CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Review: O'Toole, J., & Dunn, J. (2020). Stand up for literature: Dramatic approaches in the secondary English classroom. Currency Press
Authors	Donohoe, Peadar
Publication date	2021
Original Citation	Donohoe, P. (2021) 'Review: O'Toole, J., & Dunn, J. (2020). Stand up for literature: Dramatic approaches in the secondary English classroom. Currency Press', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, 15(2), pp. 125-129. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.15.2.10
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/scenario.15.2.10
Rights	© 2021, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-04 18:38:15
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12539

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Volume/Jahrgang 15, Issue/Ausgabe 2 (2021)
https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.15.2.10

Review: O'Toole, J. And Dunn, J. (2020). *Stand Up For Literature: Dramatic Approaches in the Secondary English Classroom*. Currency Press.

Peadar Donohoe

The views and opinions expressed in the book reviews are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of SCENARIO.

Stand Up for Literature has been crafted by John O'Toole and Julie Dunn to be a highly useful resource for all teachers regardless of experience. The book has a cornucopia of exercises that will encourage learner and teacher understanding and appreciation of text and language by getting them on their feet and embodying it through performance. There are numerous drama activities to uncover and explore a wide range of literary forms such as novels, plays, poems, songs and legends. *Stand Up for Literature* is designed to be accessible for both the novice teacher, who may not have much experience and/or confidence with drama exercises, to the more experienced teacher who is looking for new ideas and fresh inspiration.

The book is divided in two parts: Part A prepares the teacher with the theory and lexicon that underpin the drama exercises to come. Part B comprises ten exemplars (i.e., sample lesson plans) on structuring learner understanding through performance for prose, poetry and plays. I suggest for the teacher, who may have limited reading time due to many teaching and administrative demands, to jump right in with Part B as it is very accessible on its own. Hence, I will review this section of the book first to hook the reader in before detailing the elements of Part A.

In Part B there are three exemplars for prose, three for poetry and four for plays. For the teacher who has had limited experience with drama, I suggest Exemplar 1 and Exemplar 4 as starting points as both have drama exercises that are relatively easy to conduct.

For example, Exemplar 4 has exercises to discuss and uncover the poem *The Bully Asleep* by John Walsh (p. 75). For teachers of language learning (many of whom read Scenario of course), this exemplar would be an enriching exemplar to explore. Not only would it help to promote vocabulary acquisition, it would also encourage class discourse on an issue that has a social context which many students could relate to. The sixteen exercises in Exemplar 4 aim to aid

understanding of the poem while uncovering its deeper meanings. The following synopses of the first six steps will give the reader an idea of the straightforward scaffolding involved:

1. *Exploring the Poem*: this exercise asks learners to discuss what they know and don't know after reading the poem.
2. *Pairs Wondering*: this exercise encourages learners to speculate on the events and ideas outlined in the poem.
3. *Rolling Freeze-Frames with Narration*: learners are put into group and asked to freeze frame events (make motionless pictures) that may have occurred before and after the poem with a narrator supplying details.
4. *Moving from Rolling Freezes to Short Improvisations*: Students bring their freeze frames to life with three-word and then six-word phrases.
5. *Conscience Alley*: The teacher takes on the role of Bill, the protagonist of the poem, and walks through an alley of student learners while they ask questions about his life.
6. *Hot Seating Bill's Mother*: The teacher takes on the role of Bill's mother and answers the questions.

I synopsised the first six exercises of Exemplar 4, not only because I want to give the novice drama teacher a sample of how simple these exercises are to conduct, but also to give the reader an idea of how they could encourage learner involvement in drama activities. The exercises are not overly demanding or intimidating for students who may have little or no familiarity with drama.

At this point, I hope that I have sparked the reader's interest in *Stand Up for Literature* and have enticed you to continue reading more about this wonderful book. Next, I will discuss the structure of first half.

In the forward (p. VIII) Peter Freebody begins by discussing a boy he used to babysit. This boy developed a penchant for only reading direct speech (i.e., the character dialogue), rather than the whole text. When Freebody asked the boy why he didn't read the text along with the dialogue, the boy replied, "because nobody says them." What Freebody highlights is the boy focused only on the words that brought the text to life because they inspired his imagination. Freebody reckons that all too often, "[o]ver their school years students encounter lots of words 'nobody says'" (p. VIII). These disembodied words can mean little to them, and inspire them even less, as there is no connection with their own lives. However, Freebody's overriding

message is that, if one puts the text centre stage, and uses dramatic inquiries to connect the text to the student's personal and social life, then there is an opportunity for the learner to find resonances in the text that go beyond the mere didactic.

In the prologue that follows, O'Toole and Dunn expand upon this message by stressing that a key element to aid learner understanding is embodiment of the text. The authors make a strong case, that in order to help students to understand a text intellectually and emotionally, drama and role-play exercises should "lift the printed text off the page, put it back in the mouths of people and into what they do" (p. 3).

This is a very important point as exploring experiences of characters from mediums such as literature, plays and poems, through the medium of drama, can set the stage for learners to become deeply immersed in the learning experience as they are proactively involved in the construction of their learning. Exploring their interpretation of a character's viewpoint, as they interact with the viewpoints of other participants, can aid the promotion of metacognition – thinking about how and why we think the way we do (Flavell, 1978). In such a learning scenario students have the opportunity to question their knowledge and assumptions in order to help to identify their information gaps on the text they are exploring. The new knowledge gleaned from identifying their information gaps can influence their externalised activities in the role-play and how they engage with further learning.

With regards to the teacher's role in organising and participating in these explorations the authors emphasise that "teaching dramatically is also teaching artistically" (p.3). This is an invigorating and stimulating viewpoint as my experience of exploring texts dramatically with students is that it is rarely a straightforward path. There can be many diversions on the way to achieving learning outcomes. For example, an improvisational exercise can evolve/mutate into something new due to fresh ideas and inspiration that arise on the journey, come from feedback from students and/or questions raised by participants about the process. I love this kind of ebb and flow on the learning journey, where my students and I are actively collaborating and taking on board each other's perspectives and, in turn, forming new knowledge and understanding.

For example, my Youth Theatre students explored all the characters, not just the suggested Bill's mother, in the poem 'The Bully Asleep' (Exemplar 4). Each character had their turn in the spotlight via Conscience Alley and Hot-Seating exercises.



Figure 1: MTU Cork School of Music Youth Theatre Students participating in Conscience Alley (P. Donohoe)

Exploring these characters' back stories in depth allowed us to foster a deep understanding of the complexity of their inter-relationships. This led to a mediation role-play where we tried to get to the root of the problem between characters and attempt to resolve the bullying incident.

Following the prologue, there are six chapters comprising Part A. They are well structured in content and theory, building on each other to prepare teachers to lead their students on an exciting and intellectually stimulating journey of learning and discovery. Following is a very brief review of the context of each chapter:

- Chapter 1: "Drama in the English Classroom – The Basics" establishes the terminology to be used such as Language, the Human Context, Tension, Focus, Movement, Mood and Symbols.[1]
- Chapter 2: "The Dramatic Classroom" introduces key approaches and strategies, including improvisational forms and activities of drama with clear and succinct explanations. I especially liked the discussion on process drama as much has been written about this term – some of it confusing. In one page the authors state its aims which is ultimately to change the power relationship between teacher and student to open up "a wonderful world of discovery and learning" (p.14) for everyone in the classroom – brilliant!

[1] There is an emphasis on teaching language and oracy through drama.

- Chapter 3: "Preparing Yourself – Adding To Your Pedagogy" discusses key ways in which the power relationship between student and teacher can be changed through the activities of *Teacher-in-Role*. From the simple activity of hot-seating to the more complex activity of *Mantle of the Expert*.[2]

- Chapter 4: "Making It Work – The Allen Key To Drama Pedagogy" looks at how the teacher can maximise learner involvement from working in pairs to small groups to whole class involvement. Included is excellent advice on managing class time for activities and performance expectations, so that those who may fear the limelight, will be encouraged to get involved.

- Chapter 5: "Writing" examines ways that students can write in and out of role experimenting with language, structure, style and form. It encourages the teacher to use strategies that can aid learners to flex their creative muscles to adapt text and write original pieces in response, and as a way, to analyse a source text.

- Chapter 6: "Planning Your Own Drama Work – A DIY Manual" gives advice to the more experienced teachers who would like to plan their own process drama initiatives. The suggested steps are carefully laid out so that the teacher artist, by the end of the journey, will have the scaffolding to confidently enter a learning journey that will enrich their students and themselves.

I hope this overview of *Stand up for Literature* gives the reader a good idea of how valuable a resource this book is. I myself have been inspired to use a range of activities from this text with my own students. I am grateful that O'Toole and Dunn have shared their years of experience and wisdom to produce a resource that will inspire teachers and students to get on their feet and explore literature performatively for understanding. With an abundance of activities and inspirational suggestions to draw upon which, in turn, will get their students to stand up and explore literature through embodiment.

Bibliography

Flavell, J. H. (1978). Metacognitive development. In J. M. Scandura, & C. J. Brainerd (Eds.), *Structural/process theories of complex human behavior* (pp. 213-245). Sijthoff and Noordhoff.

[2] I would like to note that, when I was first introduced to *The Mantle of the Expert*, the explanation was so convoluted as to prohibit my experimentation with this process drama technique. However, the one paragraph explanation here is so straightforward and clear, that it would encourage one to use this teaching strategy.