

Chapter 12

Democracy Over-Ruled, Or How to Deny Young Children's
Agency and Voice Through Drama!

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Stephen, a character in James Joyce's (1922) famous novel *Ulysses*, explains to the central character, Leopold Bloom, that mistakes are portals of discovery. Here Joyce offers a positive view of mistakes—one that suggests that errors are an important means of gaining new insights within both our personal and professional worlds. If this is the case, and I like to think that it is, then in order to journey through this portal, a vehicle is needed. This vehicle is reflection—that sometimes painful process that forces us to look closely at our experiences, both positive and negative, in order to take advantage of the learnings inherent within them. In this chapter, reflections, both shared and individual, are used to help me identify and make explicit new understandings about pedagogy, power, children's agency and voice and somewhat surprisingly, about research.

Set within the context of an early years' classroom where I participated in a small-scale research project, the mistakes described here occurred as I worked simultaneously as both practitioner and researcher. Aimed at examining the connections between play, drama, literacy and narrative, this case study research was focussed on a series of process drama, play and literacy experiences designed for a group of 6-year-old children. I had never met these children prior to the start of the research work, although I had met with their teacher who was involved in the planning process. The experiences themselves were based upon a story I created about two young children who encounter a community of "little people," while the lesson sequence, as planned, included opportunities for the children to generate written texts in response to the tensions inherent within the story and experienced during drama and play episodes. I had successfully used this plan and narrative previously when working with young children and I was therefore confident that the children would be engaged and interested.

Before describing the major mistake central to this chapter, together with the smaller ones that led up to it, in the section below I outline three categories of mistakes relevant to classroom drama.

MISTAKES IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM

In previous work, Madonna Stinson and I (Dunn and Stinson 2011) suggest that drama planning has two levels—macro and micro. We propose

that planning at the macro level involves all the decisions made prior to commencing classroom-based process drama work, including the identification of curriculum intent, the selection of a pretext and focus question, and the sequencing of strategies. Decisions about assessment, where relevant, are also included within this level. By contrast, planning at the micro level involves all of the decisions that are made “in the moment.” These decisions are informed to a great extent by the macro plan, but are also highly dependent upon the facilitator’s artistry and creative spontaneity. No amount of planning at the macro level can ever make micro planning redundant, for micro level planning is mostly driven by, and dependent upon, the spontaneous actions, ideas and responses of the students/participants.

Within the context of this chapter and indeed the overarching purpose of this book, these two forms of planning also seem to provide a useful framework for categorizing mistakes in drama work. According to this framework, mistakes at the macro level are those that occur when planning, while those at the micro level relate to the implementation of those plans. Macro level mistakes may be caused by unfamiliarity with the participants and their needs or interests, a lack of experience in a particular context, a poorly selected pretext, a failure to fully consider the elements of drama, or even tensions between the curriculum intent for the work and the selected strategies. Once made, mistakes at the macro level can generally be overcome through replanning between sessions. Here the understandings gained through reflection-on-action (Schön 1983) can be usefully applied to create new and improved macro level plans.

By contrast, mistakes at the micro level are far more frequent and are inevitable, for the improvisatory nature of process drama makes high demands on its facilitators. Across each session a continuous flow of spontaneous decisions is needed. Facilitators draw upon reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) and their understanding of dramatic form to make on-the-spot decisions about enacting, modifying, extending or even completely ignoring their plans. For example, although the facilitator may have determined in advance the status she will adopt when working in role, it is unlikely that she will also have determined the exact language to be used, blocked the movements required to play a role or considered all aspects of the specific information to be revealed. *Bowell and Heap (2005)* suggest, therefore, that when working in role, the process drama facilitator needs to simultaneously adopt the roles of actor, director, playwright and teacher, describing the thinking required in these moments as quadripartite thinking. As such, the margin for error is extremely high and even the most skilled drama educator is bound to make multiple mistakes during any given sequence of drama work. They may, for example, mismanage time or space, adopt a status for their role work that is

too high, reduce tension of mystery by offering too much information, or fail to create a mood conducive to meaning making. Fortunately however, most will also make plenty of highly effective decisions—decisions that create work that is aesthetically charged and rich in dramatic meaning.

A third category of mistakes sits in the space between these macro level and micro level ones, occurring when the facilitator intentionally ignores what has taken place within the drama experience in order to push on with their original planning. Such mistakes, which see the facilitator privilege their original planning over the actions, ideas and responses that have unfolded within the drama work, may occur as a result of limited time for replanning or indeed fear that a revised plan may be equally unsuccessful. These mistakes are not made in ignorance, such as when a newcomer to drama facilitation fails to recognize the significance of specific micro level responses. Rather, to be classed as a true “category three” mistake, the facilitator must make a conscious and considered decision to ignore the participants’ responses and choices.

Unlike mistakes at the macro and micro level that are part and parcel of every drama experience, offering facilitators rich opportunities to learn and improve, the serious nature of category three mistakes mean that few drama educators would want to admit to making one, for such actions contradict a number of the key philosophies that underpin process drama practice. Such mistakes also reveal a failure to engage in effective reflection, for a close consideration of the action’s consequences should serve to remind the facilitator/teacher of the risks they are taking in making this choice. These risks relate to the ongoing engagement of individuals and, as a follow on, the potential for these individuals to make meaning from the drama.

THE CASE STUDY

The teaching sequence explored here was part of a research project that took place in a small primary school within an urban fringe community southwest of Brisbane, Australia. The children in the case study class were of mixed gender, and were approaching the end of the first half of their first year of formal schooling.

In terms of the overall project design, two classroom case studies were generated in tandem with my colleague, Madonna Stinson, who operated video equipment and recorded observation notes while I taught. We followed a reciprocal approach: when she taught I collected the data. I collected the data. Involving two different classes and two very different drama plans, each of us worked with our respective classes for ten hours in a single school week,

with two-hour blocks being presented on each of five consecutive school days. In addition to the video recordings and observation notes, artefacts of student work were collected, and interviews with the children and their teachers were undertaken. Following each session, Madonna and I audio-recorded detailed reflective discussions to inform recursive planning while also serving as a first stage of analysis. The children's usual class teacher also kept reflective notes. In each of the case studies, the teachers had also been involved in the design of the research work, choosing the drama to be explored and making suggestions about the particular genres of writing they hoped the children might engage with across the experience.

The pretext for the process drama I led was a narrative entitled "The Wish." Structured into five distinct chapters, the story involves two children, Sally and her brother, David, who have moved in with their grandmother because their mother is very ill and has been hospitalized (at no point in the story is any mention made of the children's father). When the children explore their grandmother's garden, they encounter a parade of little people. Sally is enthralled by these little people and, much to David's dismay, captures one of them to keep in a glass jar. As the narrative progresses, Sally demands a wish in return for the "little girl" she has captured. Negotiations ensue to ensure the freedom of the "kidnapped" citizen and also that Sally upholds her part of the bargain. When Sally chooses a frivolous wish rather than the more expected one that will magically make her mother better, it is David who negotiates with the little people in order to secure his mother's return to health.

In creating this narrative, I intentionally layered into it plenty of points of tension, including relationships under pressure, surprising responses, important tasks that must be completed and the mystery of what would happen next. The story also offers rich role-taking opportunities with the children being invited to take on roles as the little people at various points through the drama. My two teacher roles included Sally, the obnoxious and selfish child villain of the piece, and later, leader of the Council of Little People whose primary concern is the safety and welfare of her community. In selecting these roles, I hoped that they would offer opportunities to provoke, challenge and confront (as Sally); and to support and guide (as the Leader of the Little People).

In terms of the macro level plan for this play and process drama work, my interest in how drama can support children's narrative competence saw me adopt a new approach to macro planning. Where generally I would launch drama work with a pretext (O'Neill 1995) that is left behind once the dramatic action begins to unfold, in this plan I intentionally structured the drama as a series of chapters. This approach was designed, in line with the overall goals of the project, to create explicit scaffolding that I hoped would better support

and enhance the children's narrative comprehension and narrative production skills (Bruner 1986, 1990). I therefore planned to begin each session using a storytelling approach that recapped the experiences and ideas generated during the previous day's drama before moving on to introduce the new ideas of the next chapter.

This plan, while potentially effective, contained an obvious mistake at the macro level; in structuring the work in this way, I had unintentionally locked myself mentally into a pre-determined narrative that limited my responsiveness and to a certain extent blinded me to new directions. Of course it did include opportunities for the children to explore and engage in open-ended ways within each chapter, but the overall story of Sally and David was fixed in my mind, with its chapters, like those of a novel, unfolding in a pre-determined sequence. Allied to this mistake was another one—a presumption that this group of children would respond to the narrative in the same way as previous groups of children had.

Micro level mistakes also occurred, but fortunately these were not too major and were, on balance, far outweighed by some very good spontaneous choices that enabled the drama to progress and eventually achieve some very worthwhile outcomes. However, at the heart of this chapter is a mistake that sits squarely within the somewhat embarrassing third category, and it is with some trepidation that I reveal its details to an international audience of peers. In doing so, my only source of reassurance is Joyce's suggestion that making and reflecting on this grand mistake ensures access to a portal of discovery.

THE CATEGORY THREE MISTAKE REVEALED

About mid-way through this process drama, I appeared before the Council of Little People in role as Sally. From within this role, I demanded a wish as "ransom" for the little girl I had captured and was holding as a "pet" in a glass jar within my bedroom. The children, draped in lengths of material to help them engage with their roles as members of the Council, really enjoyed my portrayal of Sally, with several commenting within follow-up interviews that Sally's visit was one of their favourite parts of the drama. This was possibly because, in interacting with them, I stood on a chair to further exaggerate our comparative size difference. Sulky, obstinate and impossible to negotiate with, I, as Sally, steadfastly refused to consider the council members' pleas for the return of their citizen and instead demanded a wish.

Following Sally's departure, and with a role switch, I became the leader of the Council and gave the children the opportunity to vote on Sally's demand: to make a democratic decision about whether or not to accede to it. Ironically,

this decision to offer the children a formal vote was not part of the original plan, but rather, is an example of a good, intuitive decision made at the micro level. It was motivated by a desire to give each participant in the drama a voice while also giving me, as teacher, a clear indication of the children's engagement with the focus of the drama. As such, it was a very positive change of plans, with the potential to empower the children and, when coupled with other micro level changes, such as the use of the lengths of material to support the children's enrolment and the chair to enhance Sally's size and status, it seems that up to this point I was working very effectively as a teacher/artist, making decisions keenly attuned to careful consideration of the elements of drama (so far so good!).

As each child cast his/her vote, excitement grew. One by one, unique and careful justifications were offered that surprised the three adults present in the room with their gravity and thoughtfulness. In a reflective dialogue recorded later that same day, Madonna makes the following observations:

Some of the language they used when they discussed Sally's right to a wish (and hence the rationale for their vote) was great ... like: no, because she trapped her in the first place; yes because if she comes back she will be safe; yes, because she is taking good care of the little girl; no because Sally mentioned that she (the little girl) nearly fell off the desk so that means she is not taking good care; no, because she might be tricking us and might take the wish and not give the little girl back; and no, because that little girl is important. That was lovely. And you know there wasn't one repeat around that whole circle of 24 children ... they each expressed their own ideas.

Eventually, to loud cheers, the votes were tallied and the decision made to veto Sally's demands and to look for other ways to recover the girl. This was a strong moment in the drama and one to be savoured, a moment where a group of very young children had used sophisticated moral reasoning, together with the exercise of democratic processes, to give voice to their feelings about right and wrong.

Of course, I valued this moment too and revelled with the children in the delight of overthrowing the demands of the selfish Sally—even if the freedom of one of their own depended upon it. However, this surprising result sent my macro level planning into disarray, for in offering the children the chance to vote, I never anticipated that they would refuse Sally her wish, that they would stand up to her and deny her demands. After all, in previous offerings of this drama the children participating had willingly agreed to Sally's request, with almost no objections to this idea being offered (although on those occasions no formal vote had been taken). Suddenly, my neatly contrived chapters

had, like Sally's wish, been overthrown and I was faced with a dilemma. I could either toss out my carefully designed planning to adopt an approach responsive to the children's decisions within the dramatic world, or I could follow the original plan and exercise my power (both in role and out of it!) to grant the wish anyway, irrespective of the vote. Fortunately (or unfortunately as it turned out), time was on my side as the vote took place at the end of the day's session so I had a full 24 hours to consider these options.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight and considerable personal and dialogic reflection, the appropriate course of action is now clear. However, at the time, this option did not appear to be so obvious or straightforward. After all, the story and indeed the drama itself was entitled "The Wish" and it seemed to me that the granting of this wish was pivotal in terms of generating the action and learning experiences I had so carefully planned and negotiated with the children's teacher. For example, within later episodes of the drama, with the wish granted, the children would experience some real tension as they gossiped about what Sally might wish for. My previous experience of this drama suggested that many of them, driven by deep concern for the children's absent mother, would guess that the wish would be used by Sally to return her mother to health. They would, however, be surprised to learn that given this unique opportunity, the wish would instead be for her toys to come to life. This outcome seemed very significant to me and I was therefore keen to see how the children would respond to Sally's exciting but selfish wish.

Chosen specifically to encourage solitary, parallel or social projected play (Slade 1954), this surprise wish was designed to open up the narrative and give the children the chance to switch perspectives to that of Sally's toys. Here, within my vision for the session, and once again based on previous experience, the children would excitedly engage in rich dramatic play where they would manipulate plastic dinosaurs, action figures of Spiderman and even Barbie dolls to create complex play episodes reflective of the havoc in Sally's bedroom and Grandma's garden, all generated as a result of this wish. Then, according to my carefully designed plan, the children would become potion makers, enabling David to shrink down to miniature size in order to visit the little people and enlist their support to overturn Sally's selfish wish in favour of one that would see their mother recover her health.

Along the way, my plan would also provide opportunities for the children to engage in authentic writing tasks, which, in line with the research findings of Cremin, Gooch, Blakemore, Goff and Macdonald (2006), would give them a range of options in terms of genre. These were built into the original plan and I feared that if I followed the children's ideas and overturned Sally's request for a wish, these plans would be thrown into disarray. After all, the

purpose of the research was to examine the relationship between play, drama, narrative and written literacy!

In the end, I opted to overturn the vote in order to stick with my original plan. In doing so, I now understand that I made a significant mistake—a classic category three mistake that saw me privilege my initial plan over the responses, interests and, in this case, the explicitly stated wishes of these young drama participants.

UNDERSTANDING THE MISTAKE

In reaching this decision, I justified my actions in a number of ways. To summarize, I claimed that: in the end, the children's vote would eventually be validated anyway (based on the fact that Sally's wish turns sour and has to be overturned); that the decision to ignore the children's vote was actually in their best interests, offering them time to engage in child-structured play that I was certain they would enjoy; that a new plan might not lead to opportunities to create authentic written texts; and that this pre-ordained narrative structure was needed in order to support the development of their narrative comprehension skills. Finally, and perhaps least convincingly of all, I justified my decision by suggesting that this explicit denial of democracy would generate additional tension and that this tension would help to sustain the drama.

Sadly, however, this tension never appeared, for the next day, when the new chapter began with the revelation that in spite of their vote, the leader of the little people would grant Sally's wish after all, the children passively accepted the ruling. No outcries were heard, no complaints made. In addition, the much-anticipated dramatic play was also a fizzer, with the children's engagement being minimal, best described as compliant and polite but disinterested.

Fortunately, by the final chapter, with some serious macro planning adjustments completed, I managed to rekindle the children's interest. Indeed, they responded with great delight as Sally's selfish wish is *eventually* overturned in favour of one that returns her mother to health, creating a *happily ever after* ending that many children crave. What's more, within the interviews, a vast majority of participants suggested that this final chapter was their favourite, revealing delight and satisfaction that all had finally been put right.

Clearly then, this drama was not a failure, for overall the children's responses were very positive. Through the intentional provocation of emotion (Dunn and Stinson 2012), the scaffolding offered by role and the tensions inherent within the original narrative, a range of positive learning outcomes were achieved. For example, the children wrote with enthusiasm and energy to develop creative, high-quality texts across a variety of genres, while they

also engaged in complex critical thinking and decision-making processes. Of course, opportunities to build narrative comprehension and production skills were also offered.

For these reasons, and more, I was generally happy with the learning sequence and to a certain extent felt somewhat vindicated by my decision to overturn the vote. However, nagging doubts remained. I found myself wondering about what might have happened if I had chosen to follow the children's lead. What exciting directions might the drama have taken if I had been more responsive, if I had let it "unfold" in a more organic manner rather than forcing it into the shape and direction of my original macro plan? What if I had followed the principles of drama rather than ignoring them?

In outlining some of these principles, Neelands (2009) suggests that within drama work, teachers use their expertise and artistry to give students choices and power over the direction of their learning. Later in that same article, he goes on to note:

In process drama nothing can happen unless young people take action, initially through their social participation in making decisions, taking on roles and inter-acting with each other, and subsequently by carrying through the choices that they make in relation to the developing "plot" or "situation" they co-author with the teacher/leader.

These are, of course, core beliefs I too hold about drama in general, and process drama in particular. Yet, in this decision, I clearly had not acted on these beliefs, for rather than seeing the children as co-authors, I instead had used my power as an adult to dominate and, in so doing, denied them power over the direction of their learning.

New questions began to emerge from these reflections causing me to wonder not only about my mistake, but also about the children's reactions, especially the passive way they accepted the news that their vote had been overturned. What did this response reveal about power in classrooms? In order to gain further insights into these aspects, I turned to the reflective dialogues Madonna and I created in response to each session.

Of particular interest to me now is a conversation recorded after the dramatic play session, where the children had been given the chance to "play out" the adventures of Sally's toys suddenly brought to life. Here I make negative comments upon the quality of the children's play and look for reasons why this might be the case:

Fascinating for me as a play researcher was their inability to metacommunicate, that is, to negotiate the play from within the play. At

their age they should have been able to do it and they couldn't. They didn't even seem able to use explicit metacommunication strategies which are the most basic of these. I don't know whether it was the camera, the play context or who their play partners were ... but I'm guessing they just haven't had enough experience.

In this extract I outline a number of possible explanations for the children's lack of engagement. Significantly, only one of these explanations, the one relating to the play context, bears any connection to the actual cause of their disinterest. Most surprisingly, I also accuse them of being poor players, a conclusion that permits me to conveniently ignore the contrived nature of the wish, its placement within the narrative and the fact that it was granted against *their* wishes.

Reflecting on this play session now, I am left to wonder what might have been. How much richer might the children's experiences have been if I had explored the implications of overturning Sally's request for a wish? According to this scenario, the council members would have been required to take some alternative action, with one option being to mount a rescue mission, with all the risk and adventure this would have entailed. Driven by the tension inherent within this difficult task, the children's play in these circumstances would inevitably have been far more individual, innovative, complex and open-ended than the play that was generated in response to the "toys come to life" wish.

Later in that same conversation, I offer another hypothesis for the children's limited response to the wish, in this case one that suggests that they were "underwhelmed" because the wish itself is "silly."

JULIE: I think the wish underwhelmed them ... and that's not surprising because it's a really silly wish and it's only there because I wanted them to have the chance to play, so I'm wondering if that part of this plan needs re-developing. But the thing is, what else could she wish for? She could wish for her mother to get better, but then the drama would be over. I needed something that opens out the story, what other wish could open out the story?

What is most revealing about my comments here is not my desperation to seek yet another cause for the children's low level response, but my determination to maintain control over the narrative. Phrases like "I needed ..." and "I wanted ..." reinforce the fact that I saw myself as the sole author of this narrative, an author operating alone to create a story *for* children with an

assumed right to be in charge. Instead, I needed to see myself as a co-author. I needed to remember that, in process drama, stories aren't fixed entities locked in linear engagements pre-determined by the author. Stories, instead, offer points of departure—portals into the unknown where we co-create new stories as we experience them. This is what sets this approach apart—its ability to be responsive and reflexive.

Fortunately, Madonna had not lost sight of this principle, for she gently offered a comment about how I might adapt this plan in future offerings. She notes:

The idea of Sally asking for a wish in return for the little girl seemed to come out of the blue and it was something you imposed ... I wonder if in a future version you need to establish ... to sow some seeds so that it (the idea of Sally asking for a wish in exchange for the kidnapped citizen), comes more from the children ... it seemed a bit clunky ... this idea that she would even ask for a wish in the first place.

Ouch!

Here she gently reminds me that irrespective of my needs, the power of high-quality process drama, and indeed play, lies in its potential for participants to exercise agency and to have their voices heard. Pufall and Unsworth (2004: 9) describe voice in the context of early childhood as the "cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own," arguing that this voice surfaces "only when the adult has learned to ask and get out of the way." They go on to suggest that agency occurs when children's actions have the power to affect their worlds. At these times, voice is "an expression of agency."

Within this drama sequence, I denied children their agency; and their response, sadly, was passivity and acceptance. After all, adults, including teachers, over-rule children's wishes all the time and for these children at least, I revealed myself as being no different in this regard, maybe worse. I invited the children to express their views, to have their voices heard, and then reinforced their lack of agency by rejecting their decision.

CONCLUSION

Time to reflect is a valuable commodity, and in creating this chapter I have taken the time to take one final look at this sequence of events, to step back even further and consider once again my actions and responses. What emerged from this latest phase of reflection are new insights about my decision not

addressed within the reflective commentary outlined above. These additional insights relate specifically to the research context itself and the influence it exerted over my actions. For example, I now see that my role as researcher was not incidental to this mistake, but may in fact have been partially responsible for it because my power as an educator had been somewhat restricted by the partnership I had negotiated with the children's teacher. This partnership, as noted previously, included decisions about the content of the drama work to be addressed and the specific written genres to be explored. Any decision to throw this shared plan away in favour of one that might evolve in response to the children's interests and decisions would have required considerable renegotiation and consultation. Perhaps if this had been my own class, and I had been free to follow the children's interests, managing time according to their needs and not those of the research project, I might have made a different call.

In addition, I also now appreciate that my ability to make appropriate decisions in relation to the drama work was also hampered, quite ironically, by the goals of the research itself. In this instance, my desire to create drama experiences that generated written texts and supported the development of narrative competence dominated and, to a certain extent, clouded my thinking. Where I should have focussed on creating an experience aimed at meaning making, I allowed the narrative structure of my macro planning to lead the drama, resulting in the sidelining of several fundamental principles of process drama.

Of course some readers may see these final reflections as "excuses," offered as a desperate means of preserving my reputation as a drama educator. However, for me, they are somewhat comforting, providing additional perspectives and discoveries. In this case, the discoveries made by entering the portal of mistakes have not served to change what I believe about drama or for that matter, research. Rather, they remind me of principles I already know and understand, but in this instance had forgotten: that irrespective of our goals or purposes, we should trust and follow what we know about dramatic form; that co-authoring is a key requirement of this form; and that experiences offered without the participant agency that co-authoring requires are a denial of one of the essential characteristics of the unique art form that is process drama.

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