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SESSION SIX – DRAMA & SHAKESPEARE 4/10/01

The purpose of this session was to introduce the idea of using drama as an aid to teaching English, and in this instance, as a specific tool for looking at approaches to Shakespeare. Kate took an active approach to our learning, treating the session as though we were a class of pupils, expecting full participation from all present in order for us to see through our own experience the value of these techniques in a classroom setting.

During the course of the afternoon we undertook a series of drama activities based around scenes from 'Twelfth Night' and 'Hamlet':

HOTSEATING

For this exercise Kate had taken on the character of Hamlet, and the group were encouraged to ask her questions in order to discover character, state of mind, problems, hopes, thoughts about the future etc. These were answered as if by Hamlet himself, and although we weren't aware which character Kate had chosen we all quickly became aware it was Hamlet as the questions became increasingly sophisticated.

VALUE

This technique was very interesting and would be useful as either a way into looking at characters at the start of studying a play or as a revision exercise to assess knowledge and understanding. Those questioning can discover empathy with the character and problems with Shakespearean language are overcome.

FREEZE FRAMES / SNAPSHOTS

Here we took a scene from 'Twelfth Night'. After reading we were encouraged to decide upon the three most important moments and prepare a series of 'freeze frames' depicting the action of these moments in such a way that an audience would be able to see and hopefully understand the action even though presented as 'frozen'. We were encouraged to consider such issues as spatial relationships, facial expression and body movement.

VALUE

Freeze framing allows for valuable skills to be developed. Students are encouraged to scan the scenes for key moments and events, think about roles, direct and visualise moments from the play. Even before they perform the sequence of freezes much has already been achieved in thinking about the play. The performance itself nurtures a feeling of shared enjoyment and pride. There is also a need for evaluation after the performance in order to understand what has been achieved. The acting skills involved are not of great importance, but the choices of representation made are. We can look at what the poses chosen tell us about character and action and how we know this. Further development can be through the addition of a word or line significant to that particular character or scene.

DRAMA LINE

Using the theme of the sincerity of love depicted in 'Twelfth Night' we started to think about

this important theme in the play, ranging ourselves in a line as to where we felt each character should be positioned on the 'sincerity scale'.

VALUE

Whilst there was no acting taking place in this exercise it was clear that it could be used to promote a discussion of the issues and themes in any play, the learning begins to take place as you would have to justify your decisions and support your arguments. In this way you could also evaluate knowledge of the play and show the confusion that exists over interpretation in Shakespeare.

ROLEPLAY

This exercise involved the group in improvising, devising dialogue and directing in small groups a scenario similar to that of the opening scene from 'Hamlet'. We took on the characters of two night watchmen aware of rumours of supernatural happenings at their place of work and their responses as a result of this. Kate encouraged us to think that we were not so much acting as putting ourselves into character and thinking about how these men might think and respond.

VALUE

This technique is very useful as a way into a play. With the roleplay we did no mention had been made of 'Hamlet' yet we had covered the first scene, thought about some of the issues involved and avoided the problems of language and contemporary relevance. The emphasis is on thinking in character as opposed to proving a great acting ability.

During the plenary we discussed how all these methods provided opportunities for students to develop skills in speaking and listening, summarising knowledge and developing group and social skills. An introduction to Shakespeare can be achieved through a slow build-up of non-threatening activities, which don't have to be perceived as performance, more 'the way we learn in drama'.

These methods of approaching the teaching of Shakespeare using drama are advocated particularly by Gibson (1994), who suggests that in order to make Shakespeare interesting and accessible to all, the aura surrounding the plays needs to be removed. He advocates the use of 'active methods' in which each student plays a part in making meaning. Methods such as these encourage the students to inhabit the imaginary world of the play and foster different kinds of capabilities, not just the intellectual.

Davison & Dowson (1998), believe that the use of drama activities, such as those we have been looking at, promote personal and social development, extend language awareness and usage and provide a basis for cultural analysis. At the simplest level, any of these approaches requires the student to look at the text and explore possible meanings.

Finally, Protherough & King (1995), suggest that through drama students develop the important idea of the play as something to be performed not just read, stimulating ideas about theatrical space, staging, direction, costume etc within the historical context of Shakespeare's England.

The Cambridge School Shakespeare series provides many good ideas activities for individual approaches to plays. Below I have briefly summarised a couple of those that could be useful for any play:

In order to avoid problems with language students could take a long speech and break it down into manageable chunks, miming the action of each section. In this way they would be checking and reinforcing their understanding of the language.

Another technique for identifying the important points within a scene is to ask the students to provide you with a '30 second' version of the scene.

Asking the students to direct a particular scene using their own stage directions would get them to think about theatrical space, what characters would be doing and how they would be responding to certain situations.

I had the opportunity to see the effectiveness of these techniques in action during two lessons at my parent school. A group of Year 10 students were looking at the play 'Two' by Jim Cartwright, which is a series of interlinked duologues. The teacher's objective was to encourage the students' understanding of the characters in the play and to consider issues of performance and staging in preparation for a piece of written work. There was a gradual building up of the tasks which began with some warm-up exercises designed to relax the students and to get them used to moving around the space, listening to instructions, maintaining eye contact and the idea of physical contact. The play is set in a pub so the teacher then moved on to introduce the idea of mime related to a pub situation, gradually building this up to include the characters from the play and how their relationships with each other could be expressed without words. 'Freeze framing' was then used to select moments that would typify these relationships.

In the second part of this lesson mime was again used to look specifically at the character pairings in the play and the motivations behind these. This activity developed through a pair freeze symbolising the main feature of each of the three relationships in the play, to culminate with the addition of 'thought tracks', where a phrase or noise shows what the character in the freeze is thinking at that moment. This moves the students on to the next level of thinking about the character and response. The final activity involved selecting key scenes from the play and how these could be given special dramatic effect through the use of lighting, voice, facial expression and body language; for example, how does a character show us that they are menacing or aggressive without just saying so?

The students responded really well to the carefully structured nature of these exercises, and the opportunity to practice altogether first before performing to the group seemed to overcome any reticence or nerves. The ideas that the class were developing showed that they had a good understanding of the play and the characters and their motivations, and most of all they were all learning in an atmosphere of enjoyment.

So we can see that the techniques we have been considering can be used as an approach to any dramatic text not just Shakespeare. The theory underpinning all these activities is to stimulate the students' imagination regarding a text in order to promote a deeper understanding through learning by doing.

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