Writing-Drama Connections: A Conversation

Courtney Cazden, Harvard University, and Jim Lobdell, University of California, Berkeley, have worked together at the Bread Loaf School of English for the past six summers on the relationships between drama and writing. They met in March at UC Berkeley, where this conversation took place.

Cazden is professor of education at Harvard University. She has written extensively on language development and education. Her most recent book is Whole Language Plus: Essays on Literacy in the United States and New Zealand (Teachers College Press, 1992).

Lobdell is working on his Ph.D. at UCB, where his research focuses on ways of using drama as a means of learning in secondary English classrooms. He taught at the high school level for twenty-two years, and every summer since 1985 has worked as a member of the Acting Ensemble and an actor-teacher at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont.

Jim Lobdell: Courtney, before we start talking about connections between drama and writing, could you briefly describe the project you're working on that brought you out here?

Courtney Cazden: I came to what we'll call "Bay Area Middle School" because I wanted to look at schools where there was some likelihood of interesting writing being done outside of English classes, and where there might be some discussion and coordination among teachers in different departments. So I contacted the University of Wisconsin, where there's a center for the study of restructuring of schools. I asked them about schools around the country and they recommended Bay Area Middle School.

It is a remarkable school, an inspiration for anyone disheartened about the prospects for improving education for all students. Some of the writing assignments that I saw at Bay Area Middle School raised questions and possibilities as to how drama activities might enhance and deepen the ideas kids bring to their school writing. There were two types of drama-writing activities; all involve what I call "imaginative" thinking processes. The second set also requires rhetorical decisions about presentation or performance.

Some writing assignments involved either interpreting or creating characters. For example, one class was reading Raisin in the Sun. One assignment was the writing of a character sketch. I heard a discussion about the very end of the play. Students were taking parts and reading the script and the teacher was trying to get them to — well, she didn't say "read with expression," she said it in a less formulaic way, but she wanted them to really get into the parts. It was very hard for these eighth grade students; that was clear from their silence when the teacher asked how Mama felt about taking the money for not moving into the white neighborhood, and whether she wanted them to take it or not and why.

The task there is to go from words in the text to some fuller feeling for this person. The teacher wanted them to think about not just what kind of person Mama was, but also what Mama symbolizes in the play. She stopped the discussion for a few minutes and gave a kind of mini-lesson on symbols and symbolization.
Now, I saw a sort of reverse of this in a seventh grade English class, where the larger assignment that the students were working on was writing a short story. The lesson that I saw focused on writing dialogue. They were to write some dialogue with a partner — nothing to do with their short story — in response to a prompt. They each got different prompts, but one was "How can you say that after all this work?" They had to imagine a situation and people who might be saying that to each other and then write out the dialogue.

JL: In groups?

CC: They were working in pairs, on a two-person dialogue, and then they came up and read them in pairs.

JL: But they didn’t do any drama activity?

CC: No, but after they read their dialogue, the teacher asked the rest of the class, "How old do you think this person was? What mood do you think they were in?" She was asking them to make inferences, both about general characteristics like age and also more momentary characteristics.

JL: Like emotional state.

CC: Yes, so that you can write something that will show not tell, that shows qualities of the character without telling about them in so many words. That seemed to me the flip side of the Raisin in the Sun assignment. So that’s one set of assignments, dealing with interpreting and composing characters.

The second set is quite different. In an eighth grade social studies class, the assignment was to write an "oratory," by which the teacher meant a monologue, an interview, or a poem, a first-person piece that might be spoken by a real person on a particular occasion. They could pick their real person. I watched two students. They had already done their first drafts, and the task for the day was to work in pairs and go over the other person’s draft and answer a very specific set of questions. The first two questions dealt with information to be included in these oratories — the writer has to imagine where the speaker is, who the speaker is talking to, why the speaker is there. The two pieces that I saw were just a sort of autobiography. And that made me wonder how much they have read speeches.

JL: In essence, they were just telling about the person, as opposed to speaking in the first person?

CC: No, they were speaking in first person, but they were saying, “I was born in … and then I …” They weren’t imagining a speaking situation — Who am I talking to? What is it I’m trying to say? — and then framing everything around the audience and the purpose. That’s what they were missing. And that’s what seems to me the imaginative part, being able to imagine yourself in a situation. But rhetorical strategies are also involved. For example, how do you begin a speech? Now, a couple of other classes were working with a totally different genre, but one that seemed to have some of the performance/rhetorical aspects that overlapped with the oratory assignment. Several classes had students writing “problem-solution” letters.

JL: Can you give me some examples?

CC: In one class the students had just read Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, in which the children get into a lot of different problem situations, some of which they don’t handle very well. The students had written a problem-solution letter to one of the characters in the book raising a question about one of these events and suggesting alternative actions. Now the assignment they were working on was to write a letter about a problem in their own life and address it to a real person. They were to lay out the problem, offer several alternatives, then come to some conclusion at the end. In a science class they were studying the oceans and environmental issues and students had an assignment to write a problem-solution letter about oil spills.

Even though this assignment was very different from the oratory, it seemed to me to require the same sort of attention to effective communication in a particular context.

It seemed to me that both in the imaginative dimension and, for the second set, in the realm of communication in a particular place to particular people — which I’m glossing as the rhetorical dimension — that drama activities could really enhance the resources that kids bring to writing. I know that you wouldn’t want to make drama just a servant of the writing program, but in places where they overlap it seems to me that they can enhance one another.

JL: If one uses drama in the writing program, what the students will learn about drama will be far greater than what they need just for the writing component.

CC: I wondered what you thought of these examples and also how they might fit into the different theoretical perspectives on drama that you referred to at the end of your paper.

JL: It seems to me that one of the important things drama could do in all these situations would be to help
the students find ways to work from "inside the dilemma" as Dorothy Heathcote phrases it.

**CC: To think from within.**

**JL:** Precisely. Getting into the character — whether it's a fictional character in a play or in a short story that students write, or a real character in a real-life situation or a historical situation — involves getting inside that character's thoughts and feelings. To do that, students have to identify with the characters, find the connections between the characters and themselves.

As you know, I've done a number of "Actors in the Schools" visits around the country as a follow-up to the NEH seminar in theater we conducted at Bread Loaf last summer. When you were talking about the writing of dialogue, I was reminded of something I had done with some eighth graders in Texas. Their teacher wanted them to do the "show don't tell" kind of writing, but they weren't doing very well with it. She wondered if drama could help them to write effective dialogue in stories and to use dialogue in incidents that they incorporate into other kinds of writing, such as essays.

She gave me four character sketches, taken from their writing, in which they were merely telling about, describing a character. She asked if we could do some improvisations using those. So we got the class to come up with ideas for scenes based on the character sketches. I instructed them to try to incorporate all the information in the sketches into the dialogue and action of their scenes. Then we had some of the students improvise those scenes. After that, we had them write exactly what had been done and what had been said, so that their focus was on the dialogue and the action, exactly as it had happened in the improvises. That produced the kind of results we were after, because it got students involved in being the characters: thinking like the characters, saying the things that would be appropriate for the characters, and coming up with actions that would accompany all of this.

**CC: Do you remember one of the improvises?**

**JL:** There was one character sketch of a little brat named Billy who was missing one front tooth. He loved to torment the neighbor's cat and had gotten into a lot of trouble for it. That was it — a description of this little boy, but with no dialogue, no action. In each of the three classes where we did this I asked for two volunteers, one to be the little boy and the other his father or mother. Then I asked the students, "What's the single most interesting thing to you in that character sketch?" They answered, "The way he's always tormenting the cat." So the boy playing Billy and I got down on the floor, and I said, "What are we going to say and do first?" He responded with "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty," and started to pantomime trying to get the cat to come over. "And what are we going to do once we get the cat over here?" He said, "We're gonna grab it!" And he promptly did. I got up and left, because he was really into it at that point and didn't need me anymore. He began struggling with the cat, rolling around on the floor and doing such a good job that we could almost see this imaginary animal.

After that, the rest of the students did improv using the other character sketches, and I said, "Now we have to write these down. What happened first? What did people do and what did they say? And don't put in anything else, just the things that people actually did and said." That worked really well to help them use dialogue for the showing-not-telling kind of writing.

**CC: You must have done that before, in your own teaching, that kind of exercise.**

**JL:** Oh, yes. I often encouraged students to write scripts and put any actions that couldn't be made clear in the dialogue itself into stage directions. Then, when they were going into fiction or using dialogue in an essay, I told them to flesh it out, without adding a lot of description, letting actions and speech do the job, just as they do in a play.

One thing that intrigued me about the work you saw at Bay Area Middle School was the lesson on symbolization. "What does Mama symbolize in *Raisin in the Sun*?" is a tough question. Before we can understand what Mama symbolizes, we have to understand Mama, and that means working from the inside, getting inside Mama's head. For this purpose, I like to have students do improvisations that involve characters and situations analogous to those in the play.

**CC: So in this case, we might start with a character sketch of Mama. They were reading the scene in the play where the son, Walter Lee, came in to say that they were going to get money for not moving into this white neighborhood, and Mama was making it clear to me — though not to the kids — that she would never take the money on those terms. They could imagine situations analogous to that.**

**JL:** Sure they could. Everybody's had a similar experience. Tell the students, "Now, in this particular situation we have Mama, who is very concerned over what she's going to do about this money. Let's say that it's not Mama but you. Think of some situation you know about in which somebody is trying to give somebody else something for not doing what they really want to
do. What would happen? How would it go if you had to make this decision?" We take the play and these characters as a point of departure, then move into the realm of the students' own experience, knowledge, feelings, emotions, and attitudes to explore it. This, in turn, informs their performance.

My approach always includes getting students up on their feet, not have them just sitting in their seats. Move the desks back, set up a stage, turn the classroom into a theater or a rehearsal hall and work with it that way.

CC: What would you do with the oratory situation in your classroom?

JL: That's a tough one.

CC: Why?

JL: I think many students haven't viewed or listened to many speeches. Maybe they saw some of the Presidential election stuff or watched Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" as part of Black History Month. But a lot of students don't have much exposure to oratory, so they don't know the genre particularly well.

CC: Yes, I think it's true that students don't always have a reader's familiarity with the genre they are trying to write. At most, they may have read previous students' good assignments.

JL: On a visit to Wisconsin I worked with the teacher of an American Literature course — eleventh graders — who was using Faulkner's short story "Wash" to help students prepare for writing a paper on the multiple perspectives in novels, to help them see that even in a novel told from the point of view of one character, the author still presents multiple perspectives. To do this, the teacher divided the students into three groups, representing the three major groups in the society portrayed by Faulkner — the aristocratic whites, the poor whites, and the blacks. We then worked with them to stage an inquest based on the events in the story.

At first it was just dismal, like pulling teeth, until we got a number of students in each group to take on the roles of individual characters, such as Ku Klux Klan members and former slaves who were now free. Then, because their roles were more clearly defined, we were able to have people — students — give testimony on the stand who were thinking from inside the heads of the characters, all imaginatively living in that context at that time. That was a form of oratory. If the bell had not rung, and if students had written at that moment, they would have written fluently for the entire time, because they had so much to say.

I suggested several follow-up writing activities to that teacher. Students might write a letter to a friend or relative describing their feelings about what happened during the inquest. Or a reporter — for a Southern paper, a Northern paper, a neutral paper — might write a story on the inquest, trying to capture what happened for the audience of that particular newspaper.

CC: That's good, because you're not just a reporter, but a reporter with a stance, with a perspective.

JL: Right. Then, without being told to, students would have to think about slanting the story for that particular audience.

CC: Then they'd get to see what the different versions would be like.

JL: Yes, and they'd say, "Wait a minute. We were all at the same event, but look at all the differences."

I worked with another group at a school that was trying to put together a videotape on suicide intervention techniques for use with sixth graders. The teacher working with them provided materials on how to recognize the warning signs for low, medium, and high risk potential suicides and how to respond to people in each category. The students improvised scenes using these materials — the way people would respond, the kinds of things people would say. These students were thinking, they were involved, they were serious.

CC: Is it your experience as an English teacher that when you take the time to develop something like the inquest situation that you then need to do this for each assignment, or does it help to do it occasionally, to work now and then to help students to imagine themselves in somebody else's shoes?

JL: My experience is that after students have done this sort of activity a number of times, they can often write more imaginatively without actually doing the acting prior to writing.

CC: They can do it mentally.

JL: Right. I could say "Get yourself into the head of this character, just as if we were going to do the drama, and write from inside the character's thoughts and feelings."

CC: Scientists talk about thought experiments, so this is a thought dramatization. Jim, can you make any connections between the kinds of dramatic activities we've talked about and different dramatic theorists, like Stanislavski and Brecht?
JL: The thing to realize, first of all, is that most actors are eclectic in developing their own ways of working. We learn something from Stanislavski and something from Brecht and from Artaud and Grotowski — all the theorists that we study — then we put that together into our own individual working methods. Sometimes a little more Brecht will predominate, because you’re trying to present a message more directly and abstractly, but at other times you’re trying to get that message across through audience identification so that they will feel it, as opposed to intellectualize about it, which is more like Stanislavski. But you use them all.

CC: Is the “feel it” versus “intellectualize about it” usually considered the basic contrast between Stanislavski and Brecht?

JL: In the simplest possible sense, yes. The students who lived through the experience of the inquest felt what that experience was like. When they later reflected about it in writing, they were intellectualizing. I don’t think either Stanislavski or Brecht would be unhappy with that. Both theories are at work there and both are necessary. Dorothy Heathcote says that if students do not reflect about the experiences they’ve had in drama, then no learning will take place — they will just have had an interesting experience.

CC: And writing can be an important part of that reflection.

JL: Definitely.

References

