

Embodied Ways of Knowing: Not only our heads go to school

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Abstract

This article interrogates how a holistic, hands-on teaching approach, afforded by the use of drama structures, can encourage learners to develop empathy and critical thinking while creating safe, brave, and playful spaces for reflection and learning. Engaging in play requires learners to participate fully with their entire being: their minds, bodies, and hearts. This principle of holistic learning is also at the core of drama-based teaching and learning. This piece also showcases a process drama centered around creating (fake) news and draws on recent research highlighting drama's ability to heighten empathy.

Keywords: *drama, education, empathy, process drama, teacher education*

Ask any teacher in the western world about the typical pressures they face in the classroom, and you will likely hear stories about racing the clock. There does not seem to be enough time in a school day, week, or year: there is constant pressure to cover the curriculum, to squeeze content into 45-minute lessons, often neatly delineated by subject. In my work with student teachers and seasoned teachers, during which I introduce drama in educational settings (i.e., drama for learning, not for performance), the following point is often raised: How do we effectively translate what we experience in our teacher training into our own classroom and school realities? Who has time for reflection, play, and arts-based teaching and learning when material must be covered for the test at the end of the unit? Although I recognize the

validity of this argument, when I work with student teachers and professional teachers, I invite them to consider the different kinds of learning that can co-occur when the whole body is invited into the space, not 'just the head' (see also Schewe, 1993). Indeed, a holistic view of education, which dates back to Pestalozzi, invites a learner's entire body to participate: "head, heart, hand, and foot" (Schewe, 1993, p. 50, my translation). I further argue that holistic ways of learning can, and should, be embodied. I lean on Erika Piazzoli's (2018) definition of embodiment in educational settings, which she describes as being a multimodal and multi sensorial experience, grounded in the mind and body, thereby encompassing one's senses, interactions, and thoughts, as well as—significantly and notably— one's imagination:

“An important aspect of embodiment is the possibility it affords to express the ‘what if’ through the faculty of imagination” (p. 26).

Embodied work is channeled through the heart (affect), the brain (cognition), and through the body (tactile, kinesthetic) (see Schewe, 1993; Göksel, 2019a; 2019b). This has been mainly discussed in the context of applying drama in language teaching and learning (Schewe, 1993, 2007; Tschurtschenthaler, 2013; Schmenk, 2017; Göksel, 2019b) but applies equally to drama in education (DiE) as a whole. In a nutshell, DiE is drama conducted in educational settings by the teacher and by the learners, and it is not usually shared outside the classroom. In other words, as DiE pioneer Dorothy Heathcote famously said, “the participants get the kicks”, as opposed to the audience (as cited in Wagner, 1979, p. 147). Thus, if drama work is considered both embodied and holistic, I further argue that applying drama in the classroom—although it may require more time—allows more and more complex learning to occur, thereby reducing the stress of racing against the clock while offering learners a rare commodity: permission to play.

I like to tell my student teachers that *play is serious*: it is an excellent way to promote personal development (Brown & Eberle, 2017) and subject-specific learning. Play imparts meaning in action, which implies that play matters to the players in the moment of playing (Smithner, 2011). However, for play to occur, the players must respect a set of rules. The same applies to drama work: the group must accept the rules of play, which include an agreement to suspend disbelief in order to enter an ‘as-if’ world (Fleming, 2017; Baldwin, 2012). If the players cannot imagine the as-if, then play cannot continue. Additionally, for a group to play freely, they must be mentored to create a safe space, free from harm (physical and metaphorical), in which participants feel welcome

and free to experiment (Hunter, 2008). Tim Prentki (2022) notes that a safe space allows players to momentarily step away from their typical social constraints to discover “...deeper emotional resonances and profound empathic connections between the self and the other” (p. 39). In the last decade, the concept of a safe space has been questioned, with scholars Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) pointing out that providing too much safety can risk empowering some individuals to break the rules of respectful behavior. They thus propose the more inclusive term of ‘brave space,’ which underlines the importance of being brave enough to participate constructively in open dialogue, particularly regarding issues of social justice and diversity.

What this challenge also addresses, perhaps indirectly, is the need for more empathy both in these brave and safe spaces, as well as in educational spaces in general. Tim Prentki (2023) succinctly argues that critical empathy must be placed at the center of the curriculum and that drama is the best medium through which to practice it. Indeed, the very definition of empathy calls for making effective as well as affective connections with others. As Massumi notes: “Thinking through affect is not just reflecting on it” (p. vii, 2015). Indeed, affect, i.e. empathy, it is arguably only understood properly if it is embodied. In line with this thinking, in the foreword of *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, the editors note:

Theatre breeds empathy through its living and felt experiences of what it means to be different in different times, places, and bodies. We take on living and lived roles that are different, we hear and see the world from different perspectives, we learn to feel and understand even those that we disagree with. We take a shared responsibility

for our histories and their consequences and rediscover marginalized histories and heritages. (McAvoy & O'Connor, 2022, p. xxi)

Empathy, therefore, should be a cornerstone of teaching and learning, and it fits in particularly well with holistic approaches, such as integrating drama in educational settings. In this context, I find Barbara Schmenk's (2017) provocation that drama pedagogy is 'hole'-istic—i.e., taking account of the holes in every learner—particularly appropriate: “Instead of promoting a pedagogy for wholes, the holes—that is, the fractions and fragmentedness of selves and others—can be experienced, reflected on, and brought to life in the drama classroom” (pp. 106-107). Schmenk reminds us that holistic teaching and learning must include an awareness of the holes in every teacher and learner. Drama, through the distance and protection of a fictional context, can help participants discover and explore these holes in themselves and in the fictional characters they explore within a drama. It is worth mentioning here that in my experience of DiE work in various settings, the teacher is usually just as involved in the drama as the students and is thereby learning with the group. My observations mainly stem from stories gifted to me by student teachers in a range of international contexts and from experiences with student teachers that I regularly taught at a Swiss university of teacher education over several years.

In teacher education, various studies have found that drama work improves student-teacher empathy (Briones et al., 2022; Göksel, 2022, 2021; Malinina, 2024). Indeed, as Kelly Freebody (2022) points out, many drama pedagogues argue that drama builds empathy due to participants' experiences of stepping into new and unpredictable roles (p. 13-14). She points to Jonothan Neelands' early writing (1992), in which he suggests that taking on a role equates to exploring a new perspective, seeing how humanity connects us,

questioning stereotypes, and developing empathy and respect for others who are different from us in a wide range of ways and circumstances. John O'Toole (2022) likewise notes that drama allows us to “...ask challenging questions, playing with human figures to give us insights into how they work and how they might be different.

Identification and empathy are a part of that core business...” (p. 77). O'Toole and Cecily O'Neill are credited with creating a form of drama work called “process drama”, a long form of drama which is simultaneously structured and improvised.

A tried and tested way to invite an entire class (of adults or children) to play seriously and to step into another person's shoes is to engage them in a process drama, which is aimed at immersing the players in a fictional world for discovery, problem-solving, and developing empathy (Bowell & Heap, 2017; Fransen, 2003; O'Toole, 1992; O'Neill, 1995). While the teacher sometimes leads the drama and has a general idea of where the drama may be headed, the participants fill in the content by providing ideas and improvised stories. Process drama, much like play, is thus guided by rules, one of the most important of which is to say 'yes' to new ideas. As Cecily O'Neill notes, dramatic play requires the acceptance of illusion. Indeed, the existence of a fictional drama world “depends on the consensus of all those present” (O'Neill, 1995, p. xiii). Players must choose to immerse themselves in the world of play, participating with mind, heart, and body.

A process drama can be episodic, meaning that it can be explored in stages over an extended period of time, for example, during a series of 45-minute lessons in a school semester. Within a process drama, a facilitator can choose to take on a more significant, high-status role, such as politician, or they can choose to play a minor role with little authority, thereby allowing participants more freedom to shape the story. One aid in planning

and executing a process drama is the application of drama conventions: techniques that help participants inquire, problem-solve, narrate, and reflect on various aspects of the drama. Drama conventions aim to help advance the story and deepen participants' learning. Detailed examples of drama conventions can be found in Neelands and Goode (2015) and Baldwin (2024); these include Hot-seating, Still-images, Thought-tracking, Choral speak, Conscience Alley, and many more. Another key aspect of process drama is its unscripted nature, which puts pressure on the teacher/facilitator to think on their feet (Bowell & Heap, 2017) and sometimes having to respond to multiple prompts from different players simultaneously. This pedagogical and aesthetic aspect keeps the whole learner (and the whole teacher) engaged, thereby underlining the value of, and necessity for, holistic practice in the classroom—arguably, it keeps learning more complex and multifaceted.

I would now like to examine a process drama that I developed for young adult learners to explore the phenomenon of fake news through a dramatic lens. I have tested this process drama twice, once with a group of student teachers at a Swiss university of teacher education and another with an international group of drama practitioners, many of whom were seasoned drama teachers. I will share the detailed drama outline, interweaving it with my observations of the two groups who participated in building the story at two separate events.

**History/Herstory/Their-story:
Who gets to tell the story?**

A workshop exploring the phenomenon of fake news

The setting:

A celebrity wedding with plenty of media coverage. A glamorous couple is in the spotlight, surrounded by high-profile guests. When the bride and groom do not make it to the altar, the press scrambles to tell the world the true story. What happened?

The players:

A bride
A groom
Their respective families, friends, and foes
The media

Workshop outline:

We begin with a series of short drama warm-ups (for example, *zip-zap-zop* and *popcornin*¹) in a circle to help the group settle and to gain a sense of who is in the room. Then, the group is invited to sit in a semicircle, facing a screen, on which the full-length silhouette of a woman is projected. The silhouette is black on a white background and depicts a female figure whose age, ethnicity, and profession are unknown. The group is invited to consider who this person is. Although I attempt to keep the silhouette neutral, the figure is slender and appears to be wearing business casual clothing with a hemline just above the knees, high heels, and shoulder-length hair worn loose. With her arms crossed, she leans backward slightly, with one foot extended in front of the other². After giving the group a few moments to collectively and individually brainstorm, I bring forward a flip chart with an outline of a person's head and shoulders. I ask: "Who is this woman?" Collectively, the group creates a character, deciding which characteristics

¹ These are classical drama warm-up games. For a description of how to play please see Dawson & Kiger Lee, 2018.

² I purposely chose silhouettes with a particular look, as I wanted both characters to be plausible as celebrities of some kind, however, another time I would like to try using the 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' symbols often used to designate toilets.

define her by asking and answering questions such as: What are her likes and dislikes? How does she dress? What does she do? Who does she spend her time with? These answers are written directly onto the outline, around the outside if they relate to physical attributes or how the person is perceived by others, or inside the outline for intrinsic characteristics, feelings, values, hopes, and dreams. As Baldwin (2024) notes, rather than speaking aloud, the participants can write their ideas on Post-it notes and place them on the outline to be read aloud afterward. This exercise, called Role-on-the-wall³, allows participants to map and visualize information about a particular character in a distanced and reflective way (Neelands & Goode, 2015; Baldwin, 2024). It is also possible for the group to have conflicting ideas about a character. At this stage, every idea is valid and included as plausible. Once the group is ready, we repeat the same exercise with the outline of a male figure. The silhouette I selected has broad shoulders, short—or perhaps no—hair, and appears to be wearing a long-sleeved sweater or shirt with jeans and dress shoes. He is standing solidly on his back foot, with his right foot slightly extended in front of him, shoulders squared to the viewer, and his arms by his side. Both times I facilitated this process drama, the female figure, let us call her Johana, was cast as a strong, smart woman. In one case she was a lawyer and in the other she was a journalist, both of whom fell in love with a musician, let's call him Michal, who in one case was a rock star and in the other a singer-songwriter.

³ The drama conventions mentioned in this article are mostly drawn from Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode's seminal Structuring Drama Work (2015), now in its third edition, while yet others are from Patrice Baldwin's latest book, 40+ 'Drama' Strategies to Deepen Whole Class Learning: A Toolbox for All Teachers (2024) and from Katie Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee's Drama-Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning Across the Curriculum (2018). There is of course some overlap between these sources, which all strive to catalog and make accessible a wide range of drama conventions for use in educational settings.

I then tell the group that these two people are in a relationship: What is this relationship like? After discussing this in pairs or small groups, we move into an exercise called *Walls have ears*. The group creates the four walls of a room, leaving space in the middle. I then set the scene by asking them to imagine this: "Johana proposed to Michal in this very spot. He said yes!" The group then voices what the walls witnessed in that moment and room. Participants are invited to describe the situation: What did the walls see, feel, suspect, and hear? Who else was present in the room at the time? Who was missing? This exercise allows the group to begin world-building as they consider who else is impacted by Johana and Michal's decision. Although no one is in the role yet, ideas for who else might be involved in this story are generated. I next ask the group to think about a character connected to this story that they would like to explore. I ask participants to have a back-up plan, and to be prepared to adapt their idea in case someone picks a similar character. I also ask them not to be the bride or the groom. We then go around the circle, each person saying who they will become. At this point, it would be meaningful to have the participants write name tags with a short description, such as 'Zeyneb, the bride's best friend.' The participants in my two groups came up with a range of character profiles, including staff at the wedding venue, journalists, friends, jilted lovers, stepparents, siblings, rivals, and fans. I had prepared a few prompts, in case anyone needed help, and to balance the range of fictional wedding guests if need be. The only rule I try to enforce is that no one should play a child or an animal, as this limits their ability to play properly within the fictional world of this particular drama. After claiming a role, participants may do a walk-and-talk. This means they move around the room until I signal them to stop. They then turn to the nearest person and chat in-role. This allows everyone to flesh out their characters and develop their back-stories. This might help participants

invest more fully in the fictional world, as well as help them to focus on moving the story forward.

The next exercise is the *Rumor mill*. The purpose of this exercise is to further develop the characters and their relationships to one another and generate ideas for a next step: What might happen now and what consequences would it have? Indeed, when I created this process drama, I had a rough framework in mind, but it is up to the participants to fill in the context as well as develop the characters and their behaviors. By sharing ideas and listening to the ideas suggested by others, the group collaboratively creates the world of Johana and Michal. This sharing of ideas gives the group clues and shared experiences to build upon in later improvisations. In the exercise, I tell the participants that they are gathered at a pre-wedding cocktail party and I ask them to chat in small groups about the upcoming wedding, which is set to be the social event of the season. I remind them that everyone who's anyone will be there and I ask everyone to consider questions such as: who will attend the wedding and who was perhaps not invited? What is the groom's family like, and how do they feel about the bride? What is the bride's family like and what are their thoughts regarding the groom? The participants are encouraged to move between the groups, thus spreading and developing various rumors and connecting different characters through these stories. Again, I will emphasize that the participants co-create the characters and create the storyline themselves. After letting this exercise run for a time, we move into another exercise called Eavesdropping, for which the group improvisation is temporarily frozen and then partially unfrozen in an organized manner. As I walk past, small groups or individual characters unfreeze and loudly continue their previous conversations—or voice their private thoughts aloud. They fall silent and freeze again as I move on, and the next group unfreezes. We thus hear the voices and thoughts of various wedding

guests and others who plan to be present at the wedding, such as members of the press, potential party-crashers, and staff at the venue. This drama convention thus allows everyone in the room to overhear private thoughts or conversations. Once we have heard from every character, I shift the story to the wedding day.

Finally, the big day arrives, and everyone gathers for the wedding ceremony. The bride and groom have yet to arrive, and the guests are settling in before the ceremony begins. In this guided improvisation, I step into the role of Lina⁴, one of the bride's best friends and the wedding's master of ceremonies. We begin the improvisation with the event in full swing, with food, drinks, and gossip circulating freely. Before beginning this improvised scene, I distributed some secret tasks to various players. These are written on slips of paper with the instruction that they are not to be shared with the rest of the group. The tasks will be carried out in a specific order when a particular signal sets them in motion. This technique is meant to guide the improvisation while maintaining an element of surprise for everyone. At a signal pre-arranged by Lina, one character is instructed to dramatically announce that 'the wedding is off!' Upon hearing this, another is instructed to appear distressed and blurt out that the groom was spotted by the pool, clearly out of sorts. Yet, another character then announces that the bride has sprained her ankle and speculates there may be a delay in the proceedings. This is the signal for three other characters to create an outburst of chaos, for example, by dancing, laughing loudly, or bursting into tears. How each character carries out their task will be determined partly by the stories and personalities

⁴ This drama convention is called *Teacher-in-role* and is a wonderful way to engage learners and to invite them to immerse themselves in the fictional setting, since the teacher is clearly playing along too. When improvising, it is generally a good idea not to use the names of any of the participants and to rename the actors in order to help them step into the role.

they have developed for themselves. Participants are encouraged to improvise and elaborate on the prompts. The ensuing chaos marks the end of the improvisation and the wedding.

The distressed wedding guests are called to attend a press conference, convened by Lina. In preparation for this event, the characters gather in three groups: the bride or groom's family and friends and the media⁵. While the journalists prepare their questions and share their suspicions, the other two groups must each decide what they think—or will claim—happened at the wedding: Why did Johana and Michal not show up? Where are they now? Did she sprain her ankle? Why did he seem to be in a bad or strange mood? Did they call the wedding off? What will happen next? In addition to crafting their group's version of events leading up to and including the wedding, each character must decide what they might be willing to say (or not say) at a press conference. The final stage of this process drama is an improvisation of the press conference. This requires a lot of listening, as the participants must respond not only to the journalist's questions, but also to the statements, comments, and perhaps even allegations of the other guests. The three groups sit facing each other in a triangular formation with the two families facing off against each other, observed by the press, who take notes. The journalists interview both the bride and the groom's families in a free-for-all scrum during which they not only need to ask the right questions, but also keep track of the various stories that emerge from both families. Lina is responsible for bringing the press conference to a close and for helping participants exit the drama's fictional world⁶. During both sessions in which we played

⁵ To keep the groups somewhat balanced, I often ask the participants who played wedding venue staff to become journalists, unless they have a strong desire to join one of the other two groups.

⁶ This cool-down phase is an important part of drama work, helping participants gain distance from and to reflect upon

this scene, it became clear that listening is a challenging skill; the journalists, for example, sometimes got so caught up in the angle they were pursuing, that they only heard what they wanted to hear. The family members also had to keep track of what others were claiming, so that they could either corroborate or claim an alternative version of events. Which characters were purposely fabricating their version of events, and which were simply convinced by a particular rumor? Does anyone actually know what happened? What would Johana and Michal have said, had they been present?

The process drama wraps up with an exercise in which all the participants step out of their roles as wedding guests and into roles as journalists. Working in four groups, each is assigned a different genre (for example tabloid, talk show, etc.) and a different medium to work with. One group might choose radio news while another will share their story via social media, and one will be on prime-time television. Each media outlet is instructed to 'sell' their product to get the most views, hits, etc., while remaining true to their brand. The participants soon realize that a serious television newscast cannot afford the sensationalism of, for example, a tabloid newspaper. The various news agencies each work on creating their version of the events—what happened at the wedding and why was it called off? What can they report? Each group is coached separately and given time to rehearse the presentation of their newscast/blog/article presentation, etc. Then it is time for the news: we watch, read,⁷ and listen to the various versions of

their embodied experience (see also Neelands and Goode, 2015).

⁷ While no one actually wrote a text, each group devised their own way of sharing their news, either by having a character 'read' it aloud, or using their bodies to portray images as though they were photographs. This drama convention is known as *Still-image*.

Johana and Michal's story. In a final discussion, the group decides which news story was most convincing—or compelling—and why. The drama ends with a final cool-down during which everyone casts their favorite headline or tagline into the circle. This is followed by a more general reflection of what happened during the workshop.

The final reflection of the process drama, as well as the concluding thoughts of this paper, dwell on the question of how a holistic, embodied teaching approach, afforded by the use of drama conventions, can encourage learners to develop empathy and the critical thinking skills required to understand better each other and the world we live in. During the 'his/her/their-story' workshop, participants were given time to create a safe, brave, and playful space to develop and experience a fictional scenario, and afterwards to reflect on its parallels and resonances with topics and events present in their daily lives. In the final reflection, many participants noted the absence of the two key players, whose voices were not given any space to be heard in the various narratives created during the process drama.

Another key revelation for many participants was how the unscripted nature of process drama allowed them to fill in content that was meaningful to them. Indeed, having willingly embodied the process of generating rumors and having invested—i.e., having had a vested interest in characters affected directly and indirectly by those fake stories, offered participants a new point of view for considering the inner workings of and potential impact of, (fake) news both in its creation and consumption. Coming full circle to the question of whether drama should be applied in the classroom despite the pressures of time and the constraints of 45-minute lessons, I argue that a process drama offers a layered approach to teaching and learning by providing the opportunity to holistically explore material across subjects and

on multiple levels, developing both soft skills and offering opportunities to inquire into material from the curriculum. Although it requires time to facilitate, a process drama can cover more territory and thus perhaps even save time overall.

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