 Using written texts in drama

Ways into drama through literature

Sometimes a drama class begins with a close examination of a written text. The literacy levels in the class will partly determine the choice of text type, and how it is used. In Early Stage 1 the class may begin with the spoken word (for example the reading of a picture book or nursery rhyme), whilst older more experienced students could base their drama on poems, short stories or extracts from the newspaper. Picture books, where communication depends on the combination of picture and words, may be used in younger classes. In Stage 3 a play script might be explored.

Extracts from letters, journals, lists and posters

| Stage | Extracts |
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| Early stage 1 | Create a short letter asking for help by a well-known character from a story e.g.Dear DetectivesMy little girl is missing. She went into the woods to take some food to my mother.She was wearing a red cloak. Can you help me?Mrs HoodStudents, in role as the detectives, hot seat the teacher as Mrs Hood, and elicit help from them. What could have happened? How can the child be saved? |
| Stage 1 | Create a shopping list for a birthday party.The class decides whose party it is, and how they could prepare for it. Do this in several stages: (i) decide on a present, and draw it (ii) in pairs, practice receiving the gifts (iii) Sit at the party table and mime serving and eating food suggested by the group |
| Stage 2 | Read Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. In pairs the students draw what they think the wild thing looks like. Show and discuss these and choose one. Attach this to a poster drawn up by the teacher: "Wanted. Reward for the capture of the Wild Thing". Ask for suggestions about how to hunt for the Wild Thing. Implement some, moving around the room. Capture the Wild Thing (another teacher or child) and discuss what to do with it.Should it be released? |
| Stage 3 | Create an "old" journal page and a map from a group of explorers lost in the Australian outback.“Thursday 15th January 1840. There is little hope we will survive. We have no more water, and the horses escaped last night. Michael has not returned from his scouting expedition.”Discuss what the students know about the early explorers. Supplement this with some resources.In small groups create three depictions of crucial moments in the explorations e.g. planning, losing the way, breaking up the party. Tap in and hear the difficulties at each stage. Follow with a whole class in role discussion, with teacher in a high status role, planning a search and rescue mission. Should it be done? |

Extracts from a newspaper

| Stage | Extracts |
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| Early stage 1 | Choose a news picture with human figures that will appeal to the group (e.g. a family at the show; a group in flood waters). Students "sculpt" each other into shapes represented in the picture. When tapped on the shoulder, students say what the character may be thinking |
| Stage 1 | Choose headlines from the paper relevant to the news of the day (e.g. "record crowds attend the show" or similar comments on the Olympic Games or Christmas celebrations etc). Discuss the things that might happen at the event, and who might be there. Students create paper plate masks attached to a stick, which they can use when presenting a news report for television. |
| Stage 2 | A "squib" is a filler sometimes used in newspapers to briefly outline an unusual story. Choose an ambiguous one with "general" characters who are not famous, so there is room for students to be creative. For example:“A man has admitted to stealing $6327 from his employer's safe. However he hid the money in the local dump, where it was accidentally destroyed by workers burning off the rubbish. The man was arrested at the scene when he went back to collect the money".Discuss: What questions is the reader left with? What might be some answers? In small groups, the students decide upon three still images to express the story. Reflect on how the story was "told", comparing and contrasting the interpretations |
| Stage 3 | Discuss a controversial news story or provocative topic, such as the need to quarantine animals during outbreak of disease, or the possession of drugs by a swimming coach. Decide upon people who would have a vested interest; name fictional characters. Allow the students time for more research if needed. Adopt a high status role as the Minister for Health, and hear representations from the students in role on both sides of the issue |

Extracts from picture books

| Stage | Extracts |
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| Early stage 1 | Read Sleeping Beauty. Adopt the low status role of one of the characters who has woken after I00 years. Ask the students (in high status roles as experts in 2Ist century living) to explain the unusual things seen in this modern world (e.g. a big chopping machine in the sky. What is that called?). |
| Stage 1 | Read Rosie's Walk by Pat Hutchins. Discuss with the students what is happening (in the subtext, in pictures only) to the fox following her. Have the students form a circle, with joined hands. Have one student adopt the role of Rosie, and one the fox. Whilst the teacher re-reads the text, "Rosie" winds in and out of the circle. The students use their joined arms to allow Rosie to escape appropriately - "over, under, around, past, through". However they raise their arms or move their bodies to block the fox. Repeat the process several times with several students acting as Rosie and the fox |
| Stage 2 | Read the Great Bear by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder. Stop at the section describing the bear performing:She lifted her feet and swayed to the sound and some of the crowd clapped and cheered.Others poked her with sticks and threw stones at her ragged coat. In small groups create still images of this crowd mix. Tap in to hear the thoughts of each person watching the bear |
| Stage 3 | Read The Great Bear by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder and discuss the whole story. Write an in-role description by an animal welfare officer of the condition of the bear. Follow this by a hot seating: the teacher takes on the role of the owner of the bear after the bear's escape, and answers questions put by the welfare officers |

Using drama

Drama is an excellent method for analysing the meaning, and exploring the sound and rhythm of poetry. By using the body - feeling it in the bones - students can come to an understanding of the poem's affective qualities. The discussion of how to use the body indirectly promotes an analysis of the meaning.

Extracts from poems

| Stage | Extracts |
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| Early stage 1 | Use a simple nonsense rhyme and adapt it for reader’s theatre. Discuss the feeling in each line, and how it could be expressed.Each student can learn one line and speak it when directed by the teacher:“Mother, Mother, l feel sick, Send for the doctor,Quick, quick, quick. ln comes the doctor,ln comes the nurse,ln comes the lady with the alligator purse."It's the end," says the doctor. "It's the end," says the nurse.“It’s the end,” says the lady with the alligator purse.”From Far Out, Brussel Sprout in Drama Anytime p.60. |
| Stage 1 | Read a narrative poem or nursery rhyme such as Humpty Dumpty. Extract the main movements (sitting down, falling, breaking, riding, mending, falling apart). Students explore these in pairs in slow motion and at different levels, using freeze part way through the action. Read the poem and use slowed movement to illustrate the actions of the poem. |
| Stage 2 | Prepare strips of material, streamers, and percussion instruments. Read the following extract from Kenneth Slessor's Fixed ldeas.Students in groups of six, experiment with movements, heights and shapes appropriate to express the feelings. Share these. Reflect with the students:Frail tinkling rush Water hair streamingPrickles and glitters Cloudy with bristlesRiver of thought Swimming the pebbles-Undo, loosen your bubbles.What might "loosen your bubbles" mean? |
| Stage 3 | Students read and discuss the following poem.At what levels are the objects described: which is highest? Which is lowest?In groups of six, have students explore appropriate movements, use of space and levels, to accompany a reading of the poem by one of their group. Share all of the groups' interpretations, and then discuss the last two lines - do they agree? Extend the activity by writing a poem of "the country at night".City at NightOh what a view, eleven floors up, like a fairLike Fairyland. Layer on layer and beams of light, From storeys of windows, stories of neon,Rocking from harboured ships; Cars burrow the night, Planes coming low to land send lights before them,Whatever in aeons is changeless, This is a sight Only for twentieth-century eyes.By Nancy Keesing |

Performing drama through literature

Using stories leading to performances

| Stage | Stories leading to performances |
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| Early stage 1 | Read Mary had a Little Lamb. Using teacher in role, create a spontaneous whole class process drama (creating together – not necessarily leading to a performance) about school. The teacher adopts a low status role as Mary, and questions the students (in role as more experienced school-goers) about why it is wrong to bring a lamb to school. They could "help" her decide how to cope with the lamb at school until Mary’s mother can come to collect the lamb at the end of the day. Where can it stay? What could it eat? How can we keep it quiet? |
| Stage 1 | Read Steven Kellog's "Chicken Little", and explore with the class soundscaping to lift the story off the page. Students can add musical instruments to represent the helicopter crashing, or body percussion for the falling acorn. They can use voice to interpret the character’s emotions. The teacher can conduct an interpretive reading |
| Stage 2 | Students can create a reader’s theatre script from a text such as the Three Billy Goats Gruff, using differently pitched voices for the goats and the troll, and placing their scripts in folders of different symbolic sizes and colours as they begin to interpret the characters (e.g. the troll's script is in a large dark coloured folder; the littlest goat has a small light coloured one). |
| Stage 3 | Compare sections of the novel Hating Alison Ashley by Robin Klein and the play text of the same name, adapted by Richard Tulloch. Read Chapter 3, and then explore Scene 2 The School Classroom. Discuss the differences in the text types but similarities in story. Have the students in groups of about six, interpret and prepare for presentation small sections of this scene. As this preparation is time consuming, give each group only about half a page. When they are ready, run the prepared sections in chronological order, as one piece |

Using random words and noises

| Stage | Random words and noises |
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| Early stage 1 | Students recall sounds they might hear at the beach. Cue these with questions. What do the waves do? What sound do we hear when we walk on the sand?With the sounds, create a spontaneous narrative by adding some characters, stringing their words together, and have the whole group enact “their” story with you (e.g. one morning a family woke up early to the sound of the crashing waves). They put on their clothes, picked up their bucket and spade, and went for a walk on the burning sand |
| Stage 1 | Stand the students in a circle. Ask volunteers to give you the names of different jobs that people might do. When a job is nominated, ask students to use their bodies to show how the worker might act (e.g. police direct traffic, arrest robbers, and help lost children).Once they have enacted several jobs, choose different corners of the room for different workplaces. Give small groups of students different occupations, freeze in their workplaces and "come alive" when the group or teacher visits their corner to see how they work |
| Stage 2 | Tell an "around the room" story one word at a time, to a theme the teacher nominates e.g. on a deserted island. Each student needs to listen to hear what the others have said. Use the completed story as a starting point for small group improvisation e.g. it might be the scene before, or what happened afterward. Prepare these improvisations, use a narrator to tell the story, and illustrate it |
| Stage 3 | The students close their eyes. Create three sounds (e.g. ring a bell, slam a door, cough). Students share with a partner what the sounds made them think about, their associations (e.g. a fire alarm, choking in smoke, escaping). They join another pair, and share the associations in a group of four. Turn some of these associations into a story, and each group act it out for the whole class |