

# 4



## Using Drama to Extend the Reader

**R**eader response theorists have often focused on ideal reading, on the general stance and processes of proficient and engaged readers like Cora, Joanne, and Ron. Though I too worked hard to help my proficient readers outgrow themselves, I was especially concerned with those many other students who struggled with or resisted the reading act. I have always regarded reading of any kind, but especially of literature, as a unique and powerful way of knowing about self, others, and the world. Seeing students who went to great lengths to avoid reading made me ask what was different about their history, experience, and attitudes as readers from those of more engaged readers. I felt as if these reluctant readers had been sitting on the bench during the big game, completely bored, without even realizing they hadn't participated in the action. I asked myself how I could help them get into the game of reading and experience in some way its potential thrills and excitement.

I decided to use techniques of story theater (using the text as a script) to help students experience the world of a text, and techniques of story drama (using the text as a starting point) to help them explore the implications and possibilities at the edge of texts. The story I will tell in this chapter is about three reluctant readers who were helped by these dramatic interventions. Marvin, Kevin, and Libby were helped by drama to experience and take on for themselves some of the moves and strategies of more engaged readers. They also began, through the dramas, to rethink the nature and possibilities of reading.

Rosenblatt (1978) asserts that “the benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself” (p. 276).

She argues that the reader must evoke and exert control over the ideas, sensations, feelings, and images that are experienced while reading. The text acts both as a stimulus that activates a reader's past experience and as a guide or blueprint for selecting, rejecting, and ordering that experience. Rosenblatt even makes a specific comparison between reading and acting in a drama: "We accept the fact that the actor infuses his own voice, his own body, his own gestures—in short, his own interpretation—into the words of the text. Is he not simply carrying to its ultimate manifestation what each of us as readers of the text must do?" (1978, p. 13). In this view, literary reading requires that readers both evoke and participate in imaginary worlds whose creation is stimulated and guided by the text. Reading literature is not the reception of meaning, but the reader's participation in a "transaction" with text that produces meaning. Yet this was a conception of reading that my less engaged readers failed to understand or enact, and that left some of them scoffing.

Iser (1978) argues similarly that "apprehension of a literary work comes about through the interaction between the reader's presence in the text and his habitual experiences, which are now a past orientation. As such it is not a passive process of acceptance, but a productive response" (p. 113). For Iser, most stories cannot be fruitfully enjoyed and understood solely through explicitly articulated action because the text is filled with gaps that the reader must fill and elaborate upon to create a "virtual world."

Though Ron, Joanne, and Cora engaged in many elaborative reading activities, most of my other students did not. Eco (1978) calls such elaborative activities "taking inferential walks" and writes:

Texts are lazy machineries that ask someone [the reader] to do part of their job. . . . Frequently . . . a text tells the reader about the event A and, after a while, about the event E, taking for granted that the reader has already anticipated the dependent events B, C, D. (pp. 214, 215)

I believe that at least for less engaged readers, the dimensions of response are order-dependent; I found that the less engaged readers I studied did not respond in connective or reflective ways to their reading unless they first overtly responded on all of the evocative dimensions. I would like to make the claim that this is the case with all readers, but the data are too murky. Engaged readers seem to respond simultaneously on many if not all of these dimensions, sometimes privileging a highly reflective dimension without really discussing their response on an evocative one.

The findings about the less engaged readers strike me as very important. The collected information reveals that we often ask less engaged

readers to reflect on something that they have not experienced. This suggests that if we would help them to develop evocative, experiential response to literature, response on other dimensions would be possible for them—and the door to engaging literary worlds would finally be opened. Defining the dimensions of evocative response and thinking about questions and activities to encourage this sort of response seem to me to be important steps for teachers to take toward helping less engaged readers into the experience of reading.

My question at the point when I began to use drama, some 12 weeks into the school year, was, How could I help the rest of my student readers to think of reading as something that required the creation of meanings that were not completely printed on the page? How could I help them use words to create characters and pictures that went beyond the words? It was then that I began to think of *story theater*, or enacting *story events*, and story drama, or enacting story suggestions and possibilities, as a way to help these readers.

### WHY DRAMA?

Benton (1983) describes the act of reading as the creation of “secondary worlds” (a term he borrows from Tolkien, 1964) and the involvement and enactment of dramatic activity within those worlds. Harding (1937, 1962) and Britton (1984) support this view when they describe what they call “the participant stance” of the reader as an important dimension of reading. This stance puts the reader inside the secondary world of a story, experiencing and elaborating upon it from within. The reader taking this stance, as seen with Cora and the other engaged readers, makes moves to enter the story world and to move about inside it. These theorists also describe the “spectator role” (also exemplified in great detail by Ron, Joanne, and Cora), in which a reader sees the text as an object, reflecting and commenting upon it. Rosenblatt (1978) and others have pointed out that most teaching and research have focused on the spectator stance and how a reader interprets, evaluates, and reflects on the evoked world of the text. Little emphasis has been placed on what readers actually do to go beyond simple comprehension of story action to evoke the text and elaborate upon it as a “story participant.” Students are thus often asked to interpret a story by gazing and reflecting upon what they have never learned to experience.

Theory and research agree that what highly engaged readers do as they read is dramatic in nature. In just this vein, Enciso (1992) describes engagement in reading as

our entry into the world of the story and the intense involvement we feel as we imagine and interpret the characters, setting, events, and thematic possibilities of literary texts. It includes a complex interplay of imaginative and intellectual processes that are typically private and elusive, yet critical to comprehension and pleasure in reading. (p. 1)

Enciso (1990) describes engaged readers taking on and enacting various roles and intensely visualizing particular settings and scenes. These same activities were apparent in the responses of Ron, Cora, and Joanne, but I had little evidence that any of my other readers engaged with texts in this way.

Other research indicates that readers must first take interest in the action and setting of the story and begin to participate in a "story world" before response can occur on other dimensions, such as connecting the story to their lives or reflecting upon the story, its construction, or its authorship (Thomson, 1987). The reader, after taking unreflective interest in the story, may then evoke and enter what Bruner (1986) describes as a "landscape of action" that is directly stimulated by the facts of the story. Such interest and participation are a prerequisite to engagement on "the landscape of consciousness," in which the reader is pulled by the possibilities and potentialities of the story facts into "what those involved in the action know, think or feel, or do not know, think or feel" (p. 14).

Many other average or less engaged readers tend to take only an unreflective interest in action, or may proceed to read in a more engaged fashion, but still only on "the landscape of action." These readers do not go beyond the text, they do not actively create meaning as they elaborate upon the story experience (Thomson, 1987; Wilhelm, 1992). Enciso (1992) points out that as Barthes (1986) suggests, these readers are often bored by reading, because without engagement on both of these landscapes the reader is unable to "produce the text, play it, release it, make it go" (p. 63).

### **Pulling in Reluctant Readers**

But what about my many less engaged readers? In spite of these views on productive reading, a body of research on remedial reading supports the view that many less proficient readers do not naturally and spontaneously experience literature as participants. This lack of involvement suggests why they are reluctant to read and have negative attitudes toward reading. It also suggests why a highly participatory activity such as drama, or creative activities such as visual art, used in conjunction with the read-

ing of particular stories, might help them to experience stories in the highly satisfying way of engaged readers.

Most of the research regarding remedial or less proficient reading focuses on word identification and provides little insight into the obstacles and operational difficulties experienced by these readers. The studies that have been conducted strongly suggest that these readers do not make use of a productive conception of reading or the strategies necessary to consummate the sort of reader/text relationship that allows for an “aesthetic” (Rosenblatt, 1978) literary transaction and experience. So, I found myself asking, how can classroom activity help students to take on this kind of active reading role and to rethink the nature of the reading act?

Less proficient readers have been shown to read more slowly and less accurately than better readers. They read in local, piecemeal ways and do not make use of either extratextual information such as their personal experiences, known as schematic knowledge, or larger units of intratextual information, such as a sense of textual configuration and coherence (Cromer, 1970; Daneman & Carpenter, 1980; Perfetti & Lesgold, 1979). Yet the use of extratextual information to create global meanings is a process necessary to the creation and sustaining of what Edmiston (1991) calls “a drama world,” which suggests that drama would be one way of helping students to bring their background experiences, schema knowledge, interests, desires, and questions to bear on the reading act.

Johnston (1985) has posited that reading problems result from a combination of negative attitudes, conceptual difficulties, and self-defeating strategies. I thought this was true of many of my own students. Gambrell and Bales (1986) found further that lower-ability readers did not “spontaneously employ mental imagery as a strategy,” therefore depriving them of full evocation and participation in a story world. And less proficient readers studied by Purcell-Gates (1991) were also at a loss for strategies for stepping into and sustaining “envisionments.” They did not make use of strategies for creating meaning by building relationships with characters, taking their perspectives, and imagining and visualizing secondary worlds.

### **Turning Reading into an Active Process**

These studies imply that less proficient readers tend to conceive of reading as a decoding process rather than as active meaning-making (Gambrell & Heathington, 1981), an attitude that is certainly reinforced by traditional questioning and discussion patterns regarding literature.

Less engaged readers' approach to reading is passive; the text itself is regarded as expressing meaning to be received, instead of constructed (Johnston & Winograd, 1983). This was certainly the case for many of my own student readers, as evidenced by their initial reading attitude inventories.

As I began to think about using new classroom techniques to support the notion of reading as the active construction of meaning, I found that the use of dramatic and artistic activity to help readers both experience and learn from text is supported by a wide variety of research in language, literacy, learning, and cognition throughout various content areas (Barnes, 1986; Knapp, Stearns, John, & Zucker, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Wade, 1983). Active, participatory experiences enhance motivation and concept attainment (Bransford, 1979; Reid, 1988). Active participation, such as that incorporated in the creation of drama and visual art, creates a context for more sophisticated comprehension and the creation of elaborated meanings made with text because background schemata are necessarily activated and created, a foundational aspect of proficient reading (Hansen, 1981; Langer, 1984).

Rosenblatt (1978, 1982) has repeatedly stressed that "response" to literature is not something a text may "do" to a reader, but is instead a highly complex production of meaning. Rosenblatt (1978) points out the difference between the text, made up of words on a page, and the aesthetic experience, or "lived-through evocation," of the literary work. A reader's reflection on those experiences is what is organized into an interpretation (pp. 69–70). Further, Rosenblatt (1982) emphasizes that reading is an experience and that as teachers "our initial function is to deepen the experience . . . to return to, relive, savor, the experience" (p. 275).

Less proficient and less engaged readers must learn to think differently about the reading act and learn how to participate in the experience of literature and construction of literary meaning. My own classroom experience told me that this engagement will not occur spontaneously, but that it might be taught through the modeling of expert reading strategies and the use of participatory literary activities. As I wrote in my journal:

*It's becoming clear to me that reading is one of the creative arts. The reader has to develop and use artistic tools to create people and pictures. But how can I convince my students of this; give them this experience of reading as artistic creation? Maybe by using activities such as drama and art that encourage and scaffold active response? And that*

can show, right out in the open, what the reader is doing and the meaning that has been created? (October 1992)

Semiotic theory based on Pierce (1931/1958) argues that artistic sign systems have similar potential to linguistic ones in their power to represent knowledge, facilitate learning, and form new experiences and concepts; and that artistic representations are used by readers creating and responding to “story worlds” involved with transactions with texts (cf. Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994). According to this view, readers construct a reality rather than discover it, and can construct it only through signs and in contexts that validate the use of the signs. Pierce is particularly insistent on the vital role of the icon, or concrete image, in all thought and communication, arguing that “The only way of directly communicating an idea is by means of an icon; and every indirect method of communicating an idea must depend for its establishment upon the use of an icon” (vol. 2, p. 158). In other words, if I say the word “apple,” it means nothing unless you picture an apple in your mind. The word is a symbol that evokes an icon, or concrete image. If the word doesn’t evoke a picture, no meaning has been made.

If iconic response is prerequisite to other forms of response, then reluctant readers might benefit from learning to project concrete, iconic representations of stories such as those achieved through activities such as drama and visual art. They then might be able to sustain or extend these representations in their mind, and use them as objects to think with.

So it was that 12 weeks into the school year, my students and I set off on an exploratory journey to investigate the extent to which drama might help less proficient readers to engage in the activities of more proficient readers, and to reconceive of the act of reading and of themselves as readers.

The questions driving this classroom study included:

- ♦ How might drama guide and scaffold student readers’ development of the productive response of more expert readers, as defined by the activities of Cora, Ron, and Joanne?
- ♦ How might dramatic activity guide and support student efforts to fill textual gaps and to elaborate on and move around in textual worlds?
- ♦ How might drama engender reflection about the reading experience and the students’ conceptions of the reading act itself?

## THE STUDENTS: KEVIN, MARVIN, AND LIBBY

The drama study involved all of my students enrolled in the two reading/language arts classes that mainstreamed the school's EEN (exceptional educational needs) population of students labeled both LD (learning disabled) and ED (emotionally disturbed). All students participated in the pre- and postdrama evaluation procedures and were observed throughout the project. Both classes included students who regarded themselves as nonreaders, who were regarded by teachers as less proficient readers, and who expressed in various ways their lack of motivation and resistance to reading.

For the purpose of collecting and analyzing a manageable set of data, I chose three case study students (from my original set of nine case study students) to help me tell a coherent story about drama as a way of entering and responding to literature. These three were students for whom drama seemed to work in powerful ways, and that is why I have chosen to tell their stories.

The first student, Kevin, was a regular education student considered to be a less proficient and unmotivated reader both by himself and by his previous teachers; the second student, Marvin, was labeled both LD and ED; and the third student, Libby, was labeled LD but differed from many of her classmates because she enjoyed reading on her own. The students were selected on the basis of how well they represented a cross-section of students having some difficulty with their reading and response, and on their availability for interviews during my one free period.

Kevin was fairly representative of approximately 40 percent of the regular education students in the two study classes who indicated on the prestudy survey that they were "nonreaders," that they read "rarely," and that they regarded reading solely as a "school activity."

A small, wiry, and very pleasant boy, Kevin could not seem to sit still. Several of his past and present teachers indicated that he could have ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), but a formal referral had not yet been made. He wore flannel shirts and a hunting jacket with a tag flapping on the back. He owned a game farm at home, which he ran by himself, and demonstrated complete devotion to hunting. He expressed that reading was "a boring waste of time," though his test results on the Analytical Reading Inventory (Woods & Moe, 1989) placed him on the seventh-grade level for Word Recognition and the fifth-grade level for Independent Comprehension. Kevin was described by another teacher as "fairly average, at best" and by another as "a squirrely kid, never serious . . . a pain in the butt."



In his initial interview, Kevin indicated that he “never read stories. I mean, what for?” but that he did sometimes read “to learn things, you know. Like about hunting and fishing or raising animals.” His only extra-curricular reading was *Field and Stream* magazine.

Marvin (who was introduced at the beginning of Chapter One) was fairly representative of the EEN students, most of whom indicated that they were “poor readers,” that they “never” read, and that they regarded reading solely as a “school activity” that should be avoided or faked whenever possible. Marvin was a big boy for his age, both heftier and taller than his teachers, and was a very low ability reader. He liked to wear black Metallica T-shirts and unlaced black Nike high-top basketball shoes. His test results indicated a second-grade level for Word Recognition and a first-grade level for Independent Comprehension. His scores were approximately one to two grade levels below those of his LD classmates.

Marvin was often in trouble for hitting and pushing other students, and for constantly requesting hall passes to go the restroom. A former teacher told me: “He can’t read. He’ll never be a reader.” Early in the year, one of Marvin’s most frequently invoked expressions was: “Reading is stupid!” Marvin stated that he “never” read outside school. In fact, according to all of his teachers, he rarely read in school, usually bothering other students, acting out, or staring into space when given reading time. Marvin went so far as to state: “It’s not like I’m missing something [by not reading]!”

Libby was a very small and slightly built girl with long, straight brown hair. She was very serious and shy and seemed to blend inconspicuously into the class, never drawing attention to herself. She preferred T-shirts and jeans, often wearing subdued colors such as watery yellows or greens. The Analytical Reading Inventory indicated that she could read independently and recognize words on the fifth-grade level.

Libby represented an entirely different kettle of fish, for despite her LD label, she indicated that “I like reading” and was often seen carrying and reading books. However, she felt that she was not a good reader because she had trouble answering questions about what she had read and performed poorly on quizzes and tests regarding her reading. She reported that she liked “stories about girls like me,” but that she had trouble understanding stories “where the characters aren’t like me.” She disliked most of the reading she did for school except “when I get to choose.” She particularly liked series of books such as the American Girls, Baby-sitters Club, and Nancy Drew. She told me that she disliked school because “all you do is sit, sit, sit and write, write, write . . . you

never get to do anything. . . . I don’t like school ’cause you can’t do what you want. School blocks you from what you like to do.” She told me that she could learn more staying at home and “reading what I want.” She liked only the social aspect of school: “I like to see my friends.” Her favorite activity was horseback riding, which she did once a week at a local farm. “I like working in a horse barn. In the barn I get to do and learn things.”

## BEFORE DRAMA

For the 12 weeks prior to the use of drama as an intervention, I collected information and coded student response to stories into 10 dimensions, as described previously in Chapter Three. In contrast to the rich response data revealed by these three engaged readers, Kevin, Marvin, and Libby related few codable data about what they did as readers to evoke and reflect on story worlds.

### **Literal Reading: But It Doesn’t Say**

Libby was by far the most active reader of the three, and did indicate some awareness of her reading strategies and could report on seeing story worlds and relating to characters in particular kinds of stories. In conversation and her literary letters about her free-choice reading, Libby was able to discuss characters’ appearances and settings. She almost always did so by comparing characters to people she knew—usually her sister or her friend Jenna. Nearly all characters looked like and reminded her of a small group of people she knew and liked. However, when reading a story in class that was less familiar to her than the stock characters and situations of her favorite series, she often looked surprised and was unable to answer questions about character and setting. “It’s really hard to tell,” she’d report, “the book really doesn’t say much stuff about how things are.” She often told me that the stories we read in class were “kind of plain.” When I pressed her on what she meant by this, she told me that “It’s the characters. I don’t feel like they’re like me. I don’t get the story. It’s just kind of plain. Nothing is happening. I don’t feel like I know anybody so I don’t like it very much.”

Though she was able to evoke characters and story worlds in particular kinds of books, Libby had great difficulty in doing so with unfamiliar material. She recognized the differences in her various reading experiences, but she seemed at a loss about how to engage with unfamiliar

stories in the same way that she did with her favorite books, which she liked because “you get to know the same characters over and over again, or new ones kind of like people you really know.” Reading was better for her, she told me, “when I don’t work so hard on the words because I already know stuff about the people and places.” (This demonstrates the importance of previous life experience and the activation of this prior knowledge, or “schema,” to reading.)

Then there was Marvin. On one occasion during this first part of the year, I was reading a baseball story with Marvin. He read aloud that “Jack slid into second and kuh-nocked his kuh-nee,” pronouncing both silent k’s. When asked what a “kuh-nee” could possibly be, Marvin shrugged. “I just told you what it says. How should I know what it means?” Marvin often indicated that it was the reader’s job to pronounce words, but not to make meaning. When asked if he could “see” what was happening in the story, Marvin replied, “No.” Marvin offered that he had both played baseball and been a spectator at baseball games. So he was asked what body parts one was likely to injure when sliding into second base. Eventually, Marvin acknowledged that the “kuh-nee” was probably a “knee.”

Later in the story I asked Marvin who was behind the plate calling balls and strikes. “It doesn’t say,” he informed me, which was true in the literal sense.

“But Marvin,” I asked, “you play baseball. Who calls balls and strikes?”

“The umpire,” he replied. “But it doesn’t say who’s doing it here!” When I pursued the issue, he pushed the story across the desk to me and said, “Okay, you find it. Go ahead. You find it then!”

Marvin was not creating or visualizing a story world in his head, nor was he bringing his life to literature to construct a meaningful experience with the text. Further, he expected everything of importance to be clearly stated in the text.

I had a similar experience with Kevin as the class began reading *The Incredible Journey*. I asked Kevin what Mrs. Oakes looked like. “It doesn’t say,” he answered.

“But what do we know about her?” I persisted.

Kevin became cautious. “Well, it says she’s middle-aged . . . she cleans and cooks . . . sort of a maid . . . she lives down the road with her husband. . . .”

“So,” I asked triumphantly, springing the trap, “what might she look like? What clothes will she wear to the house? What color hair? Do you think she likes the animals?”

Now Kevin was exasperated. “It doesn’t SAY,” he replied testily. Later during our conference he told me, “I know what the story says. It’s not fair for you to ask me what it doesn’t say.”

As an experiment, I asked several less proficient readers, including Kevin and Marvin, to select a Mrs. Oakes look-alike from several photographs cut out of magazines. One photograph was of a young, stylishly dressed career woman in high heels, carrying a briefcase. Another was of an older, grandmotherly type baking bread, and so on. The students were unwilling to make a choice. “We really don’t know what she looks like,” one student complained. “There are no pictures of her in the book,” another told me by way of explaining why he was not sure. Oddly enough, the book had included an engraved picture of Mrs. Oakes that neither student had noticed or processed.

That next Monday I asked another group of less engaged readers, including Libby, to read an Eskimo legend. The story was short, economically told, and highly suggestive. After reading it, the students were asked to describe the landscape of the story, the houses, what the people looked like, and how they dressed. Their primary response, despite the fact that they knew it was an Eskimo story: “It doesn’t say.” Libby told me that there was “nothing there to get. It [the story] made me feel kind of dumb.”

I asked the students about the landscape near the Arctic Circle, and together they could describe it beautifully, with tundra adorned by wolves and icebergs dotted with seals and polar bears. References were made to the scenery in the movies *White Fang* and *Never Cry Wolf*.

The students knew what Eskimos looked like and about igloos and even eating whale blubber. But they used none of this information to build a story world, however, because the text did not include the information and the students did not instantiate it. “It doesn’t really say anything,” Libby told me. She, like her classmates, did not seem to recognize the inferential and elaborative work that the story was asking her to do.

### **Passive Reading: Tell Me What It Says**

Like many of their classmates, neither Kevin nor Marvin played an active role in creating meaning with text. Neither brought his life to literature nor took a literary experience back to his life. Neither indicated in any way that he had “experienced” literature at all. Both conceived of reading as the decoding of words. Marvin did not expect reading to be meaningful, and if he had a goal it was to identify individual words successfully; for Kevin, if meaning existed it was “in there,” inside the text waiting to

be discovered. Successful reading was being able to answer factual questions about text to the teacher's satisfaction.

Though Libby had a different idea about reading that she did for herself, she too seemed trapped by the idea that good reading—for school, anyway—was answering someone else's questions. And she seemed very tied to textual details, failing to build on these details and elaborate textual suggestions or possibilities.

Marvin revealed that the whole of his reading instruction over the past several years had been exposure to DISTAR (Direct Instructional System for Teaching Reading; Engelmann & Osborn, 1976), a method in which students repetitively identify letters and words, and that he had rarely read stories or been read to. He had no memory of reading picture books or having enjoyed or completely read a book. When I once asked him what he could “see” as he read a particular passage, Marvin replied, “See? I don't see anything, man, nothin' but words!” For Marvin, reading certainly was “stupid,” as meaningless as lists of nonsense words like “kuh-nocked” and “kuh-nees.”

Kevin offered that he had read “lots of stories, mostly from the big book [anthology] they give you in English.” For him, successful reading was “being able to answer the questions at the end . . . to know characters' names and what happened to them and stuff . . . basically you have to tell the teacher what it says.”

For Kevin, stories were particularly “dumb. They're confusing and you can't really learn much stuff from them. Not like from a magazine.” For Kevin, a story didn't provide information efficiently, and he had no sense that there was an experience to be created and valued through reading.

For Libby, enjoyable reading experiences were about “something you know about.” The power of literature to provide new experiences and to help the reader enter new perspectives seemed inaccessible to her.

These students' past reading experiences and schooling appear to have given them a reductionist, information-transmission view of reading. For Marvin, reading had consisted of words, and he did not expect that the words would work together to express any meaningful message. Reading, for students like Kevin and Marvin, was not creating and imagining meanings (Enciso, 1990), completing the openness of the text (Eco, 1978), filling gaps (Iser, 1978), or reading along indices (Barthes, 1986) to build up meanings throughout the course of a reading. What Bruner (1986) calls the “landscape of consciousness” never entered into the reading they or Libby did. The experience of reading was, at best, the passive reception and then the retelling of what, according to Kevin, “some book is telling you, or trying to tell you.”

This flies in the face of current reader-response theory, whether from schema-theoretic, psycholinguistic, or developmental orientations, which has come to view reading as a transaction between reader and text that constitutes an "experience" (Rosenblatt, 1978), as a purposeful meaning-making activity (Goodman, 1982), and as a "heightened sensory activity that imagines meanings" (Enciso, 1992). Reader-response theory argues that personal involvement and imaginative evocation of a text are necessary to the experience of a secondary world. This experience is the purpose of "aesthetic," or literary reading, and is a prerequisite to any interpretation and reflection upon that world. Without such an evocation, there is no experience, and therefore nothing to think about. Reading, in Marvin's words, must indeed be impossibly "stupid" for those readers who do not know how to evoke and enter a secondary world.

Throughout the first 12 weeks of the school year, neither Kevin nor Marvin demonstrated any sense that this meaning-making was what reading was really about. Though Libby created meaning as she read, she did not seem to create new meanings, but rather revived old ones. Neither boy showed the ability or inclination to enter or evoke a story, or any sense that they might control strategies that would allow them to do so. Libby did not seem to see or experience new kinds of stories, and I had little evidence that she reflected on stories or used them to think with. I presumed that all three possessed the cognitive ability to evoke a secondary world and to consider and reflect upon the meaning of such a world. I had observed that they were, after all, quite adept at engaging with television shows and inferring character or mood in real life. Kevin, a student in my first-hour class, liked to make announcements as I entered the room such as "He's in a bad mood today!" based on casual observation (when he made such pronouncements, he was usually right).

Through various techniques of story drama, I hoped to provide these readers with procedures that would enable them to evoke story worlds, to help them make inferences about characters and their situations, and thus find reading literature to be a rewarding experience.

## **DRAMATIC HAPPENINGS**

At this point the drama phase of the project began; for approximately 8 weeks the students engaged in a variety of drama activities directly connected to the stories they were reading.

For my classroom purposes, I used both techniques of story theater, by which I mean the enactment of described story events, and techniques of “story drama.” For the story drama activities, I used Heathcote’s (1984, 1990) definition of drama. Heathcote advocates isolating moments or details from stories to create dramatic encounters that will require entry into that story moment, elaboration of it, the taking on of other perspectives, and, consequently, a challenge to the students’ own current ways of thinking. Heathcote (1984) argues that “Drama is human beings confronted by situations which change them because of what they must face in dealing with those challenges” (p. 48). In drama you “put yourself into other people’s shoes and by using personal experience to help you to understand their point of view you may discover more than you knew when you started” (p. 44). What is called “story drama” in this study is any activity that requires entering a character’s point of view or attitude and enacting a situation or conflict that involves it. These activities were suggested by the stories we read, but were not bound by them.

All of my students first participated in several drama activities that were tied to a class reading of Sheila Burnford’s (1960) novel *The Incredible Journey* and later to class readings of various short stories and some nonfiction pieces regarding particular issues such as animal rights.

Story theater activities were used to play out the text of the story. Story drama activities were used to express, explore, and elaborate story understandings and possibilities. The story drama activities described in the following list were largely inspired by the work of Edmiston (1991). Brian Edmiston was also personally quite helpful as he discussed the use of such activities with me and helped with preliminary coding of videotaped sequences of students involved in the drama. The first, revolving role drama, was a daily activity; the others were used once or sometimes twice during these 8 weeks of intense dramatic activity.

1. *Revolving Role Drama.* The staple of our drama activity was the daily use of a revolving role drama. Each day we took on character roles and enacted particular scenes that were suggested by the story. We did the drama before reading the parallel scenes in the text so that we could bring our own experience with the characters’ problems and dilemmas to our reading. In each activity the students were asked to take on another perspective, usually that of a story character, and to visualize the story world and enact movement and interaction within that world. The students acted out their scenes in pairs, subsequently switching their roles and partners once or twice

during each class. See Appendix B for a set of lesson plans using revolving role drama to explore our class reading of *The Incredible Journey*.

2. *Dramatic Play*. Students were given a prompt or situation to be used as a stimulus for imagining and filling out a story event. The prompt usually came from the story itself, as students were asked to take on the roles of story characters imagining and enacting the psychological and physical activities that would follow a particular stimulus.
3. *Guided Imagery*. Students were asked to imagine scenes, often along with the guide of my visual description or musical accompaniment, and to subsequently write about or visually depict their conceptions of these particular scenes as they mentally experienced them. Some of the visual depictions were used as “tableaux” or as “sets” for role-playing scenes.
4. *Snapshot and Tableaux Dramas*. Students were asked to physically or artistically depict the “freezing” of particular scenes as moments in time that showed physical or emotional relationships, and displayed character gestures, expressions, and activities. When a scene had been frozen I usually asked them to provide a headline or caption for the picture, and sometimes to explain how and why they had created it. Students also drew such “snapshots” or series of such snapshots in a technique called “tableaux drama,” which is the visual depiction of a story sequence through the use of several pictures and accompanying captions or scripts.
5. *Analogy Dramas*. Students were asked to write and perform dramatic vignettes that in some way paralleled a story situation. I asked them to imagine a similar situation in their own lives, or in the life of someone else they knew, and to play out what would happen.
6. *To Tell the Truth Game*. Based on the old TV game show, several students at a time played the parts of characters. These characters were interrogated about their story lives by judges who decided who had most convincingly “become” that character.
7. *Correspondence*. Students wrote and responded to diaries, postcards, letters, and advertisements in the role of story characters.
8. *Missing Scene Scripts*. After identifying scenes that were suggested but left out of the text, students wrote and produced vignettes that filled these gaps, elaborated on story events, or explored alternate story possibilities.



9. *Newscast*. Students produced a videotaped news show about *The Incredible Journey* that involved interviewing characters, reporting on their activities, and editorializing on particular actions and decisions.

## THE MOVES THEY MADE

In contrast to the first 12 weeks of school, once we began these drama activities, Kevin, Marvin, Libby, and many others began to make new moves to create story worlds, to connect to these worlds, and to reflect upon them. I used some of the dimensions of response gleaned from Ron, Cora, and Joanne (see Chapter Three) to code and organize the emerging new reading activities of these three less engaged readers.

### Entering the Story World

Langer (1989) has argued that readers must “enter an envisionment” as a prerequisite to experiencing text. Blunt (1977) and Thomson (1987), in their respective developmental models, place “entering the text” as the first developmental stage of response. Like many of my other students, Libby, Kevin, and Marvin demonstrated difficulty in entering story worlds. During a prestudy interview, Kevin told me that he had read the first few pages of over 10 books in the past 3 weeks. “I just can’t seem to get into any of them,” he complained. “I try, but it’s just words.” After reading Chapter 1 of *The Incredible Journey*, Marvin’s nightly literary letter was simple: “This story is boring. I hat [hate] animals.” Libby reported that “it’s kind of confusing. I don’t really get it.”

While the students were reading Chapter 2 of *The Incredible Journey*, I asked them to enact and role-play various excerpts from the book, such as this one:

Twenty minutes passed and no move was made; then suddenly the young dog rose, stretched himself, and stood looking intently down the drive. He remained like this for several minutes, while the cat watched closely, one leg still pointing upwards; then slowly the Labrador walked down the driveway and stood at the curve, looking back as though inviting the others to come. The old dog rose too, now, somewhat stiffly, and followed. Together they turned the corner, out of sight. (p. 21)

When the three case study students were asked to relate what had happened in this passage and what it signified, they had no reply. The

passage was reread while three student volunteers slowly acted out the animals' parts. Three LD students from Marvin's class did a wonderful reenactment. Dan (as Luath the labrador) gestured to Brad, poking him. Brad (as the comfortable Bodger, the old bull terrier) brushed him off and settled himself back into a beanbag chair as if to go to sleep. Dan continued to dance around Brad, heading toward the door, returning, and gesturing to Brad.

Suddenly the student audience came to life. "The big dog [Dan] wants to leave!" Marvin practically shouted.

At a similar point in Kevin's class, Kevin had explained that "The old dog sort of wants to go, but he's lazy. My buffalo [from his game farm] is that way, the cows will all leave for the pasture and he goofs around and bellows but when they don't come back he gets up and follows them." This analogy was the first indication that Kevin had made connections from his own life to help create the life of a story. In her class, Libby role-played this scene with two friends. "It was cool," she said. "I could kind of see and feel what was happening." I asked her to describe what she was feeling more exactly. "It was like the dog saying, 'Let's be adventurous, let's do something.'"

What Benton (1983) calls a "secondary world" had been made accessible to these readers through the dramatic reenactment, and with it meanings came alive.

The three animals were then interviewed at a postchapter news conference, with the class playing the part of reporters. Students spontaneously stood as they peppered the animals with questions: Why were they leaving? How did they feel about their departure? Did they think they were prepared? What did they expect from the trip? What would have been said in this scene if they could talk? The questions showed the students retrospectively and predicting, visualizing, and empathizing, operating on the landscapes of action and of consciousness. In addition, students elaborated on the story, filling textual gaps and imagining possibilities. As they did so, they overtly modeled different types of productive, meaning-creating response for their classmates.

That night, Marvin wrote me his longest literary letter to date: "I like the dogs and the cat because they are nice. I think they will like to do things together and that they will make the 250 miles to be home. I hope so."

Kevin wrote, "I think they will have to hunt to stay alive. It will be a hard trip for dogs and a cat. Maybe this will be a good book."

Throughout the study, dramatic activities regarding a story helped students to enter the story world, and this ability to enter a particular

story was sustained through succeeding chapters involving the same characters without further reenactments and through rereadings not accompanied by drama.

Other information from these students (in the form of videotapes, literary letters, journals, my own observations, and running assessments of each student) also indicated that by the end of the study these students and their classmates were “entering” more stories more readily, and could more easily identify when they did not, sometimes articulating particular reasons why the entry was difficult.

### **Seeing the Story World**

Before beginning Chapter 3 I asked the students to engage in dramatic play in order to visualize the secondary world of the story.

“We are the animals,” I prompted the students. “Where are we?”

“In the woods,” someone answered.

“Okay. It’s morning. We had a hard day yesterday. How do we feel waking up after the first day of a hard journey? What do we see? What are we planning to do next?”

After a short episode of dramatic play, the students were asked to write the diary entry of one of the animals, and then to share those entries. Kevin wrote in his response journal: “I’m hungry. I can see the sun rising through the trees. I’m stiff from sleeping on the ground and my shoulders hurt. I’m excited to get going, and do some hunting.”

When I spoke to Kevin, he indicated that he was comparing an experience he had had camping out during a hunting trip to the animals’ experience in the book. He concluded our conversation by saying, “This is really getting good.” To which he added, “Sometimes I do like reading, you know.”

Libby wrote that “It’s pretty dark under all the pine trees and so we slept pretty late we were so tired. I think we need to find the old road again.” Libby told me that “It reminded me of being in the woods. . . . When I read best I guess I feel like I’m in a drama. I make up surroundings and make up scenes. I understand it better.” A bit later she advised me that “Writing and reading is easier if you are a character. It’s harder to write if you’re not somebody. You should let us do more of that.” (This points out that drama, in which you have to become somebody and take a perspective, can help students write as well as read.)

Throughout the study, my students indicated that they consciously brought their experience and knowledge of the world to the drama world.

“You have to,” one boy told me, “you have to think when did I feel like that or when did I see something like that . . . otherwise you can’t get started [with the drama].” This reference to their own experiences was something Kevin, Marvin, and many other students did not indicate doing while reading before we began to use drama, and that Libby had difficulty doing with new material.

Individual checksheets indicated that students who did not report visualizing a story world before the study regularly did so in both the 4 weeks after using drama and throughout the remaining semester of the school year. Anecdotal evidence indicated that this change came about at least partly because of the dramatic activities themselves, and partly because of the sharing of response that drama engendered. Late in the school year one girl revealed that she couldn’t “get over the idea” that she should be in a play or a movie as she read. She also said that she referred to dramatic activities experienced several months earlier when she reflected upon the experience of the story. Some students, like Libby, made an explicit connection between the experience of reading and participation in drama.

### **Seeing What’s Happening**

As we continued our reading, I occasionally asked different students to perform “snapshot dramas,” freezing their bodies into particular scenes at a moment in story time, showing the physical relationships of characters to each other, and displaying their gestures, expressions, and activities.

On one occasion I asked students to “freeze the movie in your head” and to sketch out or make notes about what they saw. Next, I asked students to create visual “tableaux”—or poster-sized pictures—illustrating a sequence of events, and to share these, in character, with a group interested in their adventures. Many students had difficulty with this task, wondering how to portray the setting. I told them the author had left it up to them to “fill in” details that had been left out of the text. As the students made their tableaux, I encouraged them to fill the pictures with weather, artifacts, and other items that would fit the story world of that particular scene.

At the end of Chapter 9, I asked students to become Tao the cat or one of the two dogs, Luath or Bodger. I then asked them, as characters, to create postcards of three scenes from the story that were most important and meaningful to them. They were to write a note to their owners on the reverse side, commenting on the scene displayed on the postcard.

Groups of three were formed of the different characters. Postcards were then shared and discussed, in character, in the groups.

On one of Marvin's postcards he had a picture of a raging river. It was almost completely water, with one tree on a far bank. The note read:

*Dear Elizabeth,*

*I never should of swum across this raging river. But I did and my head go bashed in by a log. I didnt know what hit me. A little girl took care of me cuz I couldnt hear. She remind me of you so I hurried to catch up with the dogs so I could get home.*

*Sined, Toa.*

Here Marvin demonstrates empathy with the cat, her feelings of regret about crossing the river, feelings about missing her owner, and her motivation for continuing the journey—as well as composing the longest piece of writing that any of his present or previous year's teachers had seen from him.

### **Relating to Characters**

Before reading the final chapter, I arranged for students to play a variation of the old "To Tell the Truth" game. Four students at a time played the part of one character. Their job was to do the best possible job of becoming the character, thereby convincing the "expert panel" that he or she was the most credible "real" character.

A second set of students played the part of this "expert panel," which would judge which student responded most like the character, thereby earning their votes. The rest of the students were other characters from the book who asked questions of the four students claiming to be Bodger, Tao, Luath, or one of the minor characters.

In this way students had the opportunity both to become a character and to play the part of an expert reader, testing elaborated ideas of what a character was like. This role-playing required a building of information throughout the reading of the text, a reading along what Barthes calls "indices."

When Marvin was on the expert panel, he asked those students posing as Tao: "What would you have done if you hadn't got your hearing back?" Marvin was posing an elaboration on the story, a "What If"

question, because in the story Tao does recover her hearing and then leaves the isolated Nurmi family to find the dogs and continue their journey homeward. This elaboration was a clear demonstration of Marvin's engagement, that he was "playing" the text and making it "go," as Barthes would put it.

During a different round of the game, Kevin explained why he did not choose Contestant Number Three as Bodger. "He said he looked healthier than when he left. But everybody here knows Bodger got hurt by the bear and he was in the fight with the collie so he musta had scars and stuff so he couldn't of looked all that good." All this from the reader who couldn't make any guesses about Mrs. Oakes's appearance from the available details. Acting out the scenes with the bear and the collie appears to have helped Kevin to see the scene, to enter the story world, and to see the consequences of those actions in his mind.

Reports of empathy for the main characters were very high throughout the study, both during dramatic activity and in readings of the same story that followed the activity. Students who never reported experiencing relationships to characters before the use of drama later reported engaging in a variety of relationships: becoming a friend or confidant, merging with the character, and inhabiting a parallel universe to the character. The drama activities appear to have made characters come alive for them to the degree that they recognized story characters as people to understand and have relationships with.

Interestingly, each day when we would role-play some scenes that had happened or that anticipated what would be happening to the animals during that day's reading, Libby would immediately pair up with her friend Jenna. Jenna seemed to invite Libby into the drama world and to make particular moves within the world. When I talked to the girls about this, Libby told me that "Jenna helps me to become a character and to figure out how they're going to act then I can go from there." When I asked how Jenna helped her, she said that "In the drama, I try to do what she does. I don't call her by her name but by the character's name. She asks me questions and I try to answer them. . . . She listens to me. . . . I allow her to express her thoughts and feelings. I try to make her feel happy if she's sad and I react the way I should. Maybe she'll help me to solve problems, maybe say, 'What do you think we should do?' or 'Remember when you did such and such?'"

Libby told me during a different interview that during her reading of the story "I felt like I was like Tao [the cat] . . . quiet, shy, can do stuff

for myself even though people think I need help. OK on my own but I like to be around my friends.” She reported that at the beginning of the book, she had “trouble understanding the characters . . . but now I can see the animals are just like people.” When I asked her how she came to understand the animals, she said, “By being them with my body. I got to do things and make decisions and things with my body when I was imagining I was them so I felt like them.”

For Libby much more than for the other students, using her body to do things was an important part of the dramatic experience. “I can get it because I’m doing and shaping things. Drama is like writing a story with your body.” She also liked drama because “other people have to listen to you when you are a character or they won’t know what to do. . . . You have to do things together.” This was in contrast to most of school, during which Libby told me “everyone works alone and they don’t listen to each other.”

### **Elaborating on the Story World**

As we were reading Chapter 7, in which the little Finnish girl, Helvi Nurmi, cares for Tao, a student asked me what was happening to the dogs during the same time period. I seized this as a dramatic opportunity to demonstrate how readers are asked to fill textual gaps.

“Authors leave the reader many gaps,” I told the students, “which they expect the reader to fill in. Sometimes these gaps are details, like what people are wearing or might be thinking, but sometimes they can be whole scenes, or years’ worth of time, which we have to create in our mind in some way consistent with the cues from the story.”

I then asked the students to write out the scene they felt might be transpiring with the dogs during the same time frame when Tao’s experiences with Helvi are recounted. What happened to the dogs during this time? How are the dogs feeling and acting? What does the author expect us to know about what is happening to the dogs, and how do we know this?

Kevin wrote the following scene:

*(Night in the forest.)*

BODGER: *I sure do miss that cat.*

LUATH: *You sure do miss eating the food he gets for you.*

BODGER: *Yup. That too. But I sure do miss that cat.*

LUATH: *Shut up, Bodger. (wipes his eyes) (a wolf howls in the distance)*

BODGER: *I sure just felt better when she was around.*

LUATH: *Me too. I wanted us all to come home together. It won't be the way I wanted it now. Maybe we should just keep going. I don't feel much like sleeping or talking tonight.*

BODGER: *Maybe we should leave a clear trail, you know, so she can follow us.*

During the "To Tell the Truth" game, Libby wrote down several questions for Tao, all of which were inference questions regarding Tao's feelings and motivations during different times in the story: "Why did you fight the MacKenzies' cats and how did you feel about it?" "How did you feel about Helvi and do you miss her?" "How would you have felt if Bodger died?"

When I observed that all of her questions were about feelings that weren't reported in the actual text, she told me that "I think reading is really about feelings, about seeing and feeling things. . . . That's what I like about the drama, in a regular class you can't share your feelings."

Though there were no indications that the less proficient readers in the study elaborated on story facts before our use of drama, they were entirely capable of doing so in the context of dramatic activity. Few students spontaneously employed such elaborative activity on their own after the study, but they did seem to recognize it as an element in a reader's repertoire, naturally elaborating when coming upon a situation that required it.

### **Connecting Literature to Life**

After the class had completed their reading of *The Incredible Journey*, I structured several activities that I called analogy dramas, designed to help the students compare their lives to the story and the story world back to their lives. The first activity was called "Two-Sided Story." Students were asked to act out a scene from their lives (real or projected) that in some way paralleled a scene from the book. A second activity, "In Through the Mirror," required the animal characters to leave the story world and enter our classroom. They used what they had learned from their journey to deal with new situations and challenges.

A third activity was called "Scrooge Looking Down." Students imagined that they were being taken back in time to view scenes from their



personal histories. Applying what they had learned from the experience of reading the book, they were asked how they might have lived differently or what they understood about the situation now that they had not understood at the time. Students then met as part of an “Out of Body” seminar to share and converse about their experiences.

In Kevin’s scene he was looking down on himself on his first rabbit hunt. “Kevin,” he said, “don’t leave those other guys behind just because they’re slower and noisier. Stick together. That’s one thing I learned from Luath. It’s just better to do things together, and you never know when you might need someone else. . . .”

In such activities students often made statements about the significance of particular events, a story’s central focus or meaning, and sometimes about the relationship of events to each other and how this sense of configuration or coherence helped make a rich experience for them. Though this reflective activity was not spontaneously occurring after the study, it was recognized and referred to by the students as a readerly activity, showing up continuously throughout the year in their work, and being then recorded on students’ individual response checksheets. Further, when students were asked to reflect upon a story, they sometimes reported “imagining” themselves to be characters or to be in particular situations in a type of individual dramatic play.

### **READING AS PLEASURE: “YOU HAVE TO LIVE THE STORY”**

During a conference with Kevin, I was highlighting and describing the expert engagement strategies he had used while reading a “free choice” book. After I told Kevin that he was doing “lots of things that expert readers do,” he excitedly turned to me and said, “Hey, maybe I can get good at this!” This expression of reader agency revealed precisely the attitude I wished to engender in all my students. I didn’t have much evidence of this kind that Kevin had rethought reading or himself as a reader until later in the semester. A student doing a report on Canada asked me if I knew of any stories from Canada. “I’ll take him to the library,” Kevin offered. “I know where all those stories are.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I checked out some of them about the gold rush in the Yukon and one on duck hunting.”

Kevin, who had earlier reported that he never read stories, had been motivated to read other stories about Canada because “I liked the book [*The Incredible Journey*].”

Libby told me after the study that “I feel more equal in a drama. People listen to me more,” and that “Reading after a drama is different. . . . I can see things better and I feel like I have more choices, just like in the drama.” When I asked her how reading was different from drama, she revealed that “Reading is different because it’s alone—but it’s the same because you have to pretend you’re a character and that other people are there.” Libby then went on at length about how she and Jenna were using drama together as a strategy to evoke and enjoy their free reading. “We’ll talk on the phone and pretend we are the characters and are solving their problems.” She reported reading a book called *Me, Addy* about the Underground Railroad and that she and Jenna “played the parts” to help them “understand and think about what’s happening.”

Marvin’s case of thinking about the act of reading is also dramatic. After I validated strategies he was using to evoke text, and encouraging those strategies I saw used throughout our reading and response to *The Incredible Journey*, Marvin’s attitude toward reading underwent a clear sea change. The ED teacher (resource teacher for the emotionally disturbed) said that Marvin came into the ED resource room for 3 days running, announced he was going to read, and proceeded to do it for the whole period. When he was finished, he proudly announced that this “is the first book I ever read by myself.” (Interestingly, it was entitled *Raging River*.) He then turned to his teacher and said, “I liked it, and I don’t want anybody to ask me any questions about it.”

Marvin was stating that his enjoyment and experience of the book was sufficient, and should suffice for the teacher too.

A few months after the study, when he was no longer in my class, I asked Kevin what he had learned from our story dramas.

“You have to live the story, Mr. Wilhelm,” he told me. “You have to be the book.” Now, when I see Kevin in the hallways, he greets me with the hang-ten sign and sometimes cries out, “Be the book!” And he is almost always carrying one.

“What story are you living now?” I’ll call after him as he’s jostled away by the swarming students.

It is a conversation that would have been unthinkable without our involvement with drama, which helped us to share our inner experiences of reading.

## EPILOGUE: THE POTENTIAL OF DRAMA

Kevin, Marvin, and Libby had a history of reading characterized by what Michael Smith (1992) calls “submission”: They expected to receive meaning, passively, from the text. They and many of their classmates seemed to learn for the first time, through the use of story-related classroom drama, to exert “control” over the strategies and processes of meaning construction with text. They began to see the text as a springboard for imagined possibilities.

To do so, these readers had to first achieve what I propose to call “entry” or “merging” with text. Drama, throughout this study, proved to be an effective technique for achieving entry into a textual world. Further, it provided a meaningful mode for moving around in that textual world, making meaning of it and in it, and of observing and reflecting on the world and its meaning. Drama enabled these readers to see that reading is an activity of constructing meaning, and that readers build and own this meaning.

All of these students seemed happy using drama as a response to literature, and they now seem happier about themselves as readers. Since the study, they have continued to talk about reading differently, and do more of it more profitably. They now exhibit the idea that reading is something “in the reader” and that it involves what Libby called “making choices” and “doing things,” versus their previous attitude that reading was something “in the text” or “out there.”

For them, reading literature has become something that needs to be created and constructed and enlivened. For the boys, reading literature has for the first time become an experience that holds out the promise of enjoyment. Even if they did not become passionate readers during the course of the study, this change of attitude had already made many things possible, such as Kevin’s interest in reading wilderness stories in his free time, Marvin’s pride in reading his first book, and Libby’s use of drama with her friends to help her understand unfamiliar pieces of literature.

These readers seemed to suffer most from a passive view of reading and a concomitant lack of literary experiences that required their participation. Drama, by its nature an active, participatory experience, helped the students to experience a story world, sustain that experience as they continued to read, and eventually indicate that they had reconceived the nature of reading. Drama seemed to make story language more accessible

to students such as Marvin, who had clear language difficulties, perhaps by generating interest and activating the necessary schemata. Drama also allowed for the sharing of response activities and for the "trying on" of more proficient readers' moves and strategies, such as when Libby mimicked the moves of her friend Jenna. This involvement, in turn, may eventually help them to become more engaged and powerful readers.

This classroom study suggests that though less proficient readers may have difficulties decoding words and processing figurative language and implicit meanings, the real problem may reside within the reader's view—and resultant process of reading. These readers may have been taught or may have interpreted instruction in such a way that they attended only to surface features of local text and had therefore never learned to create unified worlds and meanings by using the text more globally as a guide or "blueprint." Teachers such as myself may help such students enormously as we come to more fully understand actual processes of making meaning through reading.

In any event, the use of drama helped less proficient readers overcome their local-level decoding problems and enjoy the experience of literature. It aided them in responding on many of the sophisticated dimensions used by more expert readers of their age. Using new strategies to produce meanings helped them to also rethink the act of reading and themselves and their roles as readers.

The success of this exploration leads to other, more specific and focused questions that are worth researching. Do specific types of dramatic activity encourage activity on particular dimensions of response? Is drama useful in developing and extending the response of all readers, including those who are already highly engaged? Is drama an effective prewriting technique for reflective essays about issues the students may not have personally experienced?

Other creative artistic activities may also hold promise for changing student attitudes toward reading and their conceptions of the reading act, and for developing previously unexplored dimensions of response. I believe these questions and others are worth the attention of classroom teachers and teacher-researchers. The possibilities are dramatic.

## COMMENTARY

### MOTIVATION. MATERIALS, AND METHODS

Ironically, the dimensions of response were supposed to be the whole of my dissertation data. But once again, my concerns as a teacher trumped those of academia, and those of a desire (on my own part and that of my family!) to quickly finish up my degree.

Once I had learned what expert adolescent readers do, I was immediately thinking about how I could help my less engaged and less expert readers do the same things. This is a wonderful thing about all learning. It's especially true of teacher research as a way of learning how to teach by learning from your students: One question leads naturally to another. Excitement builds over time. There are always new ideas to share and try. All of your efforts help you to relate to your students as learners and model engaged learning for them. Every lesson, unit, and year is a new adventure of collaborative discovery. You model for students how learning is continual, joyful, and a heck of a lot of fun. You display how thinking and being are a constant process of revision. You demonstrate every day why teaching is one of the most exciting, dynamic, worthwhile, challenging, and endlessly interesting careers in the world. You remind yourself why you come to school each day: precisely because you embrace and are ready for new possibilities and potentialities.

#### Learning to Love it

My classroom project has always involved getting kids to love reading, literature, and learning, and helping them to get good at it. I've come to understand that these processes are inextricably intertwined. In our research into the literacy of boys (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2006), we found that boys privileged competence above all else. As one informant told us: "I'd rather say reading is stupid than *maybe* look like I might be stupid." When the boys described why they liked doing the things that they loved to do, competence was always at the heart of their engagement and enjoyment.

We found that when boys were intensely engaged, they were either already quite competent at that activity, or were getting demonstrably better at it, with visible signs of progress. (Although our actual study

focused on boys, our pre-study indicated that all our major findings were also true of girls—to somewhat different degrees.) This has profound implications for our teaching and for assessment—only if we highlight competence and growth will our instruction and assessment lead to motivation and progress.

As another informant said, when speaking about lacrosse: “I just like being good at it.” The corollary is that students don’t like *not* being good at it. They don’t like feeling stupid, or not knowing how to proceed and improve, and they want just-in-time assistance when they are struggling. And unfortunately, school often doesn’t provide the help they want and need when they want and need it. Buda was a boy I taught who claimed that “school teaches you how you are dumb, not how you are smart.” Another boy charged: “Teachers give you really hard things to do and then they never help you.” Still another said: “It’s like the teacher throws you into the deep end of the pool, waits to see if you drown, and then marks it down in her gradebook!” His complaint was not being thrown into the deep end of the pool, but why he had not been taught to swim first, and why he wasn’t given help when he began to struggle.

Competence is likewise the linchpin of the conditions of flow experience (Czikszenmihalyi, 1990; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2006), which, when present, entirely explained why the boys liked to do everything that engaged them (including literate activity). When the conditions were lacking, that explained why they disliked and rejected what they did not like to do. Motivation is entirely tied up in a sense of self-efficacy and visible signs of developing competence. The findings of our pleasure reading study, *Reading Unbound* (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014), yielded similar results. When readers freely choose a reading, or freely choose to continue with a reading, there are always five pleasures in play: immersive play; social, intellectual, and functional work; and inner work pleasures. These pleasures capture all the conditions of flow, and each mirrors particular kinds of competence and ways to demonstrate that competence.

Three ways to help students develop and exercise more competence are 1) by reenergizing our methods by making them more active, hands-on, fun, social, and connected to the students’ current lives, 2) by organizing learning around inquiry as cognitive apprenticeship that foregrounds an immediate functional purpose for what is learned, and 3) by rethinking and expanding the materials we use. I’ll take up the first two of these here (and the third in my commentary on the next chapters).

## Revitalizing Our Methods with Action Strategies and Drama

Surveys of American teaching (like those referred to in the commentary for the Introduction) match my own observations. Students sit at desks, do worksheets, engage in classroom “discussions” that are thinly veiled “fill-in-the-blank” lectures, and take quizzes and tests that require little beyond factual recall.

I contend that what our students learn and remember is a result of how we teach. We must model engagement and provide students with multiple ways of engaging, problem-solving, practicing new strategies, and making meaning. This means that we must overcome the salience of the traditional in the kinds of instructional methods we use.

Drama is now the most powerful teaching method in my repertoire. It’s also the most engaging and fun. I find it to be uniformly successful with all students, from the resistant and reluctant to those who are highly accomplished students. I can’t imagine teaching an elementary school class or a graduate class without using it.

I have continued to experiment, research, and write about drama and have progressed in my facility with using drama strategies. Over the years I’ve come to do more simultaneous drama work in pairs and small groups versus whole-class dramas. I’ve been doing shorter dramas and more spontaneous and scriptless drama work. I’ve also been using these activities more often, frequently starting class each day with a quick drama strategy.

Drama, of course, provides its own context and implies an analogous context from real life. But it still strikes me that I didn’t do enough in *YGBB* with contextualizing student reading and drama work in a larger context of inquiry, nor did I use drama consciously enough to create situated cognition through meaningful contexts of use. Now I also use dramas that involve authors, or that involve characters or historical figures from across different texts.

A series of teacher research studies on drama and its various effects are reported on in *Imagining to Learn* (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998). A book on how to use various “families” of drama techniques for a variety of literacy and learning purposes has become a bestseller (Wilhelm, 2012a). And yet drama is the most misunderstood of all the techniques I have written about.

Ironically, when writing my drama book for Scholastic, the editors refused to allow “drama” to be in the title, eventually calling it *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension*. Their justification is that teach-

ers misunderstand what “drama” is and conflate it with “theater,” and that teachers just don’t buy books about drama.

If I use drama in fishbowl teaching or a teacher workshop, it is invariably what most excites the other teachers, what they most immediately try to use on their own, and what they email me about and want to discuss with me. But I also get a lot of emails from people who have not yet tried it who say they don’t think their kids would be able to do it.

I think this goes back to the misconception of what drama really is and what it isn’t. Drama is not rehearsed, it is not staged, it does not involve people in tights dancing on a proscenium stage; in other words: *drama is not theater!* It IS active, short, scriptless, spontaneous, and often simultaneous (with pairs of students across a class all involved in their own dramatic worlds); it can be performed internally or externally; and it is always purposefully framed. Participants are always accountable for doing and creating a deliverable—something specific within the context of the drama strategy, something that they could write about, reflect on, or share.

I’ve found that whenever drama activities don’t work, it’s because the work has not been adequately “framed” (for a full discussion of framing and how to do it, see Wilhelm, 2012a). Before beginning a drama activity, students need to understand their roles, have a brief time to prepare, and know what they are being asked to do and how they will report out and be accountable to the class for the meaning they have made and are contributing to the ongoing inquiry.

Drama continues to be the hardest teaching and learning strategy to get some teachers to try—but also the strategy they and students get most excited about once they try it. In one of the schools where I work, a teacher told me that her students “wouldn’t do drama.” I insisted that they would, and she said that I could come in and do it with them. Since this kind of model or fishbowl teaching is something I regularly do in my PDN (Professional Development Network) schools, I readily agreed. When I asked her about the class, she smirked and said, “It’s eighth-hour, twelfth-grade remedial reading.”

I prepared a story drama lesson to help us navigate a previously assigned story. When I arrived at class one big boy hitched up his jeans and stood up. He was clearly the class spokesman. He cleared his throat and announced: “We DON’T DO drama!” The other kids all nodded in assent.

I replied that I was unaware of this, that it was “my bad,” but asked if it be all right to read the story and “do some activities.” He agreed that this was acceptable, and he sat down.



I decided to throw out any activities that would look like role-playing, but we did a “vote with your feet” activity, a radio show discussion, and a written correspondence drama and choral montage. At the end of the 90-minute block, the boy came up to me and enthusiastically told me that “this was the greatest class ever!” When I told him that all the activities had been drama, he wailed, “You tricked us!”

So maybe the Scholastic people were right—we need to call drama something else, like “action strategies.” But here is my point—even if you think kids will be resistant, or if some of them demonstrate initial resistance, it will work. I start with activities that are written, or done in pairs or small groups, activities that don’t look like drama, and then move from there. If some few students are resistant, I ask them to be videographers or recorders, writing down what they observe—I prompt them to record specific kinds of data and to help me as a co-researcher. As soon as they see the fun the other kids are having, they almost always want to join in. Of course I relent, but only after I tell them how much I needed them to be my secretary and note-taker!

Drama-in-education activities are powerful and work for many reasons. Foremost is that drama and enactment are an embodied and very human way of making meaning. It is a way to experiment and play with meanings and possibilities. If you have ever been around little kids, they are always doing drama, and when they role-play, they are always a “head taller than themselves”—they always role-play being more expert and older than they really are.

As such, drama moves students into their zone of proximal development. English language arts is a place to pursue personal possibilities and safely study the “shadow”—or that which is repressed and “out of bounds.” It is a natural place to introduce edgy topics, ethical considerations, and limits. Drama makes all this edginess safe because it provides a “liminal” space for trying out ideas, and one is not responsible as oneself in a drama—only as the character. *Liminality* means we experiment in the space on the threshold between the real and the imaginary.

Here’s another very important point for teachers: Every drama strategy correlates to a specific tool for learning, reading, or composing. For example, hotseating (where one becomes a character questioned by others, see Exhibit 4.3 for a Hotseat Planning Sheet) is a way to enter the perspective of characters and to fill in gaps, to imagine their backstory and what they are thinking and feeling. Each drama strategy is a powerful tool for learning a strategy that many adults have internalized—in an externally supported and clearly scaffolded way. We all engage in

role-plays in our minds. If your principal makes you angry, don't tell me you don't rehearse a little role-play inside your head, rehearsing what you might say, or could have said! We often perform hotseats in our minds—particularly when reading—to consider what it would be like to be someone else, or to understand their perspective. Drama also works because it personally connects life to the material under consideration. Drama allows us to try things we wouldn't do in real life, and to consider ideas that are distant from us in time, place, culture, or experience. (Again, for a fuller discussion, see Wilhelm, 2012a.) Drama is transformative, and helps us to imagine what is underground, and what could be. Drama expresses a future orientation, a tomorrow mind, and a growth mindset, focused on going beyond what is to what could be (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011).

It is also hugely significant that drama can provide a set of flexible contexts that match or are analogous to historical, cultural, and disciplinary situations that can frame and co-produce the meaning that is made. An implication of this insight is that every drama/action strategy technique is useful for teaching engaged and strategic reading of informational and nonfiction texts of all kinds (Wilhelm & Smith, 2016).

### **Using Drama to Provide Context**

Thinkers in the Vygotskian/sociocultural/teaching-as-cognitive apprenticeship tradition argue that reading and writing must be taught in contexts in which they are “necessary for something, in a way that is part of complex cultural activity, not as isolated motor skills for school” (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 128). Likewise, cognitive scientists studying the situated nature of all thinking and problem-solving activity agree that situations are not ancillary to learning, but are absolutely necessary and integral to all learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Thus, drama can work as a device for framing curriculum. I have often used “mantle of the expert” dramas (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) to contextualize learning and make it purposeful, and to foreground the need for learning to lead to application and social action/service (Wilhelm, Fry, & Douglas, 2014). For example, I have cast students as video production teams creating documentaries about civil rights issues, or web designers creating interactive relationship quizzes, or museum designers creating a museum about the settlement of America or about Egypt's contributions to modern cultures, or blue-ribbon panels proposing and

implementing programs to reciprocally support and learn from our growing immigrant and refugee populations. This kind of dramatic framing casts the students as “novice experts” and helps them to learn what experts know so they can progress towards doing what experts do—and further provides the context and need to apply and use what has been learned (Wilhelm, Fry, & Douglas, 2014).

Drama can also provide more short-term contexts for imagining what it would be like to be a character or historical figure, and for imagining that one is or could be more expert—the kind of person who possesses and exerts a growth mindset: who reads, does math, creates video documentaries, writes newspaper articles, and so forth. Drama is also a context that encourages kids to play with possibilities and to collaborate and help each other.

Drama is also an excellent context for introducing inquiry themes and essential questions (Smith & Wilhelm, 2010; Wilhelm, 2007). When creating a museum about the settlement of America, students can be asked to address the question of the costs and benefits brought to North America by Western civilization. When studying civil rights and creating video documentaries about the topic, students could be asked to address the question of what best protects and promotes civil rights, or who was the greatest civil rights leader of all time and how we can emulate such leaders in our own school and community. Asking such questions helps create a context in which the learning matters in ways that are clearly connected to the students’ lived experience, to the discipline, and to the world. Drama work helps to make all of these connections clear and personally felt.

Just as with authorial reading, when reading or studying an issue, inquiry theme, essential question, or any other set of material, the job is to first understand what is already thought and known (what I call “topical research”; Wilhelm, 2007). But if we stop here, as schools usually do, then we have not progressed very far beyond merely being information purveyors and consumers, instead of being producers of knowledge who have learned and practice how to create, evaluate, and use new understandings. Unless we go beyond information to see new patterns of meaning; to understand the story behind the story; to embrace, adapt, or resist, and then find ways to use and apply these meanings (what I call “critical inquiry”), we will not learn how to participate in communities of practice as developing mathematicians, historians, scientists, ethicists, linguists, and the like. Drama is an invaluable way to assist kids in using critical literacy as they engage in critical inquiry and understanding.

**Exhibit 4.1. Drama Strategy Chart**

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**BASIC DRAMA STRATEGIES****Reenactments**

Reenactments can be used before, during, or after reading. Reenactments prepare and assist students in figuring out and representing the literal and implied meanings of a textual episode or episodes by reframing it into a script, or simply enacting it in some way.

**Variations:** Freeze the reenactment and tap individual characters awake to talk to them about what they are thinking or feeling at the moment.

Change the text by reframing, recasting, changing, or probing it in some way, for example by having a character say something different or make a different decision. This strategy will help students figure out what texts are explicitly and implicitly saying and not saying, and how a different construction would change the text as well as the effect and meaning of the text.

**Role-Play**

Students assume the different perspectives of characters, objects, forces, or ideas and interact with others also assuming some kind of role. Students are provided with a dramatic situation and something to discuss, achieve, and be able to deliver or report on after the role-play. Role-plays are typically quite short (60–90 seconds), although they can be extended as students get more experienced.

**Variations:** Carousel/Revolving Role-Play, Questioning Roles

**Hotseating**

Hotseating intensifies role-playing by putting students on the spot so they can be addressed, advised, interviewed, and questioned in role as a character, force, or idea by a forum of students also in role, as journalists, other characters, or interested parties. This technique helps students improve their ability to analyze characters, infer, elaborate, and think on their feet. A “lifeline” group can assist the person or people on the hot seat as needed, or the lifeline members can tap in to take the hotseated person’s place.

**Variations:** Lifeline, Inner Voice/Alter Ego, Good Angel/Bad Angel, Pro/Con, Whispers, panel discussion or press conference

**Discussion Dramas**

These are techniques that support student talk and conversation about issues that matter by putting students in role and in a small or large group of other

students in role. This frees students to explore issues and express opinions that they want to deal with, but without being personally responsible for these viewpoints since they are expressed in role. By using these enactments, students not only deepen their understanding through talk, but their participation increases and they are more willing to try out new points of view. Through these discussions, they also enhance their thinking skills.

**Variations:** In-role discussions in small groups; Forum Drama, perhaps with “teacher in role”; Radio Show, TV shows, news shows, voting with your feet, four corners, choral montage, game show formats: e.g., *To Tell the Truth*

### **Correspondence Dramas**

These enactments are any writing the student does while in role. They provide students with a purpose, meaningful information, a situation, and an audience. Writing also helps deepen a student’s awareness of how different types of text are constructed.

**Variations:** Character Diary, Character Facebook page and posts, Character Letter or Postcard Exchange, Choral Montage based on character correspondence

### **Tableaux**

*Tableau* is derived from the French word for visual presentation. Tableaux (plural) help students visualize and explore both the text and the subtext of a narrative, including setting, scenes, situations, characters, relationships, and meanings. Using this technique, students can also represent vocabulary and create mental models of complex concepts and procedures.

**Variations:** tableau vivant (living pictures or statues), video clip, slide shows, captioned pictures, best/worst Scenario

### **Mantle of the Expert**

This means to wear the cloak of a more expert person and to operate in the story world or imagined context with this more expert person’s knowledge and power. This technique helps students learn the ways of thinking and knowing that experts use to understand, produce, represent, and use content knowledge.

**Variations/Extensions:** Create imaginary and real social actions or social action artifacts, create museum exhibits or even a complete museum, create a public service announcement, create a service learning project. All reflect and require expert knowledge from reading and inquiry.

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**Exhibit 4.2. Model Framing and Planning Sheet for Hotseating Activity**

Title of assigned reading: \_\_\_\_\_

In groups of 3–4 students, choose a character from this story that one of you will become for the Hotseating. Or your teacher may assign groups to represent different characters. It is important that the group agree on the following information about the character so that any one of you can go to the Hotseat and answer questions from the class. If the required information is not in the story, you will have to infer or make an educated guess about it, which is something all expert readers do when creating character.

Name of character: \_\_\_\_\_

Your age and physical appearance: \_\_\_\_\_

Your house, city/area, favorite place: \_\_\_\_\_

Your passions, “soapbox” topics, deepest desires—these may or may not be mentioned in the text: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your main goal: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your biggest obstacles and problems: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your biggest influences: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your greatest strengths: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your greatest weaknesses: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What one or two words best describe you—give examples from the text that demonstrate these traits: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Members of your group not being Hotseated will get to ask the first two questions. What will they be? And how will your character respond? How will the questions ensure a long character response, and an interesting revelation of character? How will you know that the character responses are good ones?

Question 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

What other questions might the audience ask? What will they want to know? How will your character respond, and why will s/he respond that way? Rehearse a few with your group.

### **A Few Variations on Hotseating**

**LIFELINE:** The Hotseated student can get advice from group members if she struggles to answer a question. They quickly confer to help the Hotseated character know how to respond. Or one of the group members can “tap in” and take over the hotseat to answer the question.

**ALTER EGO or INNER VOICE:** Each student-in-role could have another student from the group stand behind him to play the “alter ego,” or “Inner Voice” or “conscience,” and, after each response, reveal the character’s inner thoughts and feelings that the Hotseated character would not reveal in public, or may be in denial about, or repressing. In this way, the Hotseated student says what the character would say in a public interview, but the alter ego says what the character might be thinking and feeling behind the persona or “mask.”

**PRESS CONFERENCE:** Do the Hotseating in the context of an interview, press conference, trial, debate, or talk show.

**GOOD ANGEL/BAD ANGEL:** If a character is having a dilemma, other students can visit the character in role of a good angel trying to help them, or a bad angel tempting them to make the wrong decision. Or in role as “pros” or “cons” for deciding one way or another. Students can debrief by reflecting on the strategies used, how these exemplify argument strategies (ethos, logos, pathos), and manipulative strategies of persuasion.

**WHISPERS:** If a character is in deep trouble and in need of help, other students can walk by and provide verbal support and advice. Afterward,

students can discuss what comments were most helpful and why. This can be an imaginative rehearsal for real-life response to people suffering problems.

DEBRIEF: After the Hotseating, review with your group what went well and what answers you would change now that you have had time to think about it. One of the great things about drama is that it’s like a tape recorder—you can always “rewind” and redo things, you can erase, or you can fast-forward into the future. Too bad real life isn’t like that!

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Adapted from Wilhelm (2012a)

**Exhibits 4.3–4.6 can be found online on this book’s page and the free downloads page at [TCPress.com](http://TCPress.com)**

Exhibit 4.3. The Purposes of Various Drama Strategies

Exhibit 4.4. Tips for Setting Up Work with Drama Strategies

Exhibit 4.5. Process Drama Tools for More Effective and Exciting Teaching

Exhibit 4.6. Low-Key Role-Play and Questioning Roles to Promote Discussion