DRAMA

BROADSHEET

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DOROTHY HEATHCOTE'S MANTLE OF THE EXPERT AND ROLLING ROLE
A Personal Account of Two Historic Conferences Held Earlier This Year

The two conferences "Mantle of the Expert" and "Rolling Role" that Dorothy Heathcote led in April and May this year proved that although she may, officially, be in retirement she has by no means stopped "stirring everything around" (1), questioning and developing the nature of her own practice.

Heathcote's theory sometimes appears inaccessible because of the way in which she expresses herself - the density in the flow of her ideas, which is a feature both of her written work and her speech. The videos and other evidence of her practical work (e.g. Betty J. Wagner's book "Drama as a Learning Medium") have been regarded as a saving grace in this respect.

At these two conferences I found that I had to concentrate hard in order to follow her trains of thought and to appreciate their significance. But this was not to do with vagaries of speech or a lack of discrimination in what she said and did; and ultimately I found it very rewarding. I reached the conclusion that though her ideas are best understood in relation to her practical work - being firmly grounded in that context, it is not the case, by any means, that her practical work is much more valuable than the theory that informs it. The theory is difficult to understand because the nature and implications of her work are very complex and because she is constantly revising her ideas, so that it is difficult to define them precisely.

In this article I hope to highlight the significance of the theory that Heathcote has developed to explain her current practice and to consider something of the educational and philosophical approach it implies.

Both conferences were about developing drama work that could be used to enhance learning across the curriculum. Her aim is to enable pupils to "process" knowledge or things that they need to know so that they can begin to make sense of them.

"Rolling Role" works in the same way as "Mantle of the Expert" in so far as "the class is set upon a task in such a way that they function as experts" (2); but there is a different emphasis on adapting it to a secondary school time table (which is why the role needs to roll - or work be carried over from one lesson to the next, not necessarily involving the same pupils). Heathcote said that "Mantle of the Expert" should elicit:

1 - A commitment from the children to learn the information and skills they will need - for example an expert mariner must function within a framework of the sea, journeys, and the tools and skills of the sea farer. Because of the need for information it allows the teacher to use drama directly to run alongside and feed off the curriculum.

Being:

"3 - A task orientated situation where the job in hand must be done first. So, doing the job, fulfilling the task is the vehicle which starts creative ideas flowing." (3).

What she wants is "laboratory-style teaching" (4), engendered by the productive tension of "concern for outcomes" (5).

Heathcote's constant point of referral at the "Mantle of the Expert" conference particularly, was a quotation from Blake: "If you would do good to anyone you must do it in minute particulars" (6). Attention to detail means that nothing is taken for granted - be it a decision made about the dramatic narrative or an emotional reaction to it. It seems to me that this aspect of her current practice has the most profound implications because it suggests that the pupil is expected to engage in a far more sophisticated search than that which is directed towards finding some coherence and unity in the drama's "universal" meaning. Instead the emphasis is on recognizing the multiplicity and diversity of its possible and specific meanings and on the probable contradictions within them. This has the effect of diverting attention from the definition of the individual's immediate subjective responses to an understanding of the way in which these are determined largely by the constraints that the context and the perspective adopted impose.

The significance of the dramatic context is highlighted because
drama across the curriculum work is intended to stimulate the pupils' need to find out information for a purpose (to get on with the task in hand) and it is the context that most obviously determines the information at hand to fulfill this need. This is one reason why Heathcote's current practice avoids the limitations of the sort of drama that Jim Clark criticised in his article "Drama as Schooling? Drama as Education?" (in Drama Broadsheet Vol. 6 Issue 3). He used Bennett's example of a drama lesson supposedly set in the eighteenth century, in which the "universal" of injustice is symbolised by a mistress locking her servant into a dark cupboard as a punishment for something that she did not do.(7) The assumed learning potential of this drama is bound by the alleged "eternally human". As Brecht said of the bourgeois theatre, its "story is arranged in such a way as to create "universal" situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself...Man remains unchanged...because...the environment is (regarded as) remarkably unimportant, is treated simply as a pretext"(8). Hence the servant girl drama side steps the exploration of its other more specific meanings (apart from "injustice") because the significance of its historical context is not taken into account. From the curriculum point of view the pupils understanding of this particular historical situation is not changed because they are not made aware, for example, of "the legal coercion by which the propertied classes in eighteenth century England kept the servant class in its place"(9). Most significantly this means that they do not begin to perceive that the situation then, its implications for us now, and the ways in which we interpret its meanings are far more complex than the pupils' obvious revulsion at the cruelty of a particular individual might imply.

Heathcote's ideas provide one way of enabling pupils to see and understand more because her drama is about exploring the complexities. She does this by distancing pupils from the work using what she calls "frames" and "role conventions", which means that the drama can be stopped or slowed down at will so that the power to make conscious decisions about it (and to understand the processes involved) is in their hands and there is time to explore the context. With this emphasis, Heathcote's current practice works to offset the teacher's tendency (and/or need) to define dramas as being about particular issues (like injustice or prejudice) from which obvious conclusions can be drawn. In the servant drama the pupils' emotional reaction to it may be seen to open up a common and ideologically neutral area in which both pupil and teacher can reach consent concerning the rights and wrongs of this issue. Once this is decided the drama lesson can be wrapped up; there is inevitable resolution and closure allowing little room for contradiction and doubt because that would imply further criticism and questioning. The consequence of this may be the effective reinforcement of a dominant value system.

The point is that it is not an "authentic" instinct that necessarily orients the role play in which pupils are usually engaged in this sort of example; it is the terms of the drama and the ideology that inevitably informs it that frames the pupils' responses. Jim Clark referred to Althusser in his article (10) to illustrate the short comings in is regarded as a liberal humanist approach. If people seem to be addressed as "free" because they are encouraged to recognize their autonomy then they will "willingly adopt the subject positions necessary to their participation in the social formation"(11). The consequence is that in a Capitalist society they seem "freely"(12) to exchange their labour power for wages and voluntarily to purchase the commodities produced. Hence if a drama demands no more than the most obvious or instinctive emotional and intellectual response from "the (pupil) in the thick of it, (who) shares the experience"(13) - seemingly addressing them as "free subjects", then they may do no more than simply reiterate what they already know, feel and understand about the world. In order to begin to recognize their role in the construction of this ideology and their perpetuation of and subjection to it, they need to be given more time within the drama. They also need a broader perspective than that which comes from assuming individual roles (like that of Anne Frank(14) - an example Heathcote used) on the basis that they have some affinity with them having themselves encountered the feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Heathcote's "role conventions" and "frames" serve to distance pupils from the more immediate emotional impact of the drama: protecting them from being placed in that position of vulnerability which can effectively limit the boundaries of their understanding by allowing them recourse only to an instinctive response and action. An explanation of the ideas that Heathcote introduced us to at the two conferences should serve to illustrate how role conventions and frames can be used to highlight the contingency of a situation rather than its universality so that the construction of the individual's subjectivity becomes the subject of the enquiry. That is to say they can be used to explore the ways in which a role like Anne Frank is 'bound by a context and what the implications of this were for her, for us and for others whose interest in the subject is determined by a particular "frame", (e.g. that of the journalist or historian).

At the first conference we were working in various task oriented ways in what Heathcote calls "Praxis"(5) (taken from Freire who defined it as "a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to new action") (15). Heathcote shifted us in the course of the work from what she calls the "iconic" to the "symbolic" modes, following the pattern of "the cyclical journey to knowledge" (17), that she described in her talk at the 1989 October NATD conference.

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By "iconic", Heathcote means working with an image (be it a picture or some other material object) that is used to attract and focus the pupils on the context. By "symbolic" she means working in a more abstract way; focussing on an imaginary object, subject or piece of fiction.

Everyone at both conferences was divided into working groups, under the guidance of one or two individuals. At the first conference the context of our particular group's drama was an activities' centre, situated in an area of the landscape that had been created with a huge map laid around two sides of the room that we were in. Our drama was task orientated as we were presented with a selection of iconic materials (letters,
lists, booking forms etc) associated with the running of the activities’ centre. We were engaged in what Heathcote has called a “sorting, classifying” praxis and the tasks were made dramatic or “imperative” (and therefore engaging) because of the “productive tension” (18) which had been laid into the materials (confusion about bookings etc). The “frame” in which we approached these materials was also extremely important in so far as it determined the extent of our engagement with the work. We were welcomed as people coming to run the centre after the (mysterious) departure of the previous director. Our individual roles did not need to be more clearly defined than this in terms of character (there was some debate about this), though in order to facilitate the work we took responsibility for running different areas of the centre.

I do not think that what we did in the initial stages of the drama was particularly significant; our facilitators were aiming chiefly: “To induct, protect, disarm, engage” (19) (this way of working is aimed at juniors and infants), hearing in mind Heathcote’s warning that: “If you want a classroom to be a laboratory then very slowly is it won in to being so” (20). It was the way in which we were working within a “frame” rather than assuming particular roles which was important.

Heathcote explained what she meant by frame in her article “Signs and Portents” (21); it was at this conference that I realised its potential. She explained in “Signs and Portents” the way in which a frame can determine focus by indicating a particular approach for the participants in the drama. She outlined its purpose and dual nature in this way: “In any social encounter there are two aspects present. One is the action necessary for the event to progress forward towards conclusions. The other is the perspective from which people are coming to enter the event. This is frame and frame is the main agent in providing tension and meaning for the participants” (22). Heathcote’s focus is obviously not on the experience of “being” in the action but rather on the way in which the decisions which determine the course of the action are reached according to the way in which we are addressed by the situation and on how what occurs may be interpreted.

In terms of the event itself our frame placed us in a position of influence. It empowered us on one level because it made it so easy to get on with the task (and therefore to feel able to act expertly) and on another because it meant that our engagement was based on the imperative that the task determined (and our subsequent concerns about the situation) rather than on empathy with a fictional role or character. There was no struggle to sustain role play “authentically” (in the way that Bolton described; that is “making the role credible to (one’s) self and to (one’s) classmates”, by acting “with integrity and spontaneity”, or “living through”), the events). The imperative determined by the context shielded us from such probing in the dark. Although our drama and its context did not make claims to authenticity, the task provided the grounds for further “factual” input. We were ready to take this on board when necessary - to enable us to do the task in hand. The clearer understanding of contextual constraints provided by such background material has the potential ultimately to sharpen awareness of what it is that influences or determines responses and attitudes as well as decisions that are made.

In an “sustained” group drama the participants’ influence over focus and interpretation may effectively be limited by the constraints of time, when the drama works at what Heathcote calls “action time, the seeming life-rate of the theatre” (24). This time pressure may reinforce the teacher’s need to reach conclusions by the end of the lesson - and show results. As Heathcote developed her drama she introduced variations of the “role conventions” listed in her article “Signs and Portents” (25), offering us the flexibility to slow down the “life-rate” of the drama and deliberately to determine the course of the narrative rather than allowing ourselves simply to be swept along by it. Slowing the drama down when necessary and skipping into and out of the iconic and symbolic modes in the process of building the fiction gave us the opportunity “to have opinion, make choices, validate input” so that “the reviewing, mediating and mediating” (26), that is part of the praxis could begin to happen.

Of the two conferences it was the first that gave me most insight into Heathcote’s ideas because I was involved in a practical drama session that developed from our group work which she led. The artificiality of participating in this session while we were observed by some two hundred people threatened initially to hinder engagement. Ultimately I think that it advantaged the work because it gave us a heightened awareness of the way in which the interpreting, perceptive aspect of our involvement was addressed as we were led into the learning experience.

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Heathcote began to develop our group’s drama further she did so with Role Convention fifteen using: “objects to represent a person’s interests - indicating concerns” (27); we were framed in “participant mode” (28) - according to her definition at the 1989 October NATD conference. One of the letters that we had been presented with at the outset of the drama indicated that a group of girls from a remand home were coming to stay. We had decided that one of the girls should run away and that this should provide the narrative focus for our drama. Having discussed all the girls’ characters both outside and within our frame as staff (using Role Convention sixteen: “An account of one person by another person in naturalistic fashion”) (29), we took some time trying to decide which one had run away. Our frame was strengthened by Heathcote taking on the role of an elderly police person. With Heathcote we then determined where each of the girls from the home slept using strips of paper to represent beds - building up the context with reference to the information that we had been given. We divided into groups on the basis of whom we favoured as runaway - which meant more deliberation and a heightened sense of the significance of the fate we were wishing on the particular individual chosen. In these groups we wrote down items that we thought may have been left in the runaway girl’s locker - and the lists were put into envelopes. The exercise shifted from iconic to symbolic mode as we swapped the envelopes around and took out the various lists in our groups - as if we were finding the items for the first time in the process of looking for clues about the girl’s disappearance.
Our investment in the drama was obviously fuelled by "real" tension created by the desire to find out what was in the envelopes; this quickened the fictional tension making our need to find the lost girl more pressing. At this stage in the drama Heathcote's attention to detail was crucial because it involved us in making "infinitesimal decisions" (30), without which the narrative could not progress. This process of careful deliberation made us increasingly aware of our responsibilities, we were, as Heathcote claims, "involved at a caring and urgently involved level", because we had been "placed in a quite specific relationship with the action, (bringing) with it, inevitably, the responsibilities and more particularly the viewpoint" (31).

Eventually we decided that the girl should die; a decision that could not be taken lightly in this context and Heathcote ensured that we understood the gravity of what we had done to the subject that we had created. This led to a reassessment of our initial flippancy towards the remand school girls; at first they had been no more to us than a problem to be dealt with. We began to deconstruct and understand more fully what had informed the ways in which we had reacted.

At this point in the drama our engagement was high because we had been carefully "dropped through the layers of investment" (32). The moment was ripe for Heathcote to begin introducing us to that area of the curriculum that we had challenged her to explore through the drama; that is, music.

It is at this stage in this sort of drama that the context can be highlighted in order to fuel the learning. Dorothy was seeking to introduce us to another art form in this circumstance and she said it using a more symbolic mode. Role Convention eight: "The role depicted in picture, removed from actual life as in a...drawing" (33). The girl's dead body was represented by the outline of a face drawn on a large sheet of paper, laid on a desk, with a photocopy of real hands crossed on her chest. We maintained the frame of those who had some responsibility for the girl (as the staff) but we were able to shift in and out of this fiction without undermining our investment, because the burden of responsibility that we had been made to feel for the development of the drama had the potential to be sustained. We drew the girl's life line all over the paper cover of her bed and around her photo copied hands and decided what music might have been important to her at different stages in her life (this was particularly significant because we had found a tape in her locker - though Heathcote had not engineered this). Heathcote demonstrated in this practical way the potential there was in this drama to open up all sorts of learning areas associated with music. We recognised that as long as the music could be related back to the subject of the drama our engagement would endure. The drama ended with the telling of stories around the map of the area, about incidents that we had been collectively involved in. We were consciously building up the fiction and our investment in it - further focussing on the contextual image (the iconic) that had throughout provided an anchor for the drama (for example, when we had been looking for the girl and considering what might have befallen her). Infinite possibilities for learning related to this context, were thereby opened up.

I felt moved by the experience of being involved in this drama particularly because I was aware that we had, collectively, made a lot of crucial decisions. We had had the authority to scrutinise every significant "turn" in the narrative before it was allowed to happen. We were conscious of "our power to influence and not only watch" (34), and this had made us potentially receptive to learning, on all sorts of levels, that would have made sense to us in relation to this context.

At the "Rolling Role" conference (the second), Heathcote introduced us to different ways in which we could empower pupils to work within a frame using what she called "keying" and "contracting". Keying describes the way in which a teacher signs shared expertise, (perhaps by donning a pair of imaginary surgeon's gloves, indicating that the pupils can follow her example like a surgeon). Contracts are made when the pupils agree to take a sip of the drink (Bloody Mary was the example given), having advised the new woman how to prepare it or when they respond to the question: "Do you agree that the day might come when people with power take notice of our reasonable suggestions?" (35).

Again Heathcote emphasised the way in which the iconic mode could be used to lead the pupils into thinking and action, so that their absorption in creating a feast for "Bartholomew Fair" (in the frame of "food historians") provides the level of engagement and breadth of perspective necessary to initiate learning about the themes of the play and its socio/historical context.

Heathcote explained more clearly at this conference that she consciously worked to empower pupils by creating opportunities for the participants to become the spectators of the dramatic process in order that they might reach a clearer understanding of the drama's significance by shifting away from it. She acknowledged the Brechtian implications of this.

Again, the deconstruction of the dramatic situations explored through attention to detail and the variations in approach to the work was key. For older children especially, Heathcote's concern is that they become aware of the implications of the signing system that they use. She quoted T.E. Hall to illustrate the situation that she seeks to redress: "When we are living in our culture many of the things we do are so embedded in our doing that we don't even notice it" (36).

We had had the authority to scrutinise every significant "turn" in the narrative before it was allowed to happen. We were conscious of "our power to influence and not only watch".

Apart from the keying and contracting Heathcote also introduced us to her ideas about the "technical", the "formal" and the "informal" - ways of determining that the drama can move forward at whatever level of sophistication the pupils are in their handling of drama work. A formality or "incontrovertible given" (37) can be injected into the drama in order to create the necessary productive tension to sustain it. The constraint of the law acts as a formality (a constraint that endures), the problem of a "get away van" not being able to get up an alley way is technical (there may be ways around the problem) and a password or something that can be negotiated within the drama by everyone involved represents an informality. Those operating at an informal level (able to
accept things like passwords), are the "experts". All three represent ways of relating constraints imposed by the dramatic context, in varying degrees, to the constraints of a 'real' context. They acknowledge that since it is impossible for a dramatic context to mirror reality in its entirety, then at least the significant constraints that arise from the real context should be respected - if the learning is to make sense. They provide ways for the drama teacher to sustain the drama without necessarily intervening to bring it to the point of crisis that implies or demands a final resolution.

Heathcote's current concern with the interpretation of signs and the mediums of communication was evident in her focus on "Chamber Theatre" at the second conference (specifically for the use of older pupils). That is a piece of dramatic action watched by the rest of the class from the perspective of a particular frame. Like Brecht (as he showed in the essay "The Street Scene") (38), she is interested in the exploration of the point of view expressed by the narrator(s), be they literal narrators or interpreters of a piece of text or a story. She said in relation to this "Words have all the burden of all the processes of being that they are representing". Her emphasis was on "those three million pauses where thoughts can be revealed in action, gesture, voice and movement." (39) But she is not interested simply in "sub-text", in treating the drama like a literary text, as a vehicle for arriving at some meaning anterior to it which is "impos facto" true because it is in some way expressive of a universal feeling. "Chamber Theatre" works in the same way that the consciousness of being watched by two hundred conference delegates heightens awareness of the signing or signification process that addresses us as "free" subjects (and deceives us). It puts both actors and (framed) audience on the spot; in the best position "to explore motivation at the moment of action" (40) in order to understand how meanings are created and changed as ideology and societal constraints mould them (and not as the universal truth determines). As Heathcote said: "The essence of the technique is its concern with a point of view" (41). Again attention to detail, the flexibility to stop the action and redirect it was the key; giving the pupils time to deconstruct its significance and meaning, offering the means with which they can begin to engage with and understand the complexities of the real world and the construction of their own, often contradictory subject positions within it.

The practical task that we were given at this conference involved developing a Role Convention for a piece of "Chamber Theatre" that in turn implied a frame for the spectators. The piece of action that we focused on was taken from a Rolling Role drama that began as two lines of text (presented as part of a shooting script for a film when Heathcote used it in a High School in Jarrow) (42). The situation was: "An encounter between a grief-stricken young widower and an apothecary from whom he wanted formaldehyde to secretly preserve the body of his young dead wife." We were given a piece of narrative: "That evening, at dusk, the young man waited for his guest, the apothecary summoned after careful consideration as to time, place and purpose..." (43). Our particular group decided that this text might be presented using Role Convention eighteen, spoken by a defence lawyer. "An account written by the person who now reads it to others, for example a policeman giving evidence or a confession. The role is present in this case but in contact through their writing as an author might well be" (44) the spectators thus framed as the jury. We thought also of using the young man's older self to reconstruct the past event, using other people to illustrate the narrative through mime (like Role Convention eighteen again, as a sort of confession). Also by presenting a script writer trying to convince a studio boss to use his script - using Role Convention two: "Framed as a film...that might be stopped and started" (45).

In these examples the Role Conventions give the spectators the opportunity to adopt a particular point of view by providing them with the necessary praxis; the motivation to take significant action (whether they be framed as jury, as investigators or as film studio bosses). In all cases, the action implies taking the dramatic account apart and examining it, and in the process of "going from action to reflection" (46), to reach a more sophisticated understanding of its meanings - and their implications in different contexts; and the various ways in which it addresses those approaching it in a particular frame.

I hope that this article will have thrown some light on the significant implications of Heathcote's current practice and the ways in which the theory that underlies it has been developed. Heathcote's practical approach may be defined as what Beneviste calls "interrogative" (47). Most classroom practice is "declarative" (48), that is, it involves "imparting knowledge to a participant whose position is thereby stabilized, through a privileged discourse which is, to varying degrees, invisible". Or it is "imperative" which means that the pupils are aligned "as in identification with one set of discourses and practices and as in opposition to others" (49), thereby constituting the participant/percipient as a unified subject again. The benefit of the "interrogative" approach is that it highlights contradictions in a productive, dialectical way. It works to "disrupt the unity of the (pupil) by discouraging identification with a unified subject" (50). The interrogative is intended to invite the participant/percipient "to provide answers to the questions that it implicitly or explicitly raises" (51). It refuses the "hierarchy of discourses" (52) of the declarative because no interrogative discourse points to a single position within it - which is the place of the coherence of meaning. Like Brecht, Heathcote gives no immediate answers to the questions she poses; instead she enlists the participant/percipient in a
questioning process that does not tend towards a final, obvious interpretation. Her work acknowledges the bewildering complexity of the post modern world and our positions in it, and sees the need to interpret and question the ideology that informs it. She quoted Doris Lessing to that effect at the October 1989 NATD conference; “You are going to be taught how to examine...mass ideas...apparently irresistible pressures, taught how to think for yourself and to choose for yourself” (53). The conscious way in which: “The actual moment in time can be isolated, tried again, turned around, replayed with different solutions” (54), distanced emotionally and viewed productively (in terms of meaning) from the perspective of a particular viewpoint or frame, is the key to this way of working. In our drama at the “Mantle of the Expert” (the first) conference, Dorothy Heathcote’s notes from her “Collected Writings on Education and Drama”, Pg 205.

3. Ibid, Pg 206.


5. Ibid, Pg 181.

6. Ibid, Pg 179.7. “Drama as Schooling? Drama as Education?” from Drama Broadsheet Vol 5, No 3, Pg 1


10. Ibid, Pg 16.

11. Quoted in “Critical Practice” by Catherine Belsey, Pg 61, from “Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays”, Pg 169.

12. Ibid, Pg 61.

13. Ibid, Pg 61.


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FOOTNOTES


2. Dorothy Heathcote’s notes from her “Collected Writings on Education and Drama”, Pg 205.

3. Ibid, Pg 206.


5. Ibid, Pg 181.

6. Ibid, Pg 179.7. “Drama as Schooling? Drama as Education?” from Drama Broadsheet Vol 5, No 3, Pg 1


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12. Ibid, Pg 61.

13. Ibid, Pg 61.