

### *Educational Drama in the Age of '21<sup>st</sup>-Century Literacy'*

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In developing an opinion about literacy through drama, I have had dialectic with theories and interpretations that drama, language, and literacy theorists have presented. Through continual examination of the literature, my quest for a deeper appreciation has persisted. As I grapple for significant understanding, I attempt to make sense of literacy through drama at a time when the meaning of the term literacy is ever expanding.

Educational drama's power to support literacy learning has been one of the significant findings in my research endeavours. In observing lessons, reading teachers' drama/literacy reflection journals, and conducting multiple semistructured interviews with students and teachers, I have come to understand how a teacher can provide students with sound literacy experiences through drama. In classrooms where drama is used as a tool for learning, I have come to understand that students speak more than the teacher and become the problem solvers and decision makers. I know that drama is one of the few tools in a time of classroom diversity that creates an opportunity for all learners to engage with each other during the same learning event. Looking back at aspects of my qualitative multiple case study (Macy, 2005), I revisited teaching scenarios and rediscovered my argument that drama is closely tied to social constructivism, the New London Group's ([NLG] 2000) evolving notion of multiliteracies, and Kress and Jewitt's (2003) ideas pertaining to multimodality.

The literature that informs my understanding and expanding point of view about drama and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy is a vital beginning in that it is the essence of my developing argument that drama in education is part of the theoretical underpinnings of sound 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacies.

### **An Essential Beginning**

I begin with an exploration of the term *constructivism* because it is embedded in how I perceive the learner and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I continue a discussion about Vygotsky by looking at Wagner's (1998) work, which showed how constructivist theory supports drama in education. Next, I look at the NLG's (2000) emerging ideas that call for multiliteracies and multimodal learning. I extend this conversation by addressing the ever-expanding term *literacy*.

The more I read about constructivist theories in educational research the more aware I become of the conflicting and often unclear interpretations presented in articles and books. There are many terms connected to constructivism such as radical, cognitive, sociocultural, cultural and critical constructivism. What do these terms mean to a researcher who embraces a constructivist theoretical framework? In the following unfolding paragraphs, I hope to give my interpretation of constructivist theories. I will begin by commenting on the commonalities in and differences between Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories.

### **Constructivism: Points of agreement and points of departure**

Vygotsky's and Piaget's research have been labelled as constructivist theories (Davis & Sumara, 2002). It is relevant to note that neither Piaget nor Vygotsky used the term *constructivist theory* directly in their works. There are points of agreement between Piaget and Vygotsky, who have been labelled fellow constructivists. Both believed that each individual constructs his or her own knowledge and meaning and that children's thinking is constrained

because certain higher intellectual functions, including awareness of mental operations, are not available until adolescence (Berk, 2000).

According to Berk (2000), Piaget believed that the most important source of cognition is the child who is busy and self-motivated, forms ideas, and tests them against the world without external pressure. Vygotsky also suggested that children actively seek knowledge, but not as solitary agents. Berk contended that this is an important point of departure between the two theorists. The real differences between their works arise from the fact that each approached his work from a different point of view. Piaget, as a genetic epistemologist, sought the origin of knowing; whereas Vygotsky, a psychologist, searched for the origin of consciousness. If we compare Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories of concept development, it quickly becomes clear that Vygotsky was interested in improving instruction in school, but Piaget did not address the influence of school on concept development (Vygotsky, 1986). Berk posited that Piaget focused on the development of concepts that arose spontaneously, whereas Vygotsky focused on the dialectic between spontaneous and nonspontaneous concepts. Vygotsky termed the former *everyday* and the latter *scientific*. According to Berk, another area in which these two theorists differed was in regard to thought. Piaget believed that thought is characterized by the view that the driving force in development is internal and that maturation is the central factor in development. Vygotsky, on the other hand, asserted that development's driving force is external and that the social world is central to growth of the intellect. Therefore, from a Vygotskian perspective, knowledge develops through appropriation of the culture and through social interaction between the child and more competent others. The appropriation of culture develops the ability to use societal tools, especially language.

According to Berk (2000), for Vygotsky, language is basic to the development of thought; Piaget, on the other hand, argued that the mechanisms for development reside within the child and that learning is subordinate to development. Vygotsky believed that learning leads development. By giving social experience a fundamental role in cognitive development, Vygotsky's theory helps us to understand the wide cultural variation in cognitive skills. Unlike the theories of Piaget, who emphasized universal cognitive change, Vygotsky's theory leads us to expect highly variable development, depending on the child's social and cultural experiences (Von Glasersfeld, 1995). Both Piaget and Vygotsky have had an influence on the present-day curriculum development and classroom practice that are now embedded in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy. However, before I can begin to look at their influence on 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy, it is appropriate to look at some of the diverse terms associated with constructivist theories.

Davis and Sumara (2002) clearly divided the two major strands of constructivist theory. One they distinguished as *subject centered*, and the other *social*. They aligned the subject-centered accounts with Piaget's theories and arranged radical constructivist and cognitive constructivist theories under this strand. They believed that social constructivism is aligned with Vygotsky's theories and arranged sociocultural, cultural, and critical constructivism under this strand. According to Davis and Sumara, subject-centered constructivism does not deny the influence of context, language, and so on; they merely pointed out that these sorts of phenomena do not directly or in any determinate manner operate on individual cognition. Furthermore, they suggested that social constructivist explanations focus on language, subject matters, social habitus, school cultures, and classroom collectives. A very interesting aspect of Davis and Sumara's separation of these constructivist theories is the notion that sociocultural, cultural, and critical theories considered together have been developed beyond Vygotsky's work. They stated

that these theories were established well before Vygotsky's work was broadly received among English speakers. Davis and Sumara posited that what Vygotsky offered teachers was practical advice on scaffolding children's learning at their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

However, as Davis and Sumara pointed out, the ZPD and scaffolding are not pedagogical tools or imperatives; rather, they form a description of the relationship between one who knows and one who is coming to know. I have begun to question how constructivist theories have been transplanted into the field of education in the new millennium. After all, we must remember that these theories were developed to produce accounts of knowing and knowledge and were not based on practical advice for teachers.

### **Wagner on constructivist theories and drama**

Wagner (1998) explained comprehensively that research in educational drama is solidly built "on the same contemporary constructivist theories of learning that underlie our understanding of language and literacy acquisition" (p. 15). She interpreted the work of Vygotsky and discussed certain aspects of his work that are closely related to drama in education. In her work she positioned Vygotsky as a social constructivist.

Wagner (1998) posited that Vygotsky saw cognitive growth as dependent upon interactive play and upon children's imagining themselves in worlds that are above their physical and mental levels. His work created a solid foundation for using drama in the classroom. A central theme in Vygotsky's (1986) work was the importance of language in mediating thought: "The relation between thought and word is a living process; thought is born through words" (p. 255). Vygotsky contended that speech is social in origin because we learn it from others and that only with time does it come to have self-directive properties that eventually result in internalized verbal thought. Children therefore actively seek knowledge, and the rich social and

cultural contexts that surround them profoundly affect the way they construct the world. Wagner felt that Vygotsky's generative learning theory demonstrates the value and explains the power of drama in the classroom, and Wolf, Edmiston, and Enciso (1997) indicated that Vygotsky's notions about theatre support drama in reading activities.

Wagner (1998) argued that pretend play is relevant in Vygotsky's (1986) work. He showed how this type of play that uses objects in a nonliteral sense actually corresponds to cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) suggested, without naming a constructivist theory, that human beings create their own meaning as they construct models about the world in which they live. Meaning is constructed in dialogue with the culture in which humans are immersed. Therefore, children are active meaning makers both in play and work. In their play they create meaning through gesture. Wagner gave an example from Vygotsky's work to discuss the role of gesture. Vygotsky discussed the child who turns a household broom into a horse. Wagner juxtaposed this example against a child who, in contemporary times, turns a block into an airplane or a rocket. She stated that the "gesture becomes the thing, and the child who is making this happen knows perfectly well this is a game of pretend" (p. 19). The block has become the symbol of something else. Wagner explained that the movement of the block as a rocket propels the child into what Vygotsky (1978) termed the ZPD, which is a level slightly above the child's actual developmental level. Wagner explained that the "gesture itself is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 19). It is the gesture that leads to symbolic play. Vygotsky posited that learning leads development because of the child's efforts in the ZPD. Wagner noted that Vygotsky emphasized that human activity, including learning, is social in nature. She further linked the social nature of learning to drama:

“Spontaneous dramatic play on the part of pre-schoolers and teacher-led drama in the classroom are both powerfully social acts and both engage children in learning in their ZPD” (p. 21).

Wagner (1998) also addressed Vygotsky’s notion of first-order symbolism. She stated that both dramatic play and drawings allow children to enter imaginatively into their worlds. Here they engage in first-order symbolism because both drama and drawings say “*this* stands for *that*” (p. 24). Wagner believed that Vygotsky saw drama and drawing as forerunners to writing. Just as drama and drawing are acts of symbolism, so is writing. Wagner suggested that young children who engage in drama and drawing are laying the groundwork for later understanding that letters stand for speech sounds. When children can relate written language to speech, they use letters as second-order symbols. Therefore, according to Wagner, Vygotsky saw drama as a powerful prelude to literacy and also drew an important distinction between the way that speech and writing develop because he saw written speech as a separate linguistic function.

By placing the work of Vygotsky alongside drama, Wagner (1998) presented a strong case for drama as an effective means of helping students create meaning as well as deepen their understanding about many aspects of school learning. Wagner stated, “In the process of drama at its best, children construct their own meanings as they are launched on a voyage toward a truth beyond mere facts” (p. 33).

Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) work supports drama education in the classroom. In drama, language is connected with thought and feeling. Drama educators fully respect that when students talk, they are doing more than just merely using words; they are exploring alternative ways of thinking and feeling about the world. When students have a variety of new voices, they have an opportunity to see the world in new and varied ways, and they achieve a transformed

understanding. This notion of a transformed understanding is related to the work of the NLG and the future of literacy.

### **The New London Group's Connection to Drama in Education**

The work of a group of researchers and educators in 1994 has raised questions about the future of literacy teaching that I believe will have a positive influence on drama's future in education. The NLG's (2000) recognition of Halliday's functions of language has helped me to situate their notions of design in the type of practice that arises in classrooms where drama is included with integrated language arts curricula. Drama in education is a meaningful practice; however, a language arts educator would have to understand how to use drama strategies to design purposeful lessons that transform the students' speaking, reading, and writing into new representations. In their call for a new approach to literacy teaching, I believe that the NLG strongly supports guiding students to be consciously aware and in control of what they are learning. I believe that drama places children in learning situations that help them to reconsider what they know and how they know it. The NLG posited a pedagogy of multiliteracies. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) stated:

A pedagogy of Multiliteracies . . . focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. . . . Multiliteracies also create a different kind of pedagogy: one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve various cultural purposes. (p. 5)

The NLG (2000) has determined that meaning is made in what they termed *multimodal ways*. The group cited the World Wide Web as an example of a multimodal way of creating



meaning. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) stated that “written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (p. 5). The key idea arising from this pedagogy of multimodal ways of creating meaning is that technology is changing how we make meaning, so it is no longer possible to have one set of standards or skills that embraces all aspects of literacy learning. The emerging notions of multiliteracies and multimodal meaning suggest that educators need to provide “open-ended and flexible functional grammar which assist language learners to describe language differences (cultural, subcultural, regional/national, technical, context specific, and so on), and the multimodal channels of meaning now so important to communication” (p. 6).

### **Designing and Literacy**

According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), the NLG referred to teachers as designers of learning processes who should encourage the notion of redesigning activities while they are being practiced. To encourage the idea that meaning making is an active and dynamic process, the NLG presented three elements of design: available designs, designing, and the redesigned. Available design comprises the various semiotic systems, such as the grammars of language, film, photography, or gesture. The NLG (2000) discussed orders of discourse and showed that within orders of discourse are a variety of conventions “that take the form of discourses, styles, genres, dialects, and voices” (p. 21). The group described designing as instances of reading, seeing, and listening and referred to Halliday’s “organizing principles in the grammars of human languages” (p. 22). The NLG pointed out that Halliday’s functions of language—that is, the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions—represent the functions of available designs and produce distinctive expressions of meaning:

The ideational function handles the knowledge, and the interpersonal function handles the ‘social relations.’ As for orders of discourse, the generative interrelation of discourses in a social context, their constituent genres can be partly characterised in terms of the particular social relations and subject positions they articulate, whereas discourses are particular knowledges (constructions of the world) articulated with particular subject positions. (p. 22)

An important emphasis in the notion of design is that in the designing process continual use is made of what is available (available design). The NLG (2000) stressed that “listening as well as speaking, and reading as well as writing, are productive activities, forms of Designing” (p. 22). As students are engaged in reading, writing, and speaking, these activities transform the text into what the group call *the redesigned*. The whole purpose of designing is to create new meaning. However, it is important to heed the NLG’s emphasis that redesigning is “the unique product of human agency: a transformed meaning” (p. 23).

### **Ever-Evolving Terms About Literacy**

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2003), “Literacy has become absolutely central to education policy, curriculum development, and our everyday thinking about educational practice. It is hard to credit that just two or three decades ago the term ‘literacy’ hardly featured in formal educational discourse (p. 3). They outlined the history of the term *literacy*, starting with literacy used in relation to adults deemed illiterate. In their general discussion of literacy, they explained that “from a sociocultural perspective literacy is a matter of social practice” (p. 8). This notion is expanded by acknowledging that the sociocultural perspective does not separate ‘bits’ concerned with reading and writing from ‘nonprint bits,” which Lankshear and Knobel listed as values and gestures, context and meaning, actions and objects, talk and interaction, and tools and spaces.

Sociocultural-oriented theorists, researchers, and educators adopted the word literacy “to bypass the psychological reductionism inscribed on more than a century of educational activity associated with ‘reading’” (p. 8). The educators and researchers who embraced the sociocultural perspective wanted to keep the social in the forefront. However, according to Lankshear and Knobel, the sociocultural perspective has frequently been subverted when reading specialists and experts appropriate the term literacy without embracing the stance of the perspective.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) linked Green’s three-dimensional model to the sociocultural perspective on literacy. Her model suggests that literacy has three interlocking dimensions of learning and practices: the operational, the cultural, and the critical. This three-dimensional model brings together language, meaning, and context; and all three dimensions are taken into account simultaneously. The operational dimension includes, but is not limited to, reading and writing (or keying) in a variety of contexts in an appropriate and adequate manner. The cultural dimension is involved in the meanings as embedded in social practice, and the critical dimension provokes readers’ awareness that all literacies are selectively constructed within a particular social context. Lankshear and Knobel stated that the “3D model of literacy complements and supplements operational and technical competence by contextualizing it with due regard to matters of culture, history and power” (p. 11).

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) also addressed the NLG’s evolving concept of multiliteracies. They noted that Kalantzis and Cope posited a literacy that addresses the radical changes in work life. Kalantzis and Cope’s theory suggests a balance between technological and other relevant skills. Learners must have the opportunity to develop skills for access to new forms of work through learning the new language of work. But at the same time, the teachers’ role is not simply that of a technocrat, nor is their job to produce docile, compliant workers.

Students need to develop the skills to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives (p. 6). Neelands (1992) rightly pointed out that technological progress has led to a decline in opportunities for shared cultural activities in society and in human interaction. Educational drama is about human interaction and needs a place in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy to maintain the face-to-face interaction that is dynamic to the human condition.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) pointed out that to be literate, one needs “to know more than just ‘*how*’ to operate the language system” (p. 12). According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), literacy pedagogy has traditionally meant “teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official standard forms of the national language” (p. 9). Literacy educators have to now go beyond this narrow perspective.

Drama educators O’Toole and Dunn (2001) acknowledged the NLG’s ideas about multiliteracies. They stated that literacy is central to what is done in drama, because drama gives students an opportunity to “encode and decode the diverse and constantly changing symbol system that we confront every day” (p. 32). They further posited that drama is a discipline that can support and extend critical reading and writing as students engage directly with a broad range of material:

Starting with perhaps the most basic of multiliteracies, oracy, we think drama’s role must be self-evident to our readers, since speaking and listening are central to dramatic play, drama education and theatre, across the whole range of public and private genres. Within the drama, the students practice and recognize all the genres and registers of speech they are likely to come across. (p. 32)

Critical and cultural literacy skills thrive in a dramatic context where students are encouraged to explore beyond an existing text and create a new story. Students experience life from another perspective when they walk in another's shoes. According to O'Toole and Dunn (2001), the students are not only learning about a cultural perspective, but they also experience the perspective for themselves. Lee and Fradd (1998) also described their notion of literacy: "Literacy development involves abilities well beyond being able to speak, listen, read, and write. . . . It involves learning to observe, predict, analyze, summarize and present information in a variety of formats" (p. 14).

Miller and Saxton (2004) suggested a link between drama and multiliteracies: "The teachers we have worked with see drama as a 'fun' activity; they also recognize immediately the power of the art form for teaching multiple literacies" (p. 2). The classroom curriculum is uncovered, interpreted, and made sense of through drama.

Piazza (1999) described multiple literacies as a "complex amalgam of communicative channels, symbols, forms, and meanings inherent in oral and written language (verbal and nonverbal) as well as the arts—visual arts, music, dance, theatre [drama], and film (including television, video and technology)" (p. 2). Drama and educational theorists and researchers have found a link between the arts and the ever-evolving term *literacy*.

Eisner (2004) included the term *meaningful literacy* in his list of aims that he embraced as appropriate for schools:

A third aim for schools is to cultivate multiple forms of literacy. Literacy is normally conceived of as the ability to read and write. Sometimes computational skill, or numeracy, is added to the concept. I mean something considerably broader, however.

Literacy involves the ability to encode or decode meaning in any of the symbolic forms

used in the culture. For example, one can be literate in one's ability to experience and derive meaning from music, from the visual arts, or from dance. (p. 8).

Even though Eisner did not directly mention drama or the theatre arts, it is important to recognize that he defined literacy once again in the broader sense. He positioned himself away from programs that focus on the conventional teaching of literacy. Through different forms of representation, Eisner saw students' minds being cultivated. Schools that neglect the arts do not give students an opportunity to encounter a variety of forms of representation (Eisner, 2004).

### **Final Thoughts**

Literature that raises our awareness of the changing notion of literacy alerts us to the fact that we can no longer take a narrow skills-based view of literacy in our ever-changing world. I believe that this literature gives educators hope that drama alongside the other arts will become part of the literacy repertoire first of teachers and then of their children. My hope is that process drama's time is coming, or will be resurrected, as the voices of Cope, Kalantzis, and the other members of the NLG stir the stagnating water of narrowly conceived literacy programs. Educational drama's sound theoretical underpinnings and relevant connection to 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy learning needs to be understood so that it becomes a priority in current and future discussions about the learner and learning. Drama is, after all, a way of bringing taught disciplines into transformed learning experiences.

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