# Creative Drama through Scaffolded Plays in the Language Arts Classroom

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For many of us, working with creative drama in the classroom does not come easy. First, we believe that we have to have a great deal of experience with drama through our own high school, college, or community acting. Second, we think, "How do I fit creative drama into my language arts curriculum?" And third, we are not comfortable with performing in front of others. However, I believe that teachers, even with the most limited drama experience, can, through scaffolded plays, integrate creative drama into their own language arts classrooms to help students build their literacy.

## Early Beginnings: Creative Drama through Scaffolded Plays

Using creative drama as a literacy strategy was not the result of my academic research. Rather, it came about purely by accident during a 1978 summer school session when, in my first assignment as a student teacher, I worked with a first-grade reading class. The goal of this voluntary summer school program was to encourage reading in a fun way. In the past, it had been a class that declined in enrollment as the six weeks passed and students found other summer interests. I remember thinking it might be interesting and fun to work with literacy through creative drama. Even with my own background in drama, I could not find any material that fit my needs for this first-grade reading class. Character parts in children's plays were too long, there were too few roles, and the reading level was far too difficult for these young children. In addition, in published plays, the dialogue was stilted and the plots were not relevant to the experiences of my first graders. My solution was to write a play, complete with non-speaking parts, for those whose reading was limited or those who didn't want to read. From this experience, my idea of using scaffolded plays to build children's literacy was born.

My first scaffolded play, *There's a Bug in My Beans*, emerged from my work at a Mexican restaurant. The problem in the play centered on finding an insect in one's food while dining out. I thought this might be a topic my first-grade students could relate to and find humorous. My students and I generated questions to begin our story. What should we do if we find a bug in our food? Kill the bug? Create a scene? Call the health department? Or, simply take the bug home as a pet? In this first scaffolded play, I purposely included no children's characters. I wanted these children to imagine what it would be like to be another person. I wanted them to be creative, thinking about how a character might act and respond to others in this situation. The characters became like "masks" in this play because I thought students would feel less intimidated about performing a character who, on the surface, was not their own. The characters in this play included waiters, cooks, an elderly couple, an insect, Raid can, health inspector, and artist (among others). All of these characters were given strong personalities. To encourage these students to write and create, and because I had no idea who would be there when we acted out the play, I left several of the lines of this short play blank so that students could determine certain events and

create the ending. Here is a short excerpt:

OLD MAN: Waiter! Waiter!

WAITER: You rang?

OLD MAN: My wife just found an awful, dirty bug strolling away with her beans.

WAITER: (What would you say? Make up your own line)

OLD MAN: (What would you say? Make up your own line)

OLD LADY: (What would you say? Make up your own line)

After we had created the story line, students read and reread the lines that their characters spoke. They wrote in the lines that I intentionally left blank, and continually revised them so the play made sense. During their rehearsals, they listened carefully to each other, often recreating lines that fit the story. As an added surprise, even though this play required no scenery, students wanted to create a more full-bodied play. They drew a restaurant background on large sheets of butcher paper, created menus, signs, and brought in simple props and costumes. For example, one young boy was fascinated by the Confederacy, so he played his part dressed in gray and spoke with a Southern accent. He thoroughly enjoyed the play; after all, he was able to create his own character based upon his interest in Southern history, he could use a dialect, and he probably felt more involved because his interests were integrated in a creative way. Throughout our classes, students were reading, writing, and creating using print and nonprint-based texts. At the time, I was not familiar with constructivism, ownership, collaboration, or creativity, but now I understand that these children worked on all these levels. All eighteen of these first-grade students stayed in summer school for the entire six weeks and performed the play on the last day with parents as the audience.

I learned a great deal about children, creative drama, and literacy. I discovered that scaffolded plays could constantly change, and the play could be used over and over again to fit the interests and backgrounds of different groups. I also learned that students could find (and did find) authentic reasons to read and write. Unlike previous summers, students stayed in my class because they found a purpose for reading and writing—the creation of a play. Through repeated practice, they learned about story, dialogue, and how plot is sequenced to make sense. They used their imaginations and became different characters, using voices and actions unlike their own. With my help, they drew upon their knowledge of print and art to create their props. If you can, imagine the quality and quantity of language learning that took place that summer with all that need, all that purpose, all that repeated practice, and all that help. So many facets of their growing literacy were addressed: organizing, rewriting, discussing, performing. The parents were also impressed with what their children accomplished in six short weeks.

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## Writing Scaffolded Plays with Students

From this beginning, I have used the same play with other classes and found that each

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time was different because the children brought their own experiences, interests, and interpretations to this basic story line. Writing scaffolded plays, especially when we have little experience, may seem daunting; however, it is not as difficult as it seems. I use two approaches: one in which I develop the initial dialogue of a story and students create the endings, and one in which students create the entire play. In the first approach, I often use an existing story (*A Christmas Carol*, *Julius Caesar*) or an historical event or time period (Renaissance, Wild West). Using the people from that story and/or time period as characters, I write lines for them. I leave a number of the lines open-ended, pushing students to think about the meaning of the story and to create lines that they think the character might say at this moment in the play. Once students realize that creating dialogue in this way is not intimidating, they become eager to participate; they continually revise and rewrite the play's ending until they are satisfied that the play says what they want it to say. Below is an example of a scaffolded play about the assassination of Julius Caesar in which I wrote some of the lines, and left open lines for students to create:

CASSIUS: Caesar comes to the Senate today. He has already been made dictator for life, a title formally given only for six months in a state of national emergency. Do you see any emergencies? Must he also be given the crown?

MURELLUS: We don't have a crown. We are a republic.

CASCA: Well, Caesar has got a crown on his mind and so do the people. Better to stop him here before it is too late.

CICERO: How do we stop him? What do we do?

MURELLUS: *(What would you say? Make up your own line.)*

CICERO: *(What would you say? Make up your own line.)*

LEPIDUS: *(What would you say? Make up your own line.)*

My lines serve as a scaffold for students as they begin to write their own lines. They develop a sense of how characters talk, think, and act in the story. I have found that once students understand how to create their own lines, they begin to take over the play immediately. They want to control the story line. Some colleagues, who also work with scaffolded plays, are often surprised by this independence, telling me that they sometimes feel "left out" of this language arts engagement. One of my colleagues remarked: "They ran the show, they really did. I sat back and let them go unless they were getting off task or they were trying to bite off more then they could chew. Then I would step in and try to size it down so that is was definitely feasible."

My second approach invites students to create their own plays. Like scripts that I have written, we often start with an existing story (always selected by the students) such as a novel, poem, or historical event that we are studying in class. We leave off the ending, giving students an opportunity to revise and recreate this story with their own interpretations. When we start writing the play, students generate the problem in the story, posing it as a question (e.g., What should a person do when a political leader, such as Caesar, becomes too ambitious?). Using this base story line, or scaffold, the play can evolve by sticking close to the actual historical events, or by taking the shape of a more creative analogy to present time. For example, one of my classes compared the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair to Caesar's ambition and actions.

Next, students generate a list of what they already know about an historical event. We decide what we need to investigate further to develop the story line more fully and how we want the story to end. Then, the exciting part comes. We break the story line into major events in the play. Small groups of students develop a script

on that event. When we complete the first draft of the various scenes, we do a read-through—a first reading of the script to see if it makes sense. Students discuss what parts of the scenes do or do not make sense, and negotiate what remains and what is removed as they develop the final script.

## Impact of Scaffolded Plays on Language Learning

In my work with creative drama, I have come to find several important implications for language arts teachers. First, creative drama through scaffolded plays allows for a sharing of knowledge between teacher and student. Teachers find that they do not have to be autocratic. Rather, students become active participants in their own learning. Teachers work to help students focus the story, provide meaningful support in terms of factual knowledge, and maintain a safe environment where students do not fear ridicule by peers when they voice ideas.

Second, as teachers and students develop open-ended scripts, students' language develops originality, variety, fluency, and flexibility. Students take an existing story and create an original ending, elaborate on the original story, begin to develop dialogue and story much more easily, and understand flexibility in terms of rethinking and rewriting stories. Eichenberger and King (1995) describe the important role that scaffolding plays in students' language learning. They believe scaffold building occurs when teachers help students to participate and have voice in how and what they create.

Third, I found that ESOL (English as a Second Language) students benefit greatly in the production of scaffolded plays. To help ESOL students build literacy in English, I created characters with limited lines, lines written in their native language, and/or nonspeaking roles. For example, one of my Chinese students played a leading role in a melodrama. Some of her lines were spoken in English and others in Chinese. ESOL students learned language more easily because they, like my first-grade students, saw a need to use and a purpose for language—performing a play and communicating with others. They had ample time for repeated practice with their lines and were supported by the class and me when they needed help. In addition, by including music, art, and dance in the plays, ESOL students could participate more comfortably in these nonlinguistic symbol systems. No longer did they feel silenced; their lives and language were an integral part of the production of the play. English-speaking students benefited also by understanding the multi-dimensionality of our world in terms of culture and language.

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Whenever I had a class of ESOL students, I worked with *all* the students to create scaffolded plays that drew upon their native languages as well as English. For example, when I taught a second- and third-grade ESOL class, Vietnamese and Hispanic children retold the story of Maximilian and Carlotta to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Collaboratively, they wrote the following excerpted lines, which were spoken in English, French, and Spanish.

***Scene: The court of Maximilian and Carlotta in Mexico.***

MEXICAN CITIZEN (spoken in Spanish): We do not like you here. Go back to France where you belong.

MAXIMILIAN: (speaks in French to his interpreter): What did he say?

INTERPRETER (speaks in French): Your Majesty, he says the Mexican people love you.

MAXIMILIAN (speaks in French): Carlotta, I told you the people wanted us to stay here.

Fourth, teachers reflect upon their own practices. My colleagues who participated in scaffolded plays grew to understand more clearly how students learned and used language, and how this fostered

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their independence as learners. Some of the teachers were unaware of how much control over student meaning they exerted in their classrooms. After having completed two scaffolded plays, one scripted by me and the other constructed by students, an elementary teacher commented:

> I was really impressed with the kids. In comparing the two different plays, one of the kids said, "The first one, *Julius Caesar*, was just really hard and so serious. The second one was silly and we could have more fun. You didn't try to control us quite so much." This was really good feedback for me to hear because I wasn't aware that I was controlling them. I have really been giving this comment a lot of thought since I heard that. What exactly was I doing to make [students] feel that I was controlling them?

## Scaffolded Plays and Literacy Events

Throughout my teaching career, I have continued not only to use creative drama in my own classroom, but to include other teachers and the community in my efforts to promote a broader meaning of literacy as well as participation in different literacy practices. In an effort to increase the use of scaffolded plays as a literacy strategy, I have designed and developed over the past seven years an annual thematic dinner theater in which students perform their plays. I not only want my students to write and perform plays, I want them to truly inquire into the life and times of writers and historical figures. My gifted students read classic literary works such as *Hard Times*, *True Grit*, and/or *Romeo and Juliet*, and then study the costumes, history, art, music, and ideas of that time period. This inquiry culminates in a banquet, at which food, social customs, dress, entertainment, art, and music are presented in a shared atmosphere between students from different schools, their families, administration, and the community. Such themed dinner theaters have included celebrations of Dickens, DaVinci, the Middle Ages, the Roman Empire, Sinbad's Middle East, the Wild West, and the Roaring 20s. As a way to diminish barriers between parents, students, and myself, I held these events in my own home until the attendance became too large. These events are now district wide at both the middle and elementary levels with over 400 students participating.

As elementary teachers, we can all work with scaffolded plays; it doesn't have to become another "add on" to our curriculum, or a major project, such as the dinner theater. By working with literature that we already use in our classes, we can write short scripts, leaving lines open for our students to create, enabling them to build a more complex understanding of the literature. For example, you could take a picture book like *Working Cotton* by Sherley Anne Williams (1992), write a few lines, and let your students do the rest:

DADDY: Shelan, time to wake up. Time to work.

SHELAN: But, Daddy, the sun's not up.

DADDY: I know. We gotta start working.

SHELAN: *(What would you say? Create your own line.)*

DADDY: *(What would you say? Create your own line.)*

You can include Shelan's family members, and, to make room for many characters, you can bring in the other field laborers. They could talk with Shelan's family or they might create a song to sing while they work. During the rehearsals, you and your students can investigate the workings of cotton fields a century ago and today. You can build upon the story by bringing in other information that you and your students find about this time period and the African Americans who worked the cotton fields. You can study the music and dance of the time and incorporate this into your performance. In this way, the study of literature and its connection to our lives becomes rich, complex, and multi-dimensional. When drama is used as a way for children to understand the essential ele-

ments of story—plot, setting, and character—it also becomes a vehicle for them to understand the essential elements of *living*. With a caring and thoughtful teacher's guidance, students can participate in the drama of other people's lives, opening doors for new conversations that may lead to deeper understandings.

From my initial play, *There's a Bug in my Beans,* to my annual themed banquets, scaffolded plays have been an important strategy in helping my students build their literacy. Although drama may not be a communication form that we, as teachers, find comfortable, our students do. As Sternberg (1997) reminds us, we must value our students' creative energies and find engagements that showcase students' multimodal literacies. When we acknowledge students' important contributions to representation of meaning through drama, literacy becomes a vital and dynamic force in students' lives.

## References


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# Bridging the Theme

Allen invites us to ask such questions as, "What constitutes literacy in a school that is comprised of a large number of students from many ethnicities?" and "How do we encourage multiculturalism to flourish when we offer students opportunities to express their meanings through language systems other than print-based language?" Allen describes his work in his fifth-grade class as he helps his students understand the importance that culture plays in their representations of meaning. Students' representations cannot, and do not, rest within print-based language alone. Rather, as Allen argues, with diverse populations of children in classrooms across this country, we must envision literacy as the facility with which we can communicate through multiple sign systems.

Since Allen has so many students of diverse cultures in his classroom, he cannot assume that the knowledge that is often sanctioned in schools (Hirsch, 1988) is the knowledge that his students must know to exist within this country. Rather, Allen sees that all knowledge is situated within personal experiences. He knows that all knowledge is ideological and, therefore, all representations that children create are ideological. With this in mind, Allen chooses to have his students share their cultural knowledge, or ideologies, through semiotic systems that most closely represent what his students desire. Because Allen believes that meaning is inherently ideological, he is able to open up classroom discussions to help his students rethink their beliefs about those not like themselves. From this dialogue, students transform their beliefs about others, and, more importantly, generate new questions about unfamiliar cultures. This sharing of knowledge often comes through semiotic systems that operate together and/or co-occur: music, dance, written/oral language, the visual arts, and/or drama. They do not create texts that depend only on one sign system, but draw upon many elements from various sign systems to create a representation that is semiotic in nature.

What transpires when students draw from, interpret, and share meanings from cultures not their own? Allen argues that students become interpreters and users of many literacies. Their building of literacies then moves into a school-wide project, a multicultural day. However, this day is not merely a one-shot deal in terms of valuing diversity. The knowledge of multiple literacies enables students to understand, interpret, and create representations that are semiotic in nature on a daily basis.

## Reference

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