

## Effectiveness of Drama in the English Classroom

by Kate Marie Ryan How effective is the strategy of drama in teaching extended written text within the English classroom? This report is divided into three parts - What, Why and How; 'What' identifies the significance of this inquiry for English teachers, it also contains the definition of extended text and its link to the English in New Zealand curriculum. 'How' identifies the strategies English teachers currently employ when teaching extended text, it also describes the shift towards using and incorporating drama strategies 'Why' discusses the research to support the effectiveness of incorporating these drama strategies into the teaching of extended written text. As we are about to embark on a teaching career we as English teachers need to be aware that our students will not always share the same enthusiasm and passion we have for reading. It is no secret that many activities divert students from reading. Student's understanding of humanity comes from commerce-driven images of television and movies and teachers worry that students might read this information unquestioningly (Allen, 2001). With increasing competition for interest and time we as English teachers have a daunting task in encouraging our students to dedicate time to read any written text, let alone the curriculum specified 'extended written text'. Not only are we competing against a range of diverse media texts and extra-curricular obligations, but also added to the mix is New Zealand's global rating as one of lowest levels of literacy. With these two factors in mind the task of tackling an extended written text in the classroom becomes increasingly challenging (Middleton 2004, Irwin 2002, Education Review Office, 2003). It is worth noting here that I began my research focusing on motivating reluctant readers - in particular boys. Further into my readings it became apparent that boys are action driven, more so than girls. Jeffrey Wilhelm notes that there is a significant gender gap when it comes to reading and there is much statistical evidence that many boys do not read (McGlenn 2003). Smith and Wilhelm have completed extensive research in this area and note that boys prefer active responses to reading in which they &quot;physically act out responses, do or make something&quot; (2002 pp.1-12). Through observations and discussions with current teachers I noted that the set extended text is becoming more of a challenge to plan for and teach to students. The competition for time, opportunities for learning and ability to make connections are even more prevalent than ever. With my background in drama, I decided to further explore how we as teachers can employ drama techniques within the English classroom to provide relevant contexts to reading an extended text and therefore assist unenthusiastic readers to engage with and enjoy them more. What is extended written text? The English in the New Zealand Curriculum does not give an exact definition of an extended written text but it does indicate that text(s) studied should be of sufficient depth and complexity to enable students to develop a full and detailed analysis. The text types can include novel, non-fiction, drama script or hyperfiction. What links exist between extended written text and the curriculum? The curriculum clearly states that reading and writing are of central significance in language growth. Within the English in the New Zealand Curriculum students are expected to engage in a variety of close reading that allows them to explore language and think critically. From Years 9 to 13 students develop the ability to process information from these texts and express their ideas using transactional writing (EiNZC 1994). From the first year of secondary school, students are introduced to the 'extended written text'. This is usually in the form of a fiction novel that has been selected on the basis of its language suitability, its intrinsic value such as themes and characters, its cultural context such as relevance to the student's experience or needs and its teachable value such as links to other texts or the range of activities needed to approach it with (Middleton, E 2004). Through close reading students are invited to explore the language used and to begin to think critically about the ideas introduced. At levels 1, 2 and 3, NCEA requires students to read, study and then show an understanding of an extended written text which is then externally assessed. Research suggests that the average student does not read much outside of school (Allen 2001). Consequently it becomes hard to build lesson plans on the assumption that everyone in the class did the reading. As discussed earlier the significance of this inquiry is focused around the competition for interest, time and capabilities of our students. The curriculum expectation for student's 'perceptive understanding' and 'sustained insight' can only occur if English teachers focus on how to engage and ensure students make meaning from texts. HOW How is extended written text currently taught? Teachers often used procedures such as reader response, process writing, shared reflection and a focus on student work to examine texts. Students in literature circles read and respond to self selected texts in small groups and then draw their classmates into their reading with presentations (Rekrut 2002). Based on readings, personal observations and teaching at two Auckland schools, Glendowie College and Rosehill College, the teaching of extended text can be approached in a variety of ways. Glendowie College: This decile 9 college is situated in East Auckland, was opened in 1961 and serves the middle to more affluent socio-economic communities of Glendowie, St Heliers, Kohimarama and St Johns Park. There are approximately 900 students. The current approximate ethnic composition includes New Zealand European (Pakeha) 66 %, Asian 24 %, Pasifika 6 %, and Maori 3 % and Others 1%. Approaches to extended text include; Reading aloud Reading log and teacher follow up Chart work Reciprocal reading in 2's Article discussion and paragraph response Quotes, events recap lists Attitude line Character and scheme grid work in pairs Essay planning and exemplars Extension work on style Rosehill College: This decile 7 college is situated in South Auckland, was opened in 1970 and serves the a cross section of both lower and higher socio-economic communities, from both rural and urban areas such as Papakura, Drury, Karaka, Waiapa, Te Hihi, Kingseat and Manuera. There are approximately 1950 students enrolled. The current approximate ethnic composition includes New Zealand European (Pakeha) 73%, M&ampli;ori 11%, Indian 3%, Samoan 1%, and Other 12%. There are currently 70 international students from Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Brazil Germany, Spain and China. Rosehill was the lead school in a Ministry of Education contract to provide ICT Professional Development to teachers in the Rosehill Cluster 2001-2003. Approaches to extended text include; Reading aloud - using CD, audiotape/shared reading/group reading Give time to read - set time to read text during SSR Chapter by chapter task sheets for plot, character, setting, theme development and language aspects Close devices on plot sequences Grids for character analysis Links to current affairs It is no surprise that the approaches listed focus heavily on the reading and writing aspect of the curriculum, as this achievement standard sits within these two strands. However, keeping in mind the dilemma of competing texts such as visual media and students fear of failure in reading and writing, it is

worth investigating different strategies of teaching that cater for different learning styles (Pirie 2002, Wilhelm 2004, Heron 2003). It is also important to find strategies that enable students to gain knowledge 'in' rather than gain knowledge 'about' the texts they read (Courtney 1989). As Balais notes, reading and responding about something is not the same as participating in it (2002). In fact, Beach and Myers proclaim that the 'ultimate goal however of engaging students in their own learning is to prepare them to act. Student's participation in all social worlds can result in the construction of a greater sense of belonging' (2001, p187). The question then lies in how does an English teacher adopt teaching strategies that engages students with texts emotionally, stimulates them cognitively and yet also creates this so-called climate for greater understanding? How can extended text be taught through drama? Texts invite students to enter, experience and explore imagined worlds. By responding through drama students are encouraged to move away from normal classroom activities to the creation of new, imagined contexts that draw on the reader's secondary worlds (Benton 1992). Students use a range of competencies to interrogate, represent, transform and interpret meaning. In order to take part, students are required to draw on their understandings of human behaviour, on their practical knowledge of themselves and others, and on their aesthetic and imaginative sensibilities (Eisner 1985). In participating in these processes students are gaining a 'perceptive understanding' and 'insight' into both the fictional and the real. There are a variety of drama conventions one can incorporate when approaching an extended text, however for the purposes of this report I will identify three easy and effective strategies using the text *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as an example; A tableau is a still image, a frozen moment or a 'photograph'. David McBride states that for students who are saturated in a remote control culture, the tableau helps them to comprehend and understand sequence (Allan 2002). It is created by posing bodies and communicates a living representation of an event, an idea or a feeling. Scenes are represented in which there is conflict or heightened action, the basic elements of literature. The students become physically involved but the technique does not demand any theatrical skill. The images may be naturalistic - for examples pictures for an illustrated edition of 'To Kill a Mocking Bird' or more abstract such as an image of Justice as Atticus might imagine it (Rogers, O'Neill, Jasinski 1995). This valuable teaching strategy can be used to encourage discussion and reflection. It offers students an effective technique to clearly express ideas that they might not be otherwise skilled enough to communicate initially in writing. This strategy also helps students, especially struggling readers, to better understand text giving them that extra 'perception' and 'insight' asked of from the students. Role is the basic ingredient for exploring what it is like to be in someone else's shoes and to develop an empathy with the 'fictional' lives we read about (O'Neill, Cecily & Lambert, 1982). Whilst in role students are learning to adopt and take a stance on a set of different attitudes. This links directly to the curriculum in being able to process information and think critically. Role play draws on research surrounding co-operative learning theories as it can occur not only individually but also within a variety of groupings such as the pairs, whole class, small or large groups, or half and half (on half provide action, one half observe and respond). For instance following a tableaux, students may be asked to develop a role play about specific moments in the story. Usually role play is most successful when the teacher is 'immersed' in the scene with them. In this strategy the teacher creates a situation in which the class has one of the following; 1 The need of an expert's knowledge 2 The need to have their ideas challenged by another perspective 3 The need to provide information or some kind of service to the teacher in role Often the most effective roles a teacher can adopt are close to the teachers regular function - for instance chairing a meeting, seeking questions or discussing the pros and cons of an event. The difference is that role will always have an attitude to the event, seeking information, persuading, patronizing or opposing. The teacher in role does not 'act' and is never merely an extra - they are the usual facilitator of discussion, however within real imagined circumstances. (Johnson, O'Neill 1984). The teacher takes the role of a social worker who visits the Cunningham family. Using questioning the teacher raises possibilities and invites the students to predict and advise on the problems of the Cunningham family. Students are called upon to grasp the perspectives of the characters in the story and to act upon those understandings in empathetic and insightful ways. In short the students are drawing on a range of intelligences to create meanings across the worlds of drama, reader and the literary text itself (Rogers, O'Neill, Jasinski 1995). What do English teachers need to know to teach through drama? A teacher does not need to be an expert to use drama the classroom. They do not need to be able to act. They merely need to know their text inside out to be able to apply it within the context of real imagined scenarios. These real imagined scenarios can be developed through these three easy conventions. The fictional world can become a reality for students, providing connections and context beyond what they can experience by merely deciphering meaning from words. Jonathan Needland, Dorothy Heathcote and Cecily O'Neil all provide useful texts that discuss the implementation of drama conventions within literary and language classrooms. Why is drama effective in teaching extended written text? This report draws on a variety of expert references from both English and Drama backgrounds to support the research for engaging students in reading through using drama with extended written text. For instance advocates of 'context' English teaching such as Jeffrey Wilhelm and David Barnes and 'process' drama enthusiasts such as Dorothy Heathcote and Cecily O'Neill. (article has been chopped due to word length, further revised summary coming)

## About the Author

Kate Marie Ryan is a Secondary School Teacher of English and Drama. Born in New Zealand, she has lived in Australia, America, Italy and the United Kingdom. She holds a degree in Communication Studies and after working several years in the UK within Theatre, Journalism and Public Relations industries, she returned to New Zealand to complete a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary). She currently teaches and resides in Sydney, Australia.