

Dorothy Heathcote's Midwifery

Malcolm Dodge
Dramatic Arts Teacher
Governor Simcoe S.S.
St. Catharines

While on a teaching exchange for the 1983-84 school year in Leicester, England at St. Paul's Roman Catholic School, I was fortunate to take a two day course, ("course" being the word for workshop in England) with Dorothy Heathcote. What follows is a chronicle of what happened during the course, flavoured with my perspective of the process and a hint of how it might be applied.

The two day workshop with Dorothy Heathcote rambled philosophically and practically through many ideas and experiences. Trying to reflect, record and participate in what the two days offered, was challenging. Gathering the gems, which she juggled so expertly, soon had me dizzy. However, I was able to find a frame of reference for many of the things she uses to create drama.

Her dominant focus was on "rolling drama". It was a concept she stumbled on when trying to survive with two of her students who were offering a week of drama, to eight different classes in one school. Basically they decided to develop the drama from a common source but to have each class contribute a piece of the drama that was unique. Each class was aware of its part in the overall drama.

This approach would make the load on the instructors lighter because they wouldn't have to come up with different dramas. However, they would have to thoroughly develop one dramatic concept. The incredible bonus, which no one had considered, was the effect the classes had on each other. The teachers had not consciously planned any integration except that the school knew they were a part of the same drama. However, between classes the drama continued, as students discussed the artifacts that had been left behind by another class or pondered the implications of new developments that had occurred since yesterday. Each class realised that they were a part of the overall dramatic framework that they created for each other by producing icons for the drama that they could all believe in. This unexpected function of "rolling drama" created a dramatic momentum for the whole school. Each class had conjured drama for the other classes by leaving historical relics of their drama for the others to discover. This created a comprehensive dramatic framework that every class could believe in.

After an introduction to "rolling drama", Dorothy began the practicum. For the two day workshop, we teachers would do a "rolling drama" with thirteen year olds from a nearby school. This pairing of teachers and

students was to uncover another attribute of "rolling drama" that, to my mind, has incredible implications for community drama, which will be discussed later.

Our drama was to be based in Raby Castle, around a story of the mysterious disappearance of a young bride. What follows is a rambling discussion of what happened during the two day "rolling drama", plus an attempt to highlight some of Dorothy's midwifery.

Workshop Introduction

After introducing the ideal of "rolling drama", Dorothy discussed the following principles while also introducing the drama.

She pointed out that, in drama, the participants are asked to use personally private imaginations to explore and understand the implications of the public metaphors that are an intrinsic part of the drama. Thus, it is essential that the dramatically fictional world being created protects the players' personal contribution. This contribution is initially subjective and can only become reflective if the personal protection of each participant is guaranteed.

When all participants believe they are protected, their whole-hearted contribution is ensured. This protection is also required during reflection time. What Dorothy does so well is to create protection by framing the drama so the group is assured the distancing it requires to gain freedom of the imagination: intellectual understanding and commitment in the emotional genre which drama naturally is. She frames the drama from within and from without and her great experience helps her decide what is required and when.

Her transition from one frame to the other is almost seamless. With the drama in process she can stop it and discuss the commitment required so the drama will gain intensity and not become too diffuse, with everyone pulling in different directions. After the discussion, she will then continue with a dramatic digression that will require practically the very thing she has been discussing; commitment is one case. Being able to assure personal protection while requiring maximum personal commitment, and at the same time being able to move from the drama in process to a reflection on the dramatic process, and then illustrate the process and finally end up back in the drama, is a skill that Dorothy has honed to a fine edge. She patiently allows the participants to frame the drama solidly with both left brain and right brain experiences. This, combined with the "rolling drama" concept, can spiral into a learning experience beyond compare.

The Drama of Raby Castle

In order to "frame" the drama, Dorothy asked the teachers to role play stone masons who had to deal directly with the castle. Our initial task was to inspect

the castle carefully and make an inventory of the repairs needed for restoration. As masons, we recorded what was needed on a schematic diagram of the castle. The diagram was on a large table in the middle of the room/castle. The result was a diagram that defined the castle space to be used by the teachers and students.

Next, in order to "breed" the experience of Raby Castle, the family archives were introduced by Dorothy. She had made up the remains of the written archives and the teachers had to try and piece together as complete a picture as possible. For the archives, Dorothy had used material from a story about Raby Castle. That concluded the teachers' initial contribution.

The class of thirteen-year-olds arrived and were introduced to the teachers and then Raby Castle. Dorothy produced a picture of the castle and discussed the connotations of the name Raby and the picture. Then she introduced them to their role: National Trust volunteers who were to explore the family graveyard.

In what followed, Dorothy patiently dealt with the classes' willingness to commit themselves to the drama. Her role was to be that of a custodian, said she had seen them and she was on her way down to the main gate. She left them in the middle of the room while she walked around them. She narrated out loud her role and her physical position in relation to them. After circling the class two or three times, she stopped the drama to ask if she should appear to them from in front or from behind and, by doing the latter inevitably surprising them. This was the first real test of their commitment within the framework of the drama. If it was successful, it would help breed credibility. The group opted for the surprise and Dorothy stepped back into the drama. She said she was coming around an old gatehouse unseen. She then said, "Hello".

The class acted surprised, but it was forced. Dorothy introduced herself and a bit of their task. She then gave them another choice that would prove to be the turning point in terms of commitment to the drama. From outside the drama, she asked them if she should lead them up to the castle or if they should be allowed to find their own way up. She was giving them a chance to learn the consequences of the decisions they made in role. Would they be selfish and use the freedom of choice to get lost and scare themselves? Or would they deepen their commitment to their role as National Trust volunteers and trust the drama of Raby Castle, which Dorothy had introduced, to bring them the adventure they were looking for? This group deviated from the drama by trying to find immediate fun, but Dorothy skillfully got them back on track.

They decided from outside the drama that Dorothy, as custodian, should go ahead and they would find their own way. As custodian, Dorothy gave them instruction and left. They started off on their own, more relaxed but still forced and obviously looking for the quickest route to excitement. So they got lost. Again from outside the drama Dorothy gave their option a free rein. She stopped the drama and asked where they were. "Did they recognise anything? Had they found the main road the custodian had described?" Their answers all indicated,

"We're lost, Miss", and the subtext was "Isn't this fun? We've sidetracked the teacher into letting us do a drama about being lost on an old gloomy estate."

Now Dorothy reflected with the class on the repercussions of their choice. She assured them that she would abide by the decisions of the group and if they said they were lost and had seen a UFO, which then landed and kidnapped them, then that's what the drama had to be about. But if this was the kind of choice they made, the drama of Raby Castle would be scuttled and left behind. Later, when discussing the process of breeding trust and commitment, she mentioned that there were different ways of dealing with "mutiny". Sometimes, as with this class, reflection and a chance to get the drama back on track is enough. However, on occasion the "plank" must be used and the "mutineers" must be held accountable for their crime against the drama. It is possible to suggest that the class stay "on course" and go back to a time before the "mutiny".

After the reflection time, Dorothy included the detour in the drama by introducing killer Dobermans that would be released at sunset by the gardener. This allowed the class to have the scare they wanted and get back into the drama protected. That is, they could all renew their commitment to the drama without exposing their personal reluctance and without being embarrassed about their deviation from what Dorothy had planned. The group was developing commitment to the metaphor which was yet dormant in the drama about Raby Castle. Through this "crucible", they would gain the trust needed to "breed" the unknown drama that lay ahead.

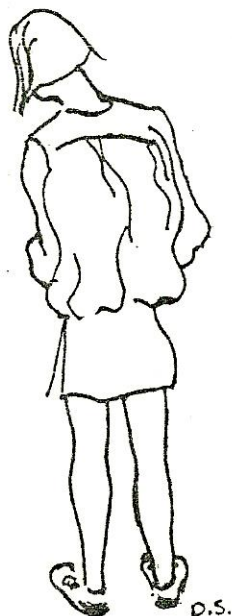
The drama continued then with Dorothy explaining to them, as the custodian, that the dogs were killers and as it was getting dark, they should make every effort to find the main road to the castle. She let them be scared for a while; they moved around the room in a herd. The group was gaining solidarity and their individual contributions were no longer as forced.

Next Dorothy, as custodian, stopped the drama and omnisciently (without any particular role) announced that since they hadn't arrived from the Gate House she had "phoned the gardener but there was no answer, which could only mean one thing — he was on his way to the dog pen." As Dorothy, she asked, "Have you heard or seen any dogs yet?" No, they hadn't was the group's unanimous response. She left them on their own again. Now the group was really scared. Next, the "coup de grace". Dorothy interjected again, as the custodian, to announce that the dogs were definitely loose. They concurred this fact with reports that some of them had heard the dogs. The custodian told them that she had finally got hold of the gardener at his quarters but, of course, that was a long way from the pen and them, wherever they were. She told them that she was sending the gardener to where she thought they had got lost and she hoped and prayed that the gardener would find them before the dogs found them.

Now, of course, the gardener could save them from their selfish detour and from within the drama. It was a detour that had nothing to do with the drama of Raby

Castle but, of course, it had everything to do with the starting point of every drama, commitment. The result was that the students had their scare and they learned what commitment to the drama and trust in the teacher can produce, something they can all believe in and learn from. The gardener led them to the custodian who had hot chocolate for all of them. Dorothy took the drinking of the hot chocolate to work on creating intention and mime. She asked them to really feel the cup and let the hot drink warm their insides. As they drank their hot chocolate one could sense that this class was now ready for Raby Castle.

Dorothy then asked if they could jump time and go ahead to the next day when they were to explore the family graveyard. They agreed, and Dorothy had them gather around the table with the map of Raby Castle and its grounds that the teachers, as masons, had created: thus introducing the first use of an icon from the other group. This evidence of the teachers' commitment to the drama fertilized the students' contribution as they were to fertilize the teachers' drama with their icons. Now Dorothy could ask more of the class, confident that they would, for the most part, advance and deepen the drama. She asked them what sort of information the National Trust wanted from the graveyard. They decided to record what was on each stone and in that way compile some sort of family tree. They were then sent out to the graveyard, this time they did not get lost but soon returned with replicas of the stones. Dorothy then asked if they could share what they found by pretending to be the voices of the people lying beneath the stones. They thought they could, and she then asked them to sit quietly as the stones; and as she touched their heads they were to read the inscription from their stone.



After this, students and teachers met for the first time within the drama. The teachers were to interview the gravestones. This ended the first day. The students left and the teachers were given homework. They were to complete the story of how the dead family members came to be marked by the gravestones uncovered by the National Trust volunteers.

On the second day, the drama rolled on into a police station that processed incoming calls from all over the world. Cards were made to designate departments and then the teachers were asked to take imaginary calls and fill out "forms" that outlined what had transpired. This was to be left for the next session with the students. All the time the framing of the drama was becoming more comprehensive and at the same time the "mise en scene" within the dramatic framework was being carefully composed to lead the students to the inspirational focus of the drama, the body of the princess found in an old chest.

When the students arrived they became the day shift of the police station. There was lots of evidence left by the night shift that "bred the dramatic context." The effect of the "rolling drama" was very evident. The students were able to build on what the teachers had left. I found this aspect particularly interesting because, it added a dimension to "rolling drama" that Dorothy hadn't discussed. Her experiments were with students of various ages within the same school. With this workshop the same phenomenon appeared to be working between two groups that had never met and that were chronologically about fifteen to twenty years apart. The fact that we had been brought together for a one-time drama and that one group was students and the other teachers did not seem to distract from the "rolling" phenomenon. It would appear that the more varied the groups are in "rolling drama" the more all inclusive the drama could become. This seems to have tremendous implications for community drama. Imagine the scope of a drama that focused all the age groups within a community by working them through a documentary drama based on the community. As this last session progressed, the problem became how to introduce the bodily remains of the princess without drastically diverting the complex drama already in progress. Dorothy first tried a phone call but finally, as the custodian of Raby Castle, had to resort to actually bringing in the remains. She had found the remains in an old chest pried open by one of the stone masons. The drama ended with the class as detectives, trying to reconstruct the position of the body in the chest. As a class, they drew a picture of the chest and the skeleton laying in it. Then scraps of material were used to represent the wedding dress that was found inside the chest. The class left the drama with this image of the bride of Raby Castle and the teachers were left with this picture of total trust and commitment to learning through drama.

Starting Points:

Now let us leave the drama and explore some starting points and consolidation strategies used by Dorothy to sculpt the drama.

What my rambling diary clearly illustrates is dramatic midwifery. Dorothy acknowledged that her starting point wasn't the students. They were coming to do a play at a special drama school. They had a day off to play at something they had never tried before. They discovered upon arrival that they would be working with

a lot of teachers surrounding them. Realizing that the drama teachers' starting point is not the students' starting point is essential. Exactly what their starting point is, must be discovered in order to intelligently choose the correct framing device.

Once a framing device has been chosen and tried, there will be feedback. From the feedback a new frame must be chosen and so on until the drama is born. Here are some of the framing devices Dorothy mentioned. The participant's frames of reference may progress as follows:

- a) Participant: we are here it's happening to us.
- b) Responsible: I am impowered to deal with the situation.
- c) Arbitrator: I am to deal with it for the group.
- d) Collector: I am interested enough to want to record what is happening.
- e) Historian: I am interested enough to search for patterns in the events that are happening.
- f) Storyteller: Others must know of the events, their essence, their meaning.
- g) Transformer: the experience matures me and expands my vision.

As midwife to the drama, Dorothy would stop the drama from without or from within and work on deepening the dramatic commitment. She might become Brechtian and discuss the structural implications of the

direction the students had decided to take. She might be very practical and introduce a dramatic digression that would allow the students to discover for themselves the result of more commitment to a certain direction. By offering various frameworks, Dorothy was constantly diagnosing the level of the students involvement.

She created the dramatic framework with the students' help and made sure they understood how the framing worked and what part it played in moving the drama forward. When Dorothy felt the students understood what was being asked of them, she would carefully explain what they would have to do. Next, she would ask them if they thought they could do it. This challenge usually lead to consensus for which Dorothy would strive before she let the drama move on. Finally, her part would be explained. Again it was negotiable depending on: what Dorothy wanted; what the students needed; and how brave the students were. Once the integration of her part and the students' part was clear, the drama would proceed.

What I have chronicled is an example of an incredibly complicated process. The "labour pains" inherent in the birth of drama are very real and must be borne because of the human dynamics required. Sometimes the union of teacher and students yields a moment of magic, when a collective of intellects and intuitions gives dramatic form to a common metaphor. The search for public metaphors is a process and, as such, finds meaningful expression through drama, an educational ritual with exciting potential.



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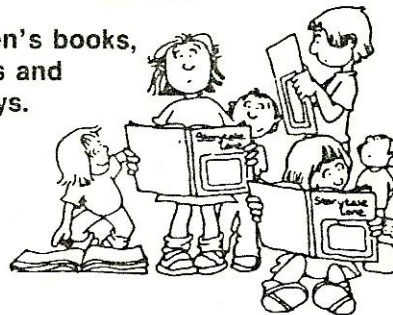
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