of the group then attempts to identify the character.

In order to develop understanding of character for drama activities, students must read strategically. This is especially true in dramatizations of content area reading, in which students research a historical period, gathering appropriate information for dramatization. Students learn to use a variety of sources, skim for references that are appropriate to their scene, and make use of headings and subheadings for guidance (Bidwell, 1992).

Cullinan (1993) demonstrated this use of dramatization in her social studies class. Before beginning a unit on the Gold Rush in the U.S., students enacted a scene in a mining town. Each student introduced the character he or she would be portraying to the class, then the brief enactment began. The students discovered that they needed to know more about the historical period in order to make the scene real. Cullinan used this experience to segue into "reading to discover" strategies, and the

class discussed the specific information they wanted to look for in order to elaborate on their scene. At the end of the Gold Rush unit the students were given an opportunity to dramatize the same scene again, this time incorporating their newfound knowledge of the time period.

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One reason that drama is such an effective tool for the development of metacognition is that students preparing a scene are actually recreating an entire story, rather than simply recalling bits of what has been read. If children can't find the detail they need for the scene (whether it's what happens next, a town's name, or the attitude of a character), they must reread, confer with peers, or look in other sources to supply the missing pieces (Hoyt, 1992). Otherwise the scene cannot continue. Children have to self-evaluate and participate in group evaluation consistently during the various stages of a dramatization.

Flynn and Carr (1994) used drama to help their students make predictions and raise questions during the reading of *Lon Po Po* by Ed Young (1989). During this story of three sisters who open their door to a wolf pretending to be their grandmother, Flynn alternated narration and role play, letting the students predict what they thought would happen next and then act on it. After dramatizing their predicted ending to the tale, the students listened to the author's ending and saw how well their forecasts fit with the story.

This dramatization can also be a transition into higher level questioning about the story. Having the students maintain their roles as the children who had outsmarted the wolf, the teacher assumed the role of their returning "absent mother" and asked them questions in character, such as "Why did you let a wolf in?" (Flynn & Carr, 1994, p. 42). Although drama



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activities can be used to target the individual components of literacy, such as metacognitive knowledge, many activities naturally support the development of higher level thinking skills and the overall comprehension of extended text.

### **Using drama to develop comprehension of extended texts**

Drama activities lend themselves to the development of comprehension on literal, inferential, and evaluative levels. According to the curriculum guidelines published by the Ontario Ministry of Education: "A student involved in a drama activity will be called upon to practice several thinking skills, such as: inventing, generating, speculating, assimilating, clarifying, inducing, deducing, analyzing, accommodating, selecting, refining, sequencing, and judging" (Yau, 1992, p. 4).

Ross and Roe (1977) maintain that drama requires the same skills that are fundamental for reading comprehension, namely an understanding and ability to express the details of the plot, characters, sequence of events, cause-and-effect relationships, word meanings, motivations and main events of the story, and the ability to sense the mood of the selection. Students who participated in a 3-month drama in the language arts program showed improvement in the areas of finding the main idea, sequencing, identifying the theme, interpreting the author's purpose, and identifying characteristics of setting and characters (Siks, 1983). Bordan (1970) found that children who could not understand the morals of fables after hearing them read aloud were able to do so after dramatizing them. Similarly, Galda's research (1982) with 108 kindergarten, first, and second grade students found those children participating in creative drama activities following read-alouds showed significantly greater comprehension than those children who followed reading with either drawing or discussion activities. The drama group outscored their peers in the areas of remembering, understanding, and solving and analyzing questions, as well as in sequential recall.

Why do drama activities have such strong effects on comprehension? The effect may be due to the constant use of reflective and imaginative powers during improvisational activities, which leads to greater ability in perspective taking, mental imaging, and creative thinking

(Yau, 1992). Acting requires reading between the lines, making judgments, and going beyond the text to analyze why a character behaves in a specific way (DuPont, 1992). The students in the enactment of *Lon Po Po* actually experienced making the decision to let the wolf into the house. From their position "in the shoes" of the character it is much easier to answer evaluative questions like "Why did you let the wolf in?" in an insightful way (Flynn & Carr, 1994).

Teachers can enhance students' inferential and evaluative skills by having them write extensive descriptions of their characters, detailing how they look, how they act, and why they do the things they do. Stewig (1974) suggested expanding on minor characters, such as the stepsisters in *Cinderella*, asking questions such as "Were they always that way?" and "If not, what happened to make them change?" He also encouraged students to delve into the details of character, inferring what they can about the characters' physical appearance, feelings, thoughts, and even social and home life. This type of activity fosters creativity as well as inferential and evaluative insights.

Swartz (1992) described an effective method for encouraging deep evaluation of character motivation called "Conscience Alley." His 11-year-old students were listening to the novel *Weasel* (DeFelice, 1990), the story of two young children, Nathan and Molly, haunted by a murderous man named Weasel. Swartz stopped his read-aloud at the point when Nathan is faced with the opportunity to kill his enemy. In "Conscience Alley" each student had the chance to say one sentence to Nathan (played by the teacher) to convince him to kill Weasel. Then each student approached him with a reason against killing. Finally, the class formed an "alley" down which Nathan slowly walked. As he passed each student, they chose to give either pro or con advice. The experience let students see the complexity of Nathan's decision and gave them the opportunity to voice their own thoughts about his choice.

Direct Point of View (POV) activities are another useful way to explore higher level thinking about reading selections. In these activities students take on the role of a character and respond to an interviewer's questions. POV avoids the abstract quality of questions such as "How did you think James felt when

he saw the giant peach?" by allowing the student to answer directly as the character. This technique helps prevent the vague answers that are the result of "standing outside the story looking in." If a student still has trouble being specific, the questions can be changed to "show me" requests, such as "Be Mary Lennox. Open the door and walk into the secret garden for the first time" (Cullinan, 1993).

POV can be extended into prediction and problem solving. In one variation, the story is stopped at a high point of the conflict, and the character is asked what he or she plans to do next. After the teacher collects several POV answers from different students, groups of students briefly enact these various predictions. The class evaluates whether the prediction makes sense in the story and if they think the characters made wise choices. They then read on to see how the author dealt with the problem (Cullinan, 1993). Drama activities that take place before and at intermittent pauses in extended text, or as accompanying projects for thematic units, seem to be most beneficial for developing comprehension.

### **Drama as a means of assessment**

An added bonus to using drama in the classroom is that it provides useful and immediate feedback about students' understanding of new materials. Students can summarize what they have learned by acting it out (Dewey, 1994). If the class has just finished reading a selection about the life cycle of a butterfly, a brief dramatization of this occurrence can be useful to evaluate the extent of their understanding of what they read. By attending to the students' actions and words, the teacher can assess what areas of the text may need additional reinforcement. Drama is also a way for teachers to assess whether there is a discrepancy between what children comprehend and their ability to express that comprehension. Drama activities provide "an outlet, both physical and verbal, for students who might otherwise have no way to express their understanding or feeling about what they have read or heard. These kids can show what they mean" (Miccinati & Phelps, 1980, p. 270).

### **Using drama to support all learners**

Mem Fox (1987) voiced one of the chief benefits of drama as method when she said,

"One of the loveliest advantages of drama is that it gives all children the chance to be successful" (p. 4). Dramatist Ruth Heinig (1987) agreed that:

Often children who have difficulty with other classroom tasks find success and a place for themselves in drama, a discovery that gives them a renewed interest in learning. Enjoyment and success together lead to self-confidence, a prime requisite for becoming a thinking, feeling, and creative person able to face life's challenges. (p. 9)

Drama activities also help to create a cooperative community of learners, especially as dramatizations allow students to experience life vicariously. Acting gives children the opportunity to see life from a different perspective, which leads to respect for others' ways of thinking.

Drama is an artistic response to reading; there is no absolute right or wrong in drama activities. One of the primary lessons of drama is that each individual's contribution is important. Children who experience anxiety about their own worth cannot focus outward on learning. Drama can provide a forum for children to participate and have their opinions reinforced as valuable. Providing such reinforcement is one of the teacher's most crucial roles in classroom drama (Bordan, 1970). Clift's study (1985) on the use of drama showed that not only do dramatizations result in more expressions of interest in students than the traditional lecture/searwork approach, they also evoke fewer expressions of fear of being singled out or having attention drawn to the fact that one doesn't know the right answer. A review of studies on the social effects of drama shows an increase in collaboration skills, cooperation, negotiation, compassion, empathy, and social tolerance among student participants.

Along with teaching the specific skills needed for success in reading, drama activities nurture students' self-concepts and help to foster cooperative learning communities. Students of all ages like "doing," and drama provides all students with the opportunity to "do" literature. Finally and foremost, drama activities motivate students to read and keep on reading and thus assist teachers in reaching their ultimate goal: creating and nurturing life-long learners.

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