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An Everyday Drama: Using Creative Dramatics to Teach Literature

Don Beck and Scott Warrow

DON: Our topic today is using creative dramatics to teach literature. Hopefully, we've all come to this article in the journal because we are genuinely interested in learning new ways to heighten our students' interest, understanding, and ability to critique poetry, prose, and even non-fiction. Now, the first thing we need to do is

MR. G. WRINKLE [seasoned high school English teacher veteran]: That's great, just great. Uh ... where can I get some coffee?

SCOTT: Sorry, Mr. Wrinkle, but we'd prefer no coffee breaks during this article.

MR. WRINKLE: Okay then, let's get straight to the point. "Everyday Drama?" Oh, boy. This isn't another one of those sappy, new age articles which is going to tell me how drama can "turn my classes around," is it?

DON: Well, Mr. Wrinkle, I wouldn't say that it's some sort of cure-all, but the simple exercises we want to talk about have worked quite well at motivating our own students. On top of that, our kids gained deeper understandings of literature.

SCOTT: We just want to share various sorts of dramatic activities you could use in your day-to-day lessons.

MR. WRINKLE: (mumbling) Oh, brother. I can see where this is going.

SCOTT: Huh?

MR. WRINKLE: Listen, no disrespect, but I've done it all before. Had the kids act out scenes to Milton, read *The Aeneid* out loud to the class—all that kind of *English Journal* junk.

DON: And? It didn't engage them?

MR. WRINKLE: "Engage" them? Ha! They screwed off most of the time, only scripted out a few sentences of dialogue, read so fast I thought they were speaking in tongues, and then literally sprinted back to their seats. Even the good kids said they'd rather sit the exercise out. More of a pain in the butt than it's worth, I say.

SCOTT: Hmm, that's too bad. I can see why you'd be reluctant to try it again.

DON: Yes, I've been burned before too. Hasn't everybody?

MR. WRINKLE: Burned isn't the word for it. My rear is still smoking.

SCOTT: Then let's reflect upon what didn't work. Take your Shakespeare scripting idea; why don't you start by telling us what kinds of things you did to help students prepare for these presentations?

MR. WRINKLE: Prepare?

SCOTT: You know, warm up activities or smaller lead-in projects. To get your students into the swing of things, keep them from performing "cold."

MR. WRINKLE: Oh, well, yes, of course. I did everything I could think of. I showed a video on iambic pentameter, handed out a copy of Stratford Festival performance guidelines, and, on top of all that, I even counted it as much as a full test grade. I figured that should have motivated them, but no luck. Listen, I understand what you two are getting at, but I just don't agree with it. The truth is this new age teaching just plain old doesn't work.

DON: Well, we thank you for your input, Mr. Wrinkle. Ms. Dash, do you have anything you'd like to add?

MS. HOLLY DASH (former English teacher, currently Middle School principal) While I respect your perspective, Mr. Wrinkle, I have to disagree. I used to use creative dramatics with my seventh and eighth graders, and both they and I found it quite refreshing. They seemed to look forward to it, always begging me to let them "act" again. Even in the years since, I've found nothing better for channeling their energy.

SCOTT: So, Ms. Dash, how did you ensure that your students would be motivated to participate and learn?

MS. DASH: Well, it's really a matter of creating a classroom community. Students won't be engaged or even agree to participate in activities such as these without feeling confident and prepared to perform at the onset. Imagine yourself in front of a large group of people you don't know that well, going out on a limb and taking risks without some experience or the support and backup of your peers. You'd be terrified, right? Probably even freeze up or out-and-out refuse to do it. It's pretty unrealistic for teachers to expect anything more from students.

MR. WRINKLE: You bet it's unrealistic. Just like I said.

MS. DASH: Well, Mr. Wrinkle, I'm saying there are steps you can take which will inspire success stories.

DON: And build confidence in the short term. Scott and I use what are called "warm-up" activities for just these purposes.

SCOTT: It's kind of like the writing process in that there's a process involved in using creative

dramatics, too. We don't expect kids to write like Maya Angelou after one week, and so we shouldn't expect them to be Laurence Oliviers either. We need to work toward it over time.

DON: For example, "word of the day."

MR. WRINKLE: Word of the what? Like on Mr. Rogers?

DON: Not quite. It's a warm up exercise. I pick a random word such as "buttress," which I say and ask students to repeat as a class. I usually give the definition of the word too so it becomes a quick vocab. lesson. The drama enters when I have them repeat it after me a few more times, each time imitating an emotion through different intonations: say "buttress" soft and sweet, as if you were in love, or angrily shout it as an insult. You get the picture. This doesn't take much time, but it gets them active and centered on me while helping them get used to being "dramatic" in a non-threatening way. Warm-ups like this are important to do on a regular basis, but especially right before a larger creative dramatic exercise.

SCOTT: Come on, let's try it now: everyone say

MR. WRINKLE: (angrily) Now hold it, you two buttresses! You mean to tell me I'm supposed to have these kids shouting their heads off?! (yelling) What in the Sam Hill good is that? It's hard enough to keep them quiet half the time!

SCOTT: Now wait a minute. Let's just calm down. Don't you see there are, in fact, justifiable goals here, Mr. Wrinkle? In the short term, little exercises such as this seize student attention. In the long run, warm-ups do much more. Far from just letting kids scream and be noisy for no reason, warm ups do exactly what we should be doing in the English classroom: help forge that overarching sense of community we agreed was so vital.

DON: As Ms. Dash said, without an open, accepting atmosphere, not only will they be reluctant to stand before their peers and, say, read a script they wrote for a unit-culminating project, but they will also refuse to share their ideas on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Or even on some hot contemporary topic they just wrote about in their own journals.

MR. WRINKLE: I'm not convinced we should take the risks involved in this sort of business when we know the tried and true methods work.

MS. DASH: But the old methods no longer work as effectively with the MTV generation.

MR. WRINKLE: That doesn't mean we have to teach them how to act like Beavis or Butthead. Okay, I'll admit I can see why you might use this "Mr. Rogers" method once in a great while, but I simply can't see myself whooping it up with my kids. Call me Mr. Undramatic.

DON: Not at all. There are many different types of warm-ups. If you don't like the word of the day, choose another one you do feel comfortable doing. Or even create one of your own which will fit your teaching style. There's no one single way to be or not to be "dramatic."

SCOTT: I can think of a great warm-up exercise which doesn't require much "acting" per se, and it even teaches students an important life skill to boot. Once, I wanted to stress the importance of listening and cooperation to my debate class before we ventured onto a large group project so I had the class break up into groups of four. One student sat in a chair, and the other three stood around her in a half-circle. The person in the chair had to pay attention to the rest of her group as one member asked simple personal questions, one asked simple mathematical questions, and the third made simple hand motions. This was a good lesson because it forced the sitting person to concentrate on three different focal points at once as she tried to answer the questions and mirror the hand motions without faltering.

MS. DASH: Interesting idea. I can see how it would be fun, but kids being kids, didn't they make it too easy or too difficult for the person sitting down?

SCOTT: No, because I explained the main objective was to achieve complete cooperation and group success. The three people standing had to find the sitting person's limit, so they could either slow down the hand motions or speed them up, ask harder or simpler questions, and so on. The group had to work as a team.

DON: This activity was a short, thirty minute warm-up and a lesson in and of itself. It cuts right to the heart of our "everyday drama" topic: dramatics don't have to be infused solely in large, final projects. Another example of a self-contained mini-lesson which immediately pops into my mind is teaching tone or atmosphere by playing a variety of music styles and asking students to move or dance around the room to each song's mood.

SCOTT: Role-playing also works well for short lessons on social issues anywhere from inter-racial dating to drug use.

MS. DASH: I think we should stop here for a quick second and clarify how this helps us teach the language arts. I don't have a problem with kids moving around to music and role-playing, but I . . .

MR. WRINKLE: Yes, that's precisely my point! Why should we teach drama in English class? Students are there to learn about Chaucer, Beowulf, and writing, not how to act, sing, and dance.

DON: True, but remember our point isn't to teach "theater" but to use drama as a way into literature. In other words, a smooth, polished performance is not the ultimate objective, but rather the creative and critical path students take to that end point. It's all about process.

SCOTT: I'm sure most language arts teachers are familiar with all kinds of justifications for drama's use in education, Don. It helps students take ownership of the text, explore meaning in new ways, develop a critical eye for "reading" movies and TV. There are literally dozens of valid reasons. But we're here to focus specifically on why and how we might infuse drama into our everyday lessons; how we can use it to teach literary concepts like symbolism, interpret poetry or parts of a novel or play, or to enhance students' listening and creative thinking skills.

DON: Yes, you're right. Sorry.

MS. DASH: So you aren't talking about things like making videos for *Romeo and Juliet* or organizing poetry readings?

DON: Not exactly. Although Scott and I both use and encourage the use of these large, unit-culminating projects, what we think needs to occur more are smaller, everyday sorts of activities, similar to the warm-ups we mentioned before which were lessons in and of themselves.

SCOTT: Let me give you another example. To help students understand more about symbolism, I created a dramatic mini-lesson which involved a stapler and students standing in a circle. After briefly defining what symbolism is and giving some examples, I showed the class how any object no matter how simple could symbolize many things, as long as we allowed ourselves to open up and imagine it. To model this first-hand, I turned the stapler into a comb by pulling it across my hair. Or I showed how it could be a butterfly by opening it up and flapping the two ends like wings. Then I asked students to take a minute to imagine what they could make the stapler represent. As we passed it around the circle each student transformed it into a different object by using or manipulating it in some way.

MR. WRINKLE: (chuckling) I'll admit that's an interesting idea, but how do you know the kids actually learned anything from this make-believing—aside from how to get sent to the nurse's office with a staple clamped into their head.

SCOTT: As with anything, Mr. Wrinkle, measuring student learning is important and not always easy, and this seems especially true when using creative dramatics. Nonetheless, the classes who did this exercise seemed to demonstrate a better understanding of symbolism when I later asked them to think of and identify examples on a short quiz.

DON: It seems you would have been able to tell they were grasping the idea as the stapler moved around the circle, too, by their success and imagination, right? And even more so if you followed the exercise up with some sort of assignment requiring them to actually use symbolism, such as writing a poem or vignette.

SCOTT: Right on both counts.

MS. DASH: So that's all there was to it? You showed them a stapler and had them make a symbol out of it? Sounds simple.

MR. WRINKLE: Yeah, real simple. I still think drama is overrated. Instead of using a stapler you should have used a pencil and talked not about what kids think it is—a toothpick, a rocket launcher, or a ceiling decoration—but something to take notes with! I have important things to tell them about symbolism, and if they know how to take good notes, they'll understand it just fine. Kids today don't listen, and that, my friends, is the real problem.

SCOTT: (aggravated) Maybe their not listening just symbolizes something about your teaching ...

YOU (gentle, intelligent reader and brilliant Michigan English teacher): Now wait a minute guys, no need to get defensive!

DON: It's good to hear from you, finally!

SCOTT: Thanks for chiming in. Glad you're still with us.

YOU: Listen, it seems to me that buried in his resistance, Mr. Wrinkle does have a valid point: there has to be something more than just creative dramatics. We're talking about teaching English, and English includes reading, writing, and, yes, even listening-comprehension skills which allow students to take coherent notes.

DON: Well, the stapler activity provides students with more, doesn't it? A visual image of symbolism.

YOU: But I also find verbal and written examples very useful and necessary for my students.

MR. WRINKLE: Yeah, especially if they go on to college. No university professor will ask them to get up and "act out" their final exam in calculus using a butterfly stapler. They'd better have some good notes.

SCOTT: Yes, of course. No one is saying to get rid of the basics but to use creative dramatics to enhance them. It's mainly just a way to heighten students' understanding. By providing visual, kinesthetic examples, one of which they themselves created, my stapler mini-lesson ensured students were much more likely to be able to

identify and relate to other written or verbal instances of symbolism from, let's say, a novel or a poem.

MS. DASH: Ah, I see. You mean if I'm teaching *Lord of Flies*, and I think it's important for the class to understand that the island represents society, I could refer back to an activity such as yours for students to draw on?

SCOTT: Yes! Hopefully some will even detect the double meaning independently because of the mini-lesson, but either way they will understand the idea that much more.

YOU: Well sure, but that sounds like some pretty higher-level thinking. I wonder if all students could do this, especially middle school kids.

DON: Maybe not every single student 100% of the time, but I've definitely found that I can reach far more kids using this method than just abstract talk.

SCOTT: No one would deny that some kids do "get it" through a lecture with a few good examples, but if we're talking about teaching all students, especially those hard to reach, we need to use creative and engaging methods utilizing many different "intelligences."

YOU: So, in essence, you're saying I can use these kinds of mini-dramatic exercises to teach all kinds of language arts terminology.

DON: Oh, and more.

MS. DASH: I'd like to hear other examples, like something more to do with poetry.

MR. WRINKLE: Yeah, I have one: how about Shakespeare? There's nothing simple about him.

DON: Old Willy? Sure! Maybe we can give you a couple useful ideas which have worked for us in the past and at the same time demonstrate many of the things we've been saying for the last three pages.

YOU: (unsuspectingly playing right into the authors' hands ...) Hey, how about iambic pentameter? Any ideas for something as complicated as scansion?

SCOTT: Why, yes. What a coincidence!

DON: Actually, we have a great idea in which students "live" the beat and rhythm of the line. The first thing to do is give a lead-in by intro-

ducing meter and rhythm in some way. When Scott taught *Romeo and Juliet*, he even went as far as to write and perform a "rap" version of the first act.

SCOTT: Then, after we discussed how rap is a modern form of stylistic language and storytelling, we drew parallels to Shakespeare and defined iambic pentameter. While it would seem natural to stop at this point, I thought it a perfect opportunity to build upon our definition and insert a mini-dramatic lesson. I asked ten students to come to the front of the room and form a single file line. It was April, so students had engaged in many of these kinds of dramatic lessons already and thus didn't need to be prepped or coaxed into it. Earlier, I had written a line from Romeo's orchard soliloquy onto large cards: "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks." Each syllable was on a single card and was marked stressed or unstressed. I handed these out in order to the ten students and had them read the line out loud, each person reading his/her card. To help students visualize and understand the concept of iambic pentameter, I asked "unstressed students" to crouch as they read their word, and "stressed students" to jump.

DON: This both clarified and reinforced their understanding. You could even go so far as to have students "perform" an entire passage this way.

SCOTT: We did, once students got the hang of it. Doing more lines also allowed us to switch performers so everyone could participate, too.

MS. DASH: That is a nice idea, but as a former middle school teacher, I'm not sure I would go through the hassle of teaching students about such an advanced concept. I do have another option I would use, though. Given the complexity of Elizabethan language, younger students have trouble understanding the basic plot and characters. Acting out an entire play is not really an option, but how about performing just short, specific scenes?

SCOTT: What about even omitting dialogue and having them perform an extremely short, fifteen-second, silent version?

DON: Hey, wait! You could even make a review game out of it: a group of students would have to pick a scene from the play and act out the silent version. The rest of the class' task is to determine the action, characters, and the context. A perfect discussion lead-in, too.

MS. DASH: Sure, and students could be assessed on how well they performed and organized the scene, which would ultimately demonstrate their level of understanding of the play.

YOU: That sounds neat and useful, but what about those kids who don't want to act, even if it is a silent version? No doubt there'll be at least a few of them, despite an established, close-knit classroom community.

MR. WRINKLE: Yeah, I thought that might be a problem.

DON: That's no problem at all. Students who don't want to "act" could become inanimate objects in the scene such as doors, tables, arrows, or whatever. Actually, it might be an interesting idea to disallow any props in order to encourage this sort of thinking.

MS. DASH: It would certainly make the performances more lively and push kids to think more critically about what they were doing.

Wow, guys! The more we talk about using performance in our everyday lessons, the easier it is for me to visualize it in the classroom. The options are just opening up right and left!

SCOTT: That's exactly the point of this article: to exchange ideas about how effective drama can be in teaching literature. Although there's no hard and fast rules for it, and it's definitely no holy grail of teaching, the benefits outweigh the risks tenfold.

DON: We should thank Ms. Dash for her critical input and Mr. Wrinkle for being so critical.

MS. DASH: My pleasure.

MR. WRINKLE: Hey, devil's advocate is my specialty.

SCOTT: And thank You for staying with us. Hope it gave you something to think about.

YOU:

About the Authors

Don Beck and Scott Warrow are first year teachers! Scott Warrow teaches English and Debate at Beverly Hills Groves High School, while Scott Beck teaches English at Waverly High School.