

DRAMA CONVENTIONS

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Conventions based on theatre practice but easily available to the classroom teacher

Constructed by Dorothy Heathcote 1988 / revised 2006

A note to be considered when using these conventions

Whichever type you select has the effect of introducing the presence or sign or signifier of an-OTHER which creates “something to stare at or consider” within the frame of power you wish the class to use when negotiating with the “evidence” of another person or group. Productive tension will always have to be a feature of such encounters. The basic tension will become present because the class care to enquire into a situation. Careful framing of point of view and need must be attended to, otherwise class are merely entertained.

- Dorothy Heathcote, letter to Eileen Pennington (31.12.06).

[In her letter to Eileen, Dorothy stated “I've been bothered for some time that I've not revisited the conventions”. She included a number of amendments to the conventions list, which have been incorporated below.]

SENSE OF A REAL PERSON, OR GROUP OF PERSONS.

1. Role / roles actually present, naturalistic, yet significantly behaving, giving and accepting responses.
2. The role / roles actually present, except framed as a film. That is, people have permission to stare but not intrude. ‘Film’ can be stopped and restarted, or re-run.
3. The role present as in ‘monument’. Can be talked about, walked around, and even sculptured afresh if so framed.
4. The role present as in ‘monument’, but with the convention that effigy can be brought into life-like response and then returned to effigy. Monuments can only know what has been carved on or about them by the maker.
5. The roles as in a wall fresco or tomb carving which is fixed to floor or wall.
6. The roles as in 3,4,5, but capable only of hearing what observers are saying. This

causes selected language to be generated by them.

7. The roles as above but activated to speak but not move.

8. The roles depicted in picture: removed from actual life, as in a photographic slide of roles, a painting, a photograph or drawing. This includes those made by a class, as well as prepared depictions.

9. A drawing seen in the making, or someone important to the action, as on a blackboard.

10. Stylized depiction of someone, e.g. identikit picture made by class in frame, e.g. as detectives, or researchers or novelists requiring to illustrate by using coins or medals depicted iconically.

11a. Stylized depiction of someone except made before hand, so is 'fait accompli'.

11b. As in 10 except depiction is presented as a jigsaw to be fitted together by class. E.g. broken stained glass window or damaged painting requiring reassembly.

12. Life size (cardboard) model with clothing (real) or role, e.g. the armour of King Henry VIII.

13. e.g. 'framed' as if in a museum or sale rooms. 'This is the dress worn by Florence Nightingale when she met Queen Victoria after Scutari'.

14. Life sized model, except the class is dressing the model so as to see 'how it was' on that day when these events happened.

15. Clothing of person cast off in disarray e.g. remains of a tramp's presence, or a murder, and escape as in a highwayman situation.

16. Objects to represent person's interests. Works as above, but more closely can indicate concerns rather than appearance, e.g. a ring of a Borgia.

17. An account of a person spoken by another person in naturalistic fashion, e.g. 'Well when last I saw him he seemed alright. I never dreamed anything was wrong'.

18. An account of a person written as if from that person, but read by someone else, e.g.

a diary found by chance or deliberately borrowed temporarily or stolen to cause permanent loss; or letter.

19. An account written by the person who now reads it to others, e.g. a policeman giving evidence or a confession. The role is present in this case but in contact through their writing as an author might well be. This mixes two conventions - 2 in the list and this one.
 20. An account written by someone, of someone else and read by yet another.
 21. Story told of another, in order to bring that person close to the action, e.g. 'I saw him open a safe once. It was an incredible performance. I'm not sure if he would assist us though'.
 22. A report of an event but formalised by authority or ritual.
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DOCUMENTS AND / OR LETTERS

23. e.g. an account of bravery in battle on an occasion of the presenting of posthumous medals.
 24. A letter read in the voice of the writer. This is an emanation of a specific presence, not just any voice, communicating the words.
 - 25a. A letter read in the voice of the writer, but the letter is read by another with no attempt to portray the person who wrote it, but still expressing feeling.
 - 25b. Any document or written account other than a letter, which refers to a specific person or event as in a newspaper article, or a biographic form, or even a filled in application form or a passport page. This can be a will written in the first person.
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26. Letter read without feeling, e.g. as evidence, or accusation in a formal situation.
27. Voice of a person overheard talking to another - informal language, i.e. a naturalistic tone.
28. Voice of a person overheard talking to another, but in formal language.
29. A conversation overheard. (Persons not seen). Deliberate eavesdropping as in spying.

30. Report of a conversation, written and spoken by another.
 31. Reported conversation with two people reading the respective 'parts'.
 32. Private reading of conversations, reported as overheard.
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33. The finding of a cryptic code message, e.g. 'tramps' or 'spies'.
34. Signature of a person found, e.g. a half-burned paper.
35. Sign of a particular person discovered, e.g. Scarlet Pimpernel (his special mark).
36. A Coat of Arms, initials placed upon objects denoting ownership.

NOTES ON CONVENTIONS

Compiled by David Allen

The word "conventions" implies the use of *theatre form*. As Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode observe in their book *Structuring Drama Work*:

... the use of conventions can be seen as part of a dynamic process that enables participants to make, explore and communicate meaning through theatre form.

Dorothy Heathcote said:

Obviously in the THEATRE, an amazing control over conventions is possible. It therefore offers a teacher in classroom a most remarkably rich field. The convention in THEATRE is an agreement to the form at any given moment. I seek to translate this into my classroom. ("Four Views of the Same Territory – Life, Art, School and Work," in SAADYT Journal, Vol. 6 No. 2, 1985.)

Working through conventions implies that the students themselves can begin to acquire a mastery over theatre form. The word "strategy," on the other hand, might imply something more short-term - a "tool" for the teacher / facilitator (e.g.: "There are a wide range of strategies that you can use to help you deliver Drama" - dramatoolkit.co.uk).

If you look at Dorothy's work in projects such as "The Treatment of Dr. Lister" (1980), "Teaching Political Awareness Through Drama" (1982) and "The Gardeners of Grantley" (1985), it is evident that she worked through conventions throughout, in a way that built layer upon layer of meaning.

SIGNS (AND PORTENTS?)

Dorothy produced a list of some 33+ conventions for drama work (see above). She saw them as a way to “make human presences come into the room; so that what we are considering and who we are considering loom large in all the work”. She said: “I am obsessed with the power of these conventions – the means by which we can make the presence of an Other, present in the room.”

She observed:

These ways of bringing in the presence of “others” demand that the students have an investment in needing to understand the person because matters depend upon it. It is never casual. Everyone must recognize the significance of the “other’s” presence as part of the enterprise. (1)

In Mantle, they are used as the means of creating the “absent presence” of different clients. She regretted, however, that

the conventions are as yet the least understood and used in Mantle of the Expert style of teaching ... (1)

Whatever conventions you set up, Dorothy observed, the children “have to be in a state of productive tension, to need to know from these people, or from evidence of these people”.

On one occasion, she was working in Reigate Primary School on a Mantle based on the life of Alice Grace, (1853-1927), the “Little Eaton Hermit” who made her home in a cave, and became something of a local celebrity. Dorothy had to consider: “How many ways can we make Alice exist? ... I can’t restore Alice’s life. I want them to understand it more.” (2)

In the school, Alice Grace was introduced through:

- a fictitious news report, revealing that heavy rains in the winter had caused a rock fall in the caves at Little Eaton. A metal Victorian hat box had been unearthed, containing artefacts which, it seemed, belonged to Alice.

Convention 19: An account written by someone, of someone else and read by yet another

- the hat box and the artefacts it contained

Convention 15: Objects to represent a person’s interests.

- a fictional letter, supposedly found in the Derby City Hospital Records (see photo). It was from a vicar writing to a doctor to enlist his help in Alice’s case. It contained information about

Alice's vagrant life, and concluded: "I am sure you will agree that her lifestyle cannot be conducive to good health..."

Convention 23: A letter read in the voice of the writer, but the letter is read by another with no attempt to portray the person who wrote it, but still expressing feeling.

- a map of the village in 1871

The children also undertook tasks to help them "penetrate the life of Alice", including, for example, making a three-dimensional model of the village in 1871; and recreating episodes from Alice's life.

Sources: unpublished transcript of NATD event with Dorothy and Eileen Pennington at the University of Warwick, 9.2.07; except (1) "The 3 Workshops Explained and Analyzed - Ankara November 21-23, 2008" by Dorothy Heathcote. Creative Drama Journal 2010, Volume 5, Issue 9-10.

"THE BOTTLING PLANT"

In a workshop in Turkey in 2008, Dorothy demonstrated how conventions might be used. The participants were in the frame of people working in a Spring Water bottling firm. Dorothy herself took on the role of "Dorothy," an elderly person, coming to the factory to look for a job – who really did not have the skills to match the job description. So this was convention number 1: "the role actually present, naturalistic, yet significantly behaving giving and accepting responses". Dorothy commented:

Now see how convention no 4 may deepen and widen considerations.

[Convention 4 is the role present as "effigy", "with the convention that the effigy can be brought into life-like response and then returned to effigy".]

Teacher now stands as Dorothy as an effigy – that is, with her back to the wall, dressed now in hat and coat with handbag. She silently watches as workers continue their work in the bottling plant.

They begin to think individually as they work, about the previous encounter, and start to put their thoughts on post-it notes and place these on the floor around Dorothy's feet, or in her open handbag.

Lunch break time arrives, and all workers now sit to eat lunch with their backs to the effigy. During this, they hear Dorothy reading their post-it notes alone and replying to their notes, so they can widen their understanding of her point of view. The teacher as Dorothy may have an agenda (e.g. she is a widow, needs work has little formal education, her children are married and away etc.). But she must respond honestly from within those parameters to the post-it notes in order to help them consider other aspects and possible resolutions which are suitable to the Bottling firm and perhaps useful to Dorothy. In mantle work there are no magical happy endings - all must work through dilemmas, not clear them up unrealistically.

As a result of the convention 4 episode, they decided with the teacher/manager, that perhaps employment could be found, so Dorothy joined the work force. Together the workshop group looked at other conventions they could try – “Dorothy” wrote a letter discussing her wedding, a simple matter of 25 years ago. Together, the wedding photograph was composed using the description in the letter. They are still workers in the Bottling factory. but are so interested in Dorothy’s story that they want to recall in action her life experiences. Teacher/manager and all the group now build Dorothy’s life story in still pictures, while at the same time they are realizing that old people may have interesting, unusual stories to tell. Had the teachers [in the workshop] been a class of children, it would be an opportunity for the children to genuinely have a relationship in the drama with an old person. Making the “photographs” is convention no 5 [“The role as portrait of person”]. To have moved to a very different kind of convention, the teachers tried out 15 [“Objects to represent a person’s interests”]. They made Dorothy’s work locker, and put inside it all the things in her life they considered to be important to her. It could be arranged that a small group of students make Dorothy’s locker - they need only be drawings or made with paper cut outs - working on the lockers allows them to understand the importance of memory, and to realize how objects can become symbols to their owners.

One of the conventions we tried in the workshop was convention 8. They made greeting cards and drew pictures of her as if they were photographs taken when she worked in the Bottling plant. They “sent” these to her address. So Dorothy has existed via conventions as

- 1) a living person looking for a job – convention 1.*
- 2) As a memory when they told the teacher/manager about the work interview c16.*
- 3) As an effigy to be thought about c 4.*
- 4) As a voice reading their post-it notes c 25.*
- 5) As a letter describing her wedding c 17.*
- 6) As photographs of Dorothy’s life c8.*
- 7) Dorothy’s locker symbolizing her interests c 15.*
- 8) Dorothy exists through her diary c 17 and*
- 9) Greeting cards with “Photographs” c 8.*

The workshop group did not actually do all these episodes, but I use them here to show how useful the conventions are in exploring many dimensions of events, people and using “drama eyes” and “implication” to deepen work.

From: “The 3 Workshops Explained and Analyzed - Ankara November 21-23, 2008” by Dorothy Heathcote. Creative Drama Journal 2010, Volume 5, Issue 9-10.

“THE TREATMENT OF DR. LISTER”

When you look at one of Dorothy Heathcote’s conventions in detail, you realise all the layers it contains.

In the drama “The Treatment of Dr. Lister” (1980), the children were in the frame of doctors, undergoing an examination in the history of medicine. They encountered a “portrait” of Lister (represented by a teacher-in-role), with medical objects on his desk, including a microscope, a stethoscope, and some surgical instruments. The instruments were borrowed from a medical school. They still had dried blood on them (the children were not allowed to touch them). And this, of course, immediately raised the issue of sterility, so central to Lister’s work...

The “portrait” of Lister is an example of Convention Number 3: “The role present as in ‘effigy’. Can be talked about, walked around, and even sculptured afresh if so framed.”

A teacher [John Carroll] was seated dressed to give an authentic impression of the man, surrounded by his microscope and surgeon’s tools. He was not precisely authentic as to dress. Teachers don’t often have those resources and anyway, good pictures can pick up errors of that kind.

John Carroll was, in fact, “only dressed as far as the table-top. If you look underneath, you’ll see his Australian boots. Desert boots as well! But above the table, he is Dr. Lister” [1].

In using a “portrait”, Dorothy observes,

what you give children is: permission to stare. But you protect them always from feeling stared at. (1)

In this case, in the “portrait” of Dr. Lister, there were several medical instruments on the table in front of him.

The placing of microscope beside surgical instruments is a classic example of efficient drama constructing. The power to synchronise information. As would-be doctors, accepting the yoke of responsibility, they examined with their eyes, the possible contribution this man “has made to our chosen careers”. ... They are about to use their skills of making connections by bringing into action their undoubted historical sense. After making this construct of meaning, they were then invited to place the evidence of their own eyes together with their historical sense and do an examination paper on “what they thought was the contribution of this man’s work to his own and the present medical scene”.

In other words: there was an emphasis on the selective use and reading of *sign*, in the “constructing of meaning through drama”.

Crucially, the drama was not simply one convention after another; but the different conventions were interrelated. So...

The children first encountered Lister as a “portrait” or “waxwork” – and they later created their own “waxworks” (to demonstrate to Lister the health hazards for working people in his day, with examples of situations that might have occurred).

When Lister was “brought to life,” he gave a “lecture,” as if he was back in his old lecture room, talking to students in his own time.

Later, the children taught Lister about the contribution he made to medicine. They presented lectures on subsequent medical developments such as dialysis.

Lister’s table was covered with (unsterilised) medical instruments; the children later had to plan how to equip a van as a sterile ambulance, to go to India. They presented their ideas to Lister, who was astonished at what they were telling him about germs.

These are examples of the sophisticated use of conventions, to give unity to the drama, and also, to give the children increasing control over it.

*Source: unpublished draft of the article “Material for Significance” *; except (1) Making Drama Work: Role Work video series, no.4 (University of Newcastle, 1992). (* For the published version, see Collected Writings on Education and Drama, ed. Liz Johnson and Cecily O’Neill, 1984.)*

The following document is from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University (File AH046).

A training day - some of the questions we formulated :-

① Using conventions should create different kinds of knowledge: e.g. an effigy by its' nature resonates and inducts differently. Can we name some of the features,

we chose 5 types of manifesting full role to explore :- the different "natures" of each manifestation: disciplines/ language opportunities

the
nature
of
the
forms

- The Robin Hood myth:
- The effigy:
- The 'normal' presence:
- The portrait:
- The emissary (representative view
∴ biased in some way)
- The film.

- protections:
- dressage latitudes:
- lures:
- limitations:
- forms of communication
- knowledge breeding potential/s.

Each has specific characteristics regarding learning and teaching possibilities:

Each demands different negotiation skills:

Each demands different linguistic basis for communication.

2. How does each form of manifestation breed knowledge?
3. What are the different forms of knowledge bred?
4. In which different ways do they "resonate" to hold attention and concern?
5. How is internalisation of experience different in each circumstance?
6. How does the form affect teacher facilitator
7. What "other" possibilities does the style create.
8. What developments naturally arise from the style of presentation and signing.
(progression)
9. What different kinds of thinking are formulated?
10. How is feed-back and response organised in each model?
11. Can we specify skills of "Keying" and "Framing" efficiently?
12. What are the elements we can identify in appearing "truthful" to children in role-encounters whilst not responding with factual information e.g. Question "Have you any family?"
Affective reply - slow ~~and~~ thoughtfully softened expression, plus "and I think of them often"....

13. How to educate the teacher to employ the visual and the verbal in a perfectly complementary blend which adds up to "resonance" and "breeding" understanding rather than "replying" & "answering"!

The system we attempted, which we intend to use again in order to refine what we consider was a good start (which was encumbered by the need to engage over 60 8/9 year olds in the training day ~~in order to~~ free staff to participate) was that whereby the children were to be research ~~ers~~ assistants examining "how teachers can help by being in the play". We worked in two ways - in the morning we researched different conventions regarding role with teacher/facilitator in charge, and in the afternoon that of one teacher working in/out of the action.

Some of the findings: ① "Film" convention highly successful in engaging chn. in hypothesis and widening their areas of reference re cause/effect:

opened up remarkably efficiently plus understanding of object as symbol: ② "Portrait" permits time span to be

scrutiny of their evidence and how it reveals attitude and bias, and ∴ most thoughtful engagement with their own verbal negotiations. ③ The emissary demands careful

is by far the hardest to successfully maintain at 'resonance' level and demands a high level teacher/facilitator. ④ The role working "naturalistically" ⑤ The efficacy is not sufficiently

researched yet to make more than the merest suggestion. based on this day's experiment.

During the afternoon session the children were engaged in responding to the teacher in / out of role - especially in the matter of spotting at high speed :- shifts in time ; shifts "in" action + "out" of action ;

"keyings" ; how the teacher was signalling in the encounters ;

and the power being endowed plus recognition of status, role-function and relationships being established.

The whole affair was a most exciting exercise & a good subject for a Ph.D. study. The video is too complex as yet to show in a general conference.

Prinny Heathcote & 1982/3 }
Drama in Education Course }
1982/3.