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The "Ideal Spectator": Dramatic Chorus, Collective Creation, and Curriculum

It is always ourselves we see on the stage.... we struggle to make human meaning and sense from what we see before us. (O'Neill, 1995, p. 76)

Theatre is the enactment of possible worlds. It is performed in a middle space owned by neither author nor reader.... It is a space for negotiation. It is the middle place of the curriculum. (Grumet, 1998, p. 149)

The chorus are free to support, ignore, question or reject the actions of the central characters, reorienting our response to the rhetoric as they do. They compel us to experience the drama as an ever-changing dynamic relationship, and not as the unfolding of the inevitable. (Rehm, 1992, p. 61)

Introduction

Good educators struggle daily to construct learning communities where every member is given a voice, no one is silenced, everyone is given the right to respond to the curriculum as individuals, yet no one student's response is privileged over another's. This article sets out to understand how the functions of dramatic chorus in theatre, specifically in the theatre of Ancient Greece, offer educators the possibility of situating themselves and their students as dramatic choruses in relation to and in dialogue with curriculum as chorus-in-curriculum. As Rehm (1992) asserts, "Perhaps the most important function of the chorus is to open up the drama to a variety of non-linear influences that a strict narrative can deny or inhibit" (p. 56). If a curriculum can be likened to a "strict narrative," then re-visioning students' relationship to curriculum as active chorus within the narrative, rather than passive audience to it, offers a different educational model to consider. A dramatic chorus is in open negotiation and interpretation with the events of the play in which it appears and belongs; it is not removed from or alienated by the action of the play, although these dramatic events still have power over the chorus as curriculum does over students. It is this kind of metaphorical thinking about chorus and curriculum that led me to consider exploring connections to dramatic chorus in the field of theatre education and in my own drama teaching, specifically in my theatre-based facilitation of collective creation process.

Thus this article is organized as a reflective practitioner's study of an innovative theatre audience education teaching project. The reader is given an overview of the functions and practices of traditional choruses of Ancient

Greek theatre followed by a consideration of these functions and practices applied to the curriculum in general, and the drama curriculum in particular. The study may be understood as metaphorical in nature in that I am applying the metaphor of dramatic chorus to understandings of curriculum and theatre education. My findings are that dramatic chorus provides a useful and potentially powerful metaphor for how students may be seen as situated, and may see themselves better as situated, in a dynamic and dialogical relationship to curriculum.

The theories and practices of Boal (1979), Norris (1996), Barone (1990), Neelands (1984), and O'Neill (1995) and their notions of theatre of the oppressed (Boal), mutualist curriculum (Norris), conspiracy (Barone), conspectus (Neelands), and process drama (O'Neill) all inform my own teaching of an extracurricular senior secondary-level audience education program in professional theatre. Students in the Intensive class offered through this program, called Belfry 101, are given the opportunity to respond through collective creation to four professional theatre productions at Victoria's Belfry Theatre. The collectively created theatre piece the Intensive ensemble devises is inspired by these audience experiences and is subsequently performed in the theatre itself. This program clearly places students in the emancipatory role of dramatic chorus in their collective and creative response to the theatre productions (curriculum) they see and thus serves as an effective example of chorus-in-curriculum.

Functions and Practices of Greek Chorus

Ancient Greek choruses from the 8th to the 4th century BC used movement and song, lyric and spectacle, stillness and silence, and occasionally monologues and dialogues with other characters in order to fulfill their function in the play. Technically, Greek choruses were highly disciplined, competitive, skilled in voice and movement, and capable of shifting in repertory through many plays in a drama festival as directed, usually by the playwrights. Their collective lyrical voice provided a contrast to the rhetorical voices in monologue and dialogue of the individual actors. As Rehm (1992) says, "By providing a different mode from the rhetoric of the actors, the chorus engages the play with an ongoing dialogue with itself" (p. 52).

The function of the chorus in Ancient Greek theatre was to:

1. provide spectacle;
2. indicate changing moods and shifting fortunes;
3. focus attention by supporting/denouncing others;
4. serve as the "ideal spectator";
5. establish/embody the ethical system/moral universe of the characters/play;
6. participate directly in the action;
7. provide information;
8. make discoveries and decisions. (Cameron & Gillespie, 1996, pp. 227-228)

Over the next 2,000 years, Western theatre history would transform the chorus into an individualized character who was seen to embody the collective voice (as in Shakespeare's chorus characters in *Henry V, Henry VIII, Romeo and Juliet,* and *Pericles* or the servant characters in the *Commedia dell'arte* and Molière) that evolved in the 20th century to the "Radio City Rockettes"-style

musical theatre chorus of background singers and dancers who help to support and advance the central plot. Beckerman (1990) reminds us of the original role of the chorus when he says the function of chorus is:

> in effect giving a performance for the audience. Their expression is usually iconic in that they crystallize a set of values or concretize an observation in an autonomous, detached manner. Their closeness to the audience is further heightened by contrast with the characters.... As a result, the chorus mediates between the events and the audience.... *We are addressed by the chorus and address ourselves simultaneously.* (pp. 123-124, emphasis added)

Brockett (1991) outlines six key functions of the Greek chorus, reiterating a number of functions described by Cameron and Gillespie (1996) above. Each of Brockett's descriptions is followed by a comment on its connection to curriculum.

> The chorus serves several functions on Greek drama. First, it is a character in the play; it gives advice, expresses opinions, asks questions, and sometimes takes an active part in the action. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

Metaphorically speaking, students are characters in the dramatic texts of their curricula. They are empowered through taking on the roles of dramatic chorus members and collective creators and can give advice or opinions, ask questions, and definitely take an active part in constructing curricula-in-action.

> Second, it often establishes the ethical or social framework of the events and sets up a standard against which the action may be judged. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

The history of Western collective creation in the last century is most often the story of a group of theatre artists drawn together by a shared critical social, political, or aesthetic philosophical perspective of some kind. Filewod's (1987) book *Collective Encounters* documents the history of these collective creations in Canadian theatre with productions that dealt with Canadian issues of regionalism, social policies, and history. It is a key element of chorus-in-curriculum for the group to share a recognized attitude about all the contexts in which they are embedded: What in the curriculum seems most important to them? Or conversely, what may be missing in the curriculum that needs to be explored? Here Boal's (1979) techniques of theatre of the oppressed, discussed below, can prove most useful in guiding a class in critically aware and proactive dramatic engagements.

> Third, it frequently serves as an ideal spectator, reacting to the events and characters as the dramatist might hope the audience would. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

Cameron and Gillespie (1996) also use this term *ideal spectator* in their description of chorus. Students should be the ideal spectators of their education. In this scenario, a caring and connected educational system would enthusiastically invite and support students' reactions to the education they are being given: a genuine dialogue about what is to be taught and how.

> Fourth, the chorus helps to set the overall mood of the play and of individual scenes and to heighten dramatic effects. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

Students' responses to curricula are greatly affected by conditions surrounding those events. Here the role of the teacher comes into focus. As *choregus*, or chorus leader, a teacher must be conscious of his or her role in creating and sustaining various moods in a curriculum, and for heightening the possible dramatic effects the curriculum may have on students. Teacher facilitation of dramatic collective creation is an example of *teacher-as-choregus* that is discussed below.

> Fifth, it adds movement, spectacle, song and dance, and thus contributes much to theatrical effectiveness. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

If boredom is one of the main problems that students and educators must contend with in schools, as cited by Powell Pruitt[1] (2003) and Taylor Gatto (2003), then the most interesting questions in response here seem to be: How might we experience curricula that is suffused with "movement, spectacle, song and dance"? How might we create theatrically effective curricular reflections?

> Sixth, it serves an important rhythmical function, creating pauses or retardations during which the audience may reflect upon what has happened and what is to come. (Brockett, 1991, p. 26)

Envisioning dramatic choral responses to curriculum allows educators and their students to function rhythmically together through collective reflection on what has happened to them in the lived experience of learning. What happens to both students and teachers in the curriculum event can involve meaningful pauses in the exploration of alternate existences; of what is, has been, or may be to come.

From Boal to O'Neill: Theorizing Chorus-in-Curriculum

Dramatic chorus is the attempt that individual voices make to speak together in order to represent the thoughts and concerns of a community: "We need not dissolve identity in order to acknowledge that identity is a choral and not a solo performance" (Grumet, 1990, p. 281).

> Now the oppressed people are ... making the theatre their own. The walls must be torn down. First, the spectator starts acting again. (Boal, 1979, p. 119)

In Boal's (1979) theory of theatre of the oppressed, the spectator and the actor, separated for centuries by increasingly elitist forms of theatre, are reunited as in the ancient rituals and become "spect-actors" (Boal, 1995, p. 13). United in this dual function of actor and spectator, the form and function of drama becomes choral in nature: as a community we become capable of observing ourselves and analyzing ourselves in action. Forum theatre, the primary mode of theatre of the oppressed, plays out an important social or political issue to the community involved. Audience members are then invited onstage to take over roles that can then attempt to change the negative outcomes of a situation and can work through an issue in a dramatically engaged manner. Applied to curriculum, the aural vision is of voices in classrooms, of teachers and students, blending together in a chorus created around a sense of common emancipatory social-political-pedagogical vision and purpose.

Whitson (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996) also adds to the understanding of choral voice in curriculum with his drawing on Bakhtin's term *heteroglossia*, "defined as the inclusion of all conflicting voices" (p. 298). Here we see chorus not as the erasure of identity for the good of the group, but rather as each unique voice adding to the harmonious/cacophonous totality of being. This is not the seeking of consensus, not the democratic rule of the majority; this is what can otherwise be seen as "conspectus" (Neelands, quoted in Norris, 1996, p. 15) and "conspiracy" (Barone, quoted in Norris, p. 3).

In an autobiographical essay entitled *Implementing a Mutualist Curriculum in a Teacher Education Program: A Beginning Teacher Educator's Story*, Norris (1996) describes how the ideas of theorists from many fields have influenced his teaching practices. Norris' understanding of conspectus and conspiracy lead directly to his development of a "mutualist curriculum" that "attempts to de-center power by making it explicit and negotiable" (p. 3) in the classroom. His essay embodies a clear understanding of voice as chorus in its political, collectivist and "emancipatory" (p. 3) efforts to create a curriculum where

> students need to be willing to bring forth their ideas and examine them in the light of others. However they need not agree. Diversity is the norm....
> Mutualism need not mean all parties have similar beliefs, rather, it is an occasion where all parties accept and value the different opinions of others. (p. 15).

This is conspectus, the term used by British drama theorist and educator Neelands (1984):

> Conspectus is a more accurate term (than consensus) in that it conveys the sense of a synopsis of opinions, in other words there may be a wide range of opinions (and differences) reflected in the drama ... In drama, then, we are saying to children that although we are working together as a group, individual reactions and opinions are still important ... The teacher's role then is to look for possibilities of grouping answers, to look for patterns that establish a conspectus whilst not ignoring or leaving out "rogue" answers that don't seem to fit at first. (quoted in Norris, 1996, p. 15)

This collective activity of negotiation that includes a "polyphony of voices" (Norris, 1996, p. 16) is the foundation of mutualist curriculum. Norris arrives at this curriculum theory through the use of Barone's notion of conspiracy to engage "writer (reader) and author (text)" (p. 3) in a mutualist function:

> Barone defines conspiracy (*conspire*) as a breathing together of writer (reader) and author (text) as they strive to find a concrete or practical utopia for pedagogical practice. It is an activity which promotes change, as a new and better world is first of all imagined and later that image of the never reachable new world guides practice in a dialectical relationship. (p. 3)

According to Barone (1990), "conspiracy can be a profoundly ethical and moral undertaking" and is also "a conversation about the relationship between present and future worlds" (p. 313).

Norris (1996) applies these choral voice-based concepts of conspectus and conspiracy to his pedagogical practice as a teacher educator at the University of Alberta. Norris understands and defines a theory and pedagogy where there can be found (a) the absolute necessity of an atmosphere of trust, (b) the

autobiographical uses of personal storytelling or journal-keeping, and (c) the primary importance of the creation and maintenance of a community in which there is the full participation and the full voice of every member. This is a negotiated curriculum "structured around student choice" (p. 27). Of course, delivery of this mutualist curriculum is greatly challenged by the institutional conditions of competition and evaluation. Remarkably, Norris' drama majors over many years received a mutually agreed-on grade (7 out of 9) for the whole class. This is a powerful example of collective-choral-emancipatory chorus in action as curriculum that can also be seen in the drama education theory of process drama.

Process drama is a contemporary drama-in-education theory and practice of improvised, participatory, lived-through group-role dramas that are generally teacher-facilitated, as presented in O'Neill's (1995) *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama* (1995). In defining process drama theory, O'Neill draws on the work of curriculum theorist MacLaren to develop an understanding of this mutually determined, continually negotiated, chorus-like student-teacher relationship:

> In the liminal state, people "play" with familiar elements and disarrange and defamiliarize them.... MacLaren regards every teacher, and in particular the teacher of drama, as a potential "liminal servant" whose duty is to engage in a kind of pedagogical surrealism that disturbs commonplace perceptions. This defamiliarization, which he sees as a crucial element in teaching and learning, relates closely to Brecht's "alienation effect" in theatre.... In this dramatic world, participants are free to alter their status, choose to adopt different roles and responsibilities, play with elements of reality, and explore alternate existences. (p. 66)

In other words, O'Neill (1995) and MacLaren are proposing that teachers and students coexist in collectively created "alternate existences": worlds where the understanding of dramatic chorus becomes significant. The defamiliarization effect of teacher as liminal servant in process drama demands the committed instigation and careful maintenance of a shared aesthetic vision of alternative realities, places, times, roles, and so forth. These are dramatic co-created worlds to be lived in by all involved, surrounded by the present, informed by the past and the future.

Theory Into Practice: Chorus in Curriculum and Collective Creation

Process drama offers one model of chorus-in-curriculum as teacher and students co-construct and role-play alternate imaginary lives—often in response to a catalyst such as a story or poem, image or piece of music, issue, or idea—that are improvised and performed simultaneously in a classroom or studio setting. A second model moves closer to theatre practice: collective creation. Collective creation is "a theatrical process whereby a group of persons working together develop a production from initial concept to finished performance" (Hartnoll, 1983). Many of the same methods and strategies used in process drama teaching are found in the generative rehearsal process of ensemble collective creation. The main distinction is that this type of chorus-in-curriculum prepares to share their responsive, reflective, investigative, cooperative work with a wider audience than themselves; that is, in performance.

A model of collective creation in response to curriculum may be found in my facilitation of an audience education program in professional theatre at Victoria's Belfry Theatre. Belfry 101 is a special program in the form of an extra-curriculum, voluntary and non-graded, for senior secondary students who wish to enrich their experience and understanding of theatre. For the price of a student subscription, Belfry 101 students participate in three-hour pre-show drama workshops that introduce them to the themes and forms they will find in five Belfry productions per season. Students from over 12 Victoria-area schools have taken Belfry 101 workshops over the past five seasons (1999 to present). The program has proved to be an outstanding success, has garnered national and international recognition, and is currently funded by the Hudson's Bay Charitable Foundation (see Prendergast, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004).

In Belfry 101's second season (2000-2001), the Belfry decided to offer an advanced-level class called Belfry 101 Intensive. This class gives a select group of students, those who are considering postsecondary theatre training and careers in theatre, the chance to be part of a collective creation ensemble. In my discussions with the artistic director of the theatre about what kind of performance this class could do, I argued that if the focus of Belfry 101 was always on the plays the students were seeing, then the Intensive class should also share this focus in their playbuilding. I suggested that after each Belfry production and Belfry 101 pre-show workshop, the Intensive class would meet for a post-show session that would feature an in-depth production analysis followed by brainstorming about what in the play most interested the group. The collective creation process would, therefore, reflect on the meaning-making the students had constructed out of the experience of a play in performance.

In this way these students were being given the opportunity to play the chorus in response to the dramas they had encountered. Rather than remaining solely as members of the audience (albeit active and dramatically prepared audience members), this group were being asked, as Beckerman (1990) describes the Greek chorus, to "mediate between the events and the audience" (p. 124). Rehm (1992) tells us that Greek playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides used a convention where "the chorus question the nature of the song they are singing" (p. 55). He tells us:

> The most famous example of a chorus calling its own activities into question occurs in ... *Oedipus Tyrannus*. At this point in the play, Apollo's oracles seem unfulfilled, and the shifting eddies of fortune appear so random that they threaten any sense of human purpose. If such is the state of the cosmos, the chorus wonder, "Why is it necessary for us to dance?" Their question is self-referential but also tied to the action of the play. Why *should* choruses dance? If events occur only at random, what allegiances are there ...? By virtue of the chorus's own self-examination, Sophocles raises a fundamental question about the purpose of theatre. How the audience responds to that question is part and parcel of the way *Oedipus Tyrannus* works in performance. (pp. 55-56)

The first Belfry 101 Intensive class followed this reflective model throughout the 2000-2001 season. Each production offered the 12 students in the ensemble (from a number of schools) the chance to deal with stories of "the shifting eddies of fortune": about the challenges of adult parent-child relation-

ships; the dangers of one-night stands; the desire for freedom and adventure; and the painful process of loss. After each of three mainstage and one studio productions, the class met with me for four hours on Saturday mornings to discuss and develop ideas about what mattered to them most about the play they had seen the previous Thursday night. The sessions generally involved a number of improvised possible storylines that came out of their brainstorming. These improvisations were documented in notes and charts or diagrams by either myself or my assistant in preparation for performance rehearsals through the March break.

Daily rehearsals during the March break allowed us to polish and shape the improvisations into scenes for our showcase performance *B101 Live* in the Belfry Studio on Monday, March 26, 2001. Belfry staff treated the ensemble as if they were any other group rehearsing in the theatre, and we enjoyed full access to costume and props storage, along with technical and front-of-house support for our show. Each of the four scenes we developed in rehearsal was an approximately 10-minute mini-play unto itself that connected back to the play that inspired it, and each reflected how the ensemble reacted and responded to their original theatregoing experience. Although audience understanding and enjoyment of each scene would certainly have been enhanced by knowledge of the original productions, we also made sure that the stories stood on their own two feet and that they had their own independent dramatic value. The performance played to an enthusiastic full house, including the theatre's artistic director who warmly introduced the project and greatly enjoyed the performance. Following the show, students conducted a talkback session with the audience, an inverted reflection of their own talkbacks as audience members with the professional actors following each Belfry 101 performance. They each spoke with pride in their accomplishment and were collectively extremely pleased with their production and their Intensive experience overall.

The Belfry 101 Intensive project has continued successfully from 2002 to the present and is ongoing. The unanimously positive student responses to the program are documented in my thesis study *"Imaginative Complicity": Audience Education in Professional Theatre* (Prendergast, 2001). Articles on this study have been published in Canada and the United States, and the study has been named the recent recipient (August 2003) of the Distinguished Thesis Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (Prendergast, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004).

Conclusion

This collective creation-chorus approach to curriculum offers students a collective and creative community to which they can truly belong. It also provides a clear purpose for that community to frame its responses to curriculum events through dramatic processes. These processes involve the effective integration of all language arts—speaking and listening, reading and writing—and other art forms such as dance/movement, music, and visual arts. Students working in this theatre form are challenged to discover their strengths as equal members of the chorus ensemble. Some will be better playwrights; others better actors, dancers, or singers; whereas a smaller group may choose to take on designing, producing, and stage managing the productions that are collectively playbuilt and performed.

Presenting to an audience is an integral part of chorus-in-curriculum. Sharing work with groups outside the chorus, ensemble, or class allows for the possible spread of dramatic conversations about curricula-in-action. Imagine a class studying a period in history, a Shakespeare play, some modern poetry, a philosophical concept, an ethical dilemma, or a scientific phenomenon that can create a collectively devised dramatic response according to whatever the group decides is most important in their experience of that curriculum. Imagine them sharing this work with another class, perhaps in the form of a Dionysian Greek dramatic festival where many plays reflective of the social and cultural concerns of their audiences were performed at one time for many thousands. To imagine these things is to reimagine education itself and to envision students in dramatic dialogue with and in active response to the curricula they encounter.

This article explores a number of ways through which an understanding of dramatic chorus applied to students' relationship with curriculum, specifically through collective creation, can offer a more engaged, responsive, dialogical and emancipatory educational experience. Grounded in the theories of Boal (1979) and O'Neill (1995), this understanding of chorus-in-curriculum is concerned with qualities of mutualism, conspiracy, and conspectus and with the creation of collective dramas in response to curriculum. Although the focus here is on drama and theatre education courses working within this framework, as seen in the postsecondary-level drama teacher education program discussed by Norris (1996) and in my own senior secondary-level audience education program, I strongly suggest the possible application of this model to general education. It is my contention that a performative model of chorus-in-curriculum education—consisting of classrooms of teachers and students engaged in dramatic dialogue with curriculum—can offer learning that lasts, in both heart and mind.

Note

1. In her keynote address to the Pre-Conference on Theatre at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education annual meeting (New York City, July 2003), Powell Pruitt cited a study she conducted of 10,000 United States urban adolescent participants asked what their main concerns or problems were with their education. Boredom was the second most commonly cited problem, following the number one concern of violence and harrassment.

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