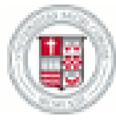

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Philosophical Perspectives on Dramatic Art

Jane M. Gangi
Sacred Heart University

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our own weight in a scene. When participants really do this and keep focused on solving the problem at hand, their natural differences and strengths arise. If any one person tries to dominate, equal sharing is hampered or destroyed. And conversely, when all participants work cooperatively, everyone has the opportunity to be heard and to try a range of responses.

What about our own awareness? The class I described occurred over twenty years ago. I say that gender was not an issue. But perhaps it was. I know my awareness of gender issues has increased since the mid-seventies. Our self-images often catch us up short. Naturally I think of myself as an open, sensitive person without strong biases—until I remember something I said, wrote, or did ten years ago that now makes me feel ashamed. So surely I am making mistakes today that will make me cringe ten or twenty years from now. But we can't give up or stop trying. And that's not just pep talk. If solving the problem of gender bias were not a process as dynamic as drama itself, it would be too boring to stimulate or to hold our interest.

Philosophical Perspectives on Dramatic Art

Jane M. Gangi

As a teacher educator I have the dual goals of helping pre-service teachers in foundations courses understand philosophical approaches to education, as well as helping them gain an awareness of the purpose and rationale for arts in the curriculum. I achieve these goals by approaching them simultaneously. While discussing all the fine arts, I focus on exploring philosophy through dramatic art because my background and interests lie in theatre, and because I believe that drama is the most accessible of the fine arts. By facilitating drama experiences in foundations of education courses, students gain an understanding of the philosophies of education as well as multiple perspectives of dramatic art by learning through experience.

What has been surprisingly easy and tremendously affirming has been the discovery that most major philosophers of education consider the arts in general—and, dramatic art in particular—essential to the curriculum. References to drama can be found in the writings of rational humanists, essentialists, progressivists, critical theorists, and economic reconstructionists, to name a few. What these writers *mean* by dramatic art differs, of course, and by experiencing these differences, future teachers can begin to articulate competing visions of how best to educate young people and to expand their repertoire of drama strategies. Hopefully, many set off on the life-long journey of developing their own philosophies of education as well.

To understand progressivism, students read John Dewey's most succinct (yet densely written) treatise, *Experience and Education*, not easy reading for undergraduates especially. This work contributes to the theoretical grounding of "learning through experience" (19), acknowledged by drama educators since the early part of this century. Through good old-fashioned lecture, I draw out for students how radically different Dewey's approach to education was in the early twentieth century compared with those who preceded him. I share Dewey's earlier writings, specifically passages from *Democracy and Education*, in which he calls for schools that employ "a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences" (84). Further, he writes, "Literature and the fine arts are of peculiar value because they represent appreciation at its best—a heightened realization of meaning through selection and concentration" (249). Contrary to popular opinion, Dewey did not strictly favor improvisational approaches to drama; he also recommended freely using "dramatizations, plays, and games" (161–162). Then, in my education foundations class, we do exactly that.

After leading students through warm-up exercises, I ask them to create improvisations in small groups, in which they solve any number of dramatic prob-

Jane M. Gangi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT. Her recent publications include a chapter on responses to drama in David Hornbrook's forthcoming book *The Subject of Drama*.

lems with minimum guidance from me. In the past, I have asked them to create who and where they are, what happens before a given "last line;" or, to create an improvisation suggested by an object (e.g., wooden spoon, needle and thread). Students explore solutions while I provide suggestions and aid them in discovery learning as a Deweyan facilitator. After sharing their improvisations with each other, students reflect on the process of "learning through experience." Some students are tremendously excited by this dramatic process while others seem to wait for me to transmit material—an approach to which they are accustomed from their long years in schools.

To introduce rational humanism, students read Mortimer Adler's *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (a much easier read than Dewey). His notion of educating the next generation by immersing students in the best of their cultures has been around since Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato. In his book, modern day *paideians* argue for an undifferentiated, challenging, high-quality educational program for everyone. Adler cites his fellow rational humanist, Robert Maynard Hutchins: "The best education for the best is the best education for all" (6). To the *paideians*, the best education is both liberal and general, not vocational; and it involves three, equally important modes of learning: knowledge in the humanities, math, and science; the development of skills; and, a continual enlargement of understanding (21–32).

To acquire knowledge of the humanities, students can study drama and storytelling, particularly to assist in the teaching of history. Adler writes:

> Preparation for the formal study of history should begin in the early grades by storytelling and biographical narratives but, when formal study begins, it should be sequential and systematic, combining a narration of events with knowledge of social, political, and economic institutions and diverse phases of cultural development. (25)

Acquiring knowledge and skills through drama—indeed, all the fine arts—also figures into the third mode of learning, enlargement of understanding. In Socratic seminars, what *paideians* are best known for, students discuss the multiple meanings of great works of literature. Adler also sees a need for an experiential approach to this mode, for omitting active and participatory experiences in drama deprives children of enriching aesthetic encounters: "The best way to understand a play is to act in it, or at least to read it out loud. . . . Participation in the creation of works of art is as important as viewing, listening to, and discussing them. All children should have such pleasurable experiences" (31).

To understand this kind of dramatic experience, I ask my students to read the old Yiddish folk tale, *It Could Always Be Worse*. A former student, Karen Cohen, now a third grade teacher, prepared this story as a readers theatre piece for another course, and she has given me permission to duplicate it for my classes. So, as Adler suggests, we read the play. Students then reflect on the differences between improvisation and play-reading, the progressivist and rational humanist approaches to dramatic art. Some students prefer improvisation to readers theatre because it grants them more freedom and autonomy. Others, as Adler predicts, have a very "pleasurable experience" reading the play. Still others (like me) see a place in the classroom for both kinds of experiences. Adler also appears open to at least some progressivist approaches in the classroom when he writes, "the more active the learner the better" (55). He complains how boring schools often are and how "little joy" exists "in most of the learning [students] are now compelled to do" (32). In fact, he even dedicates his book to Dewey, along with Hutchins and Horace Mann.

Critics of *The Paideia Proposal* argue that studying the best that has been thought or written all too often means focusing only on Western culture and excluding everybody else. In Adler's defense, he offers a "model" and not a "program" (34). Programs should be determined by regional boards and administrators who take the local citizenry into account. He denies any intention of uniformity in content and explains that *paideians* insist only that the three *modes* of teaching and learning be in place. This way, the pluralism that characterizes American culture can manifest itself.

One of Adler's fiercest critics is Ira Shor, a Marxist educator whose book, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969–1984*, serves to introduce students to yet another philosophical approach to education, that of critical theory. In contrast to rational humanism, critical theorists argue that the role of the teacher is not to initiate the young into the existing culture, as argued by the *paideians*, but, instead, to liberate the oppressed. Teachers should make students aware of existing power structures and enable them to develop the critical faculties needed to address and overcome these structures. Part of this process includes understanding cultural hegemony, whereby teachers help students see the way they participate in their own oppression. Shor sees education as a deadly political battle, and he infuses military metaphors on every page, such as "offensives," "strategies," "surveillance," and "sabotage," to name a few.

Shor cites none other than Mortimer Adler as one of the saboteurs in the early 1980s. He accuses Adler of being a traditionalist whose belief in a common core of fixed values served only to strengthen the conservative revolution. According to Shor, this revolution was staged by political conservatives to subjugate the freedom of thought that had emerged among youth during the restless sixties. Young people who criticized the Vietnam War, staged sit-ins, conducted moratoriums, and the like were simply becoming *too* educated. The best way to rectify "too much" critical thinking was, obviously, to scale back on the availability of the liberal arts, which, after all, foster independent thinking and raise the possibility of multiple perspectives.

Shor argues that three conspiratorial hoaxes cloaked politically conservative designs and fraudulently assaulted arts education. First, the emphasis on careerism and vocational education in the early seventies took away valuable time from arts education and made the liberal arts less accessible (57). Second, the Literary Crisis and the back-to-basics movement, staged at the very moment when test scores were going up (64, 74), resulted in the "barbaric cutting" of the arts (27). Third, the striving for so-called "excellence" in response to so-called "mediocrity" in the early eighties meant that students could not select their own courses of study, but instead were expected to cooperate with authority by learning prescribed knowledge and submitting to their own socialization within the status quo (119–122). This last point is where, in Shor's view, Adler and the *paideians* make their entry.

My students and I apply critical thinking skills by comparing Shor's arguments in relation to Adler and Dewey. We find that progressivists, rational humanists, and critical theorists all oppose vocationalism (Adler 7) and the elimination of the arts. In regard to vocational education, some of my students argue

that to deny secondary students access to the trades is economically unconscionable in the 1990s, given the widening gap between rich and poor classes of society. Some high school students *must* learn a trade to earn money for their college educations at a later time. Other students who cannot afford the costs of post-secondary vocational schools need these opportunities in public schools.

Shor reminds us that Dewey was patently opposed to the *paideian* idea that children should receive the same curriculum (Dewey, *Experience* 78). However, the detracking movement has embraced the *paideian* movement because *paideian* schools, such as those in Charlotte and Chattanooga, offer, in theory, the same high quality curriculum to *all* students. Detrackers see *paideian* schools as a way to address the chronic problems of low expectations and watered-down curriculum experienced all too often by economically and racially marginalized children (*Harvard Education Letter*). Ironically, what Shor labels as a politically conservative approach is the very approach touted by detracking reformers as promoting social justice and equity.

The curriculum that Shor sees as promoting equity and empowerment is one that provides ample time for "intuition, imagination and art-making" (179). To truly disengage the oppressed from taking part in their own oppression, Shor outlines an agenda based on Paolo Freire's philosophy of education (189). Augusto Boal's theatre exercises, developed from Freire's philosophy, provide concrete experiences in critical theory for both graduate and undergraduate students. To this end, I utilize Boal's "great game of power" (150). Students make explicit their tacit knowledge about the structures of power by creating visually an arrangement in which one of six chairs assumes more power than the other chairs, a table, and a bottle. Next, having explored various arrangements and coming to consensus about how this arrangement should be interpreted, one person in the group is then asked to sit in the chair that has the most power. I generally ask the lightest person in the group to take this role for safety reasons (although I have been jokingly accused of discriminating against heavier folks!). I also sometimes must ask the group to rearrange their chairs slightly so that the "one chair" is secure. The remaining persons are then asked to arrange themselves in such a way so as to take away the power of the most powerful. I have witnessed some lovely collaborations filled with cooperation and warmth. This exercise, in particular, has been more engaging to students than any other drama approach. Teachers of history and social studies find this exercise a very useful avenue for exploring power relations—the content of much of what they teach. Other students tell me this exercise causes them to think more critically and deeply than other exercises.

While I have conducted this workshop a number of times, one occasion proved potentially dangerous to participants. When my back was turned, a student—apparently intensely involved in the exercise—hurled a chair across the room at the "powerful" chair on top of the table. The chair crashed into a screen behind it and onto the floor. Disturbed by this response, an uncomfortable silence ensued. I explained to the student the inappropriateness of damaging university property, never mind the risk he had run threatening the safety of those present, including a pregnant woman seated very close to the targeted chair. Obviously, this exploration of power touched a vulnerable nerve in this student. We met privately a few days later to discuss the incident. Hopefully, he learned something from it, and so did I. While this event taught me never to turn my back, I have not stopped using this exercise.

Having spent the better part of the semester reading about and experiencing the pedagogical implications of major philosophies of education through drama, we turn our attention to issues and ideologies of the 1990s. Jonathan Kozol, an educational activist and reformer, exemplifies the view that school reform is not possible until the economic reconstruction of schools takes place. In *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, he protests the colossal injustice of economic inequities by describing underfunded and neglected schools in selected cities across the United States. Although he does not provide a theory for drama in the schools, one poignant interview in his book offers a glimpse into the role theatre can play in the most destitute of circumstances.

While investigating a "landscape of hopelessness" in the South Bronx, Kozol interviewed Jack Forman, head of the English department at Morris High, who explained why theatre was in his school's curriculum:

> I have strong feelings about getting past the basics. Too many schools are stripping down the curriculum to meet the pressure for success on tests that measure only minimal skills. That's why I teach a theatre course. Students who don't respond to ordinary classes may surprise us, and surprise themselves, when they are asked to step out on stage. I have a student, Carlos, who had dropped out once and then returned. He had no confidence in his ability. Then he began to act. He memorized the part of Pyramus. Then he played Sebastian in *The Tempest*. He had a photographic memory. Amazing! He will graduate, I hope, this June. . . . Now, if we didn't have that theatre program, you have got to ask if Carlos would have stayed in school. (101–102)

Clearly, an encounter with a theatre production has the potential to emancipate students who may not participate in their own educations in any other areas. Forman's formal approach to and systematic study of theatre as an art form and academic discipline (e.g., memorizing Shakespeare) finds commonality with the views of Adler more than Shor.

Support for a formal approach to theatre also comes from Lisa Delpit, an African-American professor and former teacher, who discusses the role of theatre in her book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. Delpit deals with controversies surrounding language diversity. She believes that teachers should honor the "nonstandard" English economically disadvantaged students bring into the classroom, but to deny them access to Standard English is unconscionable: "The language associated with the power structure—'Standard English'—is the language of economic success, and all students have the right to schooling that gives them access to that language" (68). She explains how teachers can help students acquire more than one oral form:

> Some [teachers] have had students become involved with standard forms through various kinds of role-play. For example, memorizing parts for drama productions will allow students to 'get the feel' of speaking Standard English while not under the threat of correction. . . . Playing a role eliminates the possibility of implying that the *child's* language is inadequate, and suggests, instead that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts. (53)

Requiring students to memorize anything has been a questionable practice in the

eyes of drama educators for decades, but here we have a concerned African-American academic who calls for memorization by citing its potential benefits to children, especially children of color. Likewise, Shelby Wolf demonstrates the benefits of teaching children of color to read through readers theatre. Delpit's approach to working with the neglected poor, along with Forman's and Wolf's, is a far cry from the improvisations championed by Shor. Mostly white, middle- to upper-class academics who write about what should be taught in schools and how it should be taught are remiss if they do not pay heed to educators like Delpit and Forman. If memorization of Standard English texts can assist in these most worthy causes, let us make haste!

Brain-based researchers, Renate and Goeffrey Caine, describe a second grade teacher's use of dramatic movement to help her students gain access to "codes" in Standard English. After trying unsuccessfully to teach the meanings of punctuation marks by reading aloud, she asked her students to follow her outdoors:

> She told them, 'I am going to read to you and I want you to walk around in a circle. When I say "comma" I want you to sloooow down, whenever I say "period" I want you to stop dead in your tracks, and when I say "exclamation mark" I want you to jump up and down. Do you understand?' She tried this for five minutes with perfect success. When they went back inside and read, all of them slowed down at the commas, paused at the periods, and used emphasis at exclamation marks. (109–110)

While this method may dismay some contemporary drama in education theorists and practitioners, those of us who train future classroom teachers should not overlook this kind of practical help.

Other approaches to the education of marginalized children include the "creative positives" of psychologist E. Paul Torrance. African American academics advocate his ideas as a way to enable teachers to build upon the strengths of bright students growing up in impoverished circumstances (Patton and Baytops 34). As Laurel Henegar explains, these approaches emphasize "responsiveness to the kinesthetic; ability to improvise with commonplace materials and objects; articulateness in role playing, sociodrama and storytelling; and enjoyment of and ability in creative movement, dance, dramatics and related fields" (111).

Caine and Caine emphasize children's need for interconnectedness which will prevail, one way or another. Like Charlotte Acer who underscores how integrated arts projects address juvenile delinquency with at-risk minority students, the Caines argue that whatever causes children to join gangs can be far better channeled through the arts and the emotional experiences of drama: "Participating in debates, telling stories, role-playing historical figures, reenacting historical events, and generating 'expert panel' solutions to social and medical or other scientific problems are only a few of the intellectually challenging behaviors that involve our need for social belonging and interaction" (59). They further recommend integrated thematic teaching, which drama teachers already employ, and "a great deal of real-life activity, including . . . stories, metaphor, [and] drama" (86). Renate Caine describes how she integrated drama to immerse students in a second language:

> The physical environment included all types of German artifacts and posters of places in Germany. Students rewrote their dialogues for presentation in front of class. They translated fairy tales and acted them out, and they sang German songs. The result was that in one year, students from these classes won 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 6th places in the state language contest. (108)

Caine and Caine conclude, "Our natural mental maps, therefore, seem to be at the heart of thematic teaching. That same memory system is engaged when we use stories, metaphors, celebrations, imagery, and music, all of which are powerful tools for brain-based learning" (42). Furthermore, "We understand and remember best when facts and skills are embedded in natural, spatial memory" (86).

Due to time constraints, we do not test out these theories through drama. Instead I tell students stories of ways I have successfully used these kinds of approaches in schools. I also remind them of our earlier warm-up exercises, when I used nonverbal exercises from both Nancy King and Kristin Linklater to get them in touch with moving their bodies and using their voices in a freer manner. Some students are uncomfortable with these exercises; others say they remind them of sports' warm-ups; and, still others use them as stress relievers. Linklater's goals are compatible with Caine's belief that students learn best in a state of relaxed alertness.

While reading other sources in education, I also point out to students how educators from varying backgrounds use theatre as a metaphoric prism through which to look at the process of teaching and learning from kindergarten through graduate school. Louis Rubin permeates his book, *Artistry in Teaching*, with theatrical metaphors, while Kenneth Eble highlights theatre's environments: "It is commonly forgotten that the classroom offers the rudiments of a stage. In auditoriums used as classrooms, everything is there, including curtains and lights. There is little to be lost and much to be gained in using the classroom, when appropriate, as theater" (51). Caine and Caine emphasize drama's emotional power:

> Effective learning always involves the alternation of several states of arousal. One of the fundamental reasons schools fail is that they impose on learners a single state of unrelieved boredom. The comparative importance of states of arousal can be seen in the power of entertainment and the arts. . . . The power of great theater lies to a large extent in the way in which it uses this tension. Intelligent orchestration in teaching includes an understanding of these states of arousal and borrows from theater such elements as timing and the ability to create anticipation, drama, and excitement. (31–32)

More than arousing interest and entertainment, bell hooks probes metaphors of theatre further by identifying teaching itself as a "performative act":

> And it is that aspect of our work that offers space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom. To embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage 'audiences,' to consider issues of reciprocity. Teachers are not performers in the traditional sense of the word in that our work is not meant to be a spectacle. Yet [performing] is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning. (11)

While not rivaling Robin Williams's performance in *Dead Poet's Society*, I present myself in dramatic ways throughout the semester. Gradually, I take less classroom space and students take more. The class culminates in dramatic performances of an issue, a topic, or an historical event. I give the assignment early in the semester so that students have several months to research their chosen topics. I meet privately with each group to coach them in acting and directing before they present.

Performances include interviews, debates, oral interpretations, and television shows. To compare and contrast teaching approaches, students have role-played and interviewed Maria Montessori and Reggio Emilia (early childhood education) and A.S. Neill and Daniel Greenberg (from the free school movement). They have debated the pros and cons of book banning, tracking, and ability grouping in role. The opening arguments of the attorney for the Browns in the Brown versus Topeka Board of Education have been staged. Through oral interpretation, the 18th century reformers Dorothea Dix, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Horace Mann have come alive in a living museum piece, complete with costumes, makeup, and lights. After visiting local schools and interviewing students, teachers, principals, television shows have been scripted and enacted, sometimes with video footage, to profile the contributions of Head-Start, Waldorf Schools, and a nearby HOT school (Higher Order Thinking School through the arts). After a group presented the views of African American educators calling for more oral forms of learning in the classroom, one student, for the first time in his life, told an engaging story from the African American oral tradition. He amazed his classmates who had never heard a story told before with the motivating power of storytelling.

Students have responded quite favorably to the dramatic art of these presentations for various reasons. For example, one student wrote, "Like you said, as future teachers, it is important that we feel comfortable in situations where we are presenting in front of a crowd [of our own students]." The course as a whole has empowered them to "own our classroom," "to express what we have learned . . . [and to form] relationships with one another," together with the ability "to laugh comfortably while learning at the same time." Having formulated their own philosophies of education, many leave the course eager to apply the creative teaching and learning approaches I have practiced with them.

By the end of the semester, students understand why an array of philosophers, psychologists, theorists, and education activists recognize and support dramatic art in schooling experiences in its many manifestations. Through first-hand experiences in oral interpretation, readers theatre, improvisation, debate, interviews, simulations, role-play, storytelling, and writing, they gain an understanding of the differences between competing visions and philosophies of education. These active engagements in class, created from the implications read from primary sources, provide a rich resource for classroom teachers who must explain why they use drama and other arts in the curriculum. While only massive financial aid and intense emphasis on equity can correct existing and unfair disparities in schools, drama can, quite simply, maximize the diverse ways children, and college students, learn best.

As we continue to explore and celebrate dramatic art, teacher educators of differing ethnic and racial groups need to continue a dialogue about the kinds of pedagogies and practices we teach future teachers. After all, the most important philosophical question of any generation is always: How do we best educate the young?

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