



# Using Drama to Develop Communication Skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom

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**Abstract:** The skills and knowledge which university and college students will need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unknowable. What is known is that flexibility, conceptual thinking, empathy, critical thinking and sophisticated communication skills are just some of the areas of expertise which need to be developed for the future. The following paper was delivered at The International Conference on Language Learning and Teaching in November 2015 in Dubai. The paper was delivered to university lecturers who are teaching students in English in L1 and L2 contexts in countries in Asia, Africa, Oceania, Europe and North America. It draws on the work of Augusto Boal, Dorothy Heathcote, Keith Johnstone, Cecily O'Neill, Constantin Stanislavski and Rudolf Laban to advocate the use of drama in the development of the communication skills which university and college students need for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The presentation explored the ways that drama can be used to effectively engage English L1 and ESL Learners to develop effective communication skills in everything from vocabulary work to speaking Skills to developing game simulations and computer programs.

**Keywords:** Drama, ESL, Role-playing, Improvisation, Boal, Reader's Theatre, Stanislavski

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The following paper attempts to give an overview of a number of drama skills and tools which have been and can be used to help develop the communication skills needed by students for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Drama is an engaging tool to capture the attention and interest of ESL learners but it can also be used to introduce new concepts and scaffold complex learning. Drama is also a way to engage L1 English learners and ESL students in real life communication in a world where technology and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century call for a greater need for precise and genuine communication. Drama techniques can be used to help develop the skills that ESL students need for communication in today's world through to the communication skills they may need in the future to develop Avatars and Artificial Intelligences for effective development and interaction with technology and an ever changing world.

We do not know what skills and knowledge students will need as we advance into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Larson and Miller (2011) point out that this is not a new challenge but one that should be met with encouraging creativity,

innovation, communication, collaboration, perseverance, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making. They also advocate that these skills are best taught through cross-curriculum initiatives, shared teaching initiatives and learning opportunities replicating authentic learning contexts (Larson & Miller 2011: 122-123). The skills of improvisation, role-play, group collaboration, decision making and problem solving are all explored and reflected on in drama processes and drama making and are effective mediums for introducing new concepts, scaffolding complex learning and reinforcing conceptual and language learning already taught. Drama is also a way to engage ESL students in real life communication in a world where technology and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century call for a greater need for precise and genuine communication.

## 2. DRAMA AND THEATRE AS A BASIS FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Drama involves making and communicating credible emotional connections and appealing to people's thoughts and reason. In the East Asian context it is captured in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century Japanese drama theorist and playwright



Zeami whose notion of *Fushikaden* involved finding the essence and the beauty of ideas and creating an atmosphere in which beautiful things can grow (Nearman, 1984: 45-50). It is about being prepared to play many roles and be many things. Drama is about seeing what is around you and as Hamlet says in Act Three Scene Two of Shakespeare's famous play which is named after the same character, the purpose of drama is to "...hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature..." (Shakespeare, 2003).

I have taught Education, Language, Media, Communications, I.T. and Business students at undergraduate level and in all these contexts I have used drama to help facilitate the development of communication skills. Morrow (1981) emphasizes communication skills development as an essential part of the language teaching process. Drama games and skills can be used across a range of disciplines and I have found a useful starting point is always the inclusion of drama games and improvisation work particularly those taken from the work of Viola Spolin (1986) and Keith Johnstone (1999). The techniques and games of these two drama practitioners are also familiar to many students due to the popularity of the television program *Whose Line is It Anyway* which uses many of the techniques developed by these practitioners. Of particular use are the principles of offering, accepting and advancing improvised ideas and narratives (Johnstone, 1999) and these principles can be used with students in everything from basic language development to IELTS preparation to student work done on computer simulations and game development. As Whiteson (1996) maintains, drama and improvisation are effective ways for students to apply and explore various real life applications of communication and language skills (Whiteson, 1996). Boudreault (2010) and Wessels (1987) both reinforce the benefits of using drama to develop communication skills due drama's ability to contextualize language and language acquisition while developing the language confidence of students. Many drama techniques to help develop communication skills in teaching ESL are outlined in the work of Sam (1990) and Holden (1981).

### 3. DRAMA AS A TOOL FOR SELF-AWARENESS AND EMPATHY

Drama allows students in the classroom to engage in genuine learning and to empathize with others. Role play particularly works well in the mainstream or ESL classroom to encourage students to critically think about situations and take on different perspectives. Role play probably has always existed as an activity enacted by children across many centuries and across many societies. Bowman suggests that role playing has always existed in theatre but that it developed more specific forms after the popularity of Parlor games of the Fourteenth Century and that this developed with the *Commedia dell'arte*. He goes on to write about the further developments made with Viola Spolin's work on Theatre Games in the 1940's and

Keith Johnstone's work at the Royal Court Theatre in England in the 1970's (Bowman, 2010: 35-36).

Although the role play games forms developed by Spolin (1986) and Johnstone (2012) are effective with many college and university classes, another specific form of role play that I have found useful is Dorothy Heathcote's technique of using the 'Mantle of the Expert' (Heathcote, 2008). This is a useful technique for students from Primary to Secondary to Tertiary level education which involves the teacher enrolling or reframing the students as experts in a field as the teacher helps the students to immerse themselves in inquiry-based learning while critically engaging with issues, themes and situations (Heathcote, 2008). Guidance and explanation of the theory and practice of these techniques are investigated by Heathcote and Herbert in *A drama of learning: Mantle of the expert* (1985).

The work of Brazilian drama practitioner Augusto Boal takes drama beyond simple role playing to what he initially termed a 'simultaneous dramaturgy' and the Theatre of the Oppressed with the distinctive forms of Image Theatre and Forum Theatre (Boal, 2000). Forum Theatre in particular involves the concept of the Spectator and the spectators not just watching a scene but suggesting different actions, reactions and outcomes and then often entering the scene to act out the new processes and changes. Activities and games using these techniques work well for critical thinking about a range of issues (Boal, 1992).

Process Drama, a method of drama developed from the work of drama educationalists Brian Way, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton, is a dynamic developmental drama method involving the exploration of ideas through reflection in action and is a useful tool for the development of ESL learners (Kao & O'Neill, 1998) and developing literacy programs (Sun, 2003). Particularly useful in the development of activities using Process Drama is the work of John O'Toole which involves using the creative process of drama and dramatic elements to explore contexts, situations and themes to critically think about issues and the way meaning is constructed (O'Toole, 2003).

### 4. DRAMA AS A MODE OF ENGAGING IN LEARNING

Gullatt (2008) explores the way that integration of the arts across a number of curriculum areas can be used to enhance student learning. One simple drama technique which Gullatt (2008) and other educationalists have found useful, active and engaging is Reader's Theater. Reader's Theatre probably began as a style of presenting literature in a dramatic presentational way in England during World War Two when publication of plays was limited. It is a style of dramatic presentation or drama where participants use vocal expression, the acting out of direct speech and the use of narration devices to help the audience



understand the narrative or story of fictional or non-fictional texts (Coger & White, 1973).

Reader's Theatre is a useful way to help ESL students engage actively with a range of texts from different sources. Challenging texts such as Shakespeare's plays can also be attempted with ESL students through the use of Reader's Theatre. Also with larger classes and lectures of 50 to 100 students, Reader's Theatre is an effective way to have groups of students present texts and information in a more performative way.

Reader's Theatre has also been used in academic circles as a way to present data. Presentation of data through Reader's Theatre formats has been used in a number of research projects including an exploration of the stories of teachers in the classroom (Adams et al., 1998), an ethnographic study examining the processes and participation of boys in a drama program (Sallis, 2010) and a medical research and workshop project which used Reader's Theatre to help medical educators identify and act out hidden curriculum models which hinder effective communication skills in medical training (Bell, Wideroff & Gaufberg, 2010). These and other projects point out the growing applications of Reader's Theatre and I have used it as a technique with Education students to both explore and present data in action research projects.

##### **5. DRAMA AS A SYSTEM TO EXAMINE HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IN 'REAL' AND 'VIRTUAL' CONTEXTS**

The Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski was pivotal to the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century realist drama. Having trained as an actor, I am very familiar with Stanislavski's 'method' but it was only after applying these principles to educational contexts that I saw the possibilities of using Stanislavski's techniques in range of contexts. Bilgrave and Deluty (2004) saw parallels between Stanislavski's theories and "control theories" in psychology. They explored the use of Stanislavski's notions of "Units and Objectives" and "The Magic If" in applications of behavioral modification and analysis of behavior in terms of behavior sequencing (Bilgrave & Deluty, 2004). I have used Stanislavski's system (Stanislavski, 1961) in ESL language learning sequencing and also in helping Education students to plan and initiate lesson plans. I have also applied Stanislavski's methods to help students plan and present data from action research projects. The Stanislavski system of breaking a story down into units of action which helped Stanislavski's actors analyze plays and characters, is a very useful approach for students to plan and analyze the research process. I have used Stanislavski's "Magic If" as a way for students to plan and structure interviews and analysis of data on research projects.

Other applications of Stanislavski's methods are evident in the work of Smith, Gephardt and Nestel (2015) who used Stanislavski's theories to help Nursing practitioners simulate and role play situations that they encountered in the workplace for the purpose of building more empathy and optimizing engagement and health care outcomes through creating a more holistic understanding of health care patients and contexts.

Other pivotal work has been done using Stanislavski's method (Stanislavski, 1961) and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methods (Boal, 2000) as systems for game development. Manero, Fernández-Vara and Fernández-Manjón (2013) explored Stanislavski's system and Boal's principles to develop more dynamic, dramatic and interactional digital games. Frasca (Frasca, 2004) was one of the first to see the applications of acting theories in game theory. He proposed using Boal's notion of the spect-actor as a way of developing a more commentary approach to video games providing a more sociopolitical context while creating a more interactional experience for players. I have used applications of this work to help students develop more critically engaging multi-media projects and media projects. Corcoran (2010) alludes to these techniques in his exploration of the gamification of education and educational contexts.

I have also found teaching students the principles of Laban's movement notation system (Laban, 1975) also helps with their development of media and multi-media projects. Barakova and Lourens (2010) explored the possibilities of using Laban's systems and analysis of movement (Laban 1980) for the modelling and development of three dimensional emotional and reactive movements in game applications and robots for the purpose of training autistic children. This also potentially opens up the applications of Laban's work in more sophisticated language development programs. The possibilities of using drama theory and practices in the areas of game development, multi-media projects has further applications in the development of simulations, avatars and even artificial intelligence and these continue to have their influence on educational contexts.

##### **6. CONCLUSIONS**

We do not know what skills and knowledge our students will need as they advance further into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Drama techniques such as improvisation and role play help ESL students to think, act and communicate using empathy and critical thinking. Drama can also be used to introduce new concepts, scaffold complex learning and reinforce complex concepts and language development. Drama can engage students in real life and help multi-media knowledge, game technology and Artificial Intelligence technologies develop more realistic simulations so that the challenges of the 21st Century can be met and embraced.



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