A Dramatic Approach to Reading Comprehension

Strategies and Activities for Classroom Teachers

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Drama is a significant reading intervention. If you were to perfect just one drama technique from this book, it could change your literacy time by cracking open the words of a text and letting children live inside the book. That is the essence of why we all work so hard to help every student become a good reader—so that students can taste how delicious it is to really know and love a book. This book is inviting you to take a delightful journey.

Teachers see immediate classroom results when using drama. Students eagerly anticipate drama, showing us their motivation to be actively involved in text. During drama, they begin to demonstrate surprising insights that observers may have not seen before. After drama the class discussions become more engaging and to the point. Weeks later, students still make references to the characters and the book, and the important ideas and new words carry over into new conversations. Drama makes a significant impact on students.

Observers of drama often want to see the benefits of this reading tool in their own reading workshops but wonder how to do it all without a theatre background or a resident drama specialist. And so readers of this book will love that everything they need to know is right here. This is critical because the role of the teacher is so essential to coaching students in building meaning as they work with a text. The influence of a good teacher with a wide repertoire of strategies for meeting the needs of a diverse group of students can change a child’s reading life forever.

We know that there are a variety of barriers that prevent students from making meaning from text. Teachers and reading specialists, administrators and parents puzzle over each child and look for interventions that will help each one break down the barriers and become a strong reader. There are many good books that help us understand more about teaching word recognition, building reading fluency, introducing vocabulary, and catching students with weak phonemic awareness. This book will add to your teaching repertoire significant drama techniques that can be used to build the underlying strengths of attention, focus, memory, and motivation, so that students can truly engage in books and learn to think more deeply. Then
each chapter will help you investigate a drama technique in ways that will teach children how to think. Students will be immersed in drama methods that scaffold the reading lesson for them so that they can begin to ask more questions, visualize the story, make inferences about the characters, and synthesize to find the most important ideas.

Those who work in the field of reading and want to open new doors of understanding for students will find the support they have been hoping for in this book.

The authors are offering you a wonderful gift for you and your students. Give yourself the chance to delve into a new way of working and enjoy it.

—Roberta Mantione
FOREWORD

Arts integration. It’s the biggest trend in the field of arts education. Some say it is the future of the arts in American schools; some say the quality of learning it sparks makes it the future of schooling in general. The trend is driven by a belief that two separate but equal learning domains, art and another subject area, can be brought together in ways that synergistically advance the learning of both further than either could go alone.

Given the scarce commodity of time in our schools, arts integration is a bit of a gamble—can teachers afford to take time to open up a subject area through the arts? Will the gamble pay off in greater learning? Will connecting the arts to another subject matter dilute the arts learning? Good educators across the country are taking the gamble, in increasing numbers. In my travels, I see so much experimentation that we seem to have a laboratory of future schooling under way.

Arts integration doesn’t always work. I have seen the arts used as a handmaiden to curricular material—the subject matter gets priority, and the arts are used to pep up a dull curriculum. I have seen the inverse as well, when the subject connection is really just an excuse for having a great art project.

A Dramatic Approach to Reading Comprehension, however, is a powerful and important contribution to our national experiment. Indeed, Lenore Blank Kelner and Rosalind M. Flynn erase the gamble of arts integration with a step-by-step process that ensures the quality of arts learning, and the literacy payoffs make integration more than worth the time involved. The next time you hear a doubter question the efficacy of arts-integrated learning, tell that traditionalist to shut up, and hand over a copy of this book.

The authors have created an extraordinarily complete example of arts-integrated learning that works for everyone. They have included all the pieces any educator needs. They based their process in the key that I find most essential too: engage young minds and hearts in the dynamic relevance of theatre work, and then guide
that organic enthusiasm into literacy development in the natural flow of the
invested learning.

Kelner and Flynn are deeply grounded in theatre art; not only are their activi-
ties authentic yet accessible, but even their prose has the bounce and vitality of a
good actor. They are deeply aware of the spontaneous connections that spark
between theatre work and literacy skills—sparks that lead to research verifying
increased language arts test scores for students who experience theatre work like this.

Like the great teaching artists they are, Kelner and Flynn write for every edu-
cator, at any level of teaching experience or theatrical background. A novice can
pick up this book and be running fast right away. Because the authors have distilled
deep practices of the art to such inviting and unthreatening step-by-step activities,
any teacher can guide students in authentic dramatic work in no time. Their activ-
ities are so inviting—I was glad to read the book alone in my house, so I could
indulge in the fun of enacting a frustrated orchestra conductor and finding the
words for how I appeared and felt. The activities catch the innately joyful, fun
energy of theatre, and I found myself engaged in language learning without even
knowing it. (By the way, a panicked bodybuilder is a very amusing sight.)

This comprehensive book even guides the reader to assess the learning that
explodes in these adventures. This book takes the gamble out of arts-integrated
learning, replacing it with joy, creative engagement, and learning that will play out
in the short and long terms in the lives of teachers and students.

—Eric Booth
2 Drama and Reading Comprehension

Background and Objectives

Effective integration of drama with reading comprehension requires clear objectives in each of these content areas. This chapter defines and provides background information on drama and reading comprehension, and lists the objectives in each area that ground the content of this book. Each chapter that follows refers back to the objectives stated here.

Drama

The term drama is used to describe the classroom activities and strategies presented throughout this book. Other names for drama in educational settings include creative drama, creative dramatics, educational drama, dramatic play, classroom drama, educational drama, playmaking, and improvisation.

Drama, especially as it is used in classrooms for learning purposes, exists for the benefit of the participants. Although it uses many theatre terms and conventions, its focus is on the process of the experience for students and teachers, not on a product created for others. Theatre, on the other hand, is a disciplined artistic experience in which artists work and rework the same material with the goal of performing it perfectly for an audience.

The word drama comes from the Greek word dran, meaning “to do or to act.” Students and teachers do, act, and create in the moment—improvisationally. What they create is not meant for anyone else’s eyes. Their acting and dialogue are generated spontaneously for their own self-expression and learning. Using no sets and few, if any, costumes and props, drama does not result in a polished production. Drama revolves around the creative process.

The participants are simultaneously the playwrights, directors, actors, audience, and critics. As playwrights, they decide what story to tell and what words to speak. As directors, they decide what drama strategies to use and which actors play which roles. As actors, they play the characters in the drama. As audience members, they observe the acting of others. As critics, they assess the dramatic experience and reflect on how to improve future presentations.
Drama activities in the classroom have evolved from many sources: theatre games, acting exercises, actors’ characterization work, staging techniques, theatre conventions, children’s theatre, and understandings of children’s play and the creative process. In the United States, many state and local school systems have adopted standards for the teaching of drama and theatre based on the National Standards for Theatre Education (see page 220 for a description of these standards).

In drama, participants live in the moment of the action. By using their imaginations, participants play roles and experience what others think and feel. Drama allows them to experience empathy for other people, comprehend complex situations, consider varying viewpoints and opinions, and feel the consequences of choices and behaviors. All of these dramatic experiences may cause participants to change their personal feelings or attitudes, thus impacting their real-life choices.

Drama Strategies

A drama strategy is a specific way of involving participants in a dramatization. The drama strategies included in this text involve students and teachers in thinking and working like actors, directors, playwrights, audience members, and critics. These strategies invite students and teachers to take text on the page and use it on the stage. The stage for drama is the classroom.

This book focuses on four drama strategies:

- **Story Dramatization**—Student actors enact scenes or a single scene from a story using their own words.
- **Character Interviews**—Role dramas in which student actors portray characters from a book and answer a series of interview questions.
- **Tableau**—A silent frozen picture made by student actors striking poses to represent a significant moment in a story.
- **Human Slide Show**—A sequence of tableaux presented in chronological order.

Some of the strategies require students to create their own dialogue based on information from the text. Students do so by reading and exploring the text, subtext, character traits, and character motivations.

Other strategies rely on visual images. Students create stage pictures based on information from the text. Students do this by delving into the essence of a scene to uncover its implicit and explicit meanings.

Drama Mentors

Many practitioners and authors set the stage for the work that led to this book. Their contributions to the field of educational drama influenced the practices of this book’s authors and thousands of drama teachers and specialists worldwide. Whether their goal for using drama in classrooms was to promote children’s social,
emotional, and physical well-being, to develop techniques to elicit creative expression from children, or to involve them in a creative process, these mentors understood that drama is deeply connected to what children do naturally—play.

One American writer about drama was Winifred Ward. At the start of her 1930 text *Creative Dramatics*, she claimed that creative drama allows children to “develop plays out of their own thoughts, imaginations, and emotions.” (3) She felt that dramatizing stories either from literature or original tales was an extremely “valuable avenue” leading to student growth.

British educator Brian Way was another important voice. His book *Development Through Drama* (1967) is filled with practical advice, ideas, and instructions for using drama in schools. Way’s primary concern, however, remained not with the development of drama, but with the development of people. He wrote about the ways in which drama could be a valuable tool for teaching other subjects. Way’s contribution to teachers was a wealth of concrete drama exercises to develop areas such as students’ concentration, imagination, and improvisational skills. He provided definite direction for educators who wanted to add drama to the curriculum.

Nellie McCaslin was a tireless writer about creative drama and children’s theatre. She constantly updated her work to reflect the latest trends in the fields. She and author–educator Geraldine Brain Sikis articulated the shared objectives of drama and education. They clearly described how drama promotes creativity, social, emotional, and physical development, communication skills, character building (morals, values), and self-esteem.

Learning through drama, specifically using drama teaching methods to enable students to reach a greater understanding of themselves and their world, is an approach popularized by British educator Dorothy Heathcote (Wright 1985). Heathcote’s work went beyond the drama objectives of personal development and social adjustment. Beginning in the early 1960s, Heathcote used drama not to reinforce facts, but to explore issues, principles, consequences, and social responsibilities (Bolton 1985).

Her drama work incorporated children’s existing personal knowledge about human behavior with the subject matter being studied. Heathcote believed that when you put yourself into other people’s shoes, using your own personal experience to understand their point of view, you discover more than you knew when you started (Johnson and O’Neill 1984).

Carole Tarlington’s (1985) writings on tableau and Ruth B. Heinig’s (1992) wealth of practical drama activities and techniques influenced the ideas in this book. The use of role drama as described by Cecily O’Neill and Alan Lambert (1987), Carole Tarlington and Patrick Verriour (1991), and Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton (1987) also contributed to strengthening the practices detailed within these pages. Years of studying with and observing firsthand the educational drama work of the late John C. Carr were priceless in shaping the dramatic approaches to reading comprehension that follow.

Each strategy included in this text builds on the work of these and other individuals and adds an arts-integration dimension by combining the teaching of drama with
the teaching of reading comprehension. There is a natural connection between the two subjects and both are enhanced when they become partners in students’ learning.

Drama Objectives

In order to use drama in the classroom, students must think and behave primarily like actors. To do so, students need to understand the actors’ basic tools and skills. Just as students use tools (paper, pencils, desks, etc.) and skills (reading, writing, listening, etc.) to perform at school, actors use tools and skills to perform on stage.

The three basic acting tools are imagination/mind, voice, and body. To be proficient, actors must use these tools well. In addition, there are a variety of complex skills that effective actors use. For classroom drama work, however, students need the basics. The two basic acting skills are cooperation (working as an ensemble) and concentration. To participate in classroom drama, it is essential that students develop these tools and skills.

The Basic Acting Tools

IMAGINATION/MIND

To participate meaningfully in the fictional world of a drama experience, students will use their imaginations and minds.

Imagination When they plan, enact, observe, and reflect upon their work, students will:

- agree to pretend (willingly suspend disbelief) to be characters and objects in different settings and situations
- interact with real and/or imagined characters and objects
- react to imaginary sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures

Mind When they plan, enact, observe, and reflect upon their work, students will:

- demonstrate comprehension of the basic acting tools and skills
- identify the basic acting tools and skills
- use drama vocabulary accurately
- analyze when and how the basic acting tools and skills are used in the drama experience
- analyze a character’s personality, traits, thoughts, and feelings
- find personal connections with characters
- differentiate reality from fantasy
- recall and/or retell the predetermined story in correct sequence
- reflect upon dramatic work to improve its quality

A DRAMATIC APPROACH TO READING COMPREHENSION
VOICE
When they play roles, students will use aspects of voice to communicate information about their characters and the drama’s circumstances. While acting, students will:

- vary vocal tone and pitch to create character voices and/or sound effects
- create and deliver dialogue that is in character—accurately communicates information about the character and the drama’s circumstances
- speak with expression that reflects the personality, traits, thoughts, and feelings of characters
  - project—speak loudly enough to be heard
  - articulate—speak clearly enough to be understood
  - modify Word Tempo—speak slowly enough to be understood

BODY
When they play roles, students will use aspects of body to communicate information about their characters and the drama’s circumstances. While acting, students will:

- modify posture, poses, gestures, movements, and/or walk
  - use energy when modifying body
- use facial expressions that communicate the thoughts and feelings of characters

The Basic Acting Skills

COORDINATION
Because drama is a collaborative art form, students will work as members of an ensemble. When they plan, enact, observe, and reflect upon their work, students will:

- create a community of actors who work together and support each other as members of a team
- follow instructions
  - listen to peers and the teacher
  - remain silent when cued
  - remain frozen when cued
- collaborate with peers and the teacher
  - alter actions and responses based on side coaching—suggestions and prompts provided by the teacher during the drama
  - demonstrate respect for ideas contributed by peers
CONCENTRATION
When they play roles, students will use aspects of concentration to maintain the effectiveness of the drama experience. While acting, students will:

- focus intently on the given drama task
- remain in character
  - speak only as the character
  - control inappropriate laughter
- attend and respond appropriately to the other characters
- disregard actions and noises unrelated to the drama

An Additional Vital Basic: The Audience
Participation in a drama experience often requires that students observe the work of others. When they are audience members, students will:

- differentiate reality from fantasy
  - agree to pretend (willingly suspend disbelief), that is, to accept the fictional world of the drama
- demonstrate respect for the work of the actors
  - watch quietly
  - listen carefully
  - refrain from distracting others
  - show appreciation

Reading Comprehension
Reading comprehension is the ability to read and understand text. It is more than decoding words, phrases, and sentences because comprehension means that readers get the message, get the picture, see the point of and grasp the meaning of the words on the page.

Reading Comprehension Strategies
A reading comprehension strategy is a specific way that readers engage with text in order to deepen their understanding of it. Reading comprehension strategies do not work in isolation. They are simultaneous processes that occur during and following reading.
This book focuses on six reading comprehension strategies:

- **Developing Sensory Images**—The use of some or all of the five senses to imagine what the text describes in words.

- **Building and Activating Schema**—The development and application of background knowledge to increase understanding of the text.

- **Questioning**—The use of questions to clarify and speculate about elements of the text.

- **Determining Importance**—The ability to distinguish significant text information from minor details.

- **Inferring**—The ability to interpret or draw conclusions about what is not directly stated in the text.

- **Synthesis**—The ability to create something new based on information in the text.

### Reading Comprehension Mentors

Guiding students to unlock their abilities to truly make meaning of what they read has been the subject of countless articles, books, manuals, and dissertations. There are hundreds of theories, methods, and practices, each with its own terminology and strategies, intended to lead students to full comprehension of text.


The reading comprehension approach developed in these texts is fresh, exciting, simple, and yet broad based. It embraces fundamentals found in many other approaches, but instead of being skill driven, this approach is more global. Individual reading skills are still present, but they are embedded in larger reading comprehension strategies.

The approach is based on research done in the 1980s that investigated the reading strategies proficient readers use to understand a text. The authors of the aforementioned texts believe that teachers can strengthen students’ reading comprehension with specific instruction in these reading comprehension strategies. When students are aware of how they can better understand a text, they become more thoughtful and capable readers. These authors advocate that students should understand both the content of what they read and the processes they use to make that understanding occur.

### Reading Comprehension Objectives

In addition to the drama objectives established for each of the drama strategies in this text, there are reading comprehension objectives. Clarifying these objectives sets clear goals for students, helps students develop skills, and sets the stage for more accurate assessment.
Developing Sensory Images

To enhance their understanding of a text, students will use multiple senses to create mental images when they read. Students will:

- visualize the setting, characters, and action of the text (create a mental movie)
- imagine the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures described in the text

Building and Activating Schema

To more deeply comprehend what they read, students will consider how their life and learning experiences are similar to those described in a text. Students will:

- make connections among various parts of the text
- make connections between the text and other texts they have read (text to text)
- make connections between the text and their personal experiences (text to self) and prior knowledge (text to world)

Questioning

To explore unresolved issues, concerns, and ideas raised during and after reading a text, students will engage in questioning. Students will ask or develop questions that:

- clarify evidence in the text
- probe for deeper meaning
- seek to discover new information
- promote wondering
- speculate on possibilities
- search for answers to problems

Determining Importance

To find the essentials in a text, students will distinguish between the main ideas and the details of what they read. Students will:

- demonstrate comprehension of the important elements of the text
  - identify setting, characters, conflict, obstacles, and resolution
  - list the sequence of key events
  - retell the plot (beginning, middle, and end)
- demonstrate an understanding of the author’s intent
- determine the text’s primary message
**Inferring**

To extend and enrich the meaning of a text, students will draw conclusions and make interpretations based on information provided, but not specifically stated, in the text. Students will:

- make predictions
- discover the implied information within the text—read between the lines
- combine clues found in the text with prior knowledge to make logical guesses

**Synthesis**

To demonstrate their understanding of a text, students will take information from what they have read, combine it with prior knowledge, and create something new. Students will:

- summarize and paraphrase the main points of the text
- connect the text’s main ideas with larger concepts and issues
- generalize and/or make judgments about the text
- extend and apply the information in the text to different contexts
- respond personally to the text
- form new ideas, opinions, or beliefs
- gain new perspectives

**Integrating Drama and Reading Comprehension**

There are strong, natural, and meaningful connections between reading comprehension and drama. Basic acting training and the very purposes of drama dovetail beautifully with the reading comprehension strategies. Each chapter of this book explores these connections in detail.

Combining drama with reading comprehension strengthens students’ abilities in both subjects. Using reading comprehension strategies within a dramatic context gives students the skills and awareness of what they need when they approach a text. One teacher in Oklahoma compared integrating drama and reading comprehension to training for a marathon: “When my students use drama with these reading comprehension skills, it’s like they are working out in the gym. They are training and developing their muscles so they can run the race . . . they can read and understand a text.”

Another teacher in inner-city Washington, D.C., agreed: “Comprehension goes through the roof when I use drama with my students.”
Qualities of an Integrated Lesson

An arts-integrated lesson is designed to address objectives in both the art form curriculum (drama) and the nonarts curriculum (reading comprehension). Students should be aware of both sets of objectives, all of which should be measurable and, therefore, assessable. Posting the objectives for the students helps guide them in meeting the lesson’s objectives.

A high-quality arts-integrated drama and reading comprehension lesson includes:

■ clearly stated and explained objectives in both drama and reading comprehension
■ an acting tool- and/or skill-building activity or warm-up that teaches or reinforces one or more drama objective
■ a drama strategy that encompasses both sets of stated objectives
■ reflection on the effectiveness of the lesson based on the objectives
■ revision of the drama to allow students to implement understandings gained during the reflection
■ assessment from both drama and reading comprehension perspectives

An Arts-Integration Challenge

Teachers are generally familiar with a variety of theories and practices regarding reading comprehension. Only when teachers also know enough about an art form, however, can they implement fully arts-integrated lessons. A major goal of this book is to increase teachers’ understanding of the art form of drama to promote its frequent, confident, and effective use. Teachers who strengthen their knowledge and skills in drama and combine them with existing reading comprehension knowledge and skills are more fully prepared to meet the challenge of successfully integrating these two subjects.

The next chapter concentrates on expanding teachers’ proficiency with drama. Its focus is on ways and means of preparing students to use drama successfully and productively in the classroom.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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