The Drama of Folklore: Stories as Teachers

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Abstract: For modern children and youth, folklore can be dense, and full of references to traditions and practices that are no longer recognizable. However, when students engage in a process that brings them closer to the material, and into a deeper analysis of the folktale and its various meanings, then the stories themselves take on a greater relevance. Not only do the students come to comprehend the possible meanings better, but they also appreciate the subtleties of expression and language and enjoy them. As the twenty first century has solidified the importance of visual multimedia, young people require ways other than merely reading or listening to cultural literatures, in order to be welcomed into and intrigued by these folkloric worlds. This article posits that process-oriented drama offers an effective method to engage participants in exploring folklore, keeping the process surprising, mysterious and stimulating, and encouraging the students to be collaborators in their own learning. Included are descriptions of the author’s own work with children and folklore, and examples of research studies that show the effectiveness of integrating drama into classroom studies.

Folklore, almost alone amongst traditional art forms, has been co-opted. The tales have fallen into the hands of modern storytellers who often have little connection with the cultural contexts and alter the tales at will, too often ‘cleaning them up.’ They have become the territory of anthropologists, who closely analyse the stories attempting to set them down in some definitive form, in many ways divorced from its
initial purpose and origin. In addition, folklore has gained the reputation of being for children – fictional histories that are cute but carry little importance in contemporary life.

This tradition once had a more active life: the television and cinema of its time. These modern storytelling devices, as engaging as they are, however, reduce the rich, metaphorical materials of folklore into simple, widely accessible versions that lose their emotional and cultural power. “The world is becoming with accelerating swiftness a single culture, and narrative has always been rooted in localisms.” (pg. 187, Kroeber) Previously, a community would sit for several evenings listening to an epic on a legendary hero, but now the event must be wrapped up in under two hours, sometimes even less.

This is all very regrettable. The power and purpose of folklore should not be underestimated. The initial purpose of imparting valuable lessons about life, culture, and interpersonal relationships in engaging and imaginative ways was deliberate. Stories grab attention and make an indelible impression on the listener as they speak about characters which reflect the listener himself. In addition, the tales overflowed with valuable cultural beliefs and understandings, providing non-didactic models for young people to learn the ways of being and doing in their family, village, community, and society.

Too often now, the embedded lessons become overly didactic and the once engaging story is flattened to ensure that the listeners ‘get it.’ The teller de-emphasizes what initially drew the listeners into the tales and forces an overly obvious and underengaging moral. Or the reverse happens. A storyteller co-opts a cultural myth or legend and robs it of its core significance, either by lack of knowledge about the culture or in an attempt to make the story ‘accessible,’ changing the tale into a form that fulfils the expectation of what and how a story should be.

Anthropologists, seeking to understand and contextualize the inner wisdom of the tales, put them into academic studies and journals that are far removed from the people for whom the tales were initially intended. Some will dissect the story into infinitesimal pieces, trying to re-create in writing, the rhythms and nuances of the performance style and cultural trappings. This often makes the reading of the stories stilted and shallow; too much emphasis on re-creation of the ‘proper’ and cultural specific style of telling diverts the focus from the story itself. John Dewey (1934) encourages awareness of what happens when art has a long history. He claims that art becomes isolated from the human conditions that produced it and that when art objects are separated from their conditions of production, “a wall is built around them” (pg. 3). The greater the isolation, the greater the distance from reality the less
opportunity to inform. In this way, art invents mystery and works against critical pedagogy.

Doyle (1993) notes that “Art does not exist out of context and should not exist in isolation. Society expresses itself through its cultural life, and these expressions contain references to the social totality” (Pg. 34). Folklore needs to be reconnected to its dramatic roots. It must be given the chance to succeed as engaging stories. “[B]ecause [Ramanujan] listened closely to Kannada tales, letting them tell their own story, he know how they lived in their tellings, which is why he so loved the tales about tales. [T]ale telling is a form of self-expression so vital that its denial can break up a marriage.” (Pg. xv, Ramanujan) The stories must retain their symbolic cultural and life lessons, which may need some teasing out to effect their full core purpose, yet without losing the wild and amazing adventures and journeys of the sometimes fantastical, sometimes tangibly real characters.

The Challenge

For many modern children, folklore can be dense and complicated; the Cinderellas and Snow Whites of Disney fame are, in many ways, more relevant because their reference to life is in a manner parallel to the experience and interest of the modern child. When students have an engaging way into folklore, however, the chances are strong that they will not only understand it, but also appreciate and enjoy it. And also, once they develop a personal connection to the story they are more likely to value the material or be sensitive to it when they experience or encounter it later. “Tales affect those who tell them as much as those who hear them.” (Pg. xv, Ramanujan) In truth, the students will carry the story with them, making the story an essential part of their repertory for understanding and coping with the world.

When young people experience a process that brings them closer to the material, engaging them in a deeper analysis of the folk tale and its various and possible meanings, then the stories themselves take on a greater relevance. Not only do the students come to comprehend the possible meanings better, but they also appreciate the subtleties of expression and language. They learn to read the symbolism, which is no mean feat in this era of simplistic, realistic images relentlessly offered through popular entertainment.

As the twenty first century has solidified the importance of multimedia visual stimulus for the modern child through technologies as film, television, DVDs and videos, young people require ways other than merely reading or listening to cultural literatures in order to be welcomed into and intrigued by these folkloric worlds. “Talking the way
a storyteller does ... means being able to feel and live in the very heart of culture, means having penetrated its essence, reached the marrow of its history and mythology, given body to its taboos, images, ancestral desires, and terrors.” (pg. 244, Vargas Llosa)

Drama Method

The engaging and exploratory nature of drama offers such a possibility—an effective method to engage participants in reviewing and exploring folklore in myriad ways, keeping the process surprising, mysterious and stimulating, and encouraging students to be collaborators in their own learning. At very elementary levels, students not only enjoy drama-integrated sessions, but also look forward to them—a foundation that makes drama such a powerful experience. Even when the material proves challenging or mystifying, the students stay engaged because of the overtly stimulating nature of drama activity.

Through simple and accessible strategies, dramatic explorations give meaning to content material and provide powerful opportunities for learning by evoking emotion, simultaneously stimulating affective and cognitive responses to problems, and drawing on powerful memories to develop lasting impressions (Dewey, 1943; Egan, 1999; Green, 1995). At more complex levels, students discover their ability to create, to reflect and evaluate, to reinvigorate their ongoing work, and to monitor constantly their own achievements. Drama provides a process without an end; rather, an ever-growing series of achievements that keep young people engaged, but consistently challenges them to explore more, dig deeper, and challenge themselves to uncover unique ways to express their ideas, concerns, thoughts, understanding, and discoveries. When students invest in the process and find joy in being involved, then the learning becomes more personal and the students develop a sense of ownership of and relationship to the material being explored.

At a middle school, I helped a teacher introduce the basic elements of a story by unveiling a folktale a little at a time. Each day, as we explored new aspects of the story, I told them more of the tale. By the time we had finished, the students had heard the story many times. After I finished the entire story, the teacher reviewed the story in class to test their comprehension and understanding. The students, the teacher noted, showed a greater interest in that story and were very keen on discovering details in the story that they had not noticed before. An intern-teacher who sat in on the class said that she had been taught to have the students read the story in full before working on it with the students. She was amazed on how much more enthused and interested in reading the story the students were after hearing it and exploring it orally.
In a study in the “Journal of Aesthetic Education,” Ann Podlozny (2000) reported the effects of drama instruction on the development of students’ verbal abilities. She analysed 80 previous studies and found that drama, particularly story enactment, improved students’ abilities to understand stories in general, especially those students from lower socio-economic groups or with limited reading abilities. She also discovered relationships with reading achievement, reading readiness, oral language development, and writing achievement.

One day, a girl walked into drama class with a tattered book in her hands. At first she hid the book from me and the other teachers, and shared it with members of her group only. I asked whether I could see the book and she showed me a copy of the Ramayana, the story we were exploring in class. She noted that she had checked it out of the library “to help us get the story right”. The desire to read the story more closely and to understand in greater depth the events and characters is an enviable one and certainly one that all teachers would like to instil in their students.

In her doctoral dissertation, Anita Page (1983) looked at the extent to which dramatizing stories affected students’ reading comprehension. In her investigations, a group of children listened to an adult read a story and another group heard a story on tape and then dramatized it. Page found that dramatizations tended to engage the students more than traditional reading. Further, the students who acted the story out could better identify major aspects such as the story’s central idea and character development. The two combined led to better comprehension.

In addition, if the folktales come from their own culture or ethnic heritage, they develop a potentially greater connection, as they begin to recognize reflections of themselves and their culture. The worlds may be strange in time and attitude, but the underlying beliefs contain a vague similarity to the world the young people know.

In much the same way that we appreciate traditional dance, music, and other arts, we can learn to appreciate the tradition and practice of folklore interactively and tangibly. We merely need the time to understand and appreciate the conventions of the material and how it works. This parallels the appreciation people gain for the works of great writers such as Shakespeare. At first the work can be daunting, stuffy, and remote; the barriers of language and time make it difficult to understand, let alone appreciate. Given the opportunity to explore the material in greater depth, to learn the rhythms of the language and the conventions of the time period, we move past the structural barriers and appreciate the accomplishments of the writer.
A model process involving children consists of several interdependent aspects which, when experienced in tandem with each other, increases the likelihood that the children will not only learn, but also understand and develop a lingering interest and curiosity about folkloric material and performance style. In addition, the desire to understand will help the students develop a critical eye towards the material, an essential step in perceiving how this traditional material plays an important role in understanding the place of culture, both past and present, in shaping and defining our lives.

The Process

The process referred to throughout this article proceeds roughly as follows: Students first explore basic expression and communication skills through drama, and then apply the ideas to the desired cultural story. Students then analyse the story’s structure, develop a verbal outline, and then create a narrative that accompanies a simple playing out of the story. This, finally, leads to developing the story into play form with dialogue and action. Each section is flexible in length of time. Each unfolds at a pace that suits the students’ age and abilities, as well as the particular goals of the classroom.

The advantage of such a multi-layered process is that teachers can linger on any section, to provide tangential learning experiences that will enrich both the students and the process. As this process is not engrained in students memorizing facts and drama scripts, they will benefit from the extended time for reading, research, development of their dramatizations, and ongoing reflection. In other words, the intense involvement of the students at every step in the process promotes deeper comprehension and commitment and instils in students a greater investment in the process and the learning. Another advantage is that the process involves and engages whole groups of students or an entire class at every step. They decide how involved they are and how to best shape their involvement. They review and assess their involvement and their creations and alter their work as they choose.

To begin with, the participants first experiment with various drama strategies to build knowledge of and comfort with the strategies to apply them later to building brief plays. As the students gain comfort with and an understanding of drama, the instructor introduces a mythological or folkloric tale that will become the core of the entire process. Ideally the story is transmitted orally to the class. This can be a wonderful chance for the instructor to model the free-flowing and improvisational nature of the coming process. This also encourages students to hear the story as it was originally intended. They will experience the story in a very personal way, which will promote a sense of ownership over the story as the drama process proceeds.
Certainly the story should not be read, as the students will come to rely on the words in the book, looking for the “correct” version of the story or the “correct” words a character says, and losing the nature of mythological lore. The process then becomes too pre-determined and controlled. In addition, no one should write it down. A story becomes too definitive in young people’s minds when written down. In exploring the story, it must reflect the way the young people hear and understand it. That happens only if they make the words their own.

After listening, they shape it by recalling, retelling, and analysing it to decide how to re-create it through drama. By retelling it through the process of shaping it, students are drawn to the fun, the mystery, and inconsistencies and find ways to use those elements to keep the tale uniquely oral. In addition, by having the youth speak the story repeatedly, they advise each other, thus becoming active participants in the shaping. The constant discussion and sharing strengthens understanding through purposeful and engaging work.

Often, I distribute copies of the text after the students work for a time just from their memories. A class of 6th standard boys, after having been given the story, came to me to point out many small differences in the text from the way I had told it. This led to a discussion of interpretation—how specific passages create specific reactions to or understanding of the story. I then gave the boys the option of revising their ongoing creations to incorporate the newly discovered details or to use their understanding of these details to help colour their continued work.

A teacher once pointed out to me that her students not only seemed to understand the text better after having worked first from an oral telling, but also demonstrated a higher reading ability, even though they had never read the text before. She was especially pleased with their enthusiasm towards discovering how the details of the written text matched or differed from their dramatic explorations.

After the listening to the story, students ‘try on’ the characters, actions, and key events of the story, discovering a range of ways to express particular characters or actions. As one participating teacher stated (2005), “The chance to move around and use other modes of expression other than reading and writing was excellent and helped our students express themselves. Using drama, imagination, movement helps boost comprehension of vocabulary and narrative elements of character, plot, and setting.”

For example, in a Samoan story there is an eight-legged, winged beast chasing a boy and his dog. The students created several different frozen images of the beast physically, first as individuals, then with partners or in small groups. The students (as individuals and in small
groups) then brought select experimentations some of their “experiments” to life, dramatically: they made their beasts breathe; make sounds, or move, or fly about the room. Finally, students combined the characters, events and character encounters they experimented with into a variety of on-the-spot tableaux (physically frozen images). Examples include showing what the boy and dog looked like at different moments: seeing the beast, running from the beast, and being caught by the beast. This gets them thinking about the little pieces that make up the whole and, for the devising process, offers the students a safe period of exploration and confidence building. Without thinking about it, they develop a physical vocabulary that they will draw on later when reconstructing the story in play form.

Groups of students then each take a section of the story to develop more thoroughly. When students divide up into smaller groups of four to six and each group selects an event or two to explore and re-create into play form, all students become deeply involved in the exploration process, but also delve deeper into the story. Students repeatedly work to uncover details about the situation, characters, and theme. And as the overall story is shared among the groups, students will be sharing character roles, as one individual in each group will be the main character(s). As will be seen shortly, the students have the opportunity to benefit from each other’s interpretation of the characters, as they regularly share their ongoing creations.

A small group of 6th standard boys created a scene about a group of brothers paddling back and forth between two islands in order to accomplish a specific task. In the course of working on the scene, the boys developed very specific and effective actions of the brothers launching, paddling, and landing their canoe, but there was very little delineation among the characters of the brothers. The story suggested that the brothers were of various ages and abilities. Subsequently, I challenged the boys to develop unique attitudes for each that could be displayed during the paddling. The scene evolved into a rich exploration of a constant banter among the brothers of who could achieve the most. The boys illustrated effectively the oft-used motif of the braggart older brother and the triumphant younger brother, coming to understand how that plays out in the ongoing attitudes of the brothers.

Once the story has been divvied up, each group lists the important events within their chosen scene and creates a series of still images, or tableaux, that show those events. The number of tableaux the groups create is flexible and depends on how well the students are working together. The guiding principle behind using the tableaux is that the students will develop an understanding of the overall plot. Hearing the
story only once, they may or may not recognize it later. Hearing it twice, they may discover parts or sections that strongly affect them or appeal to them. Working together as a team to recall and stage the important events of the story offers them a tangible experience to think through, in detail, the entire story and begin to comprehend the specific sequence and connection of those events. They begin to visualize the journey of the characters, putting the important actions into a causal relationship with each other. This affords the first chance for the students to investigate the story at a level deeper than mere recognition.

Inevitably, however, students will forget parts of the story, although they will not think much about it or even be aware of it. When creating play versions from the text, they come to know the story intimately and are challenged to make sense of the sequence they have chosen or are assigned. A group of 7th and 8th standard girls thought they understood the story sequence I assigned them. However, while staging a scene in which the central character was eliciting help from a friend, they could not make sense of why the friend was a part of the story. They had given the action belonging to the friend to the central character instead, which meant that the central character had no reason to seek the help of his friend. Upon reviewing the story, they discovered their mistake. Subsequently they not only came to know the story, but also exercised skills related to investigating stories to understand character-purpose, sequence, and events and their relationship with each other.

At this and the subsequent steps in the process, significant time should be given to personal and group reflection. At the very simplest of levels, students share their ongoing creations with each other to exercise critical thinking skills by describing and interpreting what they see in each other’s scenes. They develop the ability to understand how ideas can be effectively (and ineffectively) presented. As they analyse how their peers have engaged physical and vocal skills to present their interpretations of the story, they simultaneously reflect on their own choices. By engaging in these discussions, the students are also investigating the characters and situations of the story in depth. Rarely will students, or even adults, consider the small physical gestures or vocal tones of a character while reading, unless it is spelled out for them by the author. By sharing, reflecting on, discussing, and ultimately revising their own creative interpretations, the students not only present their ideas, but also develop the ability to read text more thoroughly in order to visualize beyond the written word.

Building on the precision and pointed focus of the tableaux, the students now explore the physical world of their character and the rhythm and flow of their developing scenes. They create specific actions and gestures that suggest what the characters are doing, where the characters
are, and how the characters are interacting. Students find gestures and movements that define their character’s emotional state (How can you show how angry she is?), personality (How can you express that he likes to show off all the time?), age (How can you change your walk to show she is just a little girl?), and physical state (What action can you do that shows how strong this character is?). Throughout, participants are to experiment with a variety of ways to express ideas, actions and/or characters, noting that there is no single or correct way.

Finally, the groups fully dramatize their scenes by creating dialogue to accompany the action of their characters, or “acting it out.” This step in the process is challenging, but ultimately very rewarding. As in the previous steps, groups tackle the scenes one at a time, developing the conversations and utterances that define their character’s motivation (Why is she pursuing that goal?), personality (What might he say that best shows he is disdainful of his brother?), level of intelligence (What types of words does the character use and how precise is his grammar?), interests (What does she most often talk about?) and so on.

Having grappled with the plot in earlier stages, the students now have the opportunity to explore with some depth how their character fits into that overall context. And even more significantly, they develop an ownership over that character such that they will read the text quite differently: hearing and visualizing their character more fully. In many cases, the students will develop empathy for or connection with what the character is trying to achieve and almost take offence when something is said about the character. They will be able to write with more clarity about the character and its perspective on the story. When they encounter the character in another context—carving, painting, another story, theatre—the student will be more attentive to the details of character appearance, attitude, endeavour and the like.

A common occurrence in this process, and one that makes some teachers and instructors nervous, is when students break the traditional conventions that define specific literature or characters. For example, when working with a group of 6th standard girls on the Ramayana, I gave them a lot of leeway to interpret the story through their own understanding of the story’s events. One group of the girls developed a scene between Ravana and Sita, in which Ravana kidnaps her. In their innocence, the girls decided to have Ravana literally pull Sita into his chariot. The teachers watching laughed as the girls worked on the scene. “Ravana cannot touch Sita,” one of the teachers noted. However, to the teachers’ credit and to my own purpose, we did not say a word to the girls. Instead, we waited until they wanted to find ways to improve their scene, and make it more true to the story and the legend. Here
lies the point. When the students desire to know more, to research the information necessary inorder to expand on their scenes and creations, then the learning is that much more meaningful and well retained.

To complete the process, a culminating event should be staged. The performance need not only be a sharing with other groups in the class; it could involve another class of students, or even an informal presentation for family and friends. As this process is concentrated on students’ developing connection to and understanding of the folkloric material, a more formal, costumed performance is not preferable too early in the endeavour. With the pressure of a full theatrical performance hanging over their heads, the students will concern themselves less with the material and more on the skill of performing. If, however, a formal presentation is desired, the idea should be introduced and actually planned only after it is clear that the students have had the benefit of truly gaining a deeper understanding of the material, as outlined in this article.

The in-class performance is, however, icing on the cake. The true learning has occurred through the process of reconstructing the folk tale into a play. Success is gauged on how much ownership of the process the students develop. This ownership instils in them a sense of accomplishment that will contribute to a growing ability to analyse the deeper meaning and purpose of what they are learning.

The huge advantage brought by accessing the analytical and expressive skills of the performing arts to explore folklore is that this process makes folklore available to all children, regardless of their talents or skills. Traditionally in the performing arts, participating children need to display some sort of proclivity toward the physical demands of the art, or the vocal skills needed. With the process outlined here, the students need only enjoy the imaginative journey; they are not judged for their performing talents, but assessed on their comprehension of and growing enthusiasm for the folkloric content.

This last point is central to my whole argument—a process through which children will not only build comprehension with the folklore, but develop an interest in reading and exploring more. The essential obstacle to interest in the material is accessibility. Students do not naturally gravitate to folklore because it can be full of unfamiliar references or cultural understandings. Given the opportunity to experience the material in a manner more thorough than just reading the words, the students can develop a better understanding of the unfamiliar references and cultural elements. They will even discover an enthusiasm for learning more about these unfamiliar pieces; after all, the pieces do speak about themselves, their families, and cultures. For some, it may reveal new worlds to them,
worlds they thought they knew, but did not realize the extent of their own cultural history.

When working with a diverse group of high-school students, I used a story from a culture of several of the students in the room. As we explored the story through the drama, I noted that the tale came from a book of folklore I had published about that culture. One of the students soon asked to see the book as she was interested in reading more stories from her culture that she admitted she did not know. This same student had been mostly reluctant to be involved up to that point in the process.

A true testament to how engaged students become through sharing and exploring the stories is how many times students tell me they go home and share the story with their parents, siblings, friends, and relatives. That enthusiasm for learning impresses parents, as it says how excited the students are about learning. It also shows how much investment the students have in the stories. No longer just stories, these tales and legends become a part of them, as if the students had written the stories themselves.

Exploring folklore through drama transports folklore back to its roots—oral transmission of and interaction with the material. For children, the process of taking on the tale through physical and vocal exploration and performance, makes it a part of them. The experience is of equal importance to the tale itself. Subsequently, they remember it longer, understand it better, and are able to recall a broad range of details about the story. They also visualize it better, an act becoming more difficult for the modern child given the plethora of images constantly being fed to them through the range of modern technology.

References


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