

National Drama

Heathcote Reconsidered

A report on the Pre-Conference Event to see Everyday Theatre at work in the UK held at St Marylebone Church of England School on 3rd July 2013

Dorothy Heathcote and Everyday Theatre

Dorothy Heathcote's "mantle of the expert" approach to education has inspired the work of teachers and academics across the world. She was a highly accomplished teacher of theatre and drama for learning and amongst her many achievements she defined and developed the method of "teacher in role".

Techniques such as role-play are utilised within this method and are designed to initiate investigation of moral values and critical thought, making the experience relevant to everyday situations. Each "role" we adopt in these situations has "implied" behaviour and it is this implied social behaviour which can be used in drama and dramatic situations to create deeper understanding and meanings.

Everyday Theatre use these applied theatre techniques within their interactive workshops in order to bring real issues such as domestic violence and neglect into the minds of young people. Children are able to discuss these issues in a safe environment and by encouraging independent thinking the child takes charge of their own learning and becomes an in-role expert on that particular situation.

The particular method used by Everyday Theatre is to put the situation into a video game where the players are given gaming options and different buttons to view and control a family who are having problems. The aim is to help each family member work through issues and to create a happier environment for all involved. Children must work through different levels of the game to eventually win and become "Games Masters" and are given a badge at the end. The family within the game have a range of complex issues and so the players must find complex solutions. Just as Dorothy Heathcote pioneered, critical thinking and empathy with the character is paramount to solving the problems and winning the game.

The Family Game

At this pre-conference event as with all workshops the team host, the session started with a short performance by the Everyday Theatre team that works like a demo of the game. This establishes the characters and the history of the family. We are introduced to 12 year old "T", his mum, dad, best friend Jack, Brian (mum's boyfriend) and Brian's daughter (T's possible step sister to be) Becca.

Students of the school and delegates were then invited to join in as players. We start at the first level of the game where players must take on the role of someone outside the family looking in on events and gossiping about the goings on in the house, school and work of T and his family. This gives players a chance to work out the sequence of events and look into the situation as an outsider might.

At this level we also get to grips with the game controllers such as the "Thought" button. Players push this to pause the action and find out what the character is thinking at that moment. The "Rewind" and "Fast-forward" buttons take players back and forwards in time to find out the cause of a particular problem or event and then the outcome.

Each level passed releases a password and as the game moves along these passwords make up a sentence that represents the motto of Everyday Theatre and the message they are trying to get across.

The second level involves hot seating. A team member will take on one of the roles and players are encouraged to ask questions (the harder the question the better the point bonus) to get to grips with how that character feels about the situation. Players will get clues during this level of how to help the family member, putting them on the same level as

the character and finding common ground. By hot seating a few different family members the players are gaining different perspectives and getting more and more involved with the family issues, they get to grips with the moral issues and look for ways to solve the problems. Another device introduced at this level is the "Truth" button - this can only be used once during the whole game and players can push this to get the character to pause and tell the truth. An important tool to use when "in-role" team members, talking as the character, may not be telling the truth.

During the next few levels the game becomes more and more interactive. Players take moments from T's life to explore and develop. Using physicality to act out a scene with the family and freezing it at moments when emotions are heightened to work through thought processes. Players are even encouraged to take on the role of T himself while in game to use their own initiative to drive the action and respond in character.

Resolution is brought about through sharing in a group, by contributing equally and giving ideas and suggestions for further action. Once enough points have been reached the players win and the final password is unlocked, revealing the sentence and motto: "Every Child Has Hopes and Dreams". The players are all then given a badge and a secret handshake to use in conjunction with the motto.

How it is being used

There is no doubt as to the results of this game being brought into schools. This is a positive, safe and encouraging environment. The children are involved with the characters, they empathise with them and they are right in the heart of the action, but at the same time are given the tools to look at the situation objectively. There isn't always an easy answer but this is part of the challenge and clearly one that they relish and they get to come away from the experience with a sense of achievement, of winning something and having something tangible to take away with them.

The Everyday Theatre team spend 20 weeks of the year in New Zealand class rooms and in other countries working with teachers and students and much of the time in the wider community. Supported by Child, Youth & Family the team work with social workers, police and local organisations to cope with some of the difficult issues that arise from these workshops. They have regular follow ups with schools where issues have been flagged up and they arrange community sessions in order to bring parents, children and even local police together to play the game. The Minister for Education in New Zealand has taken a great interest in the work Everyday Theatre are doing and has voiced support for the initiative.

There are clear benefits to this method of working. The children themselves never talk about their own problems, this is a fictional family within a video game, the emotional issues are always present and the children get to discuss them at length but always within the context of the game. The children are often playing for points or trying to think critically about the situation, this creates enough separation between the game and the reality that the children are never emotionally affected. The video game is a current and appropriate vehicle for this sort of work. The children identify with the use of technology and gaming language and even get to introduce some of the devices themselves such as the "Truth" button.

Comments from the participants

The most interesting observations obviously come from the players themselves. Here are some of the comments that were voiced by both delegates and students following the workshop:

"Empathy is better than sympathy"

"Critical thinking is an important subject in schools"... "this is a great method for working on that"

"Seeing the work in action at an event like this would motivate department leaders in schools to use this method"

"It wasn't too dramatic"... "it made things real and left it up to the audience"

"It used negative emotion and turned it into something positive"

"It's like a secret lesson in morals and citizenship"

Useful Links

<http://www.appliedtheatre.co.nz/everyday-theatre>

<http://www.cyf.govt.nz/>

<http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/community/about-us/dorothy-heathcote/>

<http://www.nationaldrama.org.uk/nd/>