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ABSTRACT

Playwriting gives students focused experience with dialogue, which is useful in many kinds of writing, and provides an avenue for process-based writing instruction. The assignment of writing plays allows students to try out various personae without risking direct self-identification. Students write more for one another than for the teacher, allowing the teacher to become a facilitator and resource, rather than a dictator. Topic-generating prewriting activities such as brainstorming begin the project. In an incubation period, the class fleshes out possible characters. In the drafting stage, students keep characters talking, to see where scenes might go, or write a prose sketch to get started. After a rough draft emerges, students consider some basic principles and elements of dramatic structure. Scenes usually are enhanced by incorporating some or all of the following: (1) emotion; (2) discoveries; (3) decisions; (4) reversals; and (5) angularity. Scripts are completed, and students rehearse them, with playwrights providing direction. Playwrights are present at rehearsals to provide direction to performers. The rehearsals create an impetus to revise. Following revisions, writers prepare finished manuscripts in drama format. Other students' reactions and playwright self-evaluations enter into final grades. The value of the assignment lies in what students learn about the nature and craft of representing ideas and experience in writing. (SG)

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PLAYWRITING: NOT JUST FOR DRAMATISTS

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For me, teaching playwriting in English classes has nothing to do with training playwrights. Although my students learn playwriting fundamentals which they can use later, it is of no concern to me that perhaps none of them will go on to write scripts for the stage, movies, or television. What matters is what is happening in students' writing at the moment, and what the playwriting experience allows them to learn about writing. As I have made time for playwriting--in English as well as theatre classes--and as I have refined my teaching of playwriting, I have grown increasingly pleased with what playwriting can do for my students' writing.

SOME BENEFITS

I became interested in playwriting as a part of my developing interest in process-based writing instruction. As part of that approach, I was looking for ways to expand the forms of writing available to my high school students. Drama was a mode of language that would bridge spoken and written language. I liked James Moffett's notion of using drama as a way to help kids connect the language of daily life with the language of literature, too.

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Playwriting would give students focused experience with dialogue, useful in many kinds of writing. Dramatic dialogue is more than flavor; it creates action and depicts characters. Students would have to make predictions about human behavior, and even to explore social issues within a particular situation they invented. This would require an act of imagination tested against what students thought was true in life. They would have to put to use their awareness about how people influence each other, the roles people play and their sources of power and weakness. Playwriting would allow students to try out various persona without risking direct self-identification, and they would have to consider the multiple viewpoints of their various characters and manipulate their various voices.

Most importantly, though, as I set up the playwriting experience, my students would be writing for an audience more genuine than the teacher-as-examiner, and for a purpose closer to their adolescent interests than my standard assignments, for they would be writing to interest and entertain their peers. They would receive immediate feedback about their writing and have genuine, natural reasons to revise.

I liked what the playwriting unit did for me as a teacher. Since students were writing for each other as much or more than for me, my role shifted. I did not have to be a dictator or the sole judge, so I could be a teacher. I was the facilitator of the activity, and I was a resource for kids who wanted help with some aspect of their writing. I have done some of my best

teaching in these conferences, listening to what students want to do with their writing and suggesting ways their writing could work. I was not swamped by the paper load during the playwriting unit either, so I had a little time to try some playwriting myself. I could collaborate with students (and they could collaborate with me), establishing a "community of writers" in the classroom. I could be a part of that community partly because of my role shift, but also because I was not a famous playwright; I was somebody messing around with plays, just like my students.

GETTING STARTED

Experience has taught me that much of the success of a playwriting unit depends upon how I begin it, how the curtain goes up. Some expectations must be clear from the beginning. Students must expect to use their prior experience in reading and viewing plays, movies, and television. They must expect to revise, perhaps many times, just as playwrights do. And they must expect that at least some of their work will be read aloud by other student-actors for an audience, usually the class. With most classes, the task was to create at least one well-developed scene which would eventually be performed (at least read aloud) for the rest of the class.

At first, I made the mistake of starting with what as a teacher of literature and theatre I knew best: dramatic structure. To my surprise, instruction in the structure of plays

actually inhibited writing if I started it before everybody had at least one idea they liked. As one student, Marianne, explained it, "if you start with the structure, it's like a huge scaffolding. It's just this thing there, a huge chunk of metal; it's in the way. Without an idea, what good is it?" She was right; construction begins with sketches and blueprints, not scaffolding.

So lots of topic-generating prewriting activities are very important. So is incubation. I wedged many brainstorming sessions between other classroom activities weeks before we started playwriting in earnest. We generated as many germinal ideas as possible. These might come from considering an interesting person, a group of people, or some combination of different people's traits. We thought about things people want and what they might do to get them. We considered places where people gather in groups, noting who we would expect to be there and who might be out of place there. We thought about situations real and hypothetical, subject areas like science or history which had stories to tell, and even a few philosophical ideas drawn from literature we had read and applied to new situations or people. We looked for ideas in newspapers, magazines, unread book titles, song lyrics, photographs, and music. (If this music were a movie score, what would be happening in the movie?) We tried to generate plenty of germinal ideas expecting that some would not sprout, and we started early in order to give the best ideas time to grow.

Incubation time is active, a time to flesh out possible characters, giving them tentative names and features, making notes on all kinds of things that might happen, constantly asking "what if..?" When needed, we did role playing and visualizing of places and people, trying our ideas out every which way. We collected every note and idea, no matter how small or silly. The point was to elaborate on the topic, to develop an idea, much as I asked students to develop their ideas in other kinds of writing. Students were less experienced at this kind of writing, though, and required even more help at viewing their ideas in various ways.

DRAFTING

When drafting begins, some students plunge right in, keeping their characters talking even if it is drivel, just to see where a scene might be going. That's a good way to start as long as kids see this draft as exploratory dialogue and expect to build on it and revise it. Some who are daunted by dialogue prefer to write a sketch of the scene first in prose. List makers and outliners start with informal scenarios, focusing first on dramatic action and later recreating the action with dialogue. All of the approaches, open to student choice, lead to a rough draft.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

After students have done some drafting, but before they

think of their scenes as completed, consideration of some basic principles of dramatic structure can result in much improved writing. I think of these principles as concepts to use cyclically or recursively, whenever they might be useful, and not as steps through which everyone needs to march. For my students, thinking about dramatic structure has helped with drafting, reconceptualizing, generating new ideas or alternatives from which to choose, recognizing problems which call for revision, and discovering what to cut.

Here are some principles of dramatic structure which have proven useful for me:

- The most useful principle of dramatic structure for me has been that all scenic units need dramatic action. Action is a pattern of human change. Change does not have to be physical, of course, but something must happen.
- To create dramatic action, scenes need to be driven. The most direct way to drive a scene is to have a volitional character, a character who is trying to do something. Volitional characters usually have a plan (or objective), and something important is usually at stake.
- Characters are revealed through action, what they do and say. Show them in action (speaking could be an action), don't tell about them.

As we know from literary study, scenic units usually follow this structural pattern:

1. Balance -- a static situation with dynamic potential. The way things are before the conflict begins.
2. Disturbance -- the beginning of action. Typically something goes wrong, someone says or does the wrong thing, or a new character or problem is introduced which throws the balanced situation askew and starts the action.
3. Rising Action or Crisis -- usually two characters or forces in conflict maneuver for control. The outcome remains undetermined until the climax; we don't know who or what will get the upper hand. Obstacles and complications

may be disturbances or they may add to the rising action. Obstacles make drama interesting; a character who immediately gets what he wants is boring.

4. Climax -- usually an event (though not necessarily a physical one) which is a moment of change when one force in the conflict triumphs over the other and the outcome of the conflict becomes clear.

5. Resolution -- the result of the action precipitated by the climax. Beat and scene resolutions are not necessarily final, and they may be interrupted, creating some suspense during the following scenes about how this scene will eventually be resolved.

Although we usually associate plot elements with whole novels or plays, the elements work even for scenes and subdivided scenes called beats. (There are usually three or four beats in a scene.) They apply as well for comedy, tragedy, melodrama, or farce. See if you recognize these elements in your favorite scenes.

Scenes are usually enhanced by incorporating some or all of these elements:

A. Emotion -- Aristotle called any emotional values "suffering." Characters in a scene should be feeling something all the time they are on stage, and their dialogue and actions should reflect their emotions.

B. Discoveries -- passages from ignorance of something to knowledge of it. Discoveries of information, insights, a piece of truth or even discovery of a lie help in structuring dramatic action.

C. Decisions -- make excellent disturbances and even better climaxes as long as the decision is in doubt until the climax.

D. Reversals -- changes in action, turnabouts which create interest and surprise. Kids know what they are; television is full of them. So is life. Dramatic units should change from one unit to the next, and beats and scenes usually end differently than they begin.

E. Angularity -- beating around the bush, that human habit of saying one thing when we mean another. People are rarely lucid enough to address or even recognize their problems head-on. A family member who starts a squabble about taking out the garbage really may be concerned about finances or divorce. Angularity provides time for conflicts to develop, and they can contribute to suspense.

Of course, I never present all of these concepts to any one class; it overwhelms them. I use it selectively, applying it to individual students and the features of their particular scripts. More than anything, these principles show me how to read students' drafts in ways which allow me to be helpful.

It is also at this point, when students have a work-in-progress begun, that I call their attention to other writers' plays. If we have read a play in class, we look back at a few scenes, this time with the eyes of writers. We read other scenes or one-act plays, some of them written by students, to get ourselves deeper into theatrical thinking as much as to analyze how drama works. We might even watch a few scenes on video or spread out in the auditorium to write, imagining how our scenes might look on the stage.

REHEARSAL AND REVISION

Every playwright expects to revise, knowing that the responses of directors, actors, designers, technicians and even audiences provide useful feedback for making a good script even better. After students have a good idea about who their characters will be in their best scene, I ask them to suggest

students to read the parts. While they continue to draft, I cast their plays with readers from the class, usually including a narrator to read stage directions. I assign parts so that several scenes can be rehearsed during the same class time. When everyone has a completed draft, a "work-in-progress," we gather in small groups to rehearse. Especially in English classes, rehearsal simply means reading the parts aloud a few times. The students are told that before the whole-class reading they will have some time to rewrite.

It is vital for the playwrights to be present for the rehearsal of their script, but that they do not take one of the roles. They can provide some direction to the reader/actors. More important, rehearsals create a natural impetus to revise. The readings allow the writer to hear the script, probably for the first time, helping create that distance and re-experiencing which is necessary for real revision. With instructions only to prepare for a whole-class reading, student readers inevitably respond to the script they are reading and the playwright gets valuable feedback. Responses of peers tend to be focused on the characters they are reading and consequently often reveal problems the playwright has not thought of. Natural peer questions (What does this line mean? Why do I say this? What am I supposed to do now? When was I supposed to enter/exit?) help playwrights consider aspects neglected in their scripts. Immediately after the short rehearsal time I ask the playwrights to make notes about any revisions they might consider making.

When everybody's play has been rehearsed, which usually takes two or three class periods, we spend some time revising. Members of the playwright's cast are the natural peer respondents.

Sometimes during revision I make a few suggestions either to the whole class or to individuals. Here are my most frequent suggestions for revision:

- A. Try to make transitions smooth and believable.
- B. During revision, keep in mind that characters are only life-like fictions, not real people. Feel free to change traits, speech, or actions to better suit the drama.
- C. Ask: Who is trying to do what, and why? Try to have an answer for every beat.
- D. What else could happen in the setting of your scene?
- E. What was happening just before your scene started? What will happen just after? Is it worth including, or implying?
- F. Think about word choice. Try to make characters speak believably, and try to make them sound different from each other.
- G. Lengths of speeches need variety, just like sentences in other kinds of writing.
- H. Write stage directions if you haven't done it yet. They are instructions to the actors about physical action. Try to make them precise and concise.
- I. Try dividing your scenes into small mini-scene segments called beats. (Beats tend to be short, often about a page long. Most scenes have three or four of them.) Consider whether each beat is fully developed, containing a balance, disturbance, conflict, crisis, climax and resolution, (or a beginning, middle, and end).
- J. Curtain lines--beginnings and endings--are really important. T.S.Eliot said, "My greatest trouble is getting the curtain up and down." Reconsider where to begin, and give the last speech a lasting effect.

These suggestions are about good writing of any kind, not just writing for the theatre.

PERFORMANCE

When students have revised, we read. All along I have to remind myself that because students are writing to entertain or interest the whole class, and not just the teacher, they must consider not only my standards but also those of their classmates, which are usually quite different from my own. (It's been years since I got a charge cut of public flatulence, for instance.) I expect students to act on suggestions they think will appeal to the widest audience, of which I am only a part.

When students are satisfied with their revisions I ask them to prepare a finished manuscript in drama format. Playwrights are responsible for their work. They do everything they can to prevent misreadings, which includes giving actor-readers a script which has been carefully edited and proofread. If necessary we take a little more time for rehearsal and then we read. If the scripts look especially strong, and if the school schedule allows, we might plan to read selected pieces for other classes or groups as well. We might even get acting students or the theatre program involved in some kind of production, but that is not necessary for the unit to work.

During the reading of each work-in-progress we listen for what works, what is interesting or surprising. (Serious criticism is of little value in this case.) The discussion underscores the broader audience for this writing and either directly or indirectly provides a basis for evaluation. I make notes about the class' reaction to the scripts and that enters

into the students' grades. Long before the performance I also give in-progress grades for effort, for risk-taking, for growth and learning, and at the end I ask not only for folders of script writing, but also for self-evaluations which tell me about how the writing projects developed, the problems the writers faced and what they did about them, about what they think they learned about drama and about writing.

It is in the self-evaluations rather than the finished manuscripts that I hope to read about any successes of the playwriting unit. Finished or not, the plays are now behind us. The value of the experience is what students take with them to future writing situations--what they have learned about the nature and craft of representing ideas and experience in written words.