Staging Learning

The Play's the Thing

JEAN HICKS AND TIM JOHNSON

With this method we've discovered that Post-it® notes literally give kids a voice. In the complex peer relations that sometimes silence adolescents in the classroom, this simple drafting tool makes legitimate their right to enter the dialogue.

Damon grabs a stapler, flips it open, and begins to talk into his car phone. He and Chris are in the front seat (two wooden chairs) and their ladies are in the back (two more chairs). Chris interrupts Damon's improvised phone conversation:

CHRIS: It's been a long day. Let's go clubbin' tonight.

DAMON: What club should we go to?

CHRIS: What about the Ghetto Rose?

CRYSTAL: No, we're not going to the Ghetto Rose. Let's go to Club X3.

BRANDY: Yeah, we don't wanna go to the Rose because they always shootin'. We goin' to Club X.

CHRIS: Naw, man, they don't even serve liquor there.

DAMON: Plus the chicken wings are terrible, too!

CRYSTAL: Damon, you are always worried about the food.

BRANDY: We ain't even gotta go to no club.

Let's go out to eat or somethin', since can't nobody come up with which club to go to.

CHRIS: Well, I guess we can go to Club X. But first, let's drink this fifth of Hennessey.

In less time than it takes to watch an "NYPD Blue" rerun, four seniors on a cold and dreary Friday morning created four characters, each distinct, each with accompanying body postures and accents. In slice-of-life vernacular they crafted a drama, highlighting the tension that, to their minds, exists between males who desire to be boastful and live on the edge and females who assert quiet wisdom and urge caution.

These lines were scribbled on Post-it notes as part of a process that allows an entire class to draft and perform scenes for a thematic play during a 90-minute period. This particular scene was one of several that explored, from the unique perspective of the writers, facets of peer pressure. All of these scenes give students a chance to voice, in a non-threatening way, issues important to their lives.

In this article we discuss our work with high school and middle school students, but we believe this activity will work with students of all ages. In fact, this activity was inspired in part by "Puppet Plays," a timeless video featuring third-grade writing project teacher Margaret Grant of Missoula, Montana (ASCD/NCTE, 1984). We know colleagues who have used this activity successfully with students in upper elementary grades, and we ourselves have used it with teacher groups.

Initiating the Process

We begin by inviting groups of students to work together to create scenes for a thematic play using a method that we adapted from the work of Errol Bray in *Playbuilding: A Guide for Group Creation of Plays with Young People* (Heinemann, 1994). The key to Bray's technique is his insistence on a single theme. Each student-created scene is expected to connect to this theme.

Thus the structure of a theme play differs from the more familiar exposition: rising

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action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Instead, the theme play depends on the cumulative effect created by looking at a single issue from a variety of angles. We have sometimes introduced our students to this concept by discussing with them the structure of movies and plays like *Twilight Zone* and *Plaza Suite*—works that involve a collection of vignettes under a larger umbrella theme. Each group's task, then, will be to develop a scene, illustrating one facet of the theme.

Choosing the Theme

In choosing a theme, different approaches seem to work for different age groups. Middle schoolers and even ninth-graders often have a difficult time distinguishing between a topic and a theme. When students come up with topics, such as sports, instead of themes—those larger abstract concepts that connect topics—we brainstorm with them, pushing them to larger ideas:

JEAN: So everybody has had some experiences with sports? Do you play them or watch them? [Several voices respond: "Play." "Watch" "Both."] So why do you play and watch? What makes sports interesting to you?

DONNIE: Somebody's gonna win.

JEAN: And somebody will lose?

DONNIE: Yeah.

JEAN: Why do you care? Why does anybody care?

SHONTAY: 'Cause we like them. 'Cause it's a surprise.

MICHAEL: 'Cause they've worked for it, they've earned it. You wanna see who's the best.

JEAN: So what's really behind the attraction

of sports? Is it what they play or how they play?

DONNIE: Kinda both, but more how they play.

JEAN: Why?

MICHAEL: That's what you can't know. You can know a team's good, but they could be against somebody better or against somebody who is just getting better but you don't know it until they're pitted against each other. That's the fun.

JEAN: Would it be fun if everything were made equal and everybody played the same? Or if you always had a really strong team always against a really weak team?

DEANDRE: Naw, man, who'd care? Team's gotta be able to compete or there's no point.

JEAN: Oh, so it's competition that makes sports what it is.

DEANDRE: Yeah.

JEAN: So could that really be our theme, competition? Do you see how that's bigger than just "sports?" What else involves competition? Do people compete for grades? When I was in school, everyone was out for the top score. You wanted to do better than the next guy. Do you compete for grades?

ANNELLE: Grades? Not much. But sometimes I compete against me, against how I been doing.

JEAN: What else do people compete for?

VARIOUS STUDENTS: Jobs. Money. Prizes.

JEAN: What about things that you can't touch? What about attention? How do people compete for attention?

Our discussion continued as we examined each of the topics on the board: sports, teachers, school, bullies, brothers/sisters, summer vacation, music, and having fun. In

trying to help students broaden their understanding of their concept of theme, our discussions of a new topic borrowed from things we'd noticed earlier. Our discussion of sports had helped us to see that a fight with one's sister connected to the larger theme of sibling rivalry.

Older students work through the theme selection process much more quickly, easily generating abstract terms important to them when asked to suggest themes. They'll suggest, for instance, alienation, racism, peer pressure, and love. The brainstorming that follows allows them to make these abstractions more concrete.

Racism:
- economic: discrimination and segregation on the job
- educational: attendance quotas
- voluntary: blacks have black friends, whites have white

Peer Pressure:
- sex, breaking the law, conformity vs. being yourself, drugs, alcohol, clothes, music

Specific topics such as "First Day of School," "First Dates," and "Family Reunions" can be fun to experiment with but tend to elicit stereotypical responses. Since the idea is to have groups develop scenes that could be presented consecutively, abstract themes provide the widest array of possibilities. One of the most successful thematic plays developed through this process focused on "The Generation Gap." We tried to avoid the predictable kinds of commentaries that involved adults downplaying teens' life crises. One scene provided a gap-narrowing counterpoint, portraying today's teens making the shocking discovery that some of their music was played 30 years ago. The most effective effort, however, involved one character berating another over loud music,

strange hair, short skirts, late nights, and loose morals. The audience was surprised to learn in the last line of the scene that they'd seen a teen lecturing her newly divorced mother.

Connecting to the Theme

After the theme has been established, students usually write for about ten minutes, summoning memories, ideas, and experiences related to the theme. We put the emphasis on the personal. Left to their own devices, inexperienced writers often resort to reproducing television and movie scenes they have seen. Borrowing from the media feels safer; as writers, they will not have to further develop characters or plots, or even defend the quality of either to their peers. When students frame their connections in personal contexts they eliminate this temptation and promote the kind of risk-taking that leads to growth in writing.

While we have sometimes had students share their writing in small groups, it speeds the process to ask instead for five or six students to share with the whole class. Involving everyone in the discussion helps the students focus on a narrow slice of the theme that might make a good scene. As each student shares, we invite the class to help create a title for the material being read and identify a specific aspect of the theme it embodies. In one middle school class that was considering the theme of sibling rivalry, potential scenes included:

- I Had It First (competing for family resources)
- Calling in the Troops (tattling to Mom or Dad or caregiver)
- More Than Sticks and Stones (name-calling, teasing, ridiculing)
- Battle Scars (wounds that recall famous brother-sister fights)

- Ganging Up (one sibling is always the underdog; leads to explosions)
- Fooled Ya (practical jokes, taking advantage of a sibling—especially younger ones)
- He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother (happy ending—I can beat him up, but you'd better not!).

A freshman class chose "love" as its theme. Our scene-naming focused on clichés and song lyrics that would be easy to recall as groups drafted Love Hurts, There's Plenty of Fish in the Sea, Center of Attention, May and December, and so on. Once we have sketched out possible topics for scenes we begin to ask other questions. What does each shared story say about the theme? Is it a positive or negative statement? Is it universal? How might we portray it using drama?

This activity reinforces the importance of personal experience in our writing, as students look at their own experiences and see them as sources for material. The discussion time is critical, of course; students writing by themselves often find it difficult to make connections, but in a community setting, each person's story evokes another. In the class considering the theme of "love," the following discussion took place.

QUENISHA: Mine's about this party that Angelique had before school started. Donte was supposed to be with me, but I caught him dancing with Shenata.

SHAUNA: Yeah, I heard Karen say the same thing about the boy. He is no good!

QUENISHA: Yeah, he's just like Darnelle.

SHAUNA: Girl, don't start talkin' about no Darnelle!

JEAN: So what's the theme you guys are thinking about doing your scene on?

SHAUNA: "Love Hurts." 'Cause we've all been done wrong.

Starting the Script

We encourage groups to form quickly, perhaps at tables or via the natural clustering that occurs as teens choose their territories in the classroom. Groups of three of four seem to work best, although older students have successfully involved as many as five or six actors. Sometimes groups form around one of the scenes we brainstormed earlier. The idea may emerge from freewriting or from memories of relevant incidents generated during our whole-group sharing. Other times a group compares notes and votes on a situation. Most groups choose one of the scenes named during our exploration of the theme, although some come up with a new angle that wasn't on our original list.

Next, each member develops a character. Since they have selected the scene together, students choices are necessarily limited to characters that might logically be found in the situation. They pick up on this with little or no direction, perhaps because characters arise from their own lives. In the passage at the beginning of this article, for example, the class had chosen the theme of peer pressure. Damon, Chris, Crystal, and Brandy knew they wanted to develop a scene exploring the issue of teen drinking. They quickly decided to become couples who were double-dating, in part because there were two guys and two girls in the group, but also because they knew from experience that the pressure to drink would be greater in a group setting. They could just as easily have elected to have a bouncer, bartender, or liquor store clerk instead.

Although we suggest that the groups develop the situation first and then the characters, some do the opposite. We don't object, since

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part of the purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to try something new, decide what is or isn't working, and make the necessary adjustments to the material. Often a scene must be changed because students decide the characters don't fit, or a character is changed because the group has become more enamored of the scene they developed than they are of holding on to a particular character.

After group members have developed their characters or scenes, they put the Post-its to work. We give each student in the group about six colored Post-it notes. The lined index-card type is perfect. It's simplest if each character has a different color, so we buy the packs that have yellow, green, pink, orange, and blues (available at office supply stores). It has proven to be key for each student to physically hold his or her own Post-its.

JEAN: Okay, you've each got your character, right? Who's who?

ROB: I'm Jack, the gang leader.

JEROME: I'm Tony, his brother.

JEAN: Younger or older?

JEROME: Two, three years younger, I guess.

ANGEL: I'm Desiree, Jack's girlfriend.

JEAN: (Handing each a stack of Post-its) Here's orange for Jack's lines, green for Tony's and yellow for Desiree's. That way you can tell your lines apart at a glance and move them around or throw them away if you change your mind. So how will the scene start? [Silence.] Who'll speak first?

ANGEL: I could come up and say, "Hey, Jack, you were s'posed to pick me up after school today!" I could be kinda mad.

JEAN: Okay, put that down on your note. What will you say, Jack?

ROB: I don't take nothin' from her, so I blow her off.

JEAN: How?

ROB: I can say "You know I've got better things to do than play taxi for you."

JEAN: Write that down.

ROB: She's not finished yet.

JEAN: Doesn't matter. You can each write at

the same time, as soon as you have a line you want to try. That way no one has to sit around. Just say the line out loud. Then somebody else in the scene can be thinking of a response. Plus if they've heard it, they can help you if you forget exactly how you planned to say your line. So Jack's got better things to do; what could come next?

ANGEL: [Putting her first line on the blank script] I could come back with something like, "Yeah, well you've got plenty of time to . . . hmm, what would he be doing?"

ROB: I'm hangin' out, makin' plans, figurin' how I'm gonna stay on top.

JEROME: Maybe some other gang is challenging us, movin' in on us.

ANGEL: No, I've got it. Rob's been seein' some other girl, at least that's what I hear. "You've got plenty of time to go over to Renee's. Destiny saw you there last night, so don't be lyin' to me." [She writes that on her yellow Post-it.]

Rob and Angel write back and forth, pressing their green and yellow rectangles on the master script. Suddenly Jerome interrupts. "Where's this leave me? I'm gonna join Lisa's group."

ANGEL: No, come on. You could try to keep us from fighting. How 'bout that?

JEROME: How? What would I say?

ANGEL: Maybe you've got a crush on me, and you get mad at Jack for treatin' me so bad.

ROB: And I beat you up for lookin' at my woman.

Angel and Rob start writing back and forth again. Once again Jerome is silent, but he scribbles a few words on one of his Post-its.

ANGEL: Hey, teacher! We need some more paper, some more yellow and orange.

JEROME: Hey, I've still got four Post-its left. How 'bout letting me talk for a change?

ANGEL: Okay, okay! I'm sorry, I just get goin' and forget. Why don't you tell Jack what you think of him right here? [She peels off some other Post-its and sets them aside to reposition after Jerome inserts his line.]

We've discovered that these notes literally give kids a voice. In the complex peer relations that sometimes silence adolescents in the classroom, this simple drafting tool makes legitimate their right to enter the dialogue. Post-its become their tickets into the conversation. As Jerome put it: "Hey, I've got four Post-its left. Let me say something next!"

Not all students will stand up for themselves, of course. Walking around the room, we can quickly count Post-its and intervene, if necessary. Whether a student's lack of involvement stems from personal choice or from the group's exclusion, our gentle pressure usually turns things around: "Hey, Jerome, you'd better get busy or Angel is going to have a monologue."

In addition to the Post-its, we've learned to provide each group with several large sheets of paper so that everyone can see the entire script as it develops. Students are tempted to divide the sheet in half and reserve one side for stage directions; or they may spend time thinking of a title for the scene so they can scrawl it across the top of their sheet. We tell them to focus on characters, setting, and dialogue. The rest can wait for the revision.

Learning Craft as We Draft

It should be clear that this process teaches some quite specific skills.

Using Post-its helps students make concrete the difference in punctuation styles between plays and other literary genres. But the dialogue writing format of playwriting can carry over to other forms, particularly the understanding that one separates speakers by paragraphs for the sake of clarity.

The activity also makes visual the concept of writing as a recursive activity. When students hit a snag, we suggest they go back and read their parts aloud. Sometimes a new line or direction will arise as they hear themselves in the scene. Revision is quick; lines can be peeled off and placed elsewhere or discarded completely. The process demonstrates that revision is not confined to the last step in writing.

The process also encourages a close look at language. Tim writes of overhearing the following conversation (Johnson, 2000):

"Man, that's stupid." The "stupid" sounded like it had extra vowels in it and spilled across the room.

"What?" another voice responded.

"You can't talk like that." The speaker was Kenneth. He was animated, punctuating his words with grand gestures. But his opponent wasn't easily intimidated.

"What?"

"You talk to your woman like that?"

"So?"

"So you sound like a freak."

"Hey!"

I stepped into the conversation. "What's up?" I asked.

Kenneth told me that he was afraid the dialogue would sound fake if the group used the lines written by Darrell.

"What's fake about the lines?" I asked.

He told me. "He sounds like some guy from the East end. Don't nobody sound like that where I come from."

"What are you guys going to do?" I asked, wanting them to develop a procedure for working together, to negotiate differences of interpretation, and wanting to leave the process in their control.

"I don't know," said Kenneth.

Young writers know that something doesn't "sound" right, but don't always have the language for expressing why. That gives us an opportunity to talk about word choice, dialect, and the way our speech patterns reveal our regions, backgrounds, and sometimes even our ages. Kids begin adopting the persona of their characters and, in the process, learn a lot about character development. They experience the way other characters' reactions help define the character, discover that the way they speak reveals almost as much as what they say, and learn that their dialogue must advance the scene as well as impart key information by making known the characters' actions. The drafting process in playwriting also teaches that we don't have any trouble keeping track of characters if they are truly delineated by the writer; we know who said what based on the words. Although the color-coded Post-its certainly help, they shouldn't be necessary in later drafts, when the voice of the character needs to come through.

In the scene-drafting process, students also learn about dramatic conventions. Staging considerations, for example, may mean that characters need to talk about having done

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something rather than acting it out. Background or events that precede the action currently taking place on the stage are difficult to present to an audience. For example, in "The Ghetto Rose" scene at the beginning of this piece, we know that the characters have been in Club X3 before because Damon says that the chicken wings are terrible there. We don't need to show the characters at Club X3 eating those wings; we can just embed that experience and information through dialogue.

Walking through a scene can help inexperienced writers discover what Damon knew intuitively: the folly of attempting to act out everything one says. The middle school writers of the following exchange had not yet learned this lesson:

T. T.: Hey, Roxie, remember, we're gonna pick up Darrell and Kenny today. Go get your purse and let's head out. [Roxie walks off stage and air-steps her way to her room and back.]

ROXIE: Oh, let's go get them at their house and pick them up. Come on, let's go get in the car. [They move left and pretend to sit down in the car, two chairs they have pushed together.] Where we going after we pick them up?

T. T.: We're going to the movies, remember, dodo brain. You have such bad memory loss.

JEAN: Hey, guys, let's stop here and talk about what works and what doesn't when you're staging a scene. What does the audience absolutely have to know?

JONATHAN: That they're gonna go to the movies?

JEAN: So what kind of action does that require?

DEIDRE: Them talking.

JEAN: I think so too. What action takes up time, doesn't really need to be shown?

T.T.: Roxie getting her purse?

JEAN: What else?

DEIDRE: Them getting in the car?

JEAN: So could the whole conversation happen in the car? If we have to know that she has her purse, how could you handle that?

ROXIE: I could say something like, "Oh, no, where's my purse at? Oh, here it is, on the floor."

JEAN: That's right, you could just talk about these things instead of trying to show them all.

Exchanges like this—beneficial as they are—help students discover that the play form has its limitations, largely because it is essentially dialogue. The more students experiment with drama, the more likely that they will hit a point where they're uncomfortable with this limitation. "How will they know what he looks like or where they are, unless I tell them?" a student will ask. We help them to understand that in drama, these duties fall to the set designer and the costume designer.

The centrality of dialogue can create another difficulty. Students who have been schooled in the dictum "show don't tell" are now being confused by our insistence on the opposite principle, "tell don't show." Working with this restriction, many come to value the power of description in other genres.

The First Run-Through

Each group needs to perform its scene for the class. They can present their work as reader's theater, each actor stepping up to read at the appropriate moment. Or they can

plan to walk through the scene as time permits; scripts can be photocopied or students can simply work off the script, improvising rather than reading word for word. One group decided to divide up their script, since the Post-its are easily removed, so that each character could hold a page with only his or her own lines. Members quickly discovered they needed to insert the last few words of the previous line as a cue; after that, the process worked fairly well.

Groups are instructed to jump up when their scene seems to naturally follow the one they've just seen. This helps us talk later about juxtaposing scenes with opposite points of view and combining or omitting scenes that really have the same message.

We keep the props simple—a table and a few chairs are usually handy to serve as cars, sofas, store counters, and the like. Sometimes we've had a box of hats and scarves available to help students take on the persona of their designated characters.

Debriefing after the Scene

Talking about the facet of the theme that the scene portrays helps the group start to think about the play as a whole. This is also an opportune time to point out dramatic devices that the group might use to their advantage. For example, in "Ghetto Rose" would it have been appropriate for us to see the girls get out of the car and leave their boyfriends drinking in the front seat?

TIM: Is this a positive or negative message about drinking?

DAMON: Positive, because the girls left.

TIM: True, they did. But what image is the audience left with?

CRYSTAL: The guys tipping up their bottles, saying they'll just hang out together.

TIM: So they won. Your last image makes

them the winners. How could we make the young ladies seen as the winners?

DAMON: Stop the scene with them walking away?

TIM: Exactly. You need to stage it so we're looking at the girls at the end.

DAMON: Or what if we keep it like it is, but add the sounds of a car crash as the lights go out?

TIM: That would do it!

This kind of debriefing also offers an opportunity for assessment and allows the whole class to share in peer review by asking clarifying questions and commenting on the scene.

Revision Serendipity

Sometimes a student will be absent when a scene is written and return at the time the scene is presented. There's usually some confusion, but we've learned from this experience. We now schedule a session during which the writers watch their creation being performed by students who have never seen the script before. Not having the context that the writers have, actors who go into the reading "cold" will quickly discover some of the problems: "Hey, this isn't going anywhere. There's no conflict," eighth-grader Shanea exclaimed as she read her lines. The writers had to agree. They'd gotten so caught up in their characters' chatting with one another that they'd never really gotten to the point. When another group of writers watched as performers stumbled over some of their lines, they knew they needed to rephrase some wordy and confusing sentences and add a few stage directions.

Production Not the Goal

After the initial drafting and rehearsal, students are invited to shape their separate scenes into a short theme play, ordering them for effect and perhaps adding some type of opening and closing. The drama students want to tie their slices of teen culture together by staging them like the Clifford Odets play *Waiting for Lefty,* with an opening vignette introducing the concept, then a series of vignettes or scenarios, and finally a big scene at the end.

Some classes abandon the theme at this point, however. It has served its purpose, to allow students a collaborative writing experience not as easily carried out when writing in other forms, to teach conventions of the form, and to provide students with strategies that they can apply independently. A few students invariably get hooked on playwriting and pursue it during subsequent workshop time. Sometimes, a class will decide to switch to another theme now that the process has been taught and the limitations of the first theme have been discovered.

Whether or not the students' scenes move into the production phase, the activity has allowed them to learn far more than techniques of dialogue writing and skills of collaboration. Wagner (1998) reminds us that oral language is the seedbed for later growth in literacy (34). She notes that drama in particular supports students' acquisition of a standard dialect and helps them develop fluency in both reading and writing. Like Wagner, we've discovered that playwriting takes learners down many paths to greater literacy. It's not so much about the genre or about the product as it is about creating a culture that supports the thinking and learning of writers. In our classrooms, we stage learning, not productions, because we know that when we teach the writer, the writing will come.

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