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Differentiating for Gender in the Drama Classroom

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ABSTRACT  This article takes the position that the secondary drama classroom is a powerful arena for exploring the politics of gender. It begins by suggesting that a policy for Equal Opportunity which takes a purely binary perspective of sexual identity, focussing on the boy/girl dichotomy, is fundamentally oppressive in itself. It goes on to outline ideas put forward by Judith Butler and Peggy Phelan which shift the focus of gender identity onto the body, as its cultural signifier. It then explores several practical ways in which such a focus can be used as a springboard for questioning the assumptions we hold about gender, through techniques employable in a dramatic space. It concludes by suggesting that it is only by making cultural issues of oppression explicit and open to examination within the curriculum, that a school can offer a truly emancipatory vision to its pupils, and that such exploration should supplement other form of Equal Opportunities policy.

Firstly, to put this article into context, I am a PGCE student [1], training to teach drama at a secondary level. This article forms a part of my assessed coursework, and is my response to a task specifically designed to make us, as trainees, consider the relationship between academic theory and classroom practice. My first degree, a BA in Theatre Studies and English Literature, was laden with theory that I absorbed like a sponge. However, I have since realised that sponges do not necessarily make good teachers, and one of the biggest challenges of this year has been to attempt to integrate theoretical awareness successfully into my teaching practice. I am still at an early stage in that process, and very aware of my lack of the teaching experience that would enable me to fill out the practical side of my project further. This aside, I hope my ideas will still be of interest.

To refuse to name the structural sources of human suffering and exploitation is to take a position that supports oppression and the power relations that sustain it. (Kincheloe, 1993, p. 43)
In order to differentiate classroom practice in a drama lesson on any grounds requires a coherent theoretical framework upon which to base decisions, and gender is no exception. Much research has been done on the differences in achievement across the curriculum between boys and girls, and these statistical reference points have provided springboards for pioneering work on equality of opportunity for all school students, regardless of biological gender (for example, see *Equal Opportunities for Boys and Girls*, 1982, The Inner London Education Authority). There is also a clear legal framework within which to operate [2].

However well intentioned, this work is born of a binary perspective on sexual identity, focusing on the boy/girl dichotomy, which, like any dichotomous perceptual framework is self-reinforcing: no-one can take a position on sexual politics which does not situate them on one side of a fence. In other words, as soon as I take a position on sexual politics, I draw attention to my own sexual identity, which is then ‘read’ into my statement as central to its meaning. The creation of gender stereotypes takes place in a social context, as does the challenging of gender stereotypes. Neither act can ever be independent of a binary view of the world.

I would like to suggest that such a binary concept of sexual identity is fundamentally oppressive, in that it obfuscates the view that to ‘be an individual’, i.e. to take a subject position, is never an act achieved in an apolitical space. The act of being a man or a woman is always contingent on its context, and how the act is interpreted in that context. The visible manifestation of subjectivity is, of course, the body, which unavoidably becomes a cultural signifier. Judith Butler argues that:

acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core of substance, but produces this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal the organising principle of identity as a cause. (1995, p. 136)

By shifting the focus of identity to the body as signifier, the site where its cultural meaning is created, Butler draws attention to identity as negotiated cultural performance, and its inherent instability as such. Peggy Phelan thinks along similar lines when she writes that ‘[i]dentify emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signer to convey meaning exactly’ (1993, p. 13). When the body is brought into the discursive arena, gaps emerge with exciting possibilities for drama studies.

It is from this position that I would like to argue that drama holds, within the dynamics of its own form, a potential for analysis and learning about subjectivity and identity, through the production of, and reflection upon performative identity. The purpose of this article then, is to explore how gender identity can be demystified through classroom drama, as it is my belief that such demystification is the true starting point for any political project of equal opportunity.

This kind of analysis and learning is possible in the subject of drama because there is the potentially illuminating juxtaposition in the drama classroom of the performative mode with the non-performative, meaning that ‘natural’ and ‘acted’ behaviour can be compared, contrasted and interrogated. And therefore there is, at the teacher’s disposal, the possibility of engaging a class in a reflexive process of learning which can actually go some way towards interrogating the structural processes of subjectivity and identity.
I will therefore use the remainder of this article to suggest how classroom drama techniques may be employed as tools for interrogating gender politics, focussing particularly on the well established activities of hot-seatng and thought-tracking.

For example, during a Year 8 drama lesson at a School in Berkshire, UK (my second teaching practice placement), I observed two boys acting a scene they had devised in which they played two men in a launderette, meeting by coincidence. The scene was a part of a unit of work revolving around characterisation and based on the genre of soap operas. They played a recently married man and a bachelor, respectively, and their conversation revolved around the new wife, and how bullied the husband was by her; hence his being in the launderette at her command. The scene was skilfully executed in terms of use of pace and economy of language, and also in its use of form; the scene created a ‘monster’ of the absent wife, employing something along similar lines to the conventional ‘mother-in-law joke’ form. One of the male characters mocked the second character for reading a book in bed at night when he could be ‘acting like a newly-wed man’. The format of the scene was sharp in its employment of comic conventions; for example the second man played dumb, thus acting as a foil for the ‘knowing’ character’s observations. It was a scene that I felt uncomfortable watching, from my subject position within the classroom as a female trainee teacher. The scene presented a view that bought into a tradition of denigrating women as public entertainment, particularly in stand-up comedy. The woman, an essential part of the comedy of the scene, typically is absent, and therefore voiceless. Her presence is conjured solely in terms of the males’ interpretation of her. However, the scene also used conventions of realism, in that the characters fell somewhere in-between being two-dimensional stereotypes and ‘rounded’ characters with a psychological dimension. In the context of the module in question, what the boys presented raised important questions in terms of characterisation in the genre of soap opera, and its political implications.

I have been puzzling ever since over what I would want to do as a teacher, in response to a scene of this kind and as a result of researching this article I have formulated a possible working model. It stems from an engagement with Joe Kincheloe’s notion that ‘the search for the forces that generate the interpretations of the moment moves us into a great cultural conversation’ (1993, p. 113). It is for this reason that I would aim to avoid going down the binary route of differentiating for gender by, for example, challenging stereotypical representations of men and women. This route, in my opinion, short-circuits the possibility of having that very conversation which, by its cultural nature, can only be continuing and open-ended. I want to argue instead for creating a framework of critical enquiry within the drama classroom, which takes as its through-line an exploration of the circulation of power. This upholds a moral belief that education has a responsibility to equip individuals with ways of understanding that will empower them with the means to challenge oppression. This may only be made possible through the pursuit of a common project; that of our reaching an understanding of how power is circulated within society through cultural signification.

These issues may be addressed in the processes of creating, performing and responding to drama. Within this model, gender can be considered as one particular aspect of power relationships in society, open to interrogation in the dramatic space alongside
others (race, class, sexuality, etc.) but approached laterally rather than head-on. Any performance text can be analysed in terms of its cultural currency; what it means, and how it achieves that meaning. I would argue that, used selectively, such a framework of enquiry could enrich and augment the learning in all the schemes of work throughout the whole syllabus of a drama course.

Such a scene as the one I described could take on a new status as something to be investigated in the above terms. In this way the unspoken ‘silences’ in the text could be filled. Pierre Macheray argues that ‘the text says what it does not say’, meaning that it is in the silences that we find what the text takes for granted; its implicit ideology:

The recognition of the area of shadow in or around the work is the initial moment of criticism. (Macheray, 1978, p. 82)

The module on soap operas was designed to explore and develop skills and awareness of characterisation. However ‘characterisation’ itself is a concept born of notions of what constitutes a person, and how that constitution can be represented through performance, and is certainly not apolitical.

I would like now to look at several possible ways of responding to the above scene, which I believe could enrich the work on characterisation, by giving it an interpretative context. Firstly, to add to the scheme of work on characterisation and soap opera, information about the historical context of naturalism, television realism and soap opera, and the inter-relationships between the forms, would create a context for subsequent work that would enable students to understand the form they are using as emergent from distinctive historical conditions. For example, one aspect to look at is the fact that soap opera, and television realism in general, employs performative conventions which have evolved from the form of naturalism, which developed in the theatre in the nineteenth century. Its aesthetic revolves around an understanding of a plot, where theatrical actions are determined by the psychological motivations of characters, which come to a climax and are resolved into an ideologically containable sense of an ending. Characters in soap operas have a psychological history, and much of the pleasure of soap opera comes from the belief that we ‘know’ the characters; that is, we understand their psychological history, and have a basis upon which to predict their actions.

This makes the characters something more than stereotypes, and this leads us on to practical ways of exploring these notions in the classroom. I would like to look at the technique of ‘hot-seating’ the characters after the scene. This was actually done in the lesson I saw. By questioning the actors in role, the audience (rest of the class) finds a new way of understanding the performance text; it enters into a dialogue with it, in order to find out what it needs to know about the characters. For example, here lies the potential for exploring the married couple’s relationship; as the scene was performed as realism, convention dictates that the characters have a psychological history. By being questioned in role, the two male characters are forced to become three dimensional, and yield an explanation of themselves and their actions in terms of the framework of other perspectives. The question ‘Why did you marry your wife?’ for example, is political (although the questioner might not be conscious of the fact) in that it presses for facts that might belie the shared comic stereotype of the monstrous wife. By extension, the
wife could feasibly also be ‘brought to life’ and hot-seated, to articulate her side of the story; have a voice. By skilfully joining in the questioning, the teacher could highlight issues that s/he wanted to draw to the class’s attention.

This technique is politically radical because it breaks the fourth wall of realism. Because realism as a form assumes that it reflects reality, it is mono-centric; it precludes multiple perspectives on identity, including of course gender identity. Once the fourth wall is broken, and the audience comes into play, the meanings generated by the text are no longer sacred, but questionable.

A second way into an exploration of the gender politics of this scene would be to look at it under a very consciously performative perspective. The teacher could interrogate the way that the performers in this scene characterised themselves; who had the higher status in this scene? What did he do to achieve this? How was he sitting? What did this tell us about him? For example, the signifiers of the scene can be isolated, and the scene may then be re-run with the ‘variables’ altered. [Keith Johnstone’s exercises on status (1979) could be used to give depth and insight into this area of work.] A further perspective could be gained by ‘thought-tracking’ the actor. Thought-tracking is a technique where the action can be stopped and the actor’s character questioned. This is a useful exercise for: (a) checking/increasing the depth of identification of the actor with her character in rehearsal; and (b) gaining additional insights into a character’s psychological make-up and reactions to events going on around her within a drama. However in this context, a process of thought-tracking the actor could also be used, and compared and contrasted with the thought-tracking of the actor’s character:

Teacher: ‘Stop. What are you the actor planning to do next?’
Student: ‘I am thinking I will now move away from my chair.’
Teacher: ‘Why are you going to do that?’
Student: ‘To show that my character is agitated.’

This is a subtle exercise, and possibly really only suitable for older students, but its purpose is to expose the techniques and strategies that the actor is using at all times to make dramatic meaning, and forge a believable dramatic identity.

By exposing and interrogating the mechanisms and techniques of performance in the ways suggested above, the teacher is actually doing something quite subversive. By drawing attention to performative skills in the form of realism that the boys were attempting to emulate, s/he is implicitly drawing attention to the performativity of social identity itself. When this is related to the issue of gender, the exercise of questioning the codes of performance and their interpretation, highlights the perspective that gender identity is actually constituted of behavioural codes, rather than internal essences. A friend of mine told me a story about an actor who became distraught about performing. ‘If I act another part’, he told her one night, ‘I will collapse’. When the semantics of this are interrogated in the light of this topic, this statement takes on an illuminating meaning. Performativity renders identity unstable, and therefore exposes its mutability.

Both of the above examples form part of the same educational project of de-familiarising the commonsensical, the taken for granted, in order to view subjectivity in new ways. There are many more ways of expanding this project, although I have only the
space briefly to touch on a couple more areas here. Firstly, swapping the gender of the actors in the above scene, and asking the female performers to attempt to re-produce the scene, could raise any number of questions about gender and performance, and perhaps highlight in particular, the posturing of any attempt at an absolute gender position [3]. A second idea, which reinforces the aim of de-familiarising realism, is to put the scene we have been examining in a ‘laboratory’ situation; that is, alter its form by, for example, slowing it right down, speeding it up, using song, dance, silly costume, or any theatrical device which will disturb, confuse or throw into relief its original meaning by playing with its semantics, while keeping the language the same. To understand the semantics of performance is to gain power over performativity, which, as we have seen, blurs the boundaries between drama and life.

It may be seen therefore that by purposefully using existing drama education techniques, insights and perspectives on identity, and in this case on gendered identity, can be gained and developed. I am aware that the above approach to gender in the drama classroom does not refer to the Sexual Discrimination Act of 1975. Neither is it, in itself, an equal opportunities policy for the subject of drama, but it is intended rather to work alongside one. Such a policy is still of paramount importance, and needs to address curricular issues such as access to the subject, buying texts that reflect female perspectives and giving students of each gender equal opportunities to learn about technical aspects of theatre, because sexual discrimination is still a reality in schools, and in the wider culture. I would still argue, however, that the most empowering and anti-discriminatory practice a school can implement is to make issues of oppression explicit within the curriculum, and open to examination. Only when, in Kincheloe’s words, ‘the structural sources of human suffering and exploitation’ have been named, will all students have equal opportunities to equip themselves with the potentially emancipatory tools of critical perspectives on ‘knowledge’ itself.

Notes


[2] The UK Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 stipulates equal treatment for boys and girls in relation to issues such as access to the curriculum, standards of behaviour and restrictions on dress, and sexual harassment. Most UK schools have an equal opportunities statement in the school handbook which outlines its particular policies and procedures for dealing with gender issues within the school. In a report on equal opportunities by the Inner London Education Authority inspectorate in 1982, it was recommended that schools should make a senior member of staff responsible for all issues pertaining to equal opportunities within the school (ILEA Inspectorate, 1982).

[3] An extremely interesting separate area of study for a General Certificate of Secondary Education (the examination taken at 16 in the UK) group on which a scheme of work could be based, would be to look at forms of drama where cross-gender performance takes place; e.g. pantomime, Shakespearean acting, drag etc.

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