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Spinning straw into gold: curriculum, performative literacy, and student empowerment

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Abstract

A town crier arrives in the market square to announce the royal wedding of the king and the miller's daughter. In our different roles, we respond to the news for it brings entrepreneurial opportunities, an increased workload for the palace servants, challenge to the monarchy (Can a king marry a commoner?), and, to the sour-spirited tinker, a broken heart. Yet there is a nasty rumour circulating the market that the wedding announcement is a fraud. That instead of a royal marriage to the king, the miller's beautiful daughter is locked in the darkest dungeon, tearfully spinning straw into gold. "I've seen her myself," gossips a palace servant. "Tis a sight to break your soul."

It is a simple task to lay out learning objectives for a curricular activity: to create oral language opportunities; to create an experience of collective narration; to examine the roles, responsibilities, and responses possible within a political system; to provide a springboard for writing in role or completing the narrative in writing. What is impossible to secure or even to anticipate is the unexpected learning that happens in the interstices of curricular freefall (Haskell, 2000)(8), on the "edge of chaos," within which interstanding (Taylor & Saارين, 1994)(9) becomes possible. These are the "aha!" moments of recognition that all educators desire, yet seldom are so gifted. Impossible to secure, we can only, as educators, seek to create spaces and relationships of interaction that invite the opportunity for unexpected moments of learning to emerge.

(9) Philosophers Taylor & Saارين (1994) suggest that understanding is no longer possible "because nothing stands under." They introduce the concept of "interstanding," as the co-emergence of cognition or recognition that arises in the interconnections, interrelationships, and interactions possible: "Interstanding has become unavoidable because everything stands between." (1994, p. 2).

Full Text

When I think about my homeland, I think, above all, about the possible dream, if not an easy one, of democratically inventing our society.

(Paulo Freire, 2000, p. 46)

Imagine this. You are lying in a field of wild flowers, the songs of birds riding the wind. Feel the breeze caress your face, run its length along your body. Tall grasses tickle your nose. You hear the laughter of village girls in the distance, gathering flowers for the night's festivities at the castle. You relax, close your eyes, and dream... Close by, a solitary voice rises in song, "Who will buy my flowers?" It is the miller's daughter, known in the village for the lilt of joy in her walk. But there are some who talk of her spinning straw into gold by candlelight as the village sleeps, rumours that follow her as she gathers up armfuls of flowers to sell in the market...

In a field of wild flowers, the seeds of student empowerment are sown, some caught in the restless anxious breeze, others falling on fallow ground, and yet others taking root, tentacles of growth reaching towards an understanding not yet realized.

Lying on the carpet, my eyes shut, I listen as one of my students leads the class through a visualization. Her voice is calm, and gradually, under her guidance, the walls of the classroom slip away, replaced by the sounds and smells and touch of meadow flowers and spring breezes. Visualizations create imaginary worlds within which students may be guided through a series of events, or the visualized space may be opened to the students' individual imaginings. The meadow I am lying in may be located in a place of childhood memory, or in a specific location collectively shared that is determined by the person leading the visualization. Such visualizations serve as springboards, leading to collective group action or individual response through writing, shared discussions, or embodied narration.(1)

As a drama educator and language arts instructor in a teacher education program, I actively seek curricular ways to empower my students in their own learning by creating opportunities for leadership and group collaboration. So it is, I find myself on the floor, trusting to the student's voice. We are in a drama-in-education class, where I encourage students to implement language arts across the curriculum through drama. In the past three weeks, we have been exploring issues of space travel, immigration, globalization, and city planning.

Drama, particularly role drama,(2) provides opportunities for students to step outside the four walls of the classroom and to investigate imaginary and real worlds of power, responsibility, issues, relationships, and community. Language arts activities within drama such as persuasive speech, writing in role, problem-solving through creative and critical role-play, and improvised narration all create moments where students can observe and embody the arguments fielded, the choices possible, the results of actions taken. Role drama is an invitation to personal agency: each participant, through word, action, or response, can impact on the embodied narrative being created.

Not walls of cement but... the melodies of your temperature

(Barban, 1995, p. 162)

The challenge for a teacher when seeking ways to empower students is that he or she must release control of the curriculum; to realize that curriculum is not "set in concrete," but created in response to the needs, interests, concerns, and desires of the students. Curriculum is an organic co-evolving creature simultaneously formed through the interactions of teacher and students within a specific context of location, time, and inquiry:

Far from merely existing relatively autonomously in the same location, individual and environment continually specify one another. Just as I am shaped by my location, so is my location shaped by my presence. (Davis et al., 1996, p. 163)

Curriculum is a fertile space which complexity theorists call "the edge of chaos" where patterns of interrelations are continually created and recreated through an "endless dance of coemergence" (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12).

Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor, it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it. (Pinar et. al, 1995, p. 848)

It is within this curricular space of interaction and interrelationships that understanding becomes possible. Cognition is seen as "...an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself" (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 11, *my italics*). Knowledge, like curriculum, becomes a vibrant dynamic state of being, becoming. For students and teacher, curricular moments of learning occur sometimes within performance;(3) or sometimes during group debriefings, individual reflection, or a collective reimagining following performance. (4)

Intellect's light sees but is powerless to do. The body's light sees and is able to do.

(Appelbaum, 1995, p. 121)

Performative literacy addresses the learning possible through performance. As teachers, our task is to develop the ability of students to interpret the worlds within which they participate; to help them understand the interrelationships between power structures, the hidden and notso hidden agendas of the oppressed and the oppressor. Through explorations in drama, students learn to recognize and manipulate metaphor, symbol, ritual, and role. Performative literacy then is an embodied hermeneutic understanding of the intertextual play among players in quest or inquiry, within which metaphor, symbol, ritual, relationships, landscapes, and lenses of perception shift and shape understanding. Performative literacy is the ability to place ourselves simultaneously and/or concurrently within and exterior to the unfolding performance so as to see from multiple positioning, and respond accordingly. Performative literacy, in a single breath, leads students from the single-dimensionality of dichotomies towards an understanding of the multiplicity of perspectives and outcomes possible, a liberating space where one is moved to action, to voice, to affirm one's presence.

As students and teacher engage in role drama, they co-create as yet unimagined worlds that come into being through the actions, words, and reactions of each participant in response to each other, the inquiry, and the embodied narration being realized. The embodied hermeneutic readings or understandings brought to the shared experience through performance or upon reflection is a performative literacy that enables students to understand and replay their roles both within imaginary and real worlds of interaction.

The young maiden's voice carries on the breeze. "Who will buy my flowers? Who will buy...." Her song abruptly ends, a scream shatters the peace of the meadow, there are sounds of a scuffle, curt orders, and then, silence. What has happened? My heart is pounding....

One of the four student leaders of the role drama directs us to open our eyes.(5) On the carpet next to us are role cards: merchant, royal family member, guard, miller's family or friend, palace servant. We are told to gather with our assigned groups in different sections of the room. Awaiting us is a sealed envelope within which are photographs. We are directed to each choose one picture that speaks to us.

The role drama is based on the fairytale, Rumpelstiltskin, the story of a young woman who, it was rumoured, could spin straw into gold. In their planning sessions with me, the four students now leading the role drama explained that they wanted to design a role drama to look at the issue of empowerment. They wanted to investigate ordinary life under the rule of a monarch, with the hopes of leading to a post-performance discussion on the differences between democracy and monarchy. What rules our hearts in a monarchy? What decisions are permitted? How do we understand absolute power and personal power? Within their own planning, issues of decision-making are negotiated, leadership roles taken on, a framework of action slowly evolving from the amassed pile of ideas, papers, notes, and flowcharts.

...the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected.

(Greene, 1995, p. 28)

I am one of two merchants. We open our envelope and I choose a photograph of a beautiful sandy beach with a brilliant blue sky; in the foreground is a barbed wire fence. Using our chosen photograph as a visualization aid, we develop our roles, who we are to be in the role drama. I decide to be a mender of pots and pans, a tinker by trade; my friend becomes a baker. We have stalls side-by-side in the town square. As the role drama begins and the market opens for the day, I am surprised to find myself becoming a cantankerous fellow, banging my pots and pans, snarling at my customers. I am the barbed wire fence in the photograph. At one point, we are invited to stop the action and share thought bubbles. I speak. "I am a caged animal, pacing back and forth in my stall." Secretly in love with the miller's daughter, trapped in a job I detest, I, a mere tinker, can see no escape from my situation.

A town crier arrives in the market square to announce the royal wedding of the king and the miller's daughter. In our different roles, we respond to the news for it brings entrepreneurial opportunities, an increased workload for the palace servants, challenge to the monarchy (Can a king marry a commoner?), and, to the sour-spirited tinker, a broken heart. Yet there is a nasty rumour circulating the market that the wedding announcement is a fraud. That instead of a royal marriage to the king, the miller's beautiful daughter is locked in the darkest dungeon, tearfully spinning straw into gold. "I've seen her myself," gossips a palace servant. "Tis a sight to break your soul."

In designing curricular activities, we must create the form or structure within which action arises. The challenge is to find a balance of structural flexibility that gives opportunity to students to direct and shape the emergent curriculum, and yet, is rigid enough so as to not allow the action to collapse into chaos. Too tight a reign, however, reduces the potential of a given activity to invite student intervention, input, and sense of ownership. If we, in our classrooms, are to "lay down possible new worlds," (Varela, 1987) in interaction with our students, then both students and teacher need to work within a form that invites improvisation, ongoing dialogue, and critical and creative response. The structure needs to be a porous container that allows for slippage and cracks in an imperfect but human endeavour of exploration. As poet Leonard Cohen advises,

...Forget your perfect offering There is a crack in everything That's how the light gets through.

(Cohen, 1993, p. 373)

For those of us in teacher education where emphasis is often focussed on designing lesson plans, unit plans, and learning activities against the rigour of a classroom clock and government-imposed curriculum, the concept of "letting go," is frightening...but necessary if we are to invite students to imagine anew a curriculum that realizes their own presence.

"Authentic authority is not affirmed as much by a mere transfer of power, but through delegation or in sympathetic adherence.

(Freire, 1970/1995, p. 159)

Caught in the intensity of playing my role, I only occasional pause to view the scene unfolding before me. Students in role have co-opted the narrative: the king is announced missing and presumed dead, people are arrested, prisoners escape, the servants plot a palace coup. None of these story actions had been planned or anticipated by the role drama leaders. I sneak a peek in their direction - the palace guard is standing flustered: there's been yet again another escape. Three of the remaining leaders are in the corner planning anew their strategies, and then I am arrested and thrust into jail with the miller, who engages me in treasonous speculations.

A fifteen minute break, and the villagers and the castle inhabitants revert to their customary roles of students and instructor, all of us slightly breathless at the rashness of our play. And then we are marshalled into a room where poster boards and markers are laid out on tables. "In your groups, make a sign stating your position in support of or against the monarchy." Ah, so now we are to publicly state our position. The baker and I stare at the blank whiteness of space. Others have already bent to their task, secure in their position. For fifteen minutes we debate possible wordings, and come, finally, to agreement. We look at each other. We commit. With a black marker, I write:

Walls do not a prison make.

Our protest rally marches around the outside of the building, signs held high, raucous voices disturbing the campus, bemusement etched on the faces of passing pedestrians. We then congregate in the great hall, loud chants denouncing royalty, others praising the monarchy.

And then a stranger amongst us steps forward.

"I am your king. I have walked disguised amongst you, and I now reclaim my seat on the throne."

In a single breath - villagers, palace guards, merchants, the miller's family and friends - we all kneel in his presence. No one challenges him. No one disobeys him. In stunned silence, we watch as he seats himself on his throne and casts an imperious glare upon us. The tinker recalls a conversation with the stranger, wondering whether through unguarded speech, he has endangered his life. Each person reviews what he or she may have said in the presence of the king, and what repercussions might arise.(6)

The king begins to interrogate those who had raised their voices against the monarchy. The baker, my friend, is called forward as the alleged leader of a fledgling democratic party. On the table rests a hanging rope, symbolic of death, of betrayed loyalty. Without the baker's leadership, the resistance movement against the monarchy will be lost. I step in front of her.

"My liege, the baker is innocent. It is I who you want."

And so it is that a tinker offers his life in place of that of his friend, in order to save a democratic movement, in order to protect his friend. Within that moment of decision, I had everything and nothing to lose. Walls do not a prison make.

And within that embodied moment of action, I, an ordinary teacher educator, mother, wife, suddenly understood how a person could risk his or her life for a cause, for a belief, for a friend. I suddenly understood how Nelson Mandela could spend so many long years imprisoned in his quest for racial equality; I understood finally the courage of the solitary man who stood alone in front of the tanks approaching Tiananmen Square. Walls do not a prison make.

It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained;...the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (Georg Hegel, 1967, p. 233)(7)

True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. (Freire, 1970/1995, p. 32)

And so, we come to a place of learning - our community-heart plays within unexpected landscapes, giving release to the becoming that is possible within each of us. Through our explorations we come to know the heart-integrity of community within the interrelationships with ourselves, each other, and our environment.

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information...Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.

(Freire: 1970/1995, p. 60)

It is a simple task to lay out learning objectives for a curricular activity: to create oral language opportunities; to create an experience of collective narration; to examine the roles, responsibilities, and responses possible within a political system; to provide a springboard for writing in role or completing the narrative in writing. What is impossible to secure or even to anticipate is the unexpected learning that happens in the interstices of curricular freefall (Haskell, 2000)(8), on the "edge of chaos," within which interstanding (Taylor & Saarienen, 1994)(9) becomes possible. These are the "aha!" moments of recognition that all educators desire, yet seldom are so gifted. Impossible to secure, we can only, as educators, seek to create spaces and relationships of interaction that invite the opportunity for unexpected moments of learning to emerge.

...curriculum, like language, is a moving form; conceived as an aspiration, the object and hope of our intentionality, it comes to form and slips, at the moment of its actualization, into the ground of our action. It becomes part of our situation.

(Grumet, 1988, p. 131)

The next day, two of the students who had designed and led the role drama came to me, excited and questioning. "We want to talk to you about our role drama."

A curricular desire of teachers is to arouse within students a questioning and a level of engagement that continues the conversation long after the particular activity has concluded. The hope is that what we introduce to our students is but a first step towards a long voyage of exploration and discovery.

They said, "You talked to us about how role drama helps us understand choices of action from multiple perspectives. Yesterday, when you stood in front of the king, protecting the baker, no one else stepped forward - even those who had protested the monarchy during the rally. Today, we ask ourselves, why did we not speak with you? Why didn't we challenge the king's authority? We kneeled in his presence and said nothing."(10)

Here the students were, questioning their choice of action within role. The student who had claimed to be king explained during our class debriefing after the role drama that he had, "wanted to see what would happen." When asked why everyone had kneeled (an action initiated by the tinker), it became clear that the presence of royalty had demanded the response. The simple act of kneeling was one of ritual, embodied respect earned not by the individual but through status of the throne; an act of subservience and obedience immediately taken by all present, despite the fact that we had been in the midst of a rally in opposition to (and support of) the monarchy.

Power of authority, and the absence of challenge to such claims of authority were exposed in this moment of the role drama, and the moment became a site for further questioning. How is it that authority can command such obedience? In what other circumstances does authority enter our lives and shape our response? The students' question, "Why didn't we speak with you?" initially asked from the perspective of being in role, leads us into reflection and investigation about choices taken by individuals who find themselves in conflict or compliance with authority, and the reasons why.

They said, "We created a role drama to look at empowerment, and yet, we did not empower ourselves in role. And so we are left with the question, what will we do in real life if we are faced with a decision like this? How will we act when our principles are in conflict with our perceived self-interest? What will we choose to do?"

Role drama becomes a site of introspection. Each participant asks himself or herself these questions: this is the action I took in role; by my choice, what do I learn about myself in relationship with others, the inquiry, the context within which I was taking action? What motivations, perspectives, and biases hindered or supported my choice of action? What might I choose within another context, in another role?

The insights that arise during role drama may encourage the rethinking of personal and societal positionings and beliefs and the choice of the lens through which an individual views his or her life, thus becoming an invitation to each student to imagine alternative ways of being in the world. A moment of recognition such as my own, Walls do not a prison make, may be but a momentary glimpse into another world, the opening of a hinged door to illuminate the multiple possibilities of human action and response. But such a glimpse has the potential of rewriting the world.

...The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other. It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways... It is the stop.

(Applebaum, 1995, pp. 15-16)

The stop is a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity, where all choices of action become possible, but only one may be taken. The stop in the choice of action by the tinker to stand in for his friend was the risk of losing his life, yet the opportunity of achieving liberation through his action. Walls do not a prison make. These stops, and the choice of action taken, become the site of meaning-making and interstanding that map our learning.

The students said, "We were in charge of the role drama, but there were so many different storylines happening, we didn't know what to do! We had to let go of control. We had to stop trying to direct the drama, and just trust the students. We learned that in teaching, sometimes the learning that happens is not in our control, and that we need to give over responsibility to our students. We didn't know that when we designed a role drama about empowerment, we would be exploring our own as educators."

And so it is, an unexpected gift. A gift which student teachers are alerted to the issues of empowerment and control within their own praxis. I know that I could lecture eloquently on the value of student empowerment, but it is only through experience that understanding arises. The performative literacy developed through leading and experiencing role drama simultaneously within and without enabled these students to question anew their own positioning and understanding of what it means to empower students through teaching.

Performative inquiry⁽¹¹⁾ invites students to experience and imagine anew embodied worlds, imaginary and real. Through role drama, these students and I came to a new perspective and interstanding of empowerment. Walls do not a prison make. The barbed wire fence in the photograph performs throughout our role drama, as metaphor, as identity, as multiple sites of power, restriction, opportunity, and release; a metonymic space that opens new awareness, new interstandings, new possibilities of action. Not walls of cement...but the melodies of your temperature.

Curriculum theorist and educator, Ted Aoki, speaks of the metonymic space of the backlash; the interstice between is where new possibilities arise.⁽¹²⁾ Aoki's backlash is the hinge between the imaginary worlds of possibility, and those which we inhabit, that allows us new imaginings of possible ways of becoming.

The backlash is the complexity theorist's edge of chaos, the curricular space that each of us as educators seeks to create in the sharing of a new piece of literature, a poem, a dramatic improvisation. The backlash gives breath to creative emergent spaces between - the backlash invites embodied dances of intertextual interplay and interpretation - the backlash performs.

In a meadow of wild flowers, a backlash is the moment of entering into the interstices of multiple possible worlds - the real, the not-yet real, and the imagined. The walls of the classroom disappear, and students and teacher become fellow travellers laying down a path in exploration and wonder.⁽¹³⁾

RESOURCES

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(1) Embodied narration in this sense means the collective action of creating a narrative through improvisation.

(2) Role drama involves the taking on of roles by students and teacher to explore a particular situation and/or issue within an imaginary world. If, for example, a student was in role as a lawyer or the town mayor or an employee in a store, how would he or she respond to the given problem? What actions would he or she take? A role drama, for example, might use as its origin a local issue or be one that explores decisions taken within fictional contexts, an example being the dilemma of the council members from the story of the Pied Piper who must now address the consequences of not paying the piper (See Tarlington & Verriour, 1994).

(3) Performance is understood here as an unfolding process rather than a scripted theatrical presentation.

(4) Curricular moments of learning may arise through critical and creative action and interaction either during, or following, a role drama through personal and/or communal reflection, shared remembering and conversation, writing (in or out of role). (re)imagining new scenarios or possibilities to explore, and/or questioning.

(5) The role drama discussed in this paper was designed and led by four education students in the Teacher Education Program in the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. I am indebted to their work in my own understanding of performative literacy, and for the experience that they created through the role drama. Unfortunately, I am unable to thank them individually by name.

(6) Each role drama requires a collective debriefing or shared reflection following completion. This provides students with the opportunity to share their in-role experiences, their perspectives, choices of action, and to discuss their reactions to what happened. The debriefing, or what I name a mapping-in-exploration, is a collective recalling of the journeyed experienced in role, and it is then that learning that emerged during the role drama is remarked upon and/or may emerge through the sharing of experience. Reflection then, is a form of performative literacy that enables students to give voice to their learning and understanding.

(7) As quoted by Paulo Freire, 1970/1995, p. 18.

(8) Johanna Haskell (2000) introduces the concept of freefall, in which a student enters a curricular space where choice and circumstance collide, beyond the control of the teacher. It is a "letting go" by the teacher, to see what happens. Thus it becomes a moment of potential empowerment of the student. It is the moment of Applebaum's (1995) "the stop," a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity.

(9) Philosophers Taylor & Saarinen (1994) suggest that understanding is no longer possible "because nothing stands under." They introduce the concept of "interstanding," as the co-emergence of cognition or recognition that arises in the interconnections, interrelationships, and interactions possible: "Interstanding has become unavoidable because everything stands between." (1994, p. 2).

(10) Here, the conversations with my students are reconstructed. Such moments are seldom captured on tape: they are the unexpected giftings that lead the researcher into understanding.

(11) Performative inquiry is a research methodology introduced by Lynn Fels (1999), which investigates drama as a site and action of learning.

(12) From presentations by Dr. Ted Aoki, professor emeritus, University of British Columbia, 1995-99.

(13) "Laying down a path" comes from Varela's (1987) work, and originates from a poem he translated by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantares* (1930).

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Details

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