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"I think it fits in": Using Process Drama to Promote Agentic Writing with Primary School Children

Introduction

A recent survey of 565 children in South East England presents worrying findings about the state of writing in England's primary schools (Lambirth 2016). Lambirth demonstrates how children's perceptions of their writing are shaped through the practice of teachers who adopt a "skills discourse", valuing the technical aspects of writing over "creativity". Through an analysis of children's responses to the survey, Lambirth argues that children are "compliant" with the teachers' use of the "skills discourse" in the ways in which they value their own writing. This leads Lambirth to conclude that writing in primary schools "has been objectified and that children are alienated from writing" (Lambirth, 2016: 230).

It is not so difficult to see why this might be case. In England's primary schools, a selection of children's writing at age 7 and 11 is assessed against 'frameworks' which almost exclusively value technical skills relating to handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar over content, style and originality of ideas (DfE 2015). On a wider scale, Lambirth's survey indicates a need for a change in policy; at school level, however, we were interested in how a drama-based pedagogy could disrupt the hegemony of "skills discourse" in writing.

Sponsored by the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA), this two-term project involved training Key Stage 2 teachers from a primary school in the North of England to use process drama across the curriculum to create purpose for writing. In this paper, we specifically focus on how this pedagogy was received by the children and how this impacted upon their creative historical writing. We go onto suggest that process drama can help to appropriate a "compliance discourse" by reconnecting children with the act of writing whilst still meeting the demands of the "skills discourse" agenda. In thinking about the relationship between drama and writing, we also add to work undertaken on moments where drama and writing intersect (Crumpler 2005; Cremin et al. 2006) to put forward a new theoretical model which can capture the complexity of the processes involved – a model which sees writing as

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problem-solving (Bereiter and Scardamalia's 1986) whereby children gain agency through consciously drawing upon a range of genres to translate their embodied drama experiences.

Theoretical Frame and Relevant Literature

Translating the embodied experiences of process drama into writing

By process drama we refer to a pedagogical approach which utilises drama conventions to facilitate children actively co-constructing meaning as they fluidly move between the roles of authors, actors, directors and audience (Edmiston 2003). When acting within the drama, Duffy (2014) focuses upon how group improvisation allows children to move from a distanced, third person understanding of events to an "embodied" first person experience of "emotion in action" which generates new meaning and understanding. Given that this embodiment is part of a group improvisation where the children bring their own cultural experiences to their roles of authors, actors and directors, the drama which emerges is highly complex and fluid, "embodied, negotiated moment to moment, refined, deepened and problematised" (Duffy 2014: 93). Depending upon how tightly "framed" the lesson is by the teacher (Bernstein 2000), this group improvisation can be more or less open to the generation of new meanings in the way in which problems are set up to be solved. For Edmiston (2014), the drama set up for children needs to have both "presentness", in being open to a range of possible outcomes, and "eventness", in offering multiple perspectives from which to evaluate an event.

The impact of process drama upon writing is summarised in a literature review (Dunn, Harden and Marion 2013: 253) in terms of: increased motivation to write; greater quality and quantity of writing; more complex registers used; and greater empathy with characters. In relation to our project, we were particularly interested in research which focuses on moments of interaction between process drama and writing. Within the context of early years' education in America, Crumpler (2005: 359) argues against common practice which sees writing proceeding drama to provide evidence that writing is more "dynamic" when it takes place within the process drama. Crumpler goes on to conceptualise this kind of

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writing as a "dramatic textual event" which is "embedded in building a drama world" and which draws upon "shared spaces of meaning" (2005: 362).

Using a different framework, Cremin et al. (2006) build upon Crumpler's call to bring writing and drama together by focusing on what happens when children are permitted to write spontaneously within the drama, particularly at moments of tension. "Genre" approaches to writing ("skills discourse") are compared to "seize the moment" approaches, with the latter being shown to result in writing where less attention is paid to "form and feature" and more to "content and purpose" (Cremin et al. 2006: 277).

What is missing from both Crumpler (2005) and Cremin et al. (2006), however, is a way of theorizing the relationship between drama and writing. Indeed, whilst Crumpler refers to the writing as a "dramatic textual event", he conceptualises writing as a neutral process which captures the residue of the drama. For us, what happens within the dramatic textual event is more complex. Drawing upon Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1986) work on the psychological processes underpinning writing, we see writing either within or after the process drama as a further problem-solving activity where the author makes discoursal choices which help translate their "embodied" experience into a textual form.

Towards agentic writing

Seen within the context of process drama and writing as problem-solving, dramatic textual events are complex and involve the author entering into dialogic interaction with peers, the teacher and the ways in which the lesson is framed. The author, therefore, has a number of intrapersonal, interpersonal, intertextual and curriculum based discourses upon which to draw.

Whilst research into writing and drama has looked at motivation, purpose and engagement (Dunn, Harden and Marino 2013), there has been less focus upon looking at children's writing in terms of identity. In line with Holland et al. (1998), we view the discourses which the child author draws upon as the very building blocks of their identities. As Holland et al. (1998) outline, these identities are "positional" and, seen in this light,

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Lambirth's (2016) survey illuminates just how low-status children's positional identities are in the context of primary school writing where children comply with the "skills discourse".

Upon starting this project, we wondered whether the children's translation of their embodied experiences afforded by process drama into writing could alter their positional identities through increased agency. We looked at definitions of learner agency where learners: "exercise control to… change and influence contexts" (Mercer 2012: 43); adapt the tasks they are given to make them more meaningful to themselves (Fletcher 2016); and begin to develop their own perspectives, speaking " as I as well as we" (Lantolf and Poehner 2008: 1). As outlined below, we then used discourse analysis to think about the children's writing in these terms.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper is drawn from a UKLA sponsored project which took place in a one-form entry suburban school in the North of England throughout spring and summer terms of 2017. The catalyst for the project was the school's improvement plan and the deputy head teacher who wanted to explore drama's pedagogic potential to make writing across the curriculum more meaningful. As higher education researchers in drama and writing, we worked with the school's deputy head teacher and a local theatre in education company to deliver two professional development sessions on process drama and writing at the beginning of the spring and summer terms. The focus here was on the use of a range of drama conventions and how those drama conventions could lead to writing.

Following the sessions, the drama company liaised with the class teachers to develop and deliver a cross-curricular topic-based session to four classes of 7 to 11 year olds (years 3, 4, 5 and 6) with the teachers, the deputy head teacher and ourselves observing. Directly after these morning-long sessions, we all reflected upon the use of drama and writing within the session and the class teacher and the deputy head teacher then planned and delivered a follow-up lesson with ourselves observing. In line with the "action-reflection cycle" of action

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research (McNiff and Whitehead 2006), a reflective conversation followed the taught session, prior to the class teacher planning and delivering a session without support. This process was repeated over the two terms across the four classes, with all class teachers also using process drama for writing outside of these observed lessons.

Data collection

In relation to this research paper, a key aim was to explore the potential for process drama to promote what we were loosely terming 'agentic writing'. Our main source of data, therefore, was the children's writing and we asked them to work in journals particular to the project. The children used the journals in a variety of ways: sometimes they would write notes or plans during the drama sessions; at other times they would draft or redraft their texts. Following each piece of writing, the children also wrote a short reflection upon the impact the drama had on their writing.

In order to understand the relationship between process drama and the children's writing, we undertook lesson observations of the three lessons outlined above for the four classes. These observations were structured in such a way as to enable us to describe the use of drama by the teacher(s), the roles the children were given and how the drama generated writing. As we were interested in learner agency, we thought about each lesson in terms of how much choice and control the children were given within the process drama and we adapted Bernstein's (2000) concept of teaching "framing" to help with this. Accordingly, both drama and writing lessons were broadly categorized as "weakly framed" (children given choice), "strongly framed" (children given limited choice) or "moderately framed" (somewhere between the two).

Towards the end of the project, we undertook focus group discussions with six children (three boys and three girls of mixed abilities) from each of the four classes in order to discuss how they felt about the use of drama and its impact upon writing. We felt focus groups were appropriate to capture the social dynamic which had been the hallmark of the children's drama experience. Prior to the focus group, each teacher provided us with a

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vignette about each child in terms of confidence and ability in drama and writing. Within the focus group discussions, our starting point was to ask each group about their favourite piece of writing. Whilst there was not always overall consensus, we used the group's responses to determine which piece of writing we would analyse based on the logic that their preferred piece of writing would be the one with which they most identified.

Tracing these four pieces of writing back to four lesson observations, Table 1 uses the language of "framing" (Bernstein 2000) to present key information about the ways in which process drama and writing was experienced by the teacher and the children. As is evident within the table, these process drama and writing lessons were varied in their degrees of framing, but they all involved children writing about an historical event.

(INSERT TABLE 1)

From an ethical perspective, we gained institutional ethical clearance by following the guidelines of the British Education Research Association. This saw us gaining informed consent from all teaching and leadership staff in the school as well as providing parents and carers with information about the project and the opportunity to withdraw their child from the data collection process. At the start of the project and before the focus group interviews, we verbally briefed the children about the project and asked for their assent to participate. Pseudonyms are used for all children in this paper.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse the children's creative historical writing in terms of agency, we used Gee's (2010) version of discourse analysis where identity is seen as discoursal and where Gee provides "tools of enquiry" to deconstruct how identity is "enacted" (2010: 17). Accordingly, we analysed the discourses, or "social languages" (Gee 2010: 60), used by the children in both their writing and their reflections on their writing and we considered how this was shaped by a "social language" of "compliance" (Lambirth 2016). In relation to our observational data, we thought about the relationship between the children's use of "social language" and teacher "framing". We also considered how the child authors translated their

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embodied experience of process drama by using another building block of identity - intertextuality (Gee 2010: 60) - in order to solve the problem of representing their embodied experience in a different medium. We used our observational data to think about the relationship between the children's use of intertextuality and teacher framing.

Findings and Discussion

Writing as intertextual problem-solving

The piece of writing favoured by the majority of the year 3 group was a result of the most weakly framed process drama and writing lesson. The class teacher began the lesson narrating the history of "the wall" and making a link to prior learning about the Romans before asking the children to improvise their own stories of the wall. The children acted out stories using freeze-frames before sharing them with the class. As a result of weak framing, a variety of stories emerged with the Romans almost completely forgotten and all stories being set either in the present day or during a non-specific time period. Following the sharing of freeze frames, the teacher "invited" the children to write in their journals. The children were "excited to write – they literally run to get their journals and writing pens, talking to each other about what they are going to write". As with the drama, the writing was weakly framed in that the teacher left the form and the content to the children. Some children wrote individually, others for a while in groups, and they all wrote "purposefully" for about 30 minutes.

When analsying the writing of the children in the focus group, the dynamic of their writing as "dramatic textual events" (Crumpler 2005) which plunge straight into the action is evident. James, a writer whose "outputs could be improved by his engagement with drama", demonstrates such an opening in his poem:

> "The fox runs and runs
>
> the rabbit runs and runs
>
> the fox crosses the wall
>
> the rabbit doesn't fall"

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The immediacy of James's poem is perhaps a result of the proximity of his embodied experience and James's reflection upon choosing the poetic form to capture this "embodied" experience (Duffy 2014) demonstrates how writing became an act of problem-solving (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1986): "I think it fits in and how the story works is just the right thing and length. It's got the right words to describe it to make a good poem and not make up silly things to go in." Indeed, what is noticeable about James's poem is how he is able to use repetition and rhyme to capture the motion of his embodied experience of the chase and how finding this representation gives him agency over the writing process and leads him to feel that "it fits in".

As well as drawing upon his knowledge of the poetic discourse, James's text is "intertextual" (Gee 2010) in its use of narrative conventions. Not only is James's text structured as a narrative, the way which he constructs a reader's expectations that the rabbit will fall with his early line "the rabbit doesn't fall" serves to build tension and re-enforce that ultimate expectation with the reader. This is a sophisticated dimension absent from the earlier process drama and one which ultimately thwarts the created expectation when the fox and not the rabbit is crushed by a boulder ("that's the end of the fox"). Here, the embodied experience of the process drama is altered and, we would argue, deepened, through its translation into the conscious writing of a multi-genred text.

"I can speak as I as well as we" (Lantolf and Poehner 2008:1)
The year 4 story 'The Boast' was based on a moderately framed drama session where two members of the drama company took on the historical characters of the Seafarer and the Wanderer. In role, they boasted about their adventures and in doing so used stronger framing than that employed with the year 3 class by drawing upon "a rich literary vein of historical oral language and detailed descriptions of sea setting and encounters." The children were then asked to form their own crews and improvise their own boasts which were acted out at the end of the lesson. The writing took place in a weakly framed lesson the next day - the children were given the title "The Boast" and then wrote "eagerly" for a full hour.

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When analysing the writing of the focus group, the common features include the antiquated language as modeled by the teachers in role as well as sense of visceral energy in the descriptions of the sea and the battles, which again may be a result of an "embodied" experience (Duffy 2014).   Another common feature was the way in which the children's stories tended to switch between first person plural (we) and first person singular (I). This was perhaps a result of translating the co-constructed embodied experience of the process drama where the crew ("we") were the authors of the boast into the individually written creative writing text. Chloe, a girl who before engaging in drama would "write just what is needed rather than stretch herself", starts her story in the first person plural:

> "We are the lioness warriors and this is our tale about how
>
> we became warriors.
>
> We sailed through the fierce storms and mountainous waves
>
> in the bay of Biscay and through all the rocks that surround
>
> the tip of Cornwall to find the legendary island of Lyonesse
>
> where they say the three mysterious Queens took King
>
> Arthur after his last battle. Here, they say, his knights are
>
> still sleeping in a cave and are waiting to challenge anyone
>
> who bangs on the shield that hangs at its entrance."

Indeed, the use of first person plural seems to help Chloe convincingly make intertextual borrowings from the epic genre. This is aided by the historical and geographical details imparted by the framing of the teachers in role as well as Chloe's own use of dramatic adjectives ("fierce" and "mountainous") and Chloe's subsequent easy adoption of third person plural ("they say"). As her story progresses, the epic voice gives way to more a more immediate narrative text as "we" becomes "I" and a specific adventure on the boat is retold using first person. This shift in social language in terms of the way Chloe uses intertextuality is a direct translation of her embodied experience where the story was improvised both at an interpersonal (we) and intrapersonal (I) level. The ease and stylistic control with which she is

able to shift points of view in the text suggests the agency she is given in the act of writing following her embodied process drama experience.

Diary Entries and first person narration

Children from year 5 and 6 both chose diary entries as their favourite writing piece. The drama lessons leading to the diaries were both moderately framed involving the teacher in role with year 5 children improvising their own roles in a Victorian village and year 6 children having roles assigned to them on Darwin's ship. In terms of writing, the key difference between the lessons was that whilst the year 5 diary entry was written directly after the lesson, the year 6 diary was written a week later. With regards to Crumpler (2005), it would seem logical that the year 6 diary entries would be less "dynamic" as "dramatic textual events". That this was not the case was down to the way in which the subsequent writing lessons were respectively framed.

In line with a government monitoring of children's attainment in writing at year 6, it is unsurprising that the year 5 and 6 writing lessons were more strongly framed than those observed with years 3 and 4. Indeed, both lessons involved learning objectives (for year 6 this was the title: "Can I write a diary entry?") and success criteria, which were largely taken from a "skills discourse" (Lambirth 2016), valuing spelling, punctuation and grammar. Within these strongly framed writing lessons, however, year 6 were able to write from the point of view of the character they had embodied during the process drama, whereas year 5 were all given the same title ("My Life is Hard") and asked to write from the point of view of Pip, whom only one child had embodied during the process drama.

In the year 6 diary entries, therefore, a key characteristic of the writing is the way in which the children are able to translate their embodied experiences into writing convincingly from their character's point of view. Julia, a strong writer from year 6, has her protagonist describing how:

> "peeling gone-off potatoes is boring. Very, very, mind-
>
> numbingly dull. In fact, when I heard the first drops of rain,

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I couldn't care less and pushed myself to continue; a big

mistake."

Here, the previous embodiment of peeling potatoes in the process drama becomes a

sophisticated means of showing the reader the character in action (Aristotle 1996) and

allowing the reader to deduce from this that the character is a cook. In conveying the

emotions of the character, Julia makes intertextual borrowings from the genres of a stream of

consciousness ("Very, very, mind-numbingly dumb") in what is a convincing demonstration

of how such a weary character might misinterpret the first signs of danger. As well as being a

stream of consciousness, Julia also draws upon her knowledge of narrative texts in order to

use a retrospective point of view to foreshadow danger and build suspense ("a big mistake").

Alongside this, Julia's use of a variety of sentence lengths and punctuation (note the semi

colon) shows that in these three short sentences Julia is also "complying" with her teacher's

skills discourse as enforced by the learning objective and success criteria and, more broadly,

the wider educational context.

With year 4, even though the act of writing was much closer to the process drama in

terms of time, the teacher's decision to ask the class to write from the point of view of a

character they had not embodied does lessen the children's ability to connect emotionally

with the character. In Ethan's diary entry, as with the other entries, Pip's encounter with the

convict involves a separation between a description of the encounter and a belated expression

of anxiety: "When I lie in my bed, I start to think and worry about today." Whilst this might

suggest that, contrary to Crumpler (2005), the framing of the writing lesson has more impact

upon the emotion of the writing than the writing occurring as close as possible to the process

drama, it is interesting that a lack of embodied experience did not impact on the focus group

favouring this piece of writing over others. Indeed, the embodied experience of the process

drama where the children had the freedom to improvise their own roles seems to have created

"eventness" (Edmiston 2014) with the children actively enjoying the ability to see events

from their own and other characters' perspectives. This sense of enjoying the eventness is

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epitomised by Ethan who, two days after writing the first diary entry, uses some "free time" to write another diary entry, this time from the convict's perspective:

> "So with one last glance at me, the foolish child ran back to
>
> his house. He would be in bed by now. I am thinking of
>
> sending my friend."

Here Ethan begins to find the social language of the convict to describe Pip from the outside ("foolish") and in doing so gains control over the "eventness" (Edmiston 2014) of the process drama by beginning to explore in a sophisticated way the relative nature of perception and reality. Even though the convict is a role Ethan did not personally embody, because it was a role existing and developed with the presentness of the group's improvisation, Ethan was both able and, perhaps more crucially, motivated to explore independently this perspective in writing.

Conclusion

The analysis of the four pieces of writing undertaken by a representative sample of children from years 3 to 6 suggests that when children's writing is based upon an embodied experience within process drama, the children are able to capture that experience through an emotionally convincing point of view. Equally, as shown by the year 5 class, even when the writing is based on the embodiment of a role experienced by another member of the group, if the process drama is not too tightly framed and allows for "presentness" (Edmiston 2014), children can be both able and willing to explore other perspectives made available within the process drama.

More significantly, however, there is evidence to suggest that in translating this experience, directly embodied or otherwise, from process drama to writing, children are engaging in writing as an act of problem-solving (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1986) whereby deliberation is given as to the appropriateness of potential intertextual borrowings. That this agentic approach to writing can be seen with children in year 3 (James's consideration of his use of the poetic form) indicates how writing as problem-solving should not be seen as the

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providence of the mature writer. Rather, younger primary children can write in this way if given the experience, directly embodied or otherwise, from which to draw as well as the opportunity to choose their own way of writing about that experience.

What is also clear is that this act of problem-solving goes beyond the child writer passively selecting the social language of one text type as predicated by a "skills discourse" where genre determines language features at word, sentence and text level. Instead, the child writer, infused with the "eventness" (Edmiston 2014) of an (in)directly embodied experience of the process drama,, agentically makes a range of intertextual borrowings, drawing upon and thinking about social languages which mean that their texts are almost always multi-genred. In doing so, the writers in this project are similar to Bakhtin's (1986: 110) "writer", who achieves "double-voicedness" by working "in a language whilst standing outside of language" - in translating their (in)directly embodied experiences of process drama into a textual form, the child writer is agentic and stands outside of language to think about which intertextual borrowings "fit in" with their experiences.

In terms of what this means for the quality of the writing produced, by making intertextual borrowings which translate their experiences, a "first voice" (Bakhtin 1986: 110) is heard: the motion of the chase becomes a rhythmic poem; the "crew's" boast becomes a first person plural epic tale; the monotonous experience of a cook on a ship becomes a stream of consciousness; Pip tells of his worries in diary form. But at the same time these intertextual borrowings change the very nature of the original (in)directly embodied experience of the process drama and a "second voice" (Bakhtin 1986: 110) comes through: the rhythmic poem also creates expectations for the reader; the epic tale is heightened by the use of the third person plural; the stream of consciousness also utilises Aristotle's characterisation technique; Pip is both "foolish" and not at the same time. And it is this "second voice" which, we argue, is a necessary symptom of translating the (in)directly embodied experiences of process drama into the different medium of writing; a symptom which necessarily alters the original (in)directly embodied experiences and which brings real depth and sophistication to the written text.

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Finally to return to the introduction, the writing pieces in years 5 and 6 which were more strongly framed due to the prevalence of compliance to a "skills discourse" (Lambirth 2016) were of course "double voiced" in a different sense. As Julia in year 6 said, she liked her diary entry the best because not only was her teacher pleased ("compliance discourse") with "varied punctuation" ("technical skills") but she was pleased because her "story has meaning". This kind of double-voicedness clearly shows that from a teacher's perspective, ensuring children meet the demands of a "skills discourse" need not necessarily involve objectifying writing so that "children are alienated from writing" (Lambirth, 2016: 230). Rather teachers should take the risk of weakening their own framing of teaching writing through the use of process drama to provide embodied experiences for the children in their classes in order to allow the act of writing to become agentic and the written text more sophisticated.

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