Dorothy Heathcote's Approach in Creating Dramas: A Sociocultural Perspective

Kazuko Minematsu

Abstract

This paper discusses how Dorothy Heathcote used drama as a learning medium, especially *dropping to the universal*, and analyzes her approach from a sociocultural perspective. Heathcote interacted with students in creating dramas with three essential features: dramas without scripts; teacher-in-role; and teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer. Her educational use of drama can be applied to other spheres in education.

Keywords: sociocultural perspective, the zone of proximal development, guided participation, social mediation, communities of practice

1. Introduction

Dorothy Heathcote (1926 – 2011) was a highly accomplished teacher of theatre and drama. She was one of England's best-known educators (Wagner, 1999) in that she used drama as a learning medium. Heathcote's approach can be applied not only to drama education but also to other educational areas such as language learning, social studies and history. This paper discusses how Dorothy Heathcote used drama as a learning medium, especially *dropping to the universal*, and analyzes her approach from a sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural theory (SCT) considers learning as a social practice and regards students as active participants in the construction of learning processes. Moreover, SCT suggests that cognition and knowledge are regarded as being constructed through social interaction (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Ohta, 1995, 2000, 2001).

Her main principle of dropping to the universal in creating dramas is discussed in Section 2. In order for dropping to the universal to happen, Heathcote always interacted with students in creating dramas with three essential features. These essential features are discussed and analyzed from the sociocultural perspective in Section 3: dramas without scripts; teacher-in-role; and teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer. Pedagogical implications are also presented in Section 3. Section 4 concludes the pa-

per.

2. Heathcote's teaching principle in creating dramas: Dropping to the universal

This section discusses what dropping to the universal means in creating dramas and analyzes it from a sociocultural perspective, especially 'language as a mediating tool'.

2.1 Dropping to the universal

Dropping to the universal is a crucial principle in Heathcote's teaching. For Heathcote, "the universal is the wellspring, the source of human understanding" (Wagner, 1999, p. 72). Whatever she did seems to be based on this principle. "Reflecting on the universal is...something Heathcote got a class to do for themselves, to help them identify with a wider range of other persons throughout time" (Wagner, 1999, p. 72).

Acting requires you to be someone whose life you have never lived. You need to experience a life which you have never gone through. Through acting, you have to put yourself in a world where you have to imagine and think deeply about who the person is, how he or she has lived and what kind of life he/she is having now, what kind of difficulties he/she is facing and what he/she really needs now. Even though that is someone else's life, acting requires you to be a person with a different history and culture. You need to reflect deeply on how to express yourself in order to be that person. Not sympathy but empathy is required.

In that sense, dropping to the universal has significant meaning in creating a drama. In order to drop to the universal, reflection is indispensable, because it can foster deeper thinking. Heathcote attempted to establish belief in the beginning and afterward she moved toward depth of insight about the experience. She also decided when to deepen the drama based on her students' response to the challenges they were facing. She regarded this as "a moment of new awareness" (Wagner, 1999). It is this awareness that children or students want to grasp in their lives because they want to know "what it is to be human" (Wagner, 1999). That is exactly what they want to know, but the other subjects in school rarely provide students with this kind of experience. In drama education, it is possible for students to think deeply about how to act under pressure and how to face difficult situations not alone but with other classmates who may help them deepen their thoughts. Heathcote used drama to "expand their awareness, to enable them to look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning" (Wagner, 1999, p. 10).

Furthermore, by dropping to the universal, Heathcote hoped that students would find something

important in their lives. However hard their lives might be, she wanted them to have the strength to overcome such difficulties by attempting to find the way to get through or to solve the problems. Heathcote herself had hard times in her youth. She knew how important it was to have such strength in life. Her eyes seemed to be always directed toward the weak, the oppressed and those in the minority.

2.2 Language as a mediating tool

For dropping to the universal to happen, Heathcote always interacted with students in creating dramas. Her interaction with the students shows that she used "language as a mediating tool" (Vygotsky, 1978) as well as a means for communication. This section discusses how Heathcote used language as a mediating tool with the concept of Vygotsky's view on language use. Vygotsky (1978) claims that language is a symbolic tool. Humans use tools to interact with their external environment. In this interaction, "tools mediate between the subjects (humans) and the objects (material world). Thus, tools function as mediators in goal-directed activities (Vygotsky, 1978). In the process of creating a drama, language is used as the mediator between the students and the material world. Making a drama itself can be considered a goal-directed activity.

Similarly, language is seen as a "psychological tool, the most sophisticated meditational mechanism in human sociocultural history" (Ahmed, M., 1994, p. 158). Vygotsky's fundamental claim is that "higher forms of human mental activity are mediated by culturally constructed auxiliary means" (Vygotsky 1999, p. 41). Heathcote was aware of this view in that "higher forms of human mental activity" were mediated by language in her teaching. In order to have the students experience dropping to the universal, Heathcote used language as "a mediating tool" and as a "psychological tool" with three distinct features: (1) dramas without scripts, (2) a teacher-in-role, and (3) teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer. In the next section, these three essential features are discussed in relation with the sociocultural perspective.

3. Three essential features: The sociocultural perspective

3.1 Dramas without scripts

The first feature of Heathcote's approach is that there is no script used for dramas. "Dorothy Heathcote doesn't direct drama; she evokes it. Unlike most drama teachers, she allows the students to make as many of the decisions about what the drama is going to be about as is possible" (Wagner, 1999, p. 20). Heathcote often let children decide what a drama was about, the when and where of what happened. Moreover, participants spontaneously responded and acted in the creation of drama. Each student was given freedom to express their feelings, ideas and opinions. According to Heathcote (1991):

> As an excellent teacher, I must not be afraid to move out of my center and meet the children where *they* are. …I must also have the ability to see the world through my students, and not my students through it. This ability can give a teacher a new perception, a renewal of energy and teaching style; there is a sort of regeneration when suddenly a class shows you a whole new way of looking at something. (p. 18)

Within a certain frame, the students can act freely in relation with others, but they have to take into consideration other participants' feelings and ideas. This improves their communication skills because they must listen to others and send their message clearly in order to make themselves understood.

Active participants in the learning process

The first feature of Heathcote's approach, dramas without scripts, can be analyzed from the sociocultural perspective in that students are active participants in the learning process through social connections, relations, and cooperation. For human development, social connections, relations, and cooperation are essential (Vygotsky, 1999). In other words, individual cognition emerges in and through engagement in social activity. In SCT, the learner is not a passive recipient of the transferred knowledge but an active participant in the teaching and learning process.

Having no script for a drama also means that the process of making a drama itself is considered to be very important. Heathcote considers it is a process where learning is taking place. If students had had a script for the drama in the beginning, they would not have given as much reflection as they actually did. For example, she did not allow children to continue the drama when "she [felt] that they [were] not aware of the problems they [were] causing and alternate ways to deal with them" (Wagner, 1999, p. 20).

Peer collaboration: Intersubjectivity

Heathcote stopped the drama frequently "to assess with the class how it [was] going. When the students [disagreed] among themselves as to what they [wanted] to do, Heathcote [let] them sort this out on their own, often physically turning away from the group to let them decide" (Wagner, 1999, p. 20). Peer collaboration is indispensable in creating dramas. In the process of peer collaboration, the question is how the students reach an agreement even though each of them has different viewpoints or ideas in the beginning. The term *intersubjectivity* seems to explain this process. It is the process "whereby two participants in a task who begin with different understandings of it arrive at shared understanding in the course of communication" (Tudage, 1999, p. 196).

The concept of intersubjectivity is essential in understanding the processes and consequences of peer collaboration. The use of the term intersubjectivity is based on the view that "individuals come to a task, problem, or conversation with their own subjective ways of making sense of it (Tudage, 1999, p. 196). If they then discuss their different viewpoints, shared understanding may be attained. According to Rommetveit (1979), "communication aims at transcendence of the 'private' worlds of the participants. It sets up what we might call 'states of intersubjectivity'" (p. 94). This concept of intersubjectivity can explain how students reach an agreement by transcending their own world in making a drama.

Voices echo with other voices

In Heathcote's classes, the echoes of student's voices can be also analyzed from the point of view of Bakhin. According to Wertch (1991):

Bakhin stressed the idea that voice always exists in a social milieu; there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices. For example, in addition to the voice producing an utterance, the point of view or speaking consciousness being addressed was also fundamental. (p. 50)

As this shows, when a student produces an utterance, it represents his or her point of view or consciousness and it means it is addressed to the others in the classroom. Heathcote was aware of this so she never ignored students' utterances or mumbling. She placed importance on students' voices since they represented something meaningful not only to the person him/herself but also to the others who shared the place and time in creating a drama.

Bakhin states that "meaning can come into existence only when two or more voices come into contact: when the voice of a listener responds to the voice of a speaker" (Wertch, 1986, p. 99). This may explain why Heathcote encouraged children to listen to one another. Heathcote said, "I'll not compromise on this one. Vacuums within children have to be filled, and you don't fill them easily. Unless they listen to one another, they don't have a chance to get the depth of feeling" (Wagner, 1999, p. 6). As this remark shows, Heathcote emphasized the importance of listening to others' feelings, ideas and opinions in order for them to deepen reflection. It is because Heathcote believed "reflection is the only thing that in the long run changes anybody" (Wagner, 1999, p. 73).

3.2 Teacher-in-role

The second feature of Heathcote's approach is teacher-in-role. Teacher-in-role is a method wherein a teacher participates in a fictitious situation by taking on a role. The purpose of the leader's going into role is to develop and heighten emotion in a fictional situation (Wagner, 1999). In order for a teacher to

motivate students to think deeply about a certain issue, the teacher him/herself should get into some role as a mediator or a facilitator to relate the present world (the classroom) with the other world.

Heathcote made great use of teacher-in-role since it can change the usual teacher-student relationship, and she could interact with the students more directly within the situation. By using this method, a teacher can show the students his or her own belief in the fictitious situation. In that sense, teacher-in-role provides students with the atmosphere in which they begin to identify themselves with other roles in creating a drama. This could facilitate students in living a situation as if they were actually living there, which could help students deepen the meaning of the experience. It also provides the students with the opportunity to see things not from their own perspective but from others' perspectives.

To what extent a teacher has power is very important in the class where students' spontaneous exchanges with others are appreciated. Yoshida (2008) indicates, "if the teacher has too much power, the class will expect the teacher to take leadership and make final decisions. If the teacher has too little, on the other hand, it will become difficult for the teacher to control the class" (p. 2). The concept of teacher-in-role makes a teacher move freely from less authoritative to more authoritative and play the role of a mediator. This makes the classroom atmosphere more vivid and it widens the view of the students. Teacher-in-in-role can be explained by SCT, especially *social mediation, scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD),* and *guided participation.*

Social mediation

Teacher-in-role can play the role of teacher-mediator between the students and the outside world. The concept of social mediation seems to play an important role in Heathcote's approach. Lantolf & Thorne (2006) state that "mediation is the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate the material world or their own and each other's social and mental activity" (p. 79). Language mediates between the individual and knowledge. Furthermore, sociocultural theory assumes that all cognitive development, including language development, arises as a result of social interactions between individuals.

Heathcote enhanced her students' cognitive development by encouraging and facilitating this social interactions between individuals. According to Vygotsky (1999), human development is "the product of a broader system than just the system of a person's individual functions, specifically, systems of social connections and relations, of collective forms of behavior and social cooperation" (p. 41). Learning is regarded as originating in interaction. The cognitive development occurs in interaction with others and this is a significant context within which learning takes place. In making dramas, especially in Heathcote's approach, students need to interact with others and to cooperate with others. Therefore, having no script

for a drama means students are given opportunities to interact with others including a teacher and their peers, and to cooperate with each other even though they have different opinions.

Scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

In Heathcote's approach, scaffolding within the ZPD also plays a significant role in enhancing students' reflection. Wagner (1999) observed Heathcote's classes and found "a conscious employment of the elements of drama to educate—to literally bring out what children already know but don't yet know they know" (Wagner, 1999, p. 8). This suggests that Heathcote took into consideration each student's ZPD in creating dramas. The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development (Vygotsky, 1978). The former is determined by independent problem solving and the latter is determined through problem solving under adult or teacher guidance or working together with more capable peers. The ZPD defines development prospectively and every learner has his or her own ZPD, where future learning may take place.

Scaffolding refers to the supports provided to the learner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, 1978; Collins, 2006). Scaffolding includes the supports the teacher provides to help the student carry out the task, taking either the form of suggestions or help. Scaffolding is defined as a dialogically produced inter-psychological process, and learners internalize knowledge they co-construct with more capable peers through scaffolding. (Wertsch, 1979a). The critical point is that scaffolding is the help given to a learner "that is tailored to that learner's needs in achieving his or her goals of the moment" (Sawyer, 2006). It can be said that if the teacher tells the students how to do something without considering the student's ZPD, it may not be effective. Effective scaffolding provides prompts and hints that help learners to figure it out on their own (Sawyer, 2006).

Heathcote's approach of teacher-in-role is an effective way of scaffolding to help students think on their own. Moreover, it encourages the student to actively participate in constructing knowledge. The essential point is that effective learning environments act to scaffold students' active construction of knowledge. Heathcote's guidance enabled the students to pursue deeper reflection in the ZPD. She had the ability to figure out the zone of proximal development of each student with the technique of probe and pressure. The concept of 'slowing the pace' is very important for the principles of dropping to the universal. The main purpose of this is "to provide pressure for a transformation within the children" (Wagner, 1999, p. 77). The term 'transformation' can be interpreted as actual development in the ZPD. Most groups of children need a teacher to slow the pace if they are to get into the zone of proximal development, since reflection can happen in the ZDP.

It is important for Heathcote to see what her students are in the process of becoming (Johnson &

O'Neill, 1991, p. 18). Teacher (or peer) scaffolding is typically mediated by language or cultural artifacts and can facilitate learners' cognitive development. Teacher or peer scaffolding is woven into dialogic interaction in which learning occurs, and through interaction learners eventually internalize the newly gained knowledge or skills. This explains exactly what happened in Heathcote's classes. Language and symbols (cultural artifacts) played significant roles in her teaching. Exchanging words with others helps students lead their reflection to cognitive development. That dialogic interaction helps them internalize what reflection has brought about to them.

Guided participation

Furthermore, the concept of guided participation, one of the features of cognitive apprenticeship, has significant meaning in operationalizing the ZPD idea in the classroom. In relation with the ZPD and social interaction, the term guided participation was introduced by Rogoff (1990, 1995) to clarify the nature of individuals' cognitive development within the framework of sociocultural theory. Heathcote was "interested, not in making plays with children, but in, as she terms it, burnishing children through the play. She [did] this not by heaping more information on them but by enabling them to use what they already [knew]" (Wagner, 1999, p. 10). This suggests Heathcote always took the ZPD of children into consideration while playing a teacher-in-role.

Heathcote used drama to "usher students into what Vygotsky terms the 'zone of proximal development'; with her skillful guidance, they [were] led to reflect in more profound ways than they could on their own" (Wagner, 1999, p. 10). This can be interpreted as guided participation, which emphasizes "the mutual involvement of individuals and their social partners, communicating and coordinating their involvement" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 142) while taking part in the activity that is culturally valued. This term includes the side-by-side joint participation as well as the face-to-face interaction.

3.3 Teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer

The third significant feature is teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer, which makes it possible to help students see things from a multicultural perspective. In Heathcote's approach, even though something may look worthless, it could be a gem. Any ideas the students give can be viewed as a rough stone. Through the drama, "you can facet and polish as a gem so that it can reflect the universal" (Wagner, 1999, p. 73). Heathcote picked up the words which a shy girl said with little confidence in the classroom and she tried to make what was said meaningful, as if she were an archaeologist.

In addition, the term "a teacher as an ethnographer" suggests that it is important to see things not from an insider's point of view but from an outsider's point of view, since it will give us a different per-

spective. She sometimes used symbols and had her students reflect on them and feel empathy toward people who belonged to different ethnic groups, such as Native Americans. She asked the teenagers to see a white woman's house and her way of life from the outside, that is from *inside* the Native American way of seeing. According to Michael Fleming (1998), "the teacher role gave the opportunity to help the pupils distance themselves from their own culture and start to see themselves as 'other'" (p. 152). It is possible in drama to distance ourselves from our own culture since we can play other roles, as Goffman (1959) suggests. For Heathcote, the main purpose of drama was "to train pupils to look beyond the surface action, beyond our waiter's dining room rituals to the personal and cultural values that sustain them" (Fleming, 1998, 160). Heathcote's approach had her students see things from a multicultural perspective and it helped them drop a certain phenomenon or incident to the universal. Heathcote claimed that it is important for us to know the craft, history and place of the theatre in our lives since "they help to reveal what all people and all cultures have, in their time, found to be significant" (Johnson & O'Neill, 1991, p. 107). Over time and place, we humans have something in common. By realizing it, we can discover something important in our lives. Heathcote used the teacher role for this purpose as well.

Communities of Practice

The classroom where Heathcote played roles as an archaeologist and ethnographer can be interpreted as a *Community of Practice* (CoP). Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998). They value their collective competence and learn from each other. In Heathcote's classes, a teacher and children pursued their interests in their domains, interacting and learning together. Members of a CoP are practitioners, developing a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. By playing the role of archaeologist and ethnographer, Heathcote created a classroom where individuals did not simply receive, internalize, and construct knowledge in their minds, but enacted it by participating in the practices of a sociocultural community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Her approach shows that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice.

Internalization and dropping to the universal

In SCT, internalization can be interpreted as "activities, which are external to the learner but in which he or she participates (inter-psychological) are transformed into mental ones (intra-psychological)" (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002, p. 171). After the internalization, learners become self-regulated when they no longer need to rely on outside resources to carry out the task or access that aware-

ness, because the new knowledge and skills have now become part of their cognitive repertoire. This can lead children to dropping to the universal. Children or students transform themselves into those who are able to see things reflectively through creating a drama with scaffolding from a teacher and their peers. In attempting to drop to the universal, Heathcote's approach is very significant in that it has students think about what it is to be human.

4. Pedagogical implications

Heathcote showed that drama is used as a learning medium. In the creation of a drama, the process itself is very important because that is where learning takes place. Her approach was unhurried and learner-centered. Her way of responding to students' utterances, ideas and feelings suggests that she always took into consideration their zones of proximal development. Heathcote stated that "If I am to aspire to excellence as a teacher, I must be able to see my pupils as they really are. I mustn't discourage them —I must accept them. This means adjusting myself to my pupils and seeing things from another standpoint" (Johnson & O'Neill, 1991, p. 18).

In the process of creating a drama, students were transformed through an increase in reflection with the assistance of both Heathcote and their peers. Heathcote said to the students, "Don't just stand in limbo because nothing will happen for you. Go and get some help from each other" (Wagner, 1999, p. 6). As this shows, Heathcote encouraged students to seek assistance from peers and sometimes adults. This makes the classroom cooperative rather than competitive, since it is all right to ask for help if there is trouble understanding or if a better way to solve the problem exists. Making this kind of atmosphere is very important not only in drama education but also in other subjects in school.

5. Conclusion

This paper reveals how Dorothy Heathcote used drama as a learning medium and analyzes her approach from the sociocultural perspective. Heathcote used language as "a mediating tool" and as a "psychological tool" with three distinct features: (1) dramas without scripts (2) teacher-in-role, and (3) teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer. First, having no script for a drama means that students are active participants in the learning process through social connections, relations, and cooperation. Second, teacher-in-role can facilitate social mediation, scaffolding within the ZPD, internalization, and guided participation. Third, teacher as an archaeologist and ethnographer makes it possible to help students see things from a multicultural perspective. Her approach shows that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice. Her educational use of drama can be applied to other spheres in education. It is worth taking on the challenge of adopting her methods and principles in other spheres in edu-

cation.

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