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Script Writing as a Means to Effective Writing

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Ernest Hemingway once said in something called, “Monologue to the Maestro: A High Seas Letter”. . . if you make it up instead of describe it you can make it round and whole and solid and give it life. You create it for good or bad. It is made; not described. . . .”¹ Maybe that is what appeals to our students about drama. Maybe that is why they come alive when reading a play, and why they visibly sag when asked to write descriptive passages and read short stories and novels.

It is an issue that has been puzzling us, especially during the past year. What is it about drama that causes students to react so enthusiastically? Can we utilize this enthusiasm and the vehicle of drama to attain certain classroom teaching objectives that have eluded us by other means? Is it possible that our students see and feel, even when we sometimes cannot, the roundness, the solidity, those life giving qualities of drama that make it appealing?

This unit then is a “unit in response.” It is in response to student enthusiasm about a subject. Yet its purpose is not solely to capitalize on students’ feelings for the purposes of teaching. It is in part undertaken and designed to enhance the authors’ knowledge of drama, and to make them more capable of using drama as a classroom teaching vehicle.

In terms of students, the primary purpose of the unit is to use dialogue, certainly one of the basic elements of drama, to enhance their writing and reading skills, and to a certain extent their listening and speaking skills. The two latter skills often receive short shrift in the classroom, and as such will be dealt with in the Activities section of this unit.

Our principal purpose in writing this paper leads into a regular warren of secondary purposes. Dialogue, as a component of the dramatic unity, is inexorably linked to the other dramatic requisites such as character/motivation. By studying the essentials of dialogue, we hope that our students will reach an understanding of drama in general, and of what makes drama unique, appealing and different from other literary genres. We hope that by focusing on script writing, or the dramatic dialogue aspect of drama, students will reach an understanding of how and why dialogue differs from everyday speech. And by looking at everyday speech, oral speech if you will, from the aspect of dramatic dialogue, it might well be possible to guide students from oral speech into the more disciplined act of purposeful writing.

Drama has been defined and redefined through the ages. From Aristotle’s assumption that all drama is an imitation of life, to Shakespeare and Calderon’s vision of the word as a grand stage, we are faced with the

inseparable duo of life/drama. Drama then “mirrors” life. More than novels and short stories, it approaches a reality that can be identified by the reader. It is not encumbered by description. It is not encumbered by several layers of meaning that tend to separate the younger reader from the heart of the work. It is in fact made up and not described. And as such, the wholeness of the work frighteningly approaches reality. How often have we noticed our students cast quick, curious glances at a fellow student whose involvement in a play reading has literally transported him out of the present. Even if, as some say, drama is only illusion at best, it is the illusion of humans, of men and women, of flesh and bones. And drama is a way of concentrating the living experience, that river of feeling within us, into a form that can be repeated and reviewed.

While drama mirrors life, there is an important distinction to be made between the two. Drama is a structured way of dealing with events. The dramatist creates and manipulates. He becomes for a time a deity of sorts. Our hope is that our students might experience this sensation. We hope that they might use this unit on dialogue writing to channel the events of their lives into a structured, creative form. This might in turn give them some control over the sometimes chaotic sequence of events in their lives—events that often include shootings, fires, and accompanying violent family upheavals. Without attempting to capitalize on or exploit the sadness of our students’ lives, we might use these chaotic events as a learning resource and perhaps help them to better adjust to such happenings. We could begin with the unraveling of occurrences by the participants, and work up to the creation of a dramatic script based on eyewitness and even news media accounts. This unraveling could come about in the form of theater games, which would not only help place events in sequence, but would help students come to grips with strong emotional feelings engendered by the events.

All this is no mean task. Ionesco once said that a play is, “A construction of a series of conscious states, or of conditions with mounting tensions until the states become knit together and finally unraveled or else culminate in absolute confusion.”² It is the “knitting together” that we seek in our classrooms—this knitting together of personal experience into thoughtful writing. Our students rarely lack something to say about their lives. This is the beginning, which we must encourage, of the road to effective writing. One begins with a strong impulse to say something—an impulse that is often termed the “creative impulse.” What you have to say may initially have meaning only to you, the writer. Effective writing involves taking what is important to you and making it important to others. This involves bringing order and meaning to that flow of material termed the “creative impulse.”

At one point last year the uncle of one of our students was shot to death. Their relationship had been close. She spent hours in the classroom attempting to unravel and come to grips with this incident. Even with the support of teachers and students she lacked the power to resolve this conflict, and thus really lacked the power to shape her destiny. We are not so presumptuous as to think that our teaching a unit on dramatic script writing will resolve all conflicts and suddenly grant one the power to shape one’s destiny. But we can point out to students that the dramatist has the power to resolve—the power to resolve conflict. And it is possible for our students to grasp some of this power. We are convinced that through script writing, through the creation of dramatic dialogue, as opposed to other forms of writing, students can better see the whys and wherefores of the conflicts in their lives and move toward a resolution.

What is it about the nature of dramatic dialogue that empowers our students to bring order into their writing and perhaps into their lives? All good dialogue must be clear, appropriate, and of interest to the listeners. Words cannot be wasted in drama. Each utterance should be relevant to the play’s thematic structure, and appropriate for the character who speaks the lines. Ambiguities that are not functional or intended to later startle the audience, are a waste of time. Irrelevances and sub-standard speech are distracting. Vulgarisms

and slang soon grow stale and should be used only as a means of developing certain dialectical traits. With dramatic dialogue, unlike the other literary genres, and herein lies the beauty of dramatic dialogue for our students, brevity and “to the pointness” are favorable qualities, not flaws. Everything happens fast in drama, as do the events in our students’ lives. They respond to dramatic dialogue, because it reveals the truth a lot faster than does narrative. The students grasp dramatic dialogue in much the same way they do television—their personal medium—since the techniques and spirit of the mediums in many cases overlap.

Based on the premise that ideas surge forth from life, and that plays and their scripts are based on these ideas, we propose to encourage our students to turn these ideas into dramatic scripts. Beginning with a germinal idea, what kind of story can be told? How different will John’s story or dramatic dialogue be from Maria’s?

Certain plots are basic. In fact there are a limited number of plot lines from which to work. George Polti classifies plots into 36 categories. For our purposes we can reduce these groupings to: love patterns, success patterns, the Cinderella story, dramatic returns, vengeance, reformation/conversion and the all encompassing family patterns. These patterns seem to be the most appropriate for our adolescent students. Also, considering the socio-economic class and cultural make-up of our groups, we feel that the students can work comfortably with these groupings. We are not asking our students to categorize everything they write, but rather to see the familiar patterns fall into place. Let’s take a closer look at these divisions.

LOVE PATTERNS . Probably the most easily recognized and written about theme, love is a constant that preys upon our students’ minds. They love with intensity and hate equally as hard. Being adolescents, their love may seem ephemeral to their teachers, but it is of utmost importance to the students, often taking its toll on those around them. Due to their cultural background, this adolescent love often turns into teen-age pregnancies and marriages. Probably a very successful story could take place along these lines. Our children’s mothers often married and had children at a very early age. Often these mothers work hard to protect their children from following their pattern. They want their children to finish school and then think about marriage. Thus, this teen-age love is often an obstacle to the parents’ dreams. Taking a germinal idea such as this and turning it into a dialogue between a non-consenting mother and her young daughter, could produce a very dynamic drama. By questioning the students as to the mother’s response and reaction to another young love or marriage could bring about shattering results. Having the student take both sides of the issue may help the student see the mother’s (and the teacher’s) point of view. Questions such as: Why doesn’t your mother want you to date now? How would she want you to occupy your time? What would she say if she found out you were disobeying her? Would she like this fellow if you were both older? Are her objections valid? How will you (the student) defend yourself and your right to be involved?—could set the dialogue from the start.

SUCCESS PATTERNS . Our students’ lives have not been filled with successes. They have often failed at school before coming to us. They may even see their parents as failures for not having obtained an education or a high-paying job. Though they love their parents and their culture, they may feel that success would forever thrust them into a world alien from that of their family. It would isolate them from their roots. A former student has just graduated from high school. She has been accepted to two colleges—one here in the city and one farther away, calling for a dorm-like living situation. Her mother refused to let her leave town, perhaps feeling that her daughter would be overwhelmed by the changes. We had mixed feelings about her future. We thought it would be a good idea to be away from her environment and yet feared she would not succeed at such a large and demanding place. If she succeeds at her dreams of becoming a lawyer, she will always be in contrast to her mother, who was thirteen when she gave birth. There will be a mixture of pride and fear of rejection in her mother’s love. An interesting dialogue could evolve along the lines of her mother’s reaction to

her daughter's success, graduating with honors or accomplishing her goals. What words could be used to tinge the mother's pride with the fear that the daughter will reject her? What words would her daughter use to convey her pride in her own success and the pride she feels for her mother? This success plot line is only one of many—and perhaps a bit atypical, but it would hold the interest of most of our students.

CINDERELLA STORY : What student doesn't dream of becoming rich quickly or being taken away from the drudgery of school work? The Cinderella story could take many forms. It could be the student's appearance on a game show or the finding of a wallet and subsequent reward. Cinderella stories almost always appear as fantasies. An interesting story could involve a young boy who finds a bag of stolen money and his deliberation over whether to bring it to the police or not. While he plays with his conscience, he could fantasize about what he would do with his money. This is a perfect time for a mime while he shows the audience what he would do with his newfound treasure. He could work up a mime about his new car or airplane, or his trip back to the sunny beaches of Puerto Rico. All this is reduced to ashes when he realizes he must return the money. We could call this "The Almost-Cinderella Story."

DRAMATIC RETURNS . Dramatic returns are always a viable plot for our students because they spend so much time leaving home. The leave taking from the beautiful island of Puerto Rico is always wrenching, the return always jubilant. Often times the children grow up far away from the aging parents, always wondering when they'll be reunited in this world. One student left his mother to grow up with his father. He spent many years under his father's care. One day the father was killed in a violent dispute. The son was sent back to Puerto Rico, after having lived here in New Haven for twelve of his fifteen years. He also had had little contact with his mother, with whom he was to now live. We still wonder what happened to Antonio. What was his leave-taking from here like? How did his mother look to him? What did he say when he first saw her? What changes could she see in him? Were they uncomfortable in their reunion? How can we show the touching way they spoke to one another? These questions will help the student begin to write a dialogue.

VENGEANCE . Vengeance can be a very popular plot line for students. Somehow the idea of getting even with someone is very adolescent. Perhaps the teenagers haven't fully developed their reasoning abilities and can only resolve their conflicts in a violent or vengeful way. Perhaps by learning to verbalize their conflicts, they will no longer have to resort to violence. Though vengeance may seem anathema to the teacher, it might work very well in a drama-like setting. Perhaps by working out the conflict with drama, a real fight could lose its virulence. For instance, two students are about to fight, to pay back a debt they feel is owed. The teacher asks them to forget for one moment their true feelings and "make-up" or improvise a fight. We would warn teachers here to gauge their students for this exercise to avoid any full blown fights. However, if the teacher feels the students are amenable to "rehearsing a fight," or verbalizing their disagreement, the classroom may well reap the benefits of a peaceful ending to the conflict, as they tire themselves out play acting. Having each student say exactly what s/he would like, without fists, without visible anger, may alleviate the need to get even.

REFORMATION/CONVERSION . Perhaps because our students spend a lot of time in church, or maybe because they find themselves being reprimanded, stories of a conversion from bad boy to good boy always produce a lot of fans. Just this past year, the students wrote a play that fits perfectly into this pattern. A young boy has no money to buy his mother a Mother's Day gift. So, he steals a ring. He's then arrested and never sees his mother again. While he languishes in jail, his mother dies. When he's finally released from jail, his brothers and sisters are reluctant to tell him the news, fearing his reaction. He is, of course, distraught and makes what amounts to a post-bedside promise to never break the law again. Our students gauged well the boy's anguish, understanding, from their own experience, the love he felt for his mother. Though the writer resolved the

conflict of no money for a gift in a socially unacceptable way, the boy's reformation at the end somehow rectified the situation for the students. Questions such as the following helped shape the characters' lives for the students: Why was the boy so upset about not having a gift? Why did the boy decide to steal the gift? How did his mother react to her son's jail sentence? What did the boy feel/say as they took him away? What did the mother say as they took him away? How was the irony of his release and his mother's death expressed in the dialogue? What were the mother's final words? What were the boy's promises? Is it necessary to know if he kept them or not? Though this drama may seem contrived and a bit maudlin to the teacher, it was a great success when presented at a Mother's Day program.

FAMILY PATTERNS . Probably the biggest emotional resource for our students is the family. Though the student may turn to his peers for friendship or to his teachers for advice, he will always turn back to the family for love and spiritual revival. The family never closes its doors on its own. But, however, tightknit and supportive the family is, it is also fraught with problems. Often there are more than eight or nine people vying for the mother's attention. Often, there is no visible father. On the other hand, there may be more than two generations represented. Thus we have large families made up of grandmother, mother, sons and daughters and children of these young, often unmarried, teens. We spoke of the family as a resource of emotional support. The students can also tap this resource for story/drama material. What kind of conversations thrive in large families? What is a dinnertime conversation like? Often bedrooms are shared by three or four youngsters. What types of conversations and bedtime stories emerge here?

Due to the number of people in the households, the possibility for conflict is limitless. Because the Puerto Ricans are living in a somewhat foreign land, there are numerous problems between tenant and landlord, with school officials—or just in getting around and establishing community links. Add to these problems the basic difficulty of a language barrier, and we have raw material for a number of family based dramas.

One starting point for family dramas would be to have students observe and record the various conversations that take place at dinner, with the landlord, or between generations. Another interesting exercise involves a short story called "The Letter" (La Carta) by Jose Luis Gonzalez, a Puerto Rican writer. The story can be found in English in *BORINQUEN (An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature)* or in Spanish in *Cuentos Puertorriquenos* . The story is short enough to be turned into a dialogue. What we envision here is a oneway telephone conversation where the lines of the story are the boy's lines, and the silence on the other end belongs to the mother. The boy's pauses and inflection would reflect the attention he pays to his mother's conversation. The best way to begin this exercise would be by having the students read the story out loud. Then a warm-up exercise involving the use of the telephone would ensure that the boy really appeared to be conversing on the telephone. (Viola Spolin has a telephone exercise on pgs. 292-294 that can be used very well here.) After this warm-up, an informal conversation (improvisation) based on the story could be initiated—close enough to get the general idea across. After the students are familiar both with the story and the telephone as a prop, the lines of the story could be re-written to model a telephone conversation.

Ex: Dear Mother:

As I used to tell you before leaving, things here are going well for me ³

could be re-written

Hi Mama.

See, things are just like I told you they'd be. Everything's going great!

After the conversation is enacted with the script, a whole new dimension could be added by actually writing lines for the mother. How would the mother respond to her son's optimism?, to his half-truths? What kind of questions will the mother ask about her son's welfare? This story's length is perfect for this exercise while it defines for us the devotion and loyalty felt among family members. Of course, other stories can be used in place of this one.

Obviously, there are a myriad of divergent lines that can be followed with these patterns. While vengeance may be an important vehicle of expression for some students, the love and family patterns may please other students more. Each teacher should be able to gauge her students' needs. What we have provided here are only possible schemes. They are not the only way to deal with these patterns, but they can be a start.

We have now established categories, sources of ideas for dramatic scripts. We have also established a rationale for why we chose these categories. From this point, using a sequential pattern and moving from simple ideas to more complex story lines, we will illustrate how we intend to have students write sound dialogue, vividly dramatizing aspects of their lives.

An interesting description of the possibilities of sound dialogue writing, with immense practical value for improving the quality of people's lives, appeared in a recent N.Y. *Times* article. The article explained how secretaries were being organized so that they might more effectively protest their working conditions and the manner in which they were treated in their various offices. The most effective protest technique used by these women was to prepare beforehand a dramatic script of a conversation they would have with their boss. The script would focus on a conflict between the secretary and boss. They would rehearse the script over and over again, so that they might be at their most eloquent in the ensuing confrontation. This news article can definitely be utilized in the classroom. Aside from its obvious value to students as to how script writing can be of use in the everyday world, the article can be the source of a host of ideas.

Let us begin with a relatively uncomplicated idea—a domestic situation involving some conflict. In terms of the finished product, we will limit the number of people involved in the situation. It can be a kind of parent/child stress situation, which gives rise to any number of scenarios. Here are just a few.:

1. Child asking parent to stay out later than usual for a special occasion.
2. Child asking permission to date—or date someone unacceptable to the family.
3. Child asking permission to attend a movie of suspect moral value.

All of these can culminate in an act of dramatic script writing that will be a means of resolving the problem. But this will come later.

Let us take the first situation from the list and establish a goal. We will encourage students to begin to think about engaging in a short, wordless improvisation based on this situation. Our students will be reluctant to do this. They will be intimidated by what they perceive as the difficult task of "acting" in the classroom. But we must stress that this improvisation is only a goal. It is not something to be confronted immediately. Instead,

we will use the goal of the wordless improvisation as a way of inducing students to undertake some preparatory exercises designed to make them feel comfortable, and as a way of leading them into the eventual improvisation.

Viola Spolin is a natural choice for these exercises. We can begin with something as simple as breathing and stretching exercises. We are warming up, we tell students, just as we might before an athletic contest. These exercises can continue until physical and emotional flexibility is attained. We might then divide our students into two groups—one group sitting, the other group standing in front of them. They are simply to observe each other. “You look at us. We’ll look at you.” The purpose here is to get students to begin to look at each other in a “stagey” sort of way—to begin to see each other as players in a scene. When this begins to collapse, we stop them. This particular exercise could continue in a number of ways. We are simply using Spolin to fit our own purposes. It should be emphasized here that teachers referring to this unit should feel absolutely free to use any Spolin-type activities that would help them fulfill the objectives of this unit. From here we move into a series of mirror exercises, with concentration on your opposite being the key point. Finally, we can play tug-of-war with an imaginary rope, an activity that is especially appropriate in light of our original parent/child stress scenario. It might be pointed out to students and teachers that while we are playing games, we are at the same time engaged in dramatic acting, since the two activities differ more in degree than in kind.

One more Spolin-inspired activity might be used before our actual improvisation. In fact, it could even be the improvisation that we speak of. It is an exercise in silent tension. While the other activities have involved the whole group, this activity should involve only a few players—players who have reacted well to the previous exercises. The teacher can provide the *where*, the *who* and the *what* for this activity. The *where* is the student’s home, the *who* is the parents and student, and the *what* is the volatile, wordless discussion at hand concerning late night hours. The tension is so strong that the participants are unable to speak. Thus, a wordless improvisation. Silence is the mode of communication. Silence and concentration. There should be extensive eye contact and facial and body gestures in this activity. The teacher can sometimes call out “Give:” and “Take:” in order to urge on the participants. The ending will no doubt come about spontaneously.

Our next step in the process is to take the idea, the conflict that is the basis of the wordless improvisation, and improvise a *spoken* scene *without* a formal script. Again we can turn to Viola Spolin for inspiration. The group might begin with those same breathing, bending and stretching warm-ups that preceded the first improvisation. The point is to continue to reduce the tension, the anxiety, that feeling of self consciousness that dogs students in a classroom. It must be understood, and this colors the manner in which the unit is structured, that with many of our students it is not acceptable in one’s peer group to actively engage in and enjoy school activities. On the contrary, it is acceptable to attempt to disrupt school activities. These activities are aimed at dispelling such attitudes and exerting an impact on behavior. And, of course, there is the ultimate goal of the written script. We must remember that we are approaching writing, in this case dramatic script writing, by way of oral speech. In this way we are attempting to guide students into a more disciplined form of expression. Nevertheless, before the written expression, must come the oral speech. And before the oral speech must come some practice containing physical gestures that will later be incorporated with the speech.

Using gibberish as a vehicle for introducing the improvised spoken scene might be effective. Viola Spolin feels that the use of gibberish is a somewhat advanced “dramatic technique” activity. She recommends its use after players have incorporated physical gestures and oral speech before an audience. Our feeling is that it can be used effectively at an earlier stage of development in our unit. We would strongly recommend, however, that the teacher illustrate what gibberish is before using it as a classroom exercise. The illustration

might consist of the teacher issuing a series of commands. Using gibberish he might ask a student to change his seat, pass a pencil to a fellow student, or pull up a shade. Students might then join in by turning to their neighbors and carrying on a conversation. They will converse in gibberish, but will do so as if they were making perfect sense. Invariably, some students will begin to speak gibberish with more confidence and dexterity than others. These students might then begin to make requests of others, pairing off whenever possible those more adept with those who are struggling. The overall classroom effect should be one of lightheartedness, without losing sight of the goal of incorporating sound and body expression.

The previous activities should include the whole group. But now we must move closer to the actual improvisation by selecting players to engage in certain gibberish activities. The first activity should be performed by a single player. This might have to be the teacher, whose example is then followed by a student. The player must attempt to sell something to the audience in gibberish. Anything: This particular activity has been chosen with an eye to the almost constant presence of similar situations in students' lives. As we well know, they are bombarded everyday, on TV and radio, with attempts to sell them products. Our activity just happens to be in gibberish. Follow up questions might include what is being sold, how effectively, what provides clues, etc. Another valid point to remember about this exercise is that of concentration—concentration on the part of the player toward the audience, and vice versa. The fact that the mode of communication is gibberish should intensify the concentration effort, and make further attempts to blend sound and body expression more rewarding.

The next gibberish activity involves two players. One player tells another of a past incident. The incident should come from the student's experience—a lost wallet, a trip to the emergency room, etc. The second player then tells the first player of an experience. Both use gibberish. In evaluating the activity each player can be asked what the other told him. Then ask the audience what was communicated to them. Keep in mind that the object of this is a mingling of sound and body movement—with the sound passing from gibberish to standard speech to purposeful writing.

At this point we are ready to attempt the improvised spoken scene without the formal script. The scene is the parent/child stress situation, where ultimately the well written dramatic script can be used as a means of resolving the situation, perhaps to the advantage of the script originator. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We have no formal script yet. We can, for the purposes of livening things up, use props. The scene is an apartment or house, so a table and chairs might be appropriate. The situation should again be outlined for students. A youngster is asking his parents for permission to stay out later than usual on a special occasion. The parents are reluctant to grant permission—almost adamantly opposed. Their primary worry is the late night street scene. They refuse to be swayed by the argument that “everybody” else is doing it.

With this situation in mind, the teacher can move about the room choosing players and eliciting answers to strategic questions posed by the improvisation. How would the student playing the father react to such a request by his own child? How would his own father or mother react to the request? To the student playing the part of the youngster, how do you convey your urgent need to stay out later than usual? How do you convey the feeling that you are responsible enough to merit the approval of the request? These and other questions can be asked until a spontaneous dialogue develops—a dialogue that resembles the everyday interplay of words and gestures. We would suggest a taping of one of the more polished versions of the improvised scene, so that the material on which to base the formal written dialogue can be referred to over and over again.

But what about this dramatic dialogue, this dramatic script? How can loose, weak dialogue be brought into focus? What are some of the “tricks of the trade,” those special techniques that dramatists use to sharpen and

perfect their first writings? Once our students have attempted a first writing, what are some specific details that they can include to make their dramatic writing tighter, more effective? Starting with the building blocks of the script, sentences, what can be taught to ensure that our students will write convincing dialogue?

Let's assume that economy, unity and meaning are goals in dramatic writing. How then do the dramatists and our students achieve these goals? There are definite "gimmicks" for writing good dialogue. For example, we assume that the nouns and verbs will produce the most impact in a sentence. Thus, the dramatist and our students must work on finding the most action-packed verbs and interesting nouns possible. The difference between the dramatist's work here and the novelist's effort is that the dramatist must satisfy his audience with less. While the novelist can get lost in description, thus employing lots of great modifiers, the dramatist is by nature of his work, limited to fewer. So, each word the dramatist chooses is of great importance because the plot must be advanced at every turn. Characters in drama are what might be called "self describing." That means that they are defined by what they reveal about themselves, or by what other characters may say. The dialogue is often the only clue to the character's past or to the world outside the visible stage. The dialogue, then, is virtually the whole picture for the audiences and must be succinct and clear, and comprised of a most expressive selection of words. A playwright approaches clarity by using not only common and easily understood words, but words that are novel or interesting. Through the study of synonyms, the student will be asked to select words that are more expressive than usual.

Grebanier, in his chapter on dialogue, is concerned with the impact of the utterings in dramatic dialogue. He purports that the most important actions happen at the beginning or end of a sentence, and most often at the end. For Grebanier, when the opening and closing of a sentence are given over to the least forceful ideas, the impact of the ideas may be lost. Where loose structure may be acceptable in daily conversations (facial gestures and tone can add emphasis here), to change average writing to eloquent writing, proper arrangement of words is required. "In written prose and, above all, in drama—where everything is highly selective and no time can be expended on fumbling attempts to be precise—something better is called for than loose construction." ⁴To achieve this "something better," speeches should begin with force and come to a cumulative ending. This is not to say that an uncontrolled, stumbling character would not speak in a loose, rambling way. Since dialogue is the verbal representation of the character, some loosely constructed speech may be necessary to convince the audience that the speaker is not a forceful person, for example.

Because things happen so fast in our students' lives, their speech and writing are often rapid-fire, without thought to word position. Also, the switch from the flexibility of Spanish word order to the more rigid English system, often hampers the students' expressive ability. The students rarely realize that by positioning words strategically in their written work, they can better capture their audience's interest. For example, the student provides the following speech:

Ay, you should have seen the fire man. You know, it must have been 10 feet high, the flames I mean. I thought we'd never get out—breaking down doors, trying not to get burned tripping over glass.

By fooling around with this authentic, albeit loosely structured speech, we can tighten and strengthen it, *without losing its natural and powerful component*. By retrieving the word "flames," which was lost in the flow somewhere, we can give it its proper importance. We are very careful here to leave in the slang-like flavor words—"Ay," "man," etc., though we do put them together. We come up with:

Ay man, you should have seen the fire. The flames must have been 10 feet high. We had to break down doors and trip over glass just to get out. I thought we'd be burned. I never thought we'd make it:

Thus, with slight modification, the sentence is just as provoking and real, yet manages to maintain its force.

Trite diction, cliches and redundances must be avoided in good dialogue, unless once again they are being used to define a character. We are not implying here that novels or stories would employ cliches, but rather that, due to drama's intensity, its brevity, there is really no allowance for space fillers. Though a good novel would not rely on redundancies, one or two could easily slip through. In good script, it would be too distracting. Repetition, not redundancy, can be used for emphasis but must be used very carefully. It may serve multiple functions of unity, clarity or emotive effect. But the writer must know where to stop, for repetition can soon become monotony. One way to examine this problem with the students is to present sentences with very obvious repetitions and have the students clean them up.

Ex: Sylvia: First he smacked me hard, God how he hit me. Then he hit me some more. Then he stopped because he was tired.

could be re-written

Ex: Sylvia: First he smacked me hard. God, how it hurt, Then he hit me again and again. When he got tired, he stopped.

Mention must be made of rhythm in any discussion of playwriting. When we speak of rhythm as important in the producing of certain effects in speech or writing, we speak of a pervasive rhythm. Sounds, syllables, words, sentences, acts and whole plays are effected by rhythm. Rhythm can be defined as a stress pattern, an organized repetition of emphasis. Because of the noted importance of the noun and the verb, the patterning of spaced, meaningful words can be the first step in controlling rhythm. Also, the use of modifiers can provide certain rhythmic effects. For example, to create an emphatic effect, one might use short, single word modifiers.

Ex: Thomas: My grandfather was an old squat and rude man.

Certainly the emotion of the moment will have a profound relationship to the rhythm. A young boy searching for his lost dog might shout out very frantic, entreating sentences.

Ex: Scotty, come back! Where are you? Please, are you OK? Can you hear me?

Now, although we have lauded the economy of the word in dramatic dialogue, we are not speaking of bare bones. To add flesh to the script, the students' youth and exuberance should be allowed to show through. Students' pet names and inoffensive teasing in Spanish, for example, can breathe life into a street scene. Mixing the two languages (Spanish and English), gives the listener a true picture of what it means to be bilingual.

Ex: Jose: Hey Papo. Got any "Chavos" to spare?

Fernando: Who do you think I am, "el banco?"

Thus, with two short dialogue sentences, we have not only gotten across the idea that Jose needs some spare cash, but we have also shown that Jose and Fernando are comfortable crossing linguistic borders.

Though we hesitate to write down our daily conversations and call them dramatic dialogue, everyday speech

has its value in playwriting. Sam Smiley says it best when he says, “The speech of our daily lives—with its elisions and hesitations, its repetition and iterations, its moans and cries—limits the verbal expressiveness of characters. But, the same sort of speech also contains the pathos and the sting, the sob and the clutch of the absolutely human being.”⁴

We have presented various methods and sources for turning raw material into scripts. Be they based on pictures, well-known fairy tales or dinner conversations, there are some basic questions that should be discussed at any playwriting session. They are: What are we telling?, Who are the people involved?, What are these people like?, What do they look like?, What are they doing?, Where does the drama take place?, What is the mood of the scene, of the characters?, What were the circumstances that led up to the scene?, What will happen when the scene closes? Although each circumstance will by its nature define the questions to be asked, the discussion of these basic questions will be fundamental to making the dialogue fit the story or events. In *STOP, LOOK AND WRITE*, the author says the purpose of description “is to create an atmosphere—the spirit of a place, the mood of a person, the feel of weather. This requires attention to details, rather than abstract general comments.”⁵ Hopefully, by asking the above questions, the students will become observant enough to create the proper mood and atmosphere for their dialogues.

The Picture File

The picture file would supply a wealth of ideas for those students who insist that they have none of their own. There would be two main sources of pictures. One group would consist of the usual supply of pictures taken from magazines, newspapers and books. These could be chosen by the teacher for their expressive qualities or emotive suggestion. The students could also be assigned certain types of pictures to look for. For instance, they might be asked to find pictures where the people are angry or puzzled or just plain happy. The other group of pictures would be a series of original photos taken by the teacher, or by a capable student, showing students performing various activities, or in a natural state of being. This series would try to capture work or acts in progress. For example, there could be four pictures, one of a child waiting outside the nurse’s office, one in the office watching someone else getting a needle, one in which the child is crying about her own needle, and the final one showing her coming out of the office with a half-smile, a sore arm and a leftover tear. Once all the pictures are collected, they can be placed in a file, keeping the series of pictures intact. Though the teacher may want to organize the pictures, it is advisable not to categorize them too strictly, as this might lead to the pre-defining of certain pictures.

One of the first activities generated by the single pictures is to have the children describe exactly what the picture shows—an objective description. Then the student would be asked to describe what s/he thinks is in the picture—a more subjective description. Who or what is in the picture? Where was the picture taken? When was it taken? What is about to happen? What emotions show through? Are the people angry, frustrated, laughing? Once these questions have been answered, the teacher asks the students to write a short paragraph incorporating all the details into the description. The students should try to include the before and after into their description of, “What is happening in this picture?” The teacher then asks the students to generate dialogue lines that could be coming from the people in the picture. Can the emotions of the people pictured be translated into dialogue?

Let’s suppose there is a picture of a group of children happily engaged in playing ball. What words could convey the giddy feeling of a 5-year old playing ball? Fifteen-year olds may hesitate at “feeling” the joys of being five—or find it difficult to feel the ball. By using one of Spolin’s physicalization exercises, (for example, pg. 78-79), they will begin to feel more comfortable in their new role. After they have had a chance to play ball

for a while, the teacher will ask them what things they would say or feel like saying while they catch, miss or race to retrieve the ball. The teacher tries to have them feel the height of the ball's scope, and the youth of a five-year old. The teacher writes down what they say as they play ball. As the students adjust the lines to their liking, other groups can dramatize the picture while using their script. This procedure can be used for any picture from the group of single pictures.

The pictures in a series are conducive to another type of exercise. Have the students put the pictures in order. Which happened first? How can you tell? Once the pictures are in order, the teacher has the students tell what is happening in the progression of activity. If the students decide that the people in the picture are about to fight, the teacher asks: Who are they? What are they arguing about? Why are they fighting about this? Let's imagine that they decide that the people in the picture are father and daughter arguing about her poor report card. The teacher must now work fast, never losing spontaneity nor momentum. She points to a student and asks him to portray the father. She selects another student to be the daughter. The teacher allows them to improvise their words and their roles for awhile. When they can no longer improvise, or the scene is quickly becoming dull, the teacher writes their lines on the blackboard. Once the lines are on the blackboard, they can be sharpened and perfected, with regards to some of the techniques mentioned in this unit. With each revision, a short take can be done to hear how it sounds. When the students are satisfied that their dialogue fits the picture, the exercise can be terminated for the day.

Another interesting activity that can be used while the students are still new to dialogue writing, involves picking a single picture and having several students each write a short dialogue for it. The dialogues could then be compared. It will be amazing to see the difference in "vision" expressed by the students.

Using the single pictures, have each child write a dialogue for only one picture. Mix and match the pictures and dialogues. Other students will try to match the dialogue with its picture. What this does is alert the student to the possible weaknesses in the dialogue. The dialogues could then be improved to better represent what is happening in the picture.

Conversations could be written at random and pictures found to complement the dialogues.

One picture can be shown to the group. Each child says a line of dialogue and writes it on the board. The next child adds to it until the students have a finished product. This one-line each technique works for any dialogue writing.

Activities

When we teach foreign language, be it Spanish to English speaking students or English to our Hispanic students, the four basic skills taught are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are often seen as passive skills in contrast to the more active skills of speaking and writing. It is often assumed that listening and reading are therefore more easily acquired, or as the first step in a two-step process (i.e., listening then speaking, reading and writing). One may differ as to the importance of listening as an acquired skill, but for those of us who teach language, it is of paramount importance. If a student does not listen well, does not learn to tune in to what is important, s/he may never advance to the other skills. How can we speak well if we first haven't learned to listen? Though reading seems to be a skill more aptly suited to the essay, short story or novel, listening, coupled with speaking are the most important tools for drama. If through the writing down of stories, the dialoguing and dramatizing of events in our students' lives we can improve writing skills, then it seems likely that the majority of students who are listening, approving and editing these lines will become good listeners. An example of the importance of being a good listener will strike most teachers as

quintessential. A student will approach the teacher to report that another student has been “saying things.” The other party, when questioned will deny all charges. “That’s not exactly what I said.” The students will inevitably attribute certain epithets to one another until all communication has broken down. The teacher is still in the dark as to who said what to whom. Because words have to be sharpened and economized in drama, each word bears a greater burden. If the students can become good listeners in order to write down what they hear, they will become better listeners in general and thus avoid circumstances such as the above.

Does one naturally become a better speaker, reader or writer by being first a better listener? There certainly is no evidence to the contrary. When one learns to listen well, to hear *two* tones and meanings of the words as they are being expressed, there is a good chance this person will be better able to express himself. Both of us remember learning to speak Spanish. We spoke too soon, too little perhaps and then began to pay attention to those who were native speakers. Through imitation (and enthusiasm) we began to speak this foreign tongue. We were told our accents were all wrong, and that our syntax was out of whack. So, we eventually went back to listening. We began to improve, through constant tuning in to the ear. We hope that through the listening and reading of dramatic dialogue, the speaking and writing of it will improve.

A good listening exercise that could be done early on consists of the teacher reading a paragraph of a short story aloud. The teacher then re-reads it. As the teacher reads it for the third time, she leaves out key words. The students will offer the word that they heard orally. To make the exercise more difficult, but perhaps more fun, leave out every tenth word. Thus some words will be important nouns and verbs, while others will be “an” or “the.” The good listeners will be able to recall the correct connectives and articles. This whole exercise is done orally, though it can later be adapted as a writing and reading exercise where the student reads the selection alone. He has two copies—one with the full story and one with the blanks. He must remember the words after two readings. This could very well be done with the student produced dialogues.

Further Activities

1. Folktales, legends and myths are all good sources for changing narrative to script. Some of the longer, more detailed folktales can be cut to a scene. The following are often recommended for familiarity, yet it is up to the teacher’s discretion if in 1980, in the New Haven school system, these stories are relevant:

- 1) Snow White (Hillhouse High School’s drama club did a marvelous 1980’s rendition of this old tale.)
- 2) Prometheus
- 3) Cinderella
- 4) Hansel and Gretel
- 5) The Boy who Cried Wolf (The Girl who Cried Uncle?)

If the children are unfamiliar with these stories, they could be presented as new material. Since these stories are based in the past, the idea of updating any one of them, while dramatizing it, could prove fun. Any of these stories could even be taken a step beyond—to the 21st century perhaps. *The Inner City Mother Goose* is

a good reference for the up-dating and urbanizing of familiar rhymes.

2. The possibilities in poetry are limitless. Poems can be used for simple recital, for choral reading, for unison reading or for line-around readings (where each child reads one line of the poem).

3. Exercises that can build up to dialogue writing can include the following:

a) Given half sentences, student completes them:

Ex: The dog ran off with ...

b) Given a choice of verbs, the student will pick the most expressive.

Ex: John———his milk.

slurped, gurgled, gagged on, drank

c) Given a choice of adjectives, the student will pick the most expressive.

Ex: The———curtains blew in the breeze. worn, ruffled, tattered, flimsy, plaid

d) Students will compare two very similar objects or people.

Ex: a ball and an orange

Student will then compare two non-analogous items.

Ex: A pine tree and a handkerchief

e) To practice emphasis positioning, the student will place the subject and predicate at the end of the sentences, as done in the unit.

Ex: Maria watered the plants, tripping over the baby's toys.

becomes

Tripping over the baby's toys, Maria watered the plants.

These sentences can also be re-written to disguise the emphasis.

f) Write the same dialogue from a different point of view.

Ex: Stress situation or conflict between parent and child. Write the dialogue from the child's point of view, then from the parents'. Be convincing.

g) Write a dialogue convincing someone to do something dangerous.

h) Write an argumentative dialogue with someone where you argue for something you don't believe in. Be convincing!

i) Write a dialogue that could take place at your home (or in your classroom) at any time.

j) Write a dialogue based on a new situation—ex. a first date, first day of school.

k) Write a dialogue based on a conversation between you and your teacher.

l) While watching a popular television program or in the classroom while viewing a movie, turn off the sound and write what you think people are saying.

The following activity could be used as the culmination of the unit. The emphasis is on easy availability of material within the New Haven school system.

Objectives

1. To use short stories and films to motivate students to write effective dramatic dialogue.
2. To have students at least begin to view films with a critical eye.

Materials

1. Short stories entitled “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson and “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce.
2. Two films of the same name.

Procedure

Day (1) Have students read, or in the case of younger middle school students, read aloud to them the short story by Ambrose Bierce. Specific discussion questions will be left up to the discrimination of the individual teacher. But, questions should focus on the use of dialogue in the selection and how it reveals character and furthers the plot.

Day (2) Show the film version of the story twice, both times without sound. The first occasion is for general viewing purposes. The second time is to allow students to take notes in preparation for writing a dramatic script to accompany the film.

Homework Assignment

Day (2) Have students write a rough draft of the dramatic script, based on the discussion of the short story and the viewing of the film.

Day (3) Show the film again, this time with sound, and have students compare the film dialogue with their own. Encourage students to further refine their draft.

The same sequence can be followed with “The Lottery.”

Notes

1. Sam Smiley, *Playwriting: The Structure of Action* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 128.
2. Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theater* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964), p.

- 67.
3. Jose Luis Gonzalez, "The Letter," in *BORINQUEN AN ANTHOLOGY OF PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 368.
 4. Bernard Grebanier, *Playwriting* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961), p. 252.
 5. Sam Smiley, *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*, p. 129.
 6. Hart Day Leavitt and David A. Sohn, *Stop, Look, and Write* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 34.

Books Used to Prepare This Unit

Theater-General Interest

Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama*. New York: Atheneum, 1964. Answers the question, "What is drama?" as it relates to the human experience.

Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor*. New York: Atheneum, 1972.

A very personal account of Chaikin and the Open Theater. Beautiful and poetic.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

The most informative book on the absurdist theater.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater*. Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972.

An incredible compendium of theater games and dramatic exercises. Can be easily interwoven into any classroom activity.

Styan, John. *The Elements of Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

An almost simplistic style that fools you at first. It is a very informative work. Read with Bentley's *The Life of the Drama*.

Theater-More Specifically-Playwriting

Finch, Robert. *How to Write a Play*. New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1948.

A practical guide for those wishing to develop plays. Finch even tells you where to send your manuscripts. Includes his own play "Old What's-His-Name." Especially helpful in this unit was the chapter on Dialogue.

Funke, Lewis. *Playwrights Talk About Writing*. Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Co., 1975.

Funke interviews popular playwrights such as Lillian Hellman, Neil Simon and Edward Albee. Good reading for personal insight into these writers. Interesting to see what motivates them.

Grebanier, Bernard. *Playwriting* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961.

A big book on the art of playwriting covering the elements of a play in detail. Chapter X on dialogue is especially useful in the study of dialogue as a language builder. Lots of practical advice for the would-be dramatist.

Herman, Lewis. *A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting* . Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1952.

Contains three sections: "Dramaturgy," "The Filmic Components," and "Writing the Screen Play." Unless you are interested in the actual filming of a play, skip the second part. The other two sections are quite helpful and specific about how to integrate all the elements of a play.

Smiley, Sam. *Playwriting: The Structure of Action* . Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971.

A book packed with incredible amounts of detail (and repetitions) about the elements of a play. The chapter "Diction" is very useful for those interested in the specifics of dialogue writing.

General for the Classroom

Leavitt, Hart Day and Sohn, David A. *Stop, Look and Write* . Revised edition. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1964.

A book concerned with getting the students to write *anything* creatively. Ideas that can easily be adapted for playwriting.

McCaslin, Nellie. *Creative Dramatics in the Classroom* . David McKay Co., Inc., 1968.

A positive book on using drama in the classroom. Includes selections that can be developed into plays, though they may not prove relevant for our students. Useful.

Siks, Geraldine Brain. *Children's Literature for Dramatization* . New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Literary selections that can be turned into plays. The Preface, pg. xvii, will prove interesting to the teacher if the selections are too hard to handle.

Walker, Pamela Prince. *Seven Steps to Creative Children's Dramatics* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.

We found this book to be delightfully basic as a guide to getting the children ready to act. Very helpful.

Anthologies of Plays and Selections that can be turned into Plays

Babin, Maria Teresa and Steiner, Stan, eds. *BORINQUEN: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature* . New York: Vintage Books, 1974. Good solid collection of Puerto Rican narrative and poetry in English. Good possibilities for reciting. There's one play included in the collection.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology* . Detroit: Broadside Press, 1976.

Recent black narrative. Great possibilities for reciting or converting to script.

Childress, Alice, ed. *Black Scenes* . New York: Doubleday, 1971. Cuttings or scenes from contemporary black theater. Relevant.

Bullins, Ed, ed. *The New LaFayette Theater Presents: Plays with Aesthetic Comments by Six Black Playwrights*. Anchor Books, 1974.

Good reading for the teacher. May be taught to students with a lot of preparation.

Gassner, John and Mollie, eds. *15 International One Act Plays* . New York: Pocket Books, 1969.

Translated works of some well-known works, that must be selected with a vision towards who the student is.

Kanerman, Sylvia E., ed. *Dramatized Folk Tales of the World* . Boston: Plays, Inc. 1971.

50 one-act plays that have been written based on stories from all over the world. Some language seems antiquated.

Reinert, Otto and Arnott, Peter, eds. *Twenty-three Plays* . Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978.

All the great plays here for the teacher's use. Strong introduction on the nature of drama.

Thane, Adele. *Plays from Famous Stories and Fairy Tales* . Boston: Plays, Inc., 1967.

Like Kamerman's, good collection that could work hand in hand with the original story to show the jump from story to play. The plays themselves may not be of interest to all.

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