Tableau with a second-grade student.

Scene from a playbuilding workshop among immigrant high school students in Hawaii.

Integrating Drama into the ESLL Classroom

by Daniel A. Kelin II

Drama is one of the most excellent ways for human beings to tell their own story and share it with others. This is a need we all have, as is the urge to express our thoughts, feelings, emotions and concept of life and its values. That is how we can confirm our identity and assurance of being part of a bigger wholeness. And though all arts make this possible, drama is in many ways a compact form, which can often include all the others—music, dance, writing, visual arts, etc.

—Tintti Karppinen, 2005. "'If I Were in Your Shoes': Drama, Arts and Peace Education," Artistic Practices and Techniques From Europe and North America Favoring Social Cohesion and Peace. Paris: UNESCO. p. 19

INTRODUCTION

Schools in Hawaii have an ever-increasing concentration of Pacific Island students (including Samoan, Micronesian, and Filipino), many of whom are placed in English as Second Language Learners (ESLL) programs. Separated from their culture geographically and linguistically, many such students withdraw from participating in class or simply accept not understanding lessons and classroom proceedings. One teacher told me in 2004, "I never see these [ESL] students talk in class. Never." In addition, many teachers are not well versed in the students' cultures and are unsure how to draw particular students out to help them not only to actively participate but also to gain self-confidence.

When asked by the ESLL resource teacher of West Hawaii several years ago to implement drama programming with these students, I decided to work with a process called "playbuilding," an improvisation-based, exploratory theater technique in which groups of students work together to build scenes and/or short plays based on ideas, themes, or stories. I discovered the effectiveness of playbuilding with Pacific Island youth in 1992 through my outreach work with the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, conducting programs with a Marshall Islands social service agency for youth.

Playbuilding helps Pacific Island students increase group cohesion, build verbal confidence, explore a range of verbal expressions, develop problem-solving skills, and take charge of their own learning. The work builds naturally on cultural storytelling traditions, exercising oral communication and language skills—a significant step toward expanding reading and writing skills as well. In addition, engaging students through drama gives purpose and meaning to language. A further benefit is that playbuilding draws on students' interest in deepening their cultural identity, while fostering self-esteem. Through the process students demonstrate confidence as communicators, find value and satisfaction in communicating with others, and benefit from a rewarding

process that offers significant and personal ways to achieve success.

In a study published in the Journal of Aesthetic Education, Ann Podlozny (2000) reported on the effects of drama instruction on the development of students' verbal abilities. She analyzed 80 previous studies and found that drama, particularly story enactment, improved students' abilities to understand stories in general. Students from lower socioeconomic groups or with limited reading abilities especially benefited. She also discovered relationships with reading achievement, reading readiness, oral language development, and writing achievement.

And in a 1992 experiment conducted with three groups of fifth-grade remedial readers, Sherry DuPont placed students in a structured remedial reading course for six weeks. The first group used creative drama to support reading comprehension; the second was taught traditional, nonremedial methods; and the final group made use only of the structured course. DuPont found that the first scored significantly higher than the others on both weekly and achievement tests.

The approach I take combines cultural stories, storytelling, and drama. None are used in a completely pure form; instead I adapt each as fits the situation, students, and time frame, building from the students' own understanding and experience and creating processes that reflect their needs and interests.

Over the course of a playbuilding process, students first explore communication and expression through drama to gain an initial comfort with the techniques, then apply their developing skills to a story of their own culture, analyzing its structure, developing a verbal outline, and creating a narrative that accompanies a simple playing out of the story. Finally, they develop the story into a brief play with dialogue and action that involves the entire class.

The process involves and engages students at every step. They decide how involved they are and how best to shape their involvement. They review and assess their involvement and their creations and alter their work as they choose. As outlined in this article, the process generally includes between 8 and 25 young people from ages nine and up. The classes transpire over a period of at least ten sessions, with each session lasting between 45 and 90 minutes—the longer time periods more appropriate for the older students.

I start with exercises that establish a sense of ensemble, noting to the participants that without group collaboration we will never succeed.

THE PROCESS

To begin such a playbuilding residency, the participants first experiment with various drama techniques to build knowledge of and comfort with the techniques to apply them later to building brief plays. I start with exercises that establish a sense of ensemble, noting to the participants that without group collaboration we will never succeed. From there, we concentrate on activities that utilize the whole body, as I have found that students are most uncomfortable expressing with their bodies. We experiment with creating frozen images of various characters, actions, and ideas, first as individuals then in pairs and groups.

This is an essential first step. Too often, some teachers suggest removing this warm-up because it takes time and is not directly task related. However, they miss the point. Young people should be understood through the veil of their own culture. Speaking or performing in front of others is anathema to some cultures' customs, such as those in the smaller islands of Micronesia. Some young people grow up understanding that drawing attention to oneself is not a desirable trait. For these young people to make the leap into playbuilding and in-class performance requires that they have suffcient time to understand the process and its purpose. This step also establishes an atmosphere of fun and playfulness, taking the pressure off "being right" and encouraging the students to experiment and explore.

In one class of high school students of Mexican and Micronesian ethnicity, there was a bit of tension as the students stood up to try the drama activities for the first time. With just a couple of exceptions, the students eyed each other, afraid of embarrassing themselves in front of each other. We worked through the activities, even though the commitment was not that high. However, once we got into the story, they began to loosen up as their focus switched to the story's content. They already understood the techniques, so they felt more comfortable about using them. By the time we shared the playbuilt story with each other, the students were not only having fun, but some had "mixed it up," joined in with students with whom they normally did not work.

As the students gain comfort with and understanding of drama, I introduce a cultural story that will become the core of the entire process. The story should come from the students' own culture, or at least the culture of some members of the class. Ideally, the story used will come from a less well-known culture, as this will opena door into that culture, inviting the rest of the students to learn more through the process of hearing the story and then playbuilding from it. The student(s) who are of that culture might then become experts, sharing tidbits about their culture while concurrently gaining a stronger sense of self.

I worked in one classroom that included a girl from Kiribati, a Pacific nation that not even the teacher knew anything about. Since her language skills were limited, she had a difficult time explaining anything. I introduced the story "Tebwere, Tebarere, Tetintiri and the Giant" from her culture, and it not only made her sit up and take notice, but the other students immediately saw her in a new light. The same happened with a boy in another class who quickly became the point of focus for his classmates. For days afterward they kept asking him about particulars of the story: "Are the chiefs really like that?" "Are your islands that small?" "Have you ever crawled inside one of those clams yourself?"

I share the story with the class by telling it aloud. It should not be read, as the students then rely on the words in the

book when building the scenes, looking for the "correct" version of the story or the "correct" words a character says. The process then becomes too predetermined and too controlled. In addition, this is a wonderful chance to model for the students the free-flowing and improvisational nature of the playbuilding process.

This process of telling the story rather than reading it aloud or silently is supported by the scholarship. In her doctoral dissertation, Anita Page (1983) looked at the extent to which dramatizing stories affected students' reading comprehension. In her investigations, one group of children listened to an adult read a story and another heard a story on tape, then dramatized it. Page found that dramatizations tended to engage the students more than traditional reading. Further, the students who acted the story out could better identify key aspects such as the story's central idea and character development. The two combined led to better comprehension.

The author with third through fifth graders in the playbuilding workshop.

For classroom teachers who may be concerned about telling the story instead of having a student from that culture do so, I note that I do this only when working for the first time with a group of students. I do not like to put that much pressure on any one student this early in the process. However, once a group becomes comfortable with the playbuilding process, then the students themselves should and can become the story collectors and tellers. Several times, just a day after I shared a story, students returned with stories of their own that they had asked for and heard from their parents or other relatives.

Teachers should proceed with caution when sharing stories not from their own culture. In some cultures, stories are the property of family or community. There may be unwritten or assumed rules and guidelines about particular stories and ways of telling. Teachers are encouraged to seek advice from members of the given community before sharing a story unfamiliar to them.

When the class experiences the story together in this manner, they then have a common experience and sense of the story from which they will draw. This common experience is akin to one that brings cultures together, as many have particular ways and times to share stories.

Since playbuilding should reflect how the students hear and understand a chosen story, it is important they quickly take ownership of the story by creating a verbal outline. Having the participants discuss and recount the story repeatedly throughout the process helps them not only commit the story to long-term memory but also remember and include the small events, thus becoming active participants in the shaping and preserving of the story. The outline serves two additional functions: (1) noting the main events in such a format increases the sense of the student's control; and, (2) it encourages students to see the story as a sequence of events from which they will be able to build.

Once the story has become the common property of the class, it is time for them to experiment with the possibilities the story suggests. I have always found that giving students a menu of choices gives them a good place to start when asked to create.

The initial warmup to drama is a good example. As the students become comfortable with drama, they build a menu

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of exploratory techniques. They come to see the different ways the body, the voice, and imagination can work together and help them communicate their ideas and creations. In a similar fashion, once someone shares the story, the students should experiment with the different characters and actions suggested by the story. They "try on" the characters, discovering the range of ways to express a particular character or action. As one participating teacher stated (2005), "The chance to move around and use modes of expression other than reading and writing was excellent and helped our students express themselves. Connecting body movement and spoken language was extremely helpful for them to improve English comprehension. Using drama, imagination, movement helps boost comprehension of vocabulary and narrative elements of character, plot, and setting."

For example, in a Samoan story I have used, there is an eight-legged, winged beast chasing a boy and his dog. The students could create several frozen images of the beast physically, first as individuals, then with partners or in small groups. At this step in the process there is little need for the students to share their experimentations with each other. This step is analogous to the initial drafts when writing an essay. Those drafts are for the writer, not the reader. The students (as individuals and in small groups) then bring select experimentations to life, dramatically: They make their beasts breathe, make sounds, or move or fly about the room. Finally, students combine the characters, events, and encounters into a variety of on-the-spot frozen physical images. Examples might be the boy and dog seeing the beast, running from the beast, or being caught by the beast. This gets students thinking about the little pieces that make up the whole and offers them a safe period of exploration and confidence-building. In addition, they aredeveloping a physical vocabulary that they will draw on later when reconstructing the story into play form.

Throughout this process, I strive for full and active participation of all students in the class. To achieve this, it is important that all students work on the story at the same time. Instead of asking small groups of students to playbuild a whole story, I ask them to take a single section of the story. Breaking the story up takes the pressure off any one group and encourages the whole class to support and help each other. It also encourages the students to examine closely their particular part of the story. Instead of getting overwhelmed trying to create and stage a whole story, they can apply their energies to enriching a small section. This gives students a chance to experience the whole process as accessible and doable. Ideally, once the class has worked through the process with a single story, small groups of them should be ready to handle a whole story by themselves.

Small groups of students each choose a specific scene from the outline, distributing the entire story in pieces amongst the groups. Each group divides the characters within their section, assuring that every individual has a character. Often stories have fewer characters than a group's members, so the groups should problem-solve ways to include all members of theirgroup. They can double characters up, expand characters, create new characters, or bring inanimate objects to life as in Lord of the Rings or Alice in Wonderland. As long as the story itself does not alter significantly, the number and type of characters is not a huge factor. If a scene takes place on a street, a group of students can be other people on the street, another group can provide vocal sound effects of a street, and others might be fire hydrants and lampposts. If a character is engaged in a battle with a demon, what difference does it make how many demons there might be or how many heads the demon might have? I have seen plants made up of four students simultaneously and stories about a girl become a trio of girls without the story line changing one bit.

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CREATING TABLEAUX

The groups then develop a list of the key events within their chosen scene and create tableaux depicting those events. A tableau is a group-created still image, composed of participants' bodies, that encapsulates an idea, theme, or key moment in a story. It is an immediately accessible technique that gives students a high degree of control and demonstrates their understanding of the scene or characters on which they are working. The number of tableaux the groups create is flexible depending on how well the students work together and how easily they take to the process. No matter what the number, I have the groups work on only one at a time, to better insure that all groups will move forward at a similar pace. Each time they create a new tableau, the groups review the previous ones. Eventually the groups will be practicing their tableaux with ease and confidence, since they have several times to rehearse. Students are encouraged to add elements that reflect their own understanding of the culture or enrich details of the story or characters. This step can be repeated as desired or necessary. With each repetition the class should discuss and evaluate the shared tableaux, commenting on how successful groups are at communicating the actions, characters, and ideas of the scene and offering ideas for further exploration. Ideally groups should also assess their own achievements based on how the other groups responded to their creations.

These discussions, used not only here but at subsequent steps in which the students share their developing work, are a key part of the process. The students will learn to evaluate and improve their own work by practicing the evaluation process, both as evaluators and as those evaluated. The teacher should be ready to lead the discussion, posing questions to encourage the students to think about what they see or are doing, and to guide the discussion, making sure the students don't get stuck just complaining or giving pat answers such as "It's good."

Using tableaux as the first step in playbuilding is part of

Two second graders present a tableau.

a scaffolding philosophy. If students are immediately asked to "act out" a story after hearing it, they may be too overwhelmed and their scenes will quickly devolve into simplistic, brief moments that lack sense or focus. Developing a series of tableaux mirrors the idea of creating a verbal outline, giving the students a chance to imagine the overall story before diving into its intricacies. Tableaux is a good technique for encouraging their physical investment in the story. I have found that, when dialogue is added into the process too early, the students get caught up in the words and forego action. By creating a series of tableaux, the groups focus on the interaction and physical action of the characters, solidifying their basic understanding of the plot and character motivations. After finishing the tableaux, the students have outlined the general arc of the story, which provides a foundation for the next steps in the process.

The effectiveness of tableaux solidified for me when I worked with a class that had a hard time focusing on tasks. I chose to spend the majority of our time creating, assessing, and redoing the tableaux in the hopes that the students would learn to focus on details of the story. One group got nowhere. They pretended to be people "talking" with no action suggested in their still images. Instead of focusing on what they did not have, I asked them about each of their characters and what those characters individually wanted and were doing. After each had offered a variety of answers, I then asked them to show me what the characters looked like when they were doing what they wanted. After each had an individual frozen image, we put them together, focusing on the most aligned characters. This kind of detailed evaluation helped focus the students on active choices for their scenes, and gave them a very specific place from which to continue the playbuilding.

NARRATIVE SLIDE SHOW

The groups next create narration to accompany each tableau they have created, developing a kind of "narrated slideshow." Either one student acts as narrator as the others share the tableaux or the group divides the narration among various members. The narrators put the narration into their own words, not worrying whether it is the "correct" version of the story. This step can be repeated as desired or necessary. With each repetition the class should discuss the tableaux and narration, commenting how successful groups are at clearly communicating the events of the story and possibly what key events may be missing.

In the same way that the tableaux demonstrate the students' understanding of the basic action of the story, having them create a series of narrative statements to accompany the tableaux demonstrates their comprehension of the sequence of their part of the story, as well as listening to the story's overall sequence. Creating the narration is a first step in the development of dialogue, a way for the students to solidify their understanding of the actions and intentions of the characters.

Each of these preliminary steps can be repeated as necessary, to encourage the student to look deeper into the story, emphasizing those parts that they believe are most important to the understanding of the story.

The relative ease of each of these preceding steps contrib-

utes to the students' developing sense of accomplishment, preparing them for tackling the more complicated step that follows. I have found that, with students who have little to no experience with drama and/or lack confidence with language, these steps are crucial to their later success; they are allowed and encouraged to play with the structure and content of the story without significantly changing the basic story line. Not only does this encourage them to feel comfortable contributing ideas (as they discover there really isn't a "right or wrong"), but it also introduces them to the idea that stories are not concrete, unchanging entities. Stories change in the mouth of each teller, while retaining a sense of integrity and purpose.

BUILDING SCENES

Finally, the groups dramatize the scenes by creating the characters' dialogue and action. In this step, I challenge students to use the narration and tableaux to inform the dialogue and action, incorporating the tableaux as brief moments in their scene. This gives them something to aim for, knowing that the scene will move through each of the tableaux they created. This also insures that they will continue to be physically active, an important point. Experience has taught me that students potentially lose physicality when they start concentrating on dialogue. Subsequently, this last step will take the most time, with students encouraged to evaluate their progress both as individuals and as a group as they work and rework their developing scenes.

The developing dialogue will benefit most from repetition. Students initially settle for the easy and obvious. This makes sense, since they are also developing their English language skills. It is important, then, to let them explore the easy and obvious. As with each of the previous steps, the students need the time to explore, to experiment, and then to evaluate, rethink, and implement their new understanding. Through-out, the teacher should encourage risk-taking and imaginative solutions to problems by posing thought-provoking questions and challenges.

Since this process is an attempt to build verbal confidence, taking time with each step allows students to exercise their language skills in other ways as well. Working with partners, they actively use discussion skills. Sharing their ongoing work, they are practicing oratory skills. Evaluating each other and offering suggestions, they are engaged in practical language application.

A participating teacher wrote in her evaluation (2004), "When Dan teaches my ESLL kids, I see them speaking in front of the group and actively participating. In the regular classroom they almost never speak up even if in a group of two or three kids. These kids are normally very good at fading into the background in a class and having a partner or someone else speak for them, but Dan had every student actively participating every day. My kids talk about this all year. School attendance also improves on the days Dan is here."

When the student groups share their playbuilt scenes, I refer to the sharing as "rehearsals" to clarify that the work is not finished and to lessen the pressure on them to get it "right" or "perfect." In fact, I find it essential to allow them to stop as they need to and restart as many times as necessary. This keeps an air of informality to the sharing, letting them know there is plenty of time to continue shaping and developing their scenes. I tell the students that the final "performance" will happen when all groups have come to a satisfying place.

One class actually built on this experience. As the groups watched each other developing and rehearsing their scenes, a couple of the groups built on ideas they gleaned from the others. Instead of running about the room for a chase scene, one group stood in place and played the chase in slow motion. Another group so liked the idea, they borrowed it for their own.

At the end of the process, the groups share their final "performance." Every group performing lessens the pressure on any single individual or group. As the success of the performance is dependant on everyone in the class, everyone has a vested interest in helping each other do well. Moreover, the informal performance reduces the pressure to be perfect. If problems come up, the class can always start again. In addition, the class can repeat the performance as many times as they wish.

In reality, the "performance" is icing on the cake. The true learning has occurred through the process of reconstructing a story into a play. The vast amount of discussion, questioning, rehearsal, and sharing the students' experiences offers them many opportunities to practice their language skills in useful and purposeful ways.

In one particular school the ESL students normally attended the mainstream classes, pulled out as necessary for special tutoring. The ESL teacher noted to me that most of her students didn't interact or participate. They normally sat, sometimes confused, sometimes merely reserved. When assigned to work in small groups, the ESL students habitually let the other students answer questions and take the leadership roles. When these same students then came together to participate in the playbuilding process, she added, they rose to the occasion. Engaged through the drama activities, some voluntarily took the leadership role in discussions, others added their ideas, and together they took to the task with an intensity and focus that they rarely demonstrated otherwise.

REFLECTION AND EVALUATION

For the process to be fulfilling and rich it should be teeming with supportive questions and encouragement, urging students to explore, take risks, discover, and apply those discoveries.

Each time a group shares a developing scene, the whole class should reflect on the choices made and how the sharing group might develop their ideas further. The following questions can be jumping-off points to develop questions more suited to the developing scenes.

Questions for the performers: Did you stay focused on the story or character? Why or why not? Did you build the story together with your partners? Which moments were the strongest? What could you have done differently?

Questions for those watching: What moments were the strongest? Did the performers listen to each other as well as talk? What could they have done differently?

Open-ended statements can also help students reflect on choices. "I thought I did a good job on/with . . . " "I think it

would be better if I . . . ," "In this practice, I added/tried . . . ," "I think (name) did a good job, because . . . ," or "I think (group name) needs to concentrate on . . . "

The kinds of questions that keep the students focused and productive include those on character and conflicts. When students clearly identify their character's intention and the story's conflict, it focuses development of the dialogue and action. What is it your character wants, needs, or is trying to achieve? How does your character get the others to help him/her? What actions does your character need to take to reach his/her want or need? What obstacles does your character face? How might your character overcome the obstacles? What is the conflict? How does the conflict keep the characters from achieving their intentions and goals? How does the conflict get worse before it gets better?

As the scenes become richer and more detailed, the questions asked should become more focused and specific. Was the story clearly communicated? What was missing or extra? How might the performers clarify what their character is trying to achieve? What else might the different characters need to say to help clarify their goals or the overall story? Did the physical actions seem in keeping with the story? Was there a nice balance of action and dialogue? Which might each group explore more?

EXPANDING THE PROCESS

To augment the developing "performance," occasionally I have the class create simple dance steps and/or accompanying music. Within any story, there are actions that are difficult to stage realistically. These can become more visually interesting when presented in the metaphoric style of dance. For example, in a story called "Jebro," the character Jebro and his brothers have a canoe race. The students created a dance step that gave the impression of the fluid movement of a canoe added with the suggestion of paddling. If certain students are creating the movement, others can concentrate on developing a percussive accompaniment.

When stories and other traditions of their culture are added into the mix, students become very connected to a process that reflects who they are and celebrates the unique and fascinating aspects of their ancestry. Students are then prepared to collect, share, read, and write more such stories. The ideal residency advances to a new level by encouraging everyone in the class to collect tales from their own family or relatives and bring them to class to share. Not only does this increase their personal connection to the process, but it also gives the students a chance to participate in the playbuilding process again, but this time small groups of the students playbuild from a whole story of their own choice. The students then become experts, culturally, as storytellers and as the dramatizers of the stories.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope, now, to broaden the scope of the work in three ways: (1) Develop a curriculum for training teachers to use this process, and to become comfortable with these methods; (2) Weave in processes that evaluate this method's effectiveness, examining the way teachers teach, how students from these various cultures learn best, and how effective these methods are compared with others, not only for teaching English but also the other less tangible benefits mentioned at the outset; and (3) Increase the scope of individual residencies, offering classes of students the chance to not only participate in the process but also help decide future application of the process to areas of interest for them. For example, the students may decide to videotape their in-class work and create mini-movies that not only act as indicators of their accomplishments, but work to preserve the unique aspects of their cultural literature.

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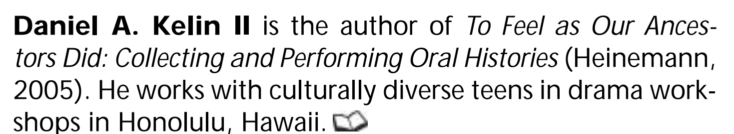

Daniel A. Kelin II is the author of *To Feel as Our Ancestors Did: Collecting and Performing Oral Histories* (Heinemann, 2005). He works with culturally diverse teens in drama workshops in Honolulu, Hawaii.