

*Living the Literature Experience: Drama Conventions for Teaching the Elementary Language Arts*

**Leonora Macy & Patricia Payne.**  
**Toronto, Canada: CANCOPY, 2011, 68 pages.**  
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I approach this review as a drama educator and sessional lecturer within a Faculty of Education as well as a former elementary school teacher. The use of drama as a tool for learning and a means to explore alternate meanings, was not foreign to me; however, the layout, specificity, and structured guidelines make *Living the Literature Experience: Drama Conventions for Teaching the Elementary Language Arts* a highly valuable resource for elementary teachers and pre-service educators. Authors Leonora Macy and Patricia Payne are clear in their admonition that *Living the Literature Experience* is not about drama as performance or ‘acting out’ stories in the language arts classroom but advocates for both students and teachers to play an *act-ive* role in learning. Stemming from their own rich experiences as elementary teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, their passion for the nexus of drama and literacy enhancement is evident. The resource book is highly practical and ‘user-friendly’ yet solidly grounded in theory – most evidently the work of process drama pioneer, Dorothy Heathcote. Divided into 11 distinct yet co-dependent chapters, the entire work provides a means for a cumulative understanding of how to implement drama to enhance literacy development for those situated as novices in this genre of teaching.

Chapter One outlines the benefits of using drama in the elementary classroom – although many of the advantages could be applicable to any classroom, grade or language learner. Payne modifies Gavin Bolton’s (1979) categories of dramatic forms into four types of drama with *process drama* (teacher-in-role) and *drama as interpretation* providing the basis for *Living the Literature Experience*. For those skeptical of the relevance drama may have to the six language arts (reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking and representing), in Chapter Two, Macy and Payne present a simple but not simplistic overview of Louise Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory

(1978) wherein meaning is derived from the transaction between reader *and* the text. They further develop Rosenblatt's metaphor using exploratory drama as the context for providing the *lived through experience*. Use of the *drama eye* – a means to suspend disbelief – is one of many rules highlighted in Chapter Three as paramount to success in bringing students into the 'as if' world of drama. Inherent within the expectation for students to clearly understand what it means to enter *drama time* is an invitation for teachers to relinquish the omniscient role and allow for students to serve as co-creators of meaning.

The core of the resource is within the explanation of nine dramatic conventions (such as *tableau*, *voice in the head*, *role on the wall*, *parallel action*, and *visual imaging*) – not intended as an exhaustive list but as a strong foundation for the drama-language arts learning journey. The conventions are the media through which objectives are met and student understanding of the text deepened (Macy & Payne, 2011). It is here that the resource moves beyond a typical inventory of strategies and exercises, and delves into how these conventions specifically and purposefully may be incorporated – complete with sample classroom vignettes. Examples for use in Division I and Division II grade levels are presented. Also included, as part of the teacher resource, is a bibliography of children's book which have potential for use. Of particular use to practicing teachers are lesson plans with concrete examples of what to say and do to meet the four considerations Macy and Payne deem critical: *Moving into the drama*; *We have a problem*; *So what do we do now?*; and *Reflection*. At a time when standardized assessment is paramount, possible extension and cross-curricular integration activities are described and sample rubrics are helpfully provided. While the focus within the book is on literacy education, Eisner's (2002) work on the unique forms of cognitive development stimulated by the arts supports the premise for implementing Macy & Payne's approach. Chapter Nine, on preparing and interpreting a script for reader's theatre, underscores curricular outcomes related to elements of story and oral fluency which can be addressed while exploring mood, vocal traits and characterization. Theoretical support for the use of reader's theatre to derive meaning from speech communication is echoed by the work of Martinez, Roser and Strecker (1999).

Macy and Payne have advanced the notion of student-centered pedagogy and transformed the concept of literacy education. Practicing teachers, undergraduate, and graduate students who are passionate about language arts and the critical nature of literacy should not only read *Living the Literature Experience*, but take on the challenge of living it in the classroom to fulfill what

arts-based methodologies call us to do: provoke insight and imaginative thinking for the betterment of the individual and society.

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#### References

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