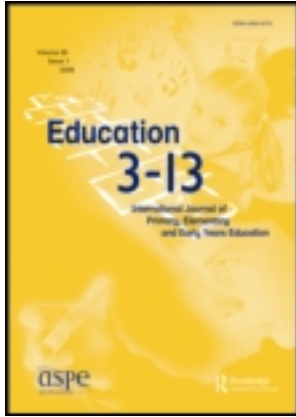


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History through drama with top juniors

Vivienne Little ^a

^a University of Warwick

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History Through Drama with Top Juniors

Our writers so far have emphasised the concepts, skills and values which can be fostered through topic work. Vivienne Little discusses the role of drama in encouraging historical understanding. She gives some lucid and expertly-documented examples of how children can be helped “to realise that people read about history books were real and had experiences and feelings . . .” Interestingly, her ideas on the importance of children’s “play” and the centrality of narrative (“the essence of history”) extends points raised by Liz Thomson in the Spring issue of **3-13**.

In her article¹ in the Winter, 1979 issue, Joan Blyth, responding to H.M.I. comment on history in primary schools in 1978², said that role-play can be helpful in teaching younger children about the past. For some years, as a result of a joint professional course in history and drama for students in training in the Arts Education department at the University of Warwick, colleagues and I have been exploring with students, and, in an in-service capacity, with primary teachers, the use of a range of drama techniques in the teaching of history to upper juniors. On the basis of our experience, I should like to endorse Mrs. Blyth’s claim and suggest that the type of work I shall describe is invaluable in convincing children of the reality of the past, in emphasising its similarity to and difference from their own times, in offering opportunities for historical thinking and the controlled use of imagination, and thus in laying foundations for the emergence of sophisticated concepts of time and cause and the nature of the discipline of history. Moreover, drama is appropriate to the promotion of these concepts fundamental to history, whether coherence of historical experience is achieved by a developmental or content-based scheme of selection.

Much of teachers’ work is concerned with the presentation of history to children. Just as the scholarly writer strives vividly to place his discoveries about the past before his reader, so must teachers in turn convey historians’ findings to their pupils. The essence of history is narrative. Bold and exciting, tentative and frustrating, sobering, joyful, unending, it is a story. Some teachers are born raconteurs. They involve listeners, stimulate

their imaginative powers, conjure understanding. No one should underestimate the didactic power of the well-told tale, and it is a power which partakes of the dramatic. Many teachers avowedly lack this spell-binding talent, but dramatic reading can help. A clear if uninspired account can be brought alive by the interpolation of carefully-chosen extracts from historical fiction, or, better still, from original source material. There is narrative power in the simplicity of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, ‘In this year, the host went secretly in midwinter, after Twelfth Night to Chippenham, and rode over Wessex and occupied it and drove a great part of the inhabitants over-sea, and reduced the greater part of the rest, except Alfred the King; and he with a small company moved under difficulties thro’ woods and into inaccessible places in marshes.....’³ Many original documents repay dramatic reading because they are in dialogue form. The trials of Joan of Arc, Thomas More, Charles I, depositions to quarter sessions, to factory inspectors, to poor-law commissioners – these provide the words of men and women of the past if not their voices and practised reading aloud can entice children over hurdles of archaic language and unfamiliar circumstances which would defeat their own silent reading skills. Teachers who, perhaps with the aid of other colleagues or gifted pupils, or perhaps a tape-recorder, give good dramatic readings of source material are presenting the stuff of history to their pupils, helping them to perceive the reality of the past from what it has left behind and employing the arts of oral communication to bridge the gap between adult minds and the

limited understanding and experience of children. (Much material of this kind is readily available in paperback collections of documents).⁴

But drama means action, and it is in the involvement of children as well as their teachers in such action, that drama offers most to history. We have found, incidentally, that the most economical and effective way of helping students and teachers to realise the potential and the pitfalls of using dramatic techniques is to induce them to undertake practical work at their own level to investigate an area of history unfamiliar to them. And, in keeping with our aim of enhancing understanding of history as a discipline, we work, both with adults and children, from historical source material (not always documentary) and on subjects which concern the lives of ordinary people, in an attempt to get behind text-book generalisations to the varied human experience they conceal. Common features of full-scale dramatic production-mime, movement, simulation, role-play – short-term and classroom based, are, in addition to story-telling and dramatic reading, the techniques we use and improvisation is our working method.

The latter raises some interesting points about language. Improvisation can be criticised as inappropriate to work in history because it involves making things up, (there is only rarely reliable evidence about what historical persons said to each other) and, more subtly, because it militates against the very sense of period it is held to foster by inviting the use of modern speech, and, more disasterously, modern slang. This can be countered in various ways. Putting history into three dimensions involves conversation. What must be emphasised is the need to make it as 'likely' as possible and this demands much study of place, time and society. The elimination of obviously ultra-modern slang combined with *sensitive* interpolations of known period usages is probably the best compromise – smatterings of 'zounds' and 'gadzooks', however well-documented, are inclined to produce levity rather than realism. After all nothing is more ridiculous than giving actors French accents after a play has been translated from French into English. In improvisation one is not recreating the past, but conveying one's interpretation of historians' picture of it, in one's own idiom. Its great value, especially for children, lies in the demands it makes on their own understanding, language resources and imagination. It is a pity to inhibit their exercise and development with efforts to achieve simulations of past speech patterns, which are

unlikely to be successful. A discussion about the pros and cons of building the Crystal Palace, conducted recently by a student as Chairman of a class of ten-year-olds in role, delighted their teacher by challenging them, with more success than she would have hoped for, to work in the conditional tense. Such extension of flexibility in the use of language cannot but be as valuable, if not more so, for children learning history, than philological researches.

Simple drama exercises like mime can provide historical insight. Extended miming of repetitive movements such as digging or shovelling can often do as much as pages of description to convey to those carrying out the exercise the monotony and exhaustion of the life of peasant or labourer and attempts to suggest period costume, for instance, involve study and practice of movement and gesture, historically revealing in themselves, in terms of social attitudes and relationships. How could Victorian ladies of a certain class seem other than stiff and remote, boned and laced up as they were? Occupational mime is especially useful in doing history with the young or less able whose reading skills are limited. It is perfectly feasible in a normal classroom with desks pushed aside to a larger scale movement in groups to illustrate fear, triumph or menace. These and similar short exercises are simple but valuable aids to finding out about, imagining and understanding the past.

Another useful tool is simulation, whose definitions and manifestations are various. What we favour is participation by children in experiences which provoke a response or provide an image to elucidate a concept. For example, students tackling a topic involving an encounter between alien civilisations created for children an environment comprising a large darkened room, strange music and blue food and drink. The children met people adorned with weird make-up and speaking an entirely unrecognisable language, inviting their participation in gesture and dance. Bewildered at first, they soon recognised intimations of friendliness to which they responded as suggested. Subsequent discussion with them revealed some understanding of their own varied reactions to foreign experiences, and that they had spontaneously made the connection with the historical material they were studying. Less elaborate, and suitable for a teacher alone with a class was a simulation devised to represent feudalism. Children were arranged in groups in the classroom and set to play a variety of board or card games in a mildly competitive atmosphere.

Communication with the teacher had to be through a child monitor. From time to time the monitor was sent to bring randomly selected children to the front of the room to perform copying tasks of no apparent relevance, depriving the team of a player and spoiling the game. This and the teacher's arbitrary decisions about the organisation of the room and unsatisfactory or puzzling answers to children's reasonable requests via the monitor soon became irksome, and predictable reactions of boredom, resignation and rebellion began to appear. At that point the exercise was ended and discussion used to relate it to the pattern and frustrations of life as experienced by mediaeval villeins burdened with boon-work and ruled by the Lord of the manor and his baliff. Thus relationships remote from modern society were translated into a more readily accessible mode in order, primarily, to get at the relevant feelings, which help to explain men's activities in events such as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 – a favourite topic of ours.

Simulation is a form of abstraction and mine too can often be used effectively in symbolic terms – a spiral dance became an analogue of the movement of prices and wages in the 14th century, for instance – but, except in the fairly direct ways described above, these techniques are perhaps most profitable for older children. For juniors simple re-enactment of the past, using role-play to represent historical characters and events they have heard or read about are important. More adventurous and productive in terms of historical thinking skills is the use of role-play to invent and represent 'typical' individuals or 'likely events' out of historical information children have discovered. Work on the operation and effects of the Old Poor Law using this method has been successful. Much of the work we carry out involves elements of all these techniques, together with dramatic reading and other 'theatre skills' such as the use of simple props, costume, sound and, sometimes, lighting effects. It is also most often carried out with teams of students or teachers, but most of the approaches and many of the effects are easily modifiable by flexible and ingenious teachers for the ordinary classroom situation.

One year, children's work began with a visit to the University which offered the stimulus from which subsequent school work sprang. Students, having the advantage of being quite unknown to the children, adopted and maintained roles in situations in which they wished children to be involved. The latter found themselves variously helping survivors in a Saxon village immediately

after a Danish attack, joining a band of smugglers faced with a confrontation with excise men, and caught in an air-raid, in 1941, while in transit as evacuees from Coventry. The pattern of the action in each case was fully determined by students, but opportunities were carefully provided for the children to offer their own ideas, comments and solutions. This they did with enthusiasm and ingenuity. Personal involvement and commitment were obvious, both at the time and in subsequent written work –

' "I must decide. Should I go and help, stay at home, or tell the excise officers? I know!" I was talking to myself. "Yes I'll tell the excise men and then I'll join my friends as if I haven't said anything. Yes and I'll tell the officers to just warn them and let them off, because they are my friends and I don't want to lose them".'

'The station was in sight when suddenly I heard a terrible sound. Above were German bombers. We all panicked and quickly rushed into a nearby air-raid shelter. Inside all was dark and there was hardly enough room for all of us to squeeze in. The noise of the planes was terrible and we did not know what to do to take our minds off them. Someone offered me some biscuits and some chocolate – they were delicious. After that we all had a sing-song, but Jason was not in the mood for that, he was sure that one of the bombs had landed on his house. We tried to reassure him but he would not believe us.....'⁵

This type of approach, which Gavin Bolton⁶ classifies as problem-solving drama, is well-suited to historical work as it forces children to see historical situations in three dimensions and work out the implications of facts they discover – for instance, in a development of the work on the Saxons, children had to work out how to divide up an area of land without the benefit of modern measuring devices. Fines and Verrier use the approach frequently and Fines has shown it providing a useful introduction to history for infants, who found out a good deal about castles in their efforts to help poor old Sir Ralph to find a new home and prepare for a visit from the King.⁷ It also counteracts a tendency, especially on the part of children, to see people of the past as rather simple-minded. Working out for a mime exactly how mediaeval farming implements were used, or how large stones were manipulated for building induces a new respect for the achievements of people without a highly sophisticated

technology. In follow-up activities, with students feeding in readings from historical sources, film-strips and video-tape recordings, children moved on through improvisation to examine some of the rites and customs of early mediaeval Britain, the moral dilemmas of individuals inside and outside eighteenth century law, and the problems of civilian upheaval in war-time. Role-play was particularly well used in the latter, with children vividly describing in discussion, how they had felt when their parents had visited them briefly in their evacuation homes. Twelve months later the impact of this year's work was still referred to in the school with satisfaction. The sheer volume of written work produced by some children normally inhibited in that area was commented upon, and the frequent allusions by the children to what had proved to be memorable experiences. They had surely provided potent images for future reference.

Another venture did not attempt such a wide range of material, but centred on the Spanish conquest of the Inca civilisation in the sixteenth century. The students' task, beginning in school this time, was to examine with the children the Inca way of life and the motivation for Pizarro's expedition. Though stimulated by their own success immediately prior to the school experience in drama work on the subject, none of them found it easy to devise practical exercises which would provide the necessary facts for the children. It seemed so much easier just to recount, but this is the very method which so often fails to involve children or help them to absorb and understand.

Eventually they created and sustained over three separate sessions an elaborate role-play exercise which sought to convey to the children notions of hierarchy and authority characteristic of Inca civilisation and something of the daily routine, and religious beliefs and practices of Inca people, emphasising the hard work of survival and the extraordinary idea that human sacrifice was considered right and honourable.

In the first session children met four small and relatively friendly individuals, who introduced themselves as Inca tribesmen and conducted them to the hall where they were faced with four tall and remote figures who began ordering them about and directing them (via occupational mime) to various forms of agricultural labour and construction work. The smaller Inca soon made clear that these were priests who, in turn, spoke of the need for reverence and obedience to Atahualpa the Sun-god and taught the children a ritual chant which they must stop work and perform if ever he

appeared. After a while an even taller student in yellow and red mask and cloak strode in imposing silent authority, acknowledging the chants with nod and gesture and conveying his orders through the priests to whom he whispered one at a time. The second week the same pattern was established, but omens of evil and danger were communicated by messages sent Inca-fashion by knotted ropes whose different coloured strings the children quickly interpreted symbolically. A fine atmosphere of suspense developed and culminated in the carrying out of the sacrifice to Atahualpa of one of the student tribesmen, just prior to which, one of the children was heard to cry out "I'd die for him". The final week saw the sudden capture of Atahualpa by the black-clad strangers so long portended in the 'quipu'. Confusion ensued, with priests deprived of their source of authority countermanding each other's orders, and the relief revealed in children's faces when Atahualpa was brought back was only equalled in intensity by the horror and sadness with which they registered, amid the mocking laughter of his captors, that he was actually dead – the sun would not rise again.

There was no doubt about the impact of this work on the children. They sustained belief throughout, worked amazingly hard at boring and wearying tasks for unsympathetic masters, painted pictures for their teacher, after the first week, which showed that the central role of the sun-god in Inca life was vivid to them and walked back to their classroom after his death in stunned silence. The work ended with a discussion conducted, out of role, by the students to draw out and reinforce the lessons about Inca civilisations they had hoped to teach. Relatively unpractised at this, they quickly realised, afterwards, that, while rightly feeling satisfied that many of the facts and concepts they had intended to put over had been grasped by the children, they had been inclined, during the discussion, to tell the children what they should have thought and felt rather than to discover (perhaps to dare to discover?) what they had actually experienced. This important recognition of a teaching fault not confined to students led to an even more productive discussion of the nature of learning. Was the final discussion with the children necessary? Should the experience have been left in trust, so to speak, for each child to take what he could and store for later reference, or does learning require its refinement and extension by skilful teaching? Students were divided, and perhaps the answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. Certainly, like Fines and Verrier, we consider discussion a vital part of

drama work with children as with students. Neither are necessarily fully aware of the obtuseness or resonant insights exhibited in their imaginative constructions, but they can be prompted on the basis of the experience, to think and feel their way into deeper knowledge. The degree of abstraction and transfer achievable, of course varies with age, and with familiarity with the subject-matter; but, while some dramatic experiences are best left to work like yeast in the minds of those involved, others can be kneaded to yield their shape and texture.

Most of these examples, the work of inexperienced students, operated at the level of helping children to realise that people read about in history books were real and had experiences and feelings both similar to, and different from, their own. This is no mean contribution to the development of historical understanding and imagination, and some analogous work of our own which led children, against a background of personal investigation and class teaching, to mount, as a whole class, with occupational mime and ritual movement, a Greek religious festival, yielded in subsequent written work, a degree of vividness and accuracy rarely met in more traditionally-inspired accounts of a day in the life of ancient Athens. At the in-service level, however, we thought it appropriate to try to discover whether more complex problems of historical understanding might profitably be tackled this way.

Alerted by a teacher to difficulties experienced by his class in comprehending the plight of a character from the I.T.V. series 'How we used to live' described as 'an orphan without expectations', we set about helping them to create a concept of a society in which inheritance was crucial to social position and the family was virtually the only welfare agency. First, a robe in which I was christened and which dates from 1840 was the springboard of a discussion about family heirlooms and the notion of the handing on of property through the generations. Then we considered with the children how they might show, by making a shape using themselves and a series of rostra, the order of importance of people in their school. (We had suggested the notion of a pyramid by thus describing on the blackboard, the hierarchical structure (simplified) of our own institution). Most of the children formed a shape, using different levels, with the Headmaster at the highest point. Some stood all on one level with the Head at the front. (Many put the secretary in a prominent position, which was, the Head assured us, a correct interpretation of her central role in

his organisation!) One group, again using one level, put the Head at the back, maintaining quite seriously, and much to his amusement, when this was later recounted, that the Head, as the most important person was placed behind so that he would be last under fire in case of attack! These exercises provided an enactive and visual correlative for notions of status. They were reinforced by asking children first to establish a shape to demonstrate their perception of hierarchy in their own families, then that indicated in each of the three families featured in the T.V. programmes. Finally, they had to find a way to show, by making shapes and using different coloured lengths of ribbon, the relative status of the three families and the links of kinship and service within and between them. By this means, the precarious position of the 'orphan without expectations' was graphically revealed, and the teacher reported that the class had a more secure understanding of some central characteristics of Victorian society. Interestingly, he used set theory and conceptions like intersecting circles which the children met in mathematics lessons, to extend the creation of imagery.

An important principle of our work is the need for fidelity not only to the discipline of history but also to that of drama. We are therefore concerned with quality of performance as well as process in drama work in history. Like Gavin Bolton, whose theories Fines and Verrier's^B work reflects, we are aware of the potential of 'non-theatrical' drama approaches to the learning of history particularly on the subjective level. But we also believe that practised performance, whether for an audience or not, can not only stimulate precision in research, but sometimes bring a deepening of awareness, a penetration at the subjective level, which may not have occurred at the preparation stage, or a reinforcement of such a penetration. This occurred from time to time in our work, for instance when a class of ten-year-olds, portraying festival day ceremonies in an Athenian temple suddenly experienced total involvement rather like that designated by the Quaker concept of a gathered meeting. Such moments cannot be made to happen to order, but they are an occasional and immensely valuable concomitant of performance. It can also provide, for an audience, a learning experience of an objective level, not to be despised by a history teacher, who needs to help his pupils not only to grasp details but to see history whole. A great deal can be accomplished without performance, and all is by no means lost if it fails, but it can make a distinctive and valuable contribution to

the efficacy of dramatic methods in the teaching of history.

No formal evaluation of this type of work has yet been undertaken, but both with students and with children it seems reasonable to suppose that enactive representation is a worthwhile approach to the teaching of history. The subject, abstract in its very nature, presents special cognitive problems for children and simple acting out of a story from the past can help to impose its reality, fix its details and clarify its meaning in their minds. Children do this naturally in play — re-iterating not only personal experiences, but the adventures of story-book characters and screen heroes. It has been demonstrated that this activity is valuable to cognitive as well as to emotional development.⁹ Moreover they soon discover the limits of their knowledge, and often, stimulated by the practical task, grow eager to find out more. They frame questions and seek information to answer them, thus exercising in an appropriate mode, the skills of an historian, and even, sometimes, coming into meaningful contact with historical evidence. Drama, operating in the concrete mode, illuminates historical content for children, and, by provoking questions and providing impetus to the search for answers, can afford initiation, by analogy, into history as a way of knowing.

Of course there is a danger of over-generalisation, of distorting history's concern with that time, those people, that place by drama's pre-occupation with the universal, history's record of change by drama's search for continuities and there is no suggestion that drama is a substitute for formal study of history. Rather it is a spur to it, for if events were entirely unique no-one could understand them and simulated experience is an aid to understanding where real experience is lacking, providing potent images to inform detailed investigation.

Some systematic support for the arguments in this section can be found in a recent report by P. J. Rogers of a small-scale application of Bruner's theories in a history project with 9 — 11 year-old children.¹⁰ Two groups were involved in visiting a ruined castle with a view to reconstructing its physical appearance and design. The first was taught, after a period of free exploration, by means of extended study, via a questionnaire followed by a lengthy guided tour to check answers and informative discussion. The second group spent a brief time on the questionnaire and the guided tour, and then played four games designed to provide an enactive representation of the important parts of the information covered in

the questionnaire. Results showed that children from the second group, (all were tested a week after the visit), not only achieved better factual recall, but also showed superior grasp of relationships between discrete items of information, thus echoing effects informally noted after our work on the 'orphan without expectations'. Rogers' experiment also emphasised the close links between enactive and iconic representation, since the enactively learned information had to be visually represented in the test. His work supports the contention that enactive and iconic representation are ways of making intelligible to pupils content which would be inaccessible to them if presented in symbolic form, and re-inforces the suggestion that the teaching of history in enactive and iconic modes is helpful (he would say *necessary*) to the development of symbolic or formal understanding.

Fines and Verrier concur. 'It struck us forcibly that drama, presented to children a remarkably faithful model of historical time: it happened at life-rate, was unplanned and often surprising, was sometimes slow and sometimes fast'.¹¹ It also presents a model of varied and conflicting limitations and pressures — a glimpse of the inter-relatedness of things. Surely, herein lies the seed from which formal understanding of historical concepts like change and continuity, intention and causation may grow.

So an imaginative approach — the use of drama — in history teaching has been shown to pay dividends in terms of motivation and rational thinking about the past. It is hoped that enough has been said to demonstrate that the activities described involved children in living through sets of circumstances 'in imagination', in 'supposing' the outcomes of actions and effects of occurrences on individuals and groups, and in the exercise of empathy. They also offered them the opportunity, on the basis of what they could find out, to construct 'with imagination' a faithful and vivid representation of the past. In other words they made a valuable contribution to the development of that mixture of the rational, the intuitive and the creative — historical imagination.

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Ross Richardson, Headteacher
St Edmund's Primary School,
Mansfield Woodhouse

A New Look at the 'Educational Visit'

It is sometimes salutary to see how existing practices can be sharpened to foster new skills and concepts. The next writer prompts us to see visits out of school – and the use of the environment – within the framework of an effectively planned topic work programme. Again, learning *processes*, such as research skills and questioning techniques, are emphasised.

Introduction

"On Tuesday it was our school trip. We set off at 9 o'clock and lots of mums waved us off. My mum wasn't there because she had taken our Wayne to the dentist. It was a lovely day and we saw lots of things on the way. Just before we got there Darren was sick and the bus had to stop. When we got there Sir had to pay for us all. He had to pay this man who was wearing a uniform. There were lots of postcards and booklets about the castle that you could buy. We looked round the castle and then me and David were hungry. Sir let us have our sandwiches. Mine were cheese and tomato."

Whilst Adrian's account might be an extreme example of a child "missing the point", it is obvious that he was pre-occupied with the social aspects of the outing – what he ate for lunch and who was sick! Even so he made some reasonably important observations, for instance, the fact that

some people wore uniforms and that people have to pay for admission to ancient monuments. But was the teacher intending to develop ideas relating to the reasons why people wear uniforms or the cost of preserving our national heritage? If not, the child's response to the experience was fairly superficial and generalised and could be an indication of a lack of clearly defined objectives for the visit.

Adrian's teacher was, not surprisingly, disappointed with this account of the class visit. In fact he found it both a disturbing and salutary experience that a significant number of the children, having given every appearance of being well motivated and interested in the visit, gave evidence, in follow-up work, that they had been pre-occupied with what might be described as trivial or even irrelevant details.

The context of 'Topic work'

It is a well-documented fact that primary