

**This book
is not about
drama...
it's about
new ways
to inspire
students**

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Introduction: Active and Social Approaches to Literacy

“. . . most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture.”

— Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (p. 127)

Any class is potentially a close community, a community of learners. Teachers can bring about a sense of community in their classrooms by creating regular opportunities for students to negotiate, collaborate, and share their learning. The cultivation of this kind of community learning spirit can transform the social atmosphere of the class, creating a very positive environment.

The Classroom as a Community of Learners

Many teachers, aware of this potential, always look for ways to provide a focus for the whole class to learn and share together. From shared reading to drama performances to writers' workshops, some of the most successful classroom practices are those that bring students together in social situations to learn from each other and enjoy each other's achievements. Students' confidence grows in situations where they are listened to, involved, and invited to make positive contributions.

Sharing personal stories

Here is a case in point. A teacher from London, England, Alan Newland, wrote an article about his class of 10-year-olds. The class had been talking about *The Patchwork Quilt*, a picture book by Valerie Flournoy. To follow up this experience, Newland invited his students to bring in treasured possessions from their earliest memories: old clothes, favorite toys, family photographs. The class responded so enthusiastically that the teacher set aside a whole morning every week for sharing the stories that lay behind the students' treasures. Many of these were highly personal:

One week a girl brought in a piece of dress material worn by her mother as a maternity smock, accompanied by a letter written by mum recalling the days spent wearing it. A broken old watch had been given to one child's mother as a final parting gift of a dying grandfather.

The atmosphere of trust that had been created in this class enabled the students to share intimate memories that embraced both birth and death.

Over time, the same teacher noticed that, as they told their stories, the students were rapidly becoming highly competent storytellers. He concluded that the students' stories were not simple anecdotes but "appraisals of their experiences." The students were growing in confidence because their experiences were being validated and were becoming significant to themselves and others.

This experience is presented in greater detail in *Stories in the Classroom*, by David Booth and Bob Barton.

The students' confidence was founded on being taken seriously and being listened to — but also on having opportunities to *practise*. The students were learning from one another how to tell their stories effectively and how to engage their listeners. The class exemplified a close community.

Towards Memorable Learning

All students benefit from learning that is active and social in character. Learning that is participatory, that involves students and engages them, is memorable learning: learning not to be forgotten.

Going inside the story

Here is one instance. In chapter 3 of Henrietta Branford's *Fire, Bed & Bone*, the family in the story remembers when a visiting preacher talked to the villagers about equality and about how the results of their labor were unevenly shared: "The Bible says that God told Adam he must sweat to eat. Do you see the Lord of the Manor, whose harvest you are bringing in just now, sweat for what is laid upon his table? Or do you rather sweat to lay it there?" Students have enacted this scene, through making a still image of it and then bringing the scene to life. Alternatively, they could have extended the story and improvised a scene about what the villagers say to one another when the preacher has left.

Students who do this will have much more active knowledge of the story and of the social history — the Peasants' Revolt — that is central to this book. Rather than discussing the story from a distance, they will have been *inside* the story. This use of *Fire, Bed & Bone* is an example of the way in which active and participatory approaches can support student learning not only in literacy, but right across the curriculum.

Getting out of their seats

In another classroom, this one in a London, United Kingdom, school with high levels of socio-economic deprivation, 10-year-old students read *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* by Louis Sachar. The teacher found that a sure-fire way to engage her class (which included 12 boys, some of them reluctant students) was to develop dramatic approaches to the novel: these included using dialogue from the novel to create brief play scripts, drawing storyboards of a scene and enacting these, and freeze-framing different scenes before bringing them to life. The students performed their play scripts and scenes for one another — everything they did had an audience.

In interviews after the event, the students were articulate about the aspects of drama that they valued:

- "I like acting because you can move around your body, and you can learn new stories while you do it."
- "You get to stand up and get out of your seats — you don't have to always be sitting and listening to the teacher."

This emphasis on getting out of their seats, on moving around, and of learning with the body as well as the head, was a key element in students' enjoyment of drama. This experience is a long way from "brain gym." In this kind of work, the movement is part of the learning and enriches the learning — it is not a break

See the Glossary, "Overview of Drama Conventions," for a summary of common drama conventions, including still image.

from it. Students spend far too much time sitting in school, and approaches that enable them to learn with the whole of themselves, to be active and expressive, are likely to prove more effective than approaches where they are glued to their seats.

Collaborating in role

But the ethnically diverse class acting out scenes from the Louis Sachar book also appreciated other aspects of the drama work:

- “You get to work in groups, and when you work in groups you have to organize it together, so you feel like all of you have organized it, not just one person.”
- “When we act, we have to organize things, the way we learn, who we get to be, what we have to do. We get to do things which we may never be able to do when we’re older.”
- “You get to turn into a different person for a few minutes.”

These important insights show that the class had appreciated the opportunities for organizing and decision making that this kind of group work had presented them with. They had been expected to behave maturely and to take responsibility, and they had responded to these expectations well. They found working in role to be releasing — they were each enabled to “turn into a different person” and see the world from a different viewpoint.

A Vision for Role-Playing

We recognize the power of working in role. In this book, we offer opportunities for students to interact with the themes, characters, and events in a text through role-playing. They can find themselves inside the lives and actions of the people that fill the stories and texts that they meet in all areas of the curriculum. Part instruction manual, this book provides interactive and artistic strategies and conventions that can enhance co-operative and collaborative meaning-making such as students experience when improvising in role. It thereby provides a way for teachers to recharge the reading and writing activities that they use in their teaching. The relationship between literature and talking in and out of role nurtures and enhances the development of literacy, and supports the deepened meaning-making that can result from working inside and outside a text. Students benefit from exploring this unique relationship.

What role-playing allows students to do

Role-playing, the core of this book, offers students these opportunities:

- to spend time in the shoes of others and conversely, find out more about themselves
- to examine critically the problems and issues that arise in texts, and to seek and rehearse solutions
- to become more aware of cross-cultural relationships, identity, and the power inherent in the words and registers of language
- to find personal voice and learn to listen attentively to each other
- to write in and out of role about the people, events, and reflective meanings that accrue through drama

- to use the information and knowledge gained through reading and research to inform and affect the direction of the drama
- to make plays together, improvising in role and using researched information as they co-create and construct from ideas in texts, and exploring the words of some scripted texts through improvisation and interpretation
- to share with trusted others the plays they have developed in groups through the ensemble process

Working in role helps students generally with their learning. They acquire a technique that enables them to inhabit, in imagination, unfamiliar situations and experiences. There is plenty of evidence that students enjoy this way of learning and that it can engage even reluctant or underachieving students.

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