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Beth Murray

University of North Carolina

Spencer Salas

University of North Carolina

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METHODS

Acting Out Against the Norm: Improvisational Frames and Nolan's *Crazy*

BETH MURRAY AND SPENCER SALAS

“ My mind drifts back to the meeting in Dr. Gomez’s office. Right before we left the room, after we had turned the lights back on, Haze asked Shelby if she should ever do it—leave her mother helpless and choking—and Shelby lost it. She burst into tears and said she didn’t know. Even if her mother wanted her to do it, how could she?

CRAZY GLUE: *You’re starting to think about your own mom, goob. Careful.*

AUNT BEE: *He needs to think about her. It’s not healthy pushing her memory away.*

I stop as usual just across the street from my house and as usual stare up at it. The windows look dark and the house vacant. I shiver and remember when we first moved in and the house seemed gigantic to me. Back then there were only small cracks in the ceilings and no holes in the roof. We could fill the cupboards with food.

CRAZY GLUE: *Yeah, yeah, and you had plenty to of heat, and cable, and the phone worked—don’t go there.*

I wait for a car to pass, then cross the street, climb the steps and pause at the door.

LAUGH TRACK: *As usual. (LAUGHTER)*

FAT BALD GUY WITH A MUSTACHE: *Now he will conjure up some sweet memory from the past that will remind him of his dad in the good old days.*

LAUGH TRACK: *As usual!*

AUNT BEE: *It’s important for him to remember something nice about his father before he goes inside.*

Remember that Christmas when the chimney guys were fixing the flue in our chimney in the old house, and Dad got the idea on Christmas Eve to dress as Santa and climb into the chimney and have Mom call me outside to see him? (Nolan, 2010, p. 61-63)

In response to our editors’ call for this special issue on “Mental Illness,” we begin with an excerpt from Han Nolan’s novel *Crazy* (2010). Teen-aged Jason navigates the swirling worlds of his mother’s death, his father’s undiagnosed mental illness, and his own emerging adolescent identity—accompanied by the voices in his head: Crazy Glue, Aunt Bee, Fat Bald Guy With a Moustache, Sexy Lady and the collective character of Laugh Track (a Greek-chorus of crowd responses and commentaries). In his parallel world of school, a small support group of non-imaginary teens grows into Jason’s friends as his father’s untreated condition ripples through the pages of the novel and Jason’s life and thoughts. When his father enters treatment, Jason’s fears about his own wellness surface; and, he struggles to choose between the classmates he has come to know and those voices that have inhabited his mind since his mother’s death.

Even in a new English Language Arts (ELA) education committed to fostering, and sustaining “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95), reading a book such as *Crazy* would constitute the violation of a widespread canonical norm. That is, issues of mental health are rarely approached in the middle and secondary ELA curriculum and barely whispered about in the shadows of “polite” U.S. society. Yet, critical pedagogies that remain silent about public and personal issues such as mental health risk perpetuating what Miller (2012) describes as a mythology of the norm—“when a person cannot be readily understood or identified, there may be a psychological need to minimize, hurt, or make the person disappear altogether” (p. 107). We argue that it does not have to be that way.

In social justice oriented approaches to teaching Young Adult (YA) literature, ELA teachers work to “unsettle” students’ assumptions and biases (Behrman, 2006; Schieble, 2012) and commit to the possibilities of counter narratives. Such teachers (ourselves included) are also ethically obligated

to foster a reflective context for unpacking and examining emerging perspectives and re-orientations. *Crazy* is a tough read—for its innovative narrative/play-script hybrid format and even more for the themes it forefronts. Teaching *Crazy* and other YA texts about mental illness is equally challenging—requiring more than teacher “mindfulness” (Coccia Hamel, Shaw, & Smith Taylor, 2013), but also knowhow. In the sections that follow we bring a tradition of applied theatre (Cohen-Cruz, 2012; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O'Neill, 1995) to the practice literature for “embodied” reader response in middle and secondary ELA classrooms (Wilhelm, 2004, 2008).

readers to interact critically with narratives surrounding mental health. Thinking about collaborative improvisation as a tool for “protecting students into learning” (Johnson & O'Neill, 1984; Robinson & Heathcote, 1980) and exploring multiple perspectives through role taking (Eriksson, 2011), we describe three specific examples of improvisational theatrical frames designed around the Nolan novel. Our immediate intent is to provide teachers and students a starting point for critically inhabiting an array of perspectives in relation to the story—with the larger goal of counteracting pedagogical silence about mental illness in the English Language Arts classroom.

Mural, Jackson Pollock

As Prendergast and Saxton (2009) have explained, contemporary applied theatre is the legacy of an ancient proclivity for public performance to explore, express, and give meaning to individual and community experiences. Research examining the intersections of applied theatre and literacy learning have emphasized the potential of textual improvisation for generative, social meaning making and response to literature (Jasinski-Schneider, Crumpler, & Rodgers, 2006); for scaffolding talk (Dwyer, 2004); for driving collaborative inquiry and problem solving across subject areas (Bowell & Heap, 2001; Swartz & Nyman, 2010); and, for shaping and informing writing (Grainger, 2004). In our shared experiences, we have found that adolescent students, in particular, welcome the interplay of immediacy and distance in theatre as a way to negotiate complex identities between real and imagined worlds and the leveraging of emotion and mind-body connections for meaning making (cf., Gallagher, 2007).

Our intent here is to illustrate how applied theatre strategies might be leveraged to create spaces for young adult

Vocalizing *Crazy*

In the extended passage with which we opened, Jason remembers an initial group therapy session facilitated by Dr. Gomez. While other group members respond to Shelby's discussion of her mother's imminent death with empathic inquiries, Jason's thoughts turn inward and continue on his walk home: first in narrative, then in chorus. Note that Nolan's italics indicate voices in conversation in Jason's head, while un-italicized text indicates all other elements of storytelling, including Jason's internal, unvoiced first-person narrative.

A classroom teacher wanting to take advantage of the inherent theatricality of *Crazy* could simply cast roles for a read aloud readers' theatre style. However, rather than assigning students specific roles, we suggest challenging them in small groups to first analyze and interpret an assigned passage (four to six lines of text) chorally. Choral theatrical reading creates an opportunity for students to take on the voices

of the narrative without being “put on the spot”—and is a way of easing adolescents into the narrative and, more importantly, the themes of the novel. This might begin with students reading individually and then pairing or grouping to identify three important words or phrases in their passage that would constitute the script for their “performance.” For example, a passage for choral vocalization might include the excerpt, “Remember that Christmas when the chimney guys were fixing the flue in our chimney in the old house, and Dad got the idea on Christmas Eve to dress as Santa and climb into the chimney and have Mom call me outside to see him?”

Vocal tools that students might employ for reading the passage could include varying the number, tone, rate, volume, and pitch of voices as they articulate a word or the entire phrase. Additionally, the reading(s) might be voiced in unison or in round. Teachers might also encourage the exploration of repetition or the echoing of important words within the phrase such as, “Remember that Christmas,” or “Dad,” or “in the old house.” Working with small groups of students preparing their vocalization, teachers might engage readers in a discussion about how their own voices might capture the different realities in Jason’s head—perhaps allowing some to be exaggerated with others more subtle. We suggest allowing ample time for the groups to rehearse the vocalization and then to share them with the larger class—followed by performers/readers comparing and contrasting what each group achieved. For example, questions for a post-performance discussion might include individual and/or collaborative reflection about the auditory images created by choral voices, the patterns, and commonalities that recurred across performances, as well as the moments of contrast or difference.

The work of the teacher before, during, and after these sorts of vocalizations also includes quietly noting students’ levels of participation and engagement with the material as the small groups prepare and perform. Additionally, the teacher-facilitator will want to pay special attention to the student-performers’ curiosities, resistances, stated connections to their own lives or perceptions and outside information (and misinformation) in relation to the reading. Students cannot perform a choral reading without deeply reading and analyzing the text. It helps to have a paper copy of the passage for each person to note thoughts and cues. After the sequence, the paper copy that student participants have annotated provides a record of where the students have taken the reading—a meaningful formative assessment that teachers might then build on in a subsequent improvisation or discussion of the novel.

Again, collectively approaching a novel such as *Crazy* as a choral text allows participants a degree of distance from a single character over time. By short-circuiting over or under identification with a specific character, the choral exercises we describe here allow students safe entry into and exit from a character—while nevertheless engaging them, even if temporarily, in a specific perspective or even a range of perspectives.

Mapping Jason’s Thinking

As a second collaborative applied theatre strategy for transacting with *Crazy*, we recommend a collective drawing or map of Jason’s mind (Neelands & Goode, 2000). Teachers begin by placing students in groups of three or four. For this specific activity, we have found that groups larger than four do not allow for an equal distribution of engagement.

Each group takes an array of markers or other drawing instruments and a large sheet of craft paper big enough so that each can draw on it at once if they so choose. Again, they may also want to have a copy of *Crazy* on hand. Teachers ask each group to draw a “map” of Jason’s mind—what’s going on in his thinking at a specific point in the novel or across a chapter or the entire narrative. Each contributes to the collective drawing, wielding a marker in turns or simultaneously. A collective drawing requires that readers listen to each other’s ideas and make individual and collective decisions about the representation—and build from the various contributions their classmates make.

As such, the collective drawing strategy also promotes listening, compromise, and discussion. These are more important than speed or a pretty picture. Readers will want to use as much visual (rather than written) information as possible, with labels for clarity, as needed. The maps might answer questions such as: How does Jason’s mind work? What—and who—are inside it? Is there a relationship among the voices in his head, or among some more than others? If these voices were real people, what might they look like? If these voices were abstractions, what might they look like? What might constitute a metaphor for Jason’s mind and how its rhythms and triggers work? When completed, readers display, share, compare, and contrast each other’s maps looking for pattern and uniqueness. This is interesting to do as a gallery walk first, prior to a spoken presentation and/or Q & A style discussion with the whole group, to prompt individual meaning making and interaction with the visual representations as foundation.

Finally, throughout the strategy, teachers are equipped with options to monitor small conversations in the collective drawing exercise or to press on, prepare for, or redirect potentially damaging stereotypes or misinformation through a simple whispered comment to an individual reader or a more general challenge to the class's emerging representations of mental illness.

Improvisational Interviews

A third improvisational frame for *Crazy* might revolve around staging of an episode of "The Mind"—a fictional talk show whose guests are voices and figments of a person's imagination—in the case of *Crazy*, a teenager named Jason. Prior to stepping inside the theatre strategies, we encourage teachers to work with the class to establish the space as an interview show with a live studio audience and to determine which two or three mind characters will be interviewed. Student volunteers will perform the mind characters (Aunt Bee, Fat Bald Guy With a Moustache, Sexy Lady and/or Crazy Glue) and be interviewed or hot-seated. Teachers can challenge students to walk, talk, and answer in character. Some of the answers to the interview questions will be known; others will be improvised. It helps to have the entire class start writing potential questions for the studio audience to ask, then to stop and cast the mind characters after all have written a bit. Composing the questions helps both the studio audience to engage in questioning and the potential mind characters to begin rehearsing their answers prior to dramatization. For management, modeling, and tone-setting reasons, it is wise to begin with teacher-in-role as host of the show. We suggest scaffolding the initial interview questions on how the mind character and Jason met, how long they have been together—looking back. A fake microphone is a worthy prop here to prompt one speaker at a time.

A talk-show-interview format provides an opportunity for engaging the in-mind characters rather than Jason himself, at least at first, thereby lowering the risk level of the student performers playing a present-day teenager unintentionally self-disclosing or triggering sensitivities. The focus on backstory provides the distance buffer of time. The host interview followed by volunteer questions from the studio audience sequence also allows for modeling in-role parameters and tone, self-selected distance/immediacy for participants, as well as the opportunity to shift that distance/immediacy as the session unfolds and the emotional climate is safely assessed.

Concluding Thoughts: Controversy, Inquiry, and the Arts

In conclusion, thoughtfully designed improvisational theatre/literacy inquiry can foster a social, expressive space in which young people construct, question and reconstruct readings surrounding themes of mental illness and other critical issues that are too-often silenced in our curricula. The embodiment of reading invites students into the world of a text and challenges those same students as they negotiate complex narratives and unpack taboos. Just as the frame enclosing a photograph or portrait establishes a focus for viewers to consider the elements inside the frame structure, the improvisational "frames" we have described provide a focal point for readers' negotiation of textual moments. For applied theatre in an ELA curriculum to be generative rather than simply interpretative, the specific improvisational frame that teachers provide must include enough tension to place students in engaged rather than stagnant positions in relation to the emerging inquiry (Bowell and Heap, 2001). A novel such as *Crazy*—where Nolan plays with form and format to intentionally blur the lines between social and psychological spaces—ripples with possibilities and questions about *how*—not just *whether*—to facilitate collective explorations of the emotionally-charged, potentially controversial narrative.

The three strategies we have described revolve around a single novel. However, they have the potential for broader applications and adaptations to a range of texts. While every choice a teacher makes is significant, when deciding whether to delve into a topic or use a strategy that might stir administrative controversy, parent concern or student discomfort, a frequent choice is avoidance. Yet, when controversy, inquiry, and the arts supportively mingle in ELA classrooms, the question is no longer whether to approach a challenging topic or complex narrative, but bravely in the nuances of how.

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Beth Murray is Assistant Professor of Theatre Education in the Department of Theatre at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Spencer Salas is Associate Professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.