FEATURE

Making process drama effective online for children and young people

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Introduction

"Drama always has to include the possibility of 'something unforeseen'."

Master teacher Cecily O'Neill wrote this in her article Dorothy Heathcote: Teacher Power and Student Choices in The Journal for Drama in Education, Volume 36, Issue 1, Winter 2021.

We were already mid-pandemic then and this was probably the right time for thinking about the 'unforeseen' in the lives of children and young people. Especially when it involved drama - a space of coming together.

If we cannot be in one room, sense each other's presence, and work together on one big sheet of paper, how can we do drama? How can we be a collective?

In search of finding the collective in isolation, we found the essence of drama. The pandemic taught us how drama truly harnesses the power of imagination and helps in application of life skills and intelligence. If it wasn't for drama and the power it arms an individual with – to morph, shift and adapt – we wouldn't have survived the pandemic.

At *Joy of Drama*, we went online in Spring 2020 when India went into an 18-month lockdown. We had to quickly adapt to the new medium and invent. We had to rethink:

- engaging the body and mind
- teaching strategies
- bringing everyone together.

The biggest shift was when we had to move to more in-depth process work which would result in a live virtual product where that product need not be a performance. We were very clear in our approach from day one that we were exploring life skills rather than turning children into performing artists.

Deepening the process

The pandemic had made all of us extremely vulnerable and children felt the brunt when there wouldn't be a day when they did not hear about death and despair. So, it was the drama program which was perhaps the only place where they could play, create and get out of their quarantine.

As an independent organisation, we work with children between the ages of 4½ years and 17 years, during after-school hours. Children from urban backgrounds residing in metropolitan cities such as

Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad etc. live in nuclear families now, and are mostly the only child of the family. This creates an ever increasing need for parents to offer their children a safe space for social interactions and to engage them in creative explorations. The children we work with come from such backgrounds of socio-economic classification (SEC) A1, A2 and A households. During the lockdown, schools had taken a much more detached mode of teaching online by holding sessions with over 100 students, showing PowerPoint presentations, and muting all children with videos switched off. We had taken the opposite route. We had reduced the classroom to 6 students and all of us would keep ourselves unmuted and visible on screen. We had to feel that we were in one room together.

We consciously started looking at how the medium supported us instead of focusing on what it hindered. Going online gave us the opportunity to make more personal connections with our students and lockdown gave us a lot of common ground to play on.

How online supported drama work

- Home had become a stimulus
- We could involve parents and siblings
- Resource material was readily available for both teachers and students
- Time management was easier than before

We started with exploring the online space which the children were already familiar with. Children as young as 5 in India are usually used to operating smartphones. They are able to watch videos and also make video calls. Therefore children already had an idea of interacting with the screen and we began from there.

We redesigned our sessions in an episodic format and to our delight, later found out that Dorothy Heathcote would also encourage teachers to look at their work in episodes**.** We would usually begin our session with a recap of what happened in the session before, as our sessions are weekly. We would revisit one moment from the last session which stayed with us by using freeze frames to replay the moment. Then we would get on with the main session. Our closing rituals would always be a reflection of what happened this session and sharing possible explorations for the next session. This format kept the children hooked on to the drama, and for the next session they would be more prepared. At times children would bring in costume and prop elements which may be of use in the following session.

Engaging the body and mind - warming up for online

The first thing that we did was to change our warm up sessions into games children could play!

Scavenger hunts

How does one hunt alone? The online sessions transformed our homes into a playground. Children as young as 4 years old could work on their tactile, motor and observation skills just by playing the different scavenger hunt games that we conducted during our sessions. The coloured alphabet game, where we used the *whiteboard* to write "a blue M" or "a red S" and the children would hunt for objects that were blue in colour and began with the letter M or red in colour and began with the letter S in their homes.

This is a game that gave the children a reason to move around and get to know about things that were theirs but often went unnoticed.

The *chat* option took the role of "chits" wherein we could send words to children and they would move their bodies as *if* they were using that particular object, which would then become a clue for others to go and find it in their own homes, like a toothbrush or a jacket etc.

Working with paintings/photographs
Personal photographs became a powerful hook for our drama lessons. While moving from the physical to the social aspect of a drama lesson, such hooks assisted in smooth transitions from the 'known' to the 'unknown'. Whether it was building new stories out of an old photograph or picking characters from the photograph to use for an existing drama lesson, the children found it helpful to give and take from each other's photographs.

At *Joy Of Drama,* we have always used paintings by the maestros as nameless pieces of artwork in the classroom. Burdening the child with names hinders their imagination as they often feel inadequate in front of such great names. We noticed that whenever we used one of the great paintings such as Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* as a hook without prompting the class with ideas, what came out of that session was completely original, unbiased and often gave a new lens to the painting. An 8 year old child would have worked with the painting without having to understand the concept of 'impressionism' which would be a completely abstract concept for her, whereas the painting being a concrete stimulus, opens up a larger canvas for her to work on. The online medium gave us an opportunity to work with the works of a great number of artists. Due to the dearth of resources offline, this new medium offered us easy and quick access to numerous paintings.

Working with music
Using music as a stimulus has been one of the most fruitful offerings of the online medium for our curriculum. With the diminishing exposure and knowledge of the classical forms of music amongst this generation of children, warm ups and hooks designed around western classical and Indian classical pieces of music proved to be effective stimuli for our lesson plans. We used Strauss's *Blue Danube* as well as Pandit Ravi Shankar's *Ragas* for reflective artwork. The music would be played for as long as children would listen and reflect on what it made them feel (for older students) or what it reminded them of - something from their past (for younger children) - as an artwork which would then become the hook for the drama. We also used music to create 'ambiences' of spaces as a part of our online Mantle of the Expert projects.

Adapting Dorothy Heathcote's drama conventions and strategies for online

At *Joy Of Drama*, the 33 drama conventions of Dorothy Heathcote play a vital role. We have been able to design our curriculum with so much more ease, efficacy and structure because of the conventions which otherwise would have been improbable.

Conventions are designed to make children think, to engage them, to create new knowledge in the classroom. But it was also a guide to make all of this happen for the children 'in the classroom'.

Rediscovering ways to make it effective online was a practice that opened another world of possibilities for our curriculum.

Our online sessions have a teacher student ratio of 6:1 with no assistant teachers. This challenged us to experiment with *teacher voices*. This *Drama Strategy* helped us engage children effectively with various drama conventions. Using various tools of the Zoom applications such as 'spotlighting' , we created spaces quite smoothly without breaking the trail of thought or losing the opportunity to use the 'colleague-talk'.

Figure 1: Our students, Kyra Sinha and Vibha Rao, created work together

Figure 2: Suzanne, Sumedha and Zola creating photographs with content created during the lesson

Figure 3: Praapti, Saarthak, Veer and Aryah (all 5-year-olds in 2021) seen here in-role with costume elements conducting a meeting as a part of an MoE project

We were able to establish Dorothy Heathcote's concept of the *The Real and The Imaginary World* by using the camera to our advantage. For our youngest batch (the photo above) , blocking their cameras with their palm and then taking it off to come back on screen would take them to the imaginary world which we had named *Dramaland*. One could come out of *Dramaland* by repeating the same ritual. This ritual cemented the concept of the *real and the imaginary* in the young minds way faster than we had expected.

Working online with effigy

The one thing that the online medium gifted us, the facilitators, was the focus of the children. It was very easy for the class to quickly get into the mode of working together without distractions as the screen became the focal point rather than, as commonly mistaken, a hindrance. Working with *effigies* required a certain amount of collaboration among the children. You can find a screenshot of one of our sessions below where we used various combinations of iconic conventions (12-13) and enactive conventions (3-7) to create the protagonist of our story. Here we took the assistance of one

Figure 4: Krishnapriya as the portrait of the fictional character "Nurbanu" created by the children

of the family members (mother/sister/father) of the child to create the portrait. The adult in the room was able to perform the activities that an assistant teacher would otherwise do in a classroom. These were done by using simple language with both the adult and the child.

Working online with symbolic and iconic conventions

Working with first person accounts, a combination of conventions (17-18, 22-23) proved to be extremely effective in our online classrooms. At a time where all the writing was happening on emails and whatsapp texts, we decided to build collaborative handwritten stimuli for the classrooms, most of the time as a part of the drama lesson. Writing-in-role and designing-in-role helped the children to not just create reflections but also create stimulus for each other. You can find a few of the handwritten collaborative stimuli below.
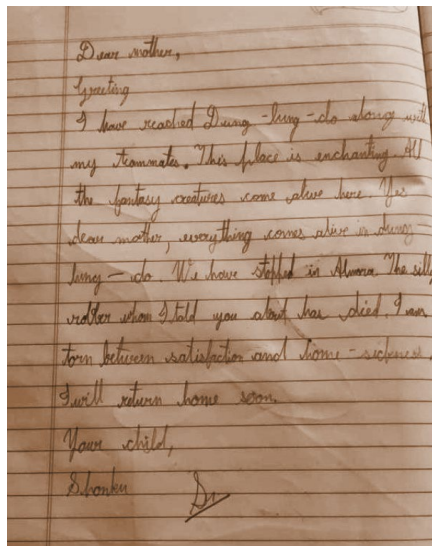

Figure 5: An example of writing-in-role to create stimulus for the classroom by Sumedha Roy
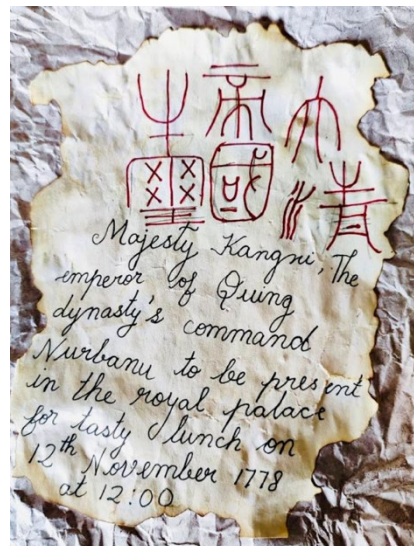

Figure 6: An example of a handmade inquiry-based stimulus (A royal invite) by Angela

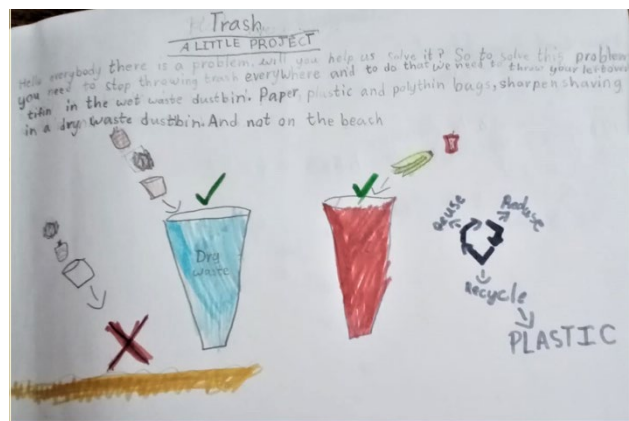*Figure 7: An example of practising the Iconic convention (no. 8) of using maps in our drama lessons*

Figure 8: Our student, Devika, created this poster as a part of an MoE project "The Beach Cleanup"

Understanding and applying knowledge through writing-in-role activities such as these helped children create new and original ideas without banking on anyone else and taking risks to approach creating on their own.

The whiteboard option on Zoom became our idea boards which were saved and used for recaps in subsequent sessions. Saving everyone's work became much easier and regular. Documentation of children's works became efficient. What you see below (fig. 9) is an example of a list of questions made

by a group of 7 year olds. A group of expert designers running a design firm would ask these questions

Q1. what kind of colours would you like for your shop?

Q2. What kind of lighting would you like to have in your shop?

Q3. How big would you like your shop to be?

Q4. How do you want your shop to look like?

Q5. Would you like to have a workspace in the shop for yourself?

Q6. Would you like a counter for billing in your shop?

Q7. What kind of decor would you prefer in your shop/ maybe screens?

Q8. Would you like to sell kid's furniture?

Figure 9: example of an ideas board

of their client. This was a part of another MoE project that they were a part of.

Helping Welfare Organisation
502, 5th floor, near Lalbagh
Metro Station
Bengaluru 560004
karnataka

Bengaluru Bruhat Mahanagara Palike
Hudson Circle, Sampangi Rama
Nagar, Near Unity Building,
Bengaluru,
Karnataka 560002

Sub: Seeking permission to build a kitchen at our office for community lunch for the underpriviledged

To : The Corporation Commisioner

Respected Sir,

We are a group of people who run an organisation to help underpriviledged people. We have 4 teams in our office. We plan to make food everyday for around 500-700 people. For that we will need more space in our office where we can create a kitchen and cook. We are aware that this would require us to have your permission and a few licences. We will be very grateful if we get your permission.

Thank you,
Helping Welfare Organisation

Figure 10: The whiteboard being used for a collaborative official letter writing exercise as a part of an MoE project by 8-year-olds

Interactions with photographs became trouble free as we could erase, write and rewrite to fully understand and engage with the images using the annotation feature on Zoom. Here you see our children, Ishaan, Ahana, Gayatri and Gianna engaged with a photograph of tribal siblings.

Figure 11 shows an example of making symbols in class and using them so that the entire class could touch, feel and wear the symbols.

Bringing Everyone Together

Let us now share one of our initial online mantle projects.

Saving the community park

One of our senior facilitators conducted a mantle project online in the winter of 2021.

Figure 11: An example of a tribal symbol that we created in class. This one was made by our student, Praapti Chatterjee.

We worked with a group of 6 children online. All were in the age group of 8-10 year olds. The context was to save a community park from being dug up to create multiple-level parking and a shopping complex.

During the pandemic, there was a lot of conversation around essential and non-essential services. As our 'present' situation was the biggest context, we used that to plan and initiate the mantle. Many unused spaces in the city were being considered as potential areas of development. As India is in a phase of ongoing development and New Delhi being the capital city of India, the government is always on the lookout for opportunities to generate more means to develop the city.

Schools on the other hand were rushing with their course content to finish the syllabus and get children to take innumerable tests; often a strategy to keep the children in school. There were many important social science topics which schools were either skipping or rushing through.

This gave us the opportunity to create a mantle project bringing in the curriculum area of 'learning about your city' and 'citizenship'.

Building the context - the hook

We began our session with an informal chat to check in with each other. This is a practice we continue to maintain with our online students at present as well. As a part of this conversation we introduced a newspaper article which spoke about government permissions to allow construction in Delhi. The children shared how some of their neighbours had already started construction work in their apartment building or neighbourhood.

The teacher then initiated the drama by reading out a letter. A scanned version of the letter was shared simultaneously on zoom as she read out from the same letter which was in her hand. This was a 'letter' from the Municipality Corporation Of Delhi (MCD) to the Residents Welfare Association (RWA) of the residential colony in an area called Gulmohar Park. The letter was a notice from the MCD on initiating park demolition work as this particular park was not in use anymore and that a market complex along with a parking space was to be built at that site. The teacher went into Teacher-in-role as the president of the RWA as she read the letter; she changed her voice register and explained her agony in the role.

The frame

Children were in the frame of Environmental Enthusiasts. They were a part of voluntary workers with an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) who would work with communities to find sustainable solutions to keep the environment clean. This frame was 'known' to the children as they were consuming a lot of content on environment and cleanliness through school projects.

Once the letter was read out, the teacher asked if the volunteers would like to write a letter back to the MCD. The children then wrote a letter collectively in role and used Zoom's whiteboard feature to do so. Since Zoom has a feature to rename the participant, the children had the opportunity to name themselves as they wished to get into the roles of the volunteers.

The 'Renaming' and 'Collective Writing' together became a convention to help children get in role and be present in the now with the problem. The children wrote back to the MCD on behalf of the RWA and requested a meeting. The teacher then spoke in the role of a senior official in MCD and invited them to an online meeting.

We used the breakout room feature in Zoom to enter the RWA - MCD meeting. The breakout room gave each child the opportunity to get into the present status the role required. Entering and exiting the breakout room felt as if there was a real change of space. We still use it as space within the space.

Before going into the breakout room, the teacher, now out of role, introduced the children to some persuasive speaking techniques which they might need to use in the meeting. The children practised the technique out of role but we had to pause our Mantle as our session time had ended. Before closing the session, we recapitulated and reflected on what had happened in the drama.

Next week

The children were ready with their notebooks which they thought would be a good idea to carry along with them to the meeting. We renamed ourselves and entered the breakout room. During the meeting, the volunteers were able to use 'persuasive speaking skills' and the teacher, in the role of the MCD officer, agreed to give the volunteers 6 months to fix the unused park but did not commit to payment for the repairs as according to them, they had no budget for doing this.

Once we were back into the Zoom main session, we reflected out of role about what went right, what could have been better etc. The teacher then created a collective drawing of a map of the park along with the children using the whiteboard feature.

Once the map was made, the children went back into their role as volunteers and used the 'brainstorming' strategy to discuss what needs to be done in the park. They came up with the following ideas:

- Laying down tracks
- Trees and plants to be put in
- Swings and benches
- A small pond
- Dustbins
- Boundary wall repairs
- Regular gardeners to take care of the park
- Separate animal feeding areas
- Street lights
- Machinery for garden upkeep
- Manure for gardening
- Sign boards

Budgeting

Budgeting and raising money came up as an important point during the brainstorming session proposed by the RWA president (teacher-in-role).

It was important and a curriculum area from our internal teaching areas.

The discussion then took a turn to finding out ways to raise money and put a reasonable budget for repairs etc. It was important for the children to understand that repairs and maintenance cost money and someone will have to raise it. Until then, children pledged thousands of dollars without realising where the money would come from.
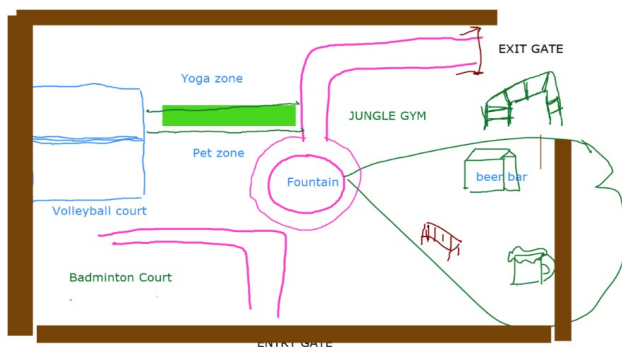

Figure 12: This was the drawing of the proposed park design created by the volunteers

They zeroed down to the following ways to raise money:

From residents - for which (awareness generating posters were made , to make the residents realise the need for the park), in addition a street play on this theme was practised and performed in the community.

From corporations – they have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds - the teacher had an out of role discussion about this during the session.

Ongoing sessions

The next 3 sessions were focused on developing the mantle.

A session was dedicated to finding out what kind of plants and trees can be planted, given Delhi's weather conditions. Children used the internet to research, shared their findings by using the 'screen share' feature in Zoom and came up with suggestions.

Children created a list of sapling varieties. They also individually drew and presented the various plant species they were exploring during individual research. The teacher used the breakout rooms to create individual spaces to perform solo activities and once they were back in the same room together, it gave an impression of actually being inside a room together!

At the end of 5 sessions the children had explored and learnt the following:

- Environmental issues
- Residential Welfare Association's role and responsibility
- Government bodies
- Environmental activism
- About plants and trees
- Designing messages for a cause
- Budgeting
- Raising funds
- Making inventories
- Resolving conflicts
- Learning about citizen rights and responsibilities.

Figure 13: A notice made as a part of the MoE project

The final 3 sessions were used to create a 'street theatre' piece where the children devised and performed the street play online. They used photographs of their own neighbourhood park as the background screen for their performance.

This is how a Mantle Project also had a performance product to showcase and share with the audience.

The audience, who are usually parents of our students, appreciated the holistic approach to the project and the children shared the entire process of creating the performance.

Reflections/observations

- Online sessions were very effective to draw attention of the classroom to a particular subject, as the focal point was the screen and not an entire studio where children could get distracted.

- Children with attention deficit and hyperactivity issues were able to adjust better online as all instructions, either auditory or visual, were directed from a single source, the laptop screen.

- Children who were naturally conscious about their work being looked at and being judged, felt the eyes vanishing and experienced a sense of freedom to create.

- Children were able to discover their own homes from new perspectives as the entire house had become a labyrinth of stimuli that had gone unnoticed for the longest time.

- The distribution of power in the class was effortless. Both the quiet ones and the loud ones felt comfortable and equally heard and seen as every screen (*gallery view mode on the Zoom application*) was of the same size, which would not have been the case in an in-person session where the taller child would have been seen more and the louder child would overpower the quieter.

- Children discovered their hidden skills during reflections. While they were a part of a class where work was done in collaboration, with questions being asked, ideas being exchanged and discussions being held, the reflection was often done in private, at one's own desk. This gave the children ample freedom to think and reflect on their learning without having the burden of proving anything in the class or grabbing appreciation from the facilitator.

Challenges

The biggest and only challenge for us at *Joy Of Drama* was to adapt our approaches to ensure drama based learning and facilitation via the online medium. Utilising digital tools creatively to engage children and implement techniques to convey energy across screens was a big learning for our entire team.

Why did it work?

The online medium offered the facilitators a large canvas to research real time as the class would progress and helped them bring out resource material to develop the unscripted drama.