

To Be Wise Before We Are Old: Teaching as Creating Spaces for Learning Wisdom

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When King Lear addresses his three daughters with the question, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (Act I, scene 1, 49), it is clear that this octogenarian monarch assumes a power to judge and rank their answers. Lear is like an authoritarian teacher giving his students a final oral public examination in which they are to show in a performance—on his terms—if they are worthy enough to be given the responsibility of running the kingdom. Goneril, speaking in front of the assembled court, and then Regan attempting to outdo her sister, both pass his test with ease; they use the sort of flattering language they know their patriarchal father is expecting to hear. But Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to participate as expected in this testing game. She answers him truthfully that she loves him no more or less than any daughter ought to love her father. When she addresses him with honesty in plain words he is not expecting to hear he flies into a rage, disowns her, divides the kingdom among her sisters, and then banishes his faithful servant, Kent, when he questions Lear’s impetuous judgment.

Any attentive audience, or reader, will learn much about love and life by experiencing and reflecting on the consequences of escalating hateful actions and by comparing them with deeds of care, kindness, and tenderness. Succeeding deceitful and violent events reveal how little Lear knew himself, let alone his daughters’ true natures. After much anguish and having being reunited with Cordelia, as he cradles her hanged dead body, he reveals in his despair some of what he now knows about love for a child who will “never, never, never, never, never” (Act V, scene 3, 307–309) return.

Ensemble Learning and Ambitious Reading

My recent involvement as the director of pedagogy at Ohio State for our partnership with the UK’s Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) has provided me, in collaboration with our cross- and intra-institutional teams, with extended opportunities to explore and research new

approaches to teaching demanding texts. We are investigating how teaching may create spaces for ensemble learning in both university and public school classrooms, focused by what we call the ambitious reading of complex texts. The RSC's rehearsal process, which we are adapting, is grounded in the assumption that we learn better with other people when we share common goals, like the interpretation and performance of one of Shakespeare's plays. At Ohio State we are exploring how such an ensemble-based approach can be applied beyond the theatre to the interpretation of any complex text across disciplines.

Clearly much of teaching must focus on students' learning skills, on acquiring factual and conceptual information, and on synthesizing the results of a body of scholarship. I argue, however, that highly significant teaching happens when students and teachers transform the comprehension and interpretations of texts through a focus on learning some wisdom. Such an approach requires us as teachers to share power in running the class by collaborating with students; we invite new interpretations and we create learning scenarios that accommodate students' interests as well as our curricular goals.

Though Lear the king was a terrible teacher for his daughters, Shakespeare the playwright, in the famous words of his character Hamlet, can "hold the mirror up to nature" (Act III, scene 2, 22) to educate us about many of the mysteries and miracles of life and our humanity. In *Lear*, Shakespeare shows us an ancient king who was not wise: he only wanted to hear what he already understood about love, believed that he had nothing to learn from other people, and thought that a test he alone devised would reveal the truth. In contrast, if teachers and students can imaginatively enter worlds, like those of King Lear, to join Lear and other characters on often harrowing but ultimately enlightening journeys, we can see the world with them, collaboratively make some sense of their changing lives, and collectively assess our changing understandings.

Whereas, as his Fool notes, Lear was "old before [he] hadst been wise" (Act I, scene 5, 25), by learning and reading ambitiously alongside people of any age, we can all, I believe, become a little wiser without having to grow older.

By learning alongside characters as they grapple with the dilemmas of their life journeys, students and teachers can explore what wisdom might be held in dramatic narratives.

Dramatic Inquiry

Dramatic inquiry is the pedagogy that I use to create ensemble learning and to engage in the ambitious reading of complex texts. This approach to teaching and learning harnesses two abilities shared by people of any age: their aptitude to represent actions and to interpret those representations. First, I show students how to represent events dramatically, either by acting or by using still or moving images based on passages

from the text. Furthermore, I emphasize that participants don't have to be proficient actors to show, say, what Lear's daughters might have done as they answered their father. Second, I guide them to interpret our representations, seeking to build on and encourage their collective curiosity about the meaning of narratives, for example, their questions about *King Lear's* take on the nature of love, wisdom, old age—and the complicated relations among those concepts.

Young children will readily dramatize when they play, and older students will often want to create a theatrical presentation. Dramatic inquiry is a hybrid: it can be as playful and as performative as students want it to be. As participants in dramatic inquiry collaboratively play with performing meaning they present ideas to themselves rather than to an external audience. People's natural curiosity feeds both young children's incessant questioning and researchers' extended explorations. Dramatic inquiry seeks to pose inquiry questions that are engaging for participants and that focus on significant aspects of texts. In my teaching, I keep returning to the following question: how can reading with dramatic inquiry help us learn to be wise?

A recent book, *How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People*, provides a useful tool for thinking about the qualities of wisdom. Having interviewed old people to discover more about wise action, Henry Alford (2009) synthesized the results of his search into five dimensions of wisdom: reciprocity, doubt, non-attachment, discretion, and social conscience.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is well illustrated by relationships based on the Golden Rule and by the sense of compassion that we develop when we are able to adopt the perspectives of those who disagree—and even compete—with us. One way in which dramatic inquiry is different from role-play and conversation is that participants use social imagination to move among viewpoints and reevaluate people’s actions from different positions. Role-play, in contrast, often only represents one viewpoint.

Asking what a daughter’s duty might be to her father, fifth and sixth grade middle school students in Reynoldsburg and their teacher, Amy McKibben, contextualized their inquiry by dramatizing short extracts from the play. All spoke and moved as if they were both Goneril and Lear during their exploration of the scene when she angrily demands that her father control the riotous behavior of the one hundred knights who have arrived with the king to stay a month at her castle. Working in groups to create inferred scenes before the actual encounter between father and daughter, the students imagined and enacted moments from the knights’ partying with Lear, imagined they were Goneril’s servants having to clean up, and then, using lines from the text, spoke as Goneril attempting to contain her anger before meeting with her father. As they discussed how best to deal with the family turmoil, one child’s comment exemplified the ability to hold two opposing views simultaneously, “It was hard to know what to do because they both believed they were in the right. The king wanted to have fun, but his daughter must have been fed up and felt she was being taken advantage of.”

Doubt

Doubt is at the heart of inquiry because when we doubt we are never satisfied that we have reached a definitive conclusion and will want to continue to investigate a topic or interrogate a text. Used productively, doubt means always being open to interpretation from another viewpoint. In this way, it works hand-in-glove with that aspect of reciprocity that encourages our taking the other’s perspective. As the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, no one ever “has the last word” because meaning is always being made in an ongoing conversation that is never “finalized” (Morson & Emerson 268).

Recently, I worked in England with a group of international graduate students, who mostly spoke English as a second or third language. Having talked about the tragic ending to *King Lear*, we explored the

opening scene in order to imagine alternatives to the father-daughter exchanges. We then turned to end of the play and wondered what would happen if, following the advice of Goneril's husband, Albany, Goneril and Regan, like Cordelia, had been honest and had spoken "what they [felt]" — not what they "ought to" — have said. Then, having imagined and enacted multiple possibilities for what the sisters could have said and done, the students wanted to revisit, and reenact, what the sisters actually did say. Having considered these alternatives, the students were ready to reconsider their previous interpretations about why Goneril and Regan might have spoken in public of their love for their father. The students could now consider the interpretation that the sisters were not simply trying to win Lear's love-competition but were also influenced by their anticipation of Lear's angry reaction to honest emotions. These interpretations in turn led them to new perspectives on why Goneril and Regan ordered the doors locked against Lear and why he cursed them and departed alone into a gathering storm.

Non-Attachment

Non-attachment, for Alford, is apparent in the ironic self-awareness people often demonstrate when they don't take themselves too seriously and let go of trying to control for particular outcomes.

In exchanges with his Fool, Lear begins to undermine the seriousness of his desire to maintain the authority of a king having given away his power to rule. He finds laughter as he parries with the Fool who, unlike anyone else, is able to playfully tell him truths about his foolishness. Jason, one of the middle school boys in Amy McKibben's classroom, who on occasion could be a disruptive influence as a jokester, was delighted when he and others had the chance to make their classmates smile and giggle. They imagined they were the Fool whose job it was to entertain Lear and make him laugh even when that included telling jokes at the king's expense.

The young boys' self-parodying laughter resonated for me as I remembered my 93-year-old aunt's ability to laugh at herself as Lear never does. Almost blind, in residential care, and in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, Noel is still fond of quoting from Shakespearean speeches and sonnets she learned as a girl. As she notes her inability to do a task unaided, her ironic chuckle is invariably accompanied by her favorite quote from *As You Like It*: "And so from hour to hour we ripe

and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot and rot; and thereby hangs a tale” (Act II, scene 7, 27–29).

Discretion

We exercise discretion when we could act in one way but choose to act in another. Cordelia is very deliberate in her choice not to flatter her father, but her discretion is not tempered by reciprocity or doubt about the wisdom of her action. It could be argued that her sisters show more discretion than she when they perform as their father expects. Cordelia does not show that she understands her father, and her failure to perform in public as expected costs her a likely marriage and leads to the loss of her land and an abandonment of her father to the antagonism of her sisters and their husbands.

Knowing something does not mean that we should necessarily speak or even act on that knowledge in public without considering consequences. As a first-year high school teacher I was surprised that it was common practice for teachers to ignore students furtive smoking during recess in contradiction with the school rules. One day, a newly arrived assistant principal announced that he had discovered where smoking was happening at recess and was going to suspend anyone he caught. In response, one wise seasoned teacher said that he’d spent 25 years not finding out what was happening at recess. My friend must have imagined the tensions and resentments that followed the administration’s planned suspensions.

Because dramatic inquiry is rooted in pretend play students enjoy the possibility of choosing what to say and how to act. However, dramatic inquiry makes choice visible and available for public consideration and change. With teacher guidance, participants can reflect on characters’ motivations and choices, examine consequences, and rework their actions. The middle school students tried out possible ways Goneril could have exercised more discretion in response to her father’s excesses. Similarly, the graduate students enacted and described settings where Lear’s daughters might have cared for him had he been able to control his anger and listen to his children.

In Harry Gee’s Reynoldsburg High School classroom in a program for students at risk of dropping out of school, one student’s representation and interpretation of a fictional event illustrated what he had learned about discretion. Students collaboratively read *Hurricane* (Hirsch), a

book about champion boxer Rubin Carter's decades-long struggle to be exonerated after having been wrongly accused of and imprisoned for murder. In one of the small group's brief dramatizations of key moments using phrases from the text, Carter was shown meeting with a Canadian group who wanted to be his advocates. Two students represented Carter: one the angry proud Carter who entered prison and the other an older, wiser Carter who has decided to listen and seek help. In a conversation focused by the inquiry question, "What did freedom mean for Carter?," one student, Kay, who had himself experienced legal detention, mused on the difference between physical and spiritual freedom, freedom of the body and freedom of the soul. He was adamant that it was more important to have freedom of the soul than physical freedom. And he reflected on how he, like the older Carter but in contrast with the younger Carter, had learned to control his anger and present himself in ways that would mean others might see him in a better light. When Harry asked him how he would develop freedom of the soul, he replied, "By reading."

Social Conscience

Wisdom is never an individual affair. Part of being wise is recognizing that our deeds always affect others' lives. Or as Alford puts it, wise people who have developed a social conscience try to improve the lives of others.

Teachers using dramatic inquiry can address students so that their conversations turn toward and highlight the social and cultural dimensions of life, in particular how one person's actions affect another's reactions. As they moved among different viewpoints and spoke back to characters they had represented, the middle school students enacted their compelling advice for Lear, Goneril, and Regan. Lear had to respect his daughters if he wanted them to respect him: he needed to learn to listen and repeat back what he had heard. But equally, Goneril and Regan could not turn their father out into a storm no matter how justified or wronged they felt. They needed to understand how difficult it was for an old man to change. Without losing the pleasure of dramatic conflict, these young people explored why the characters were so egocentric and how they could have acted differently by taking other viewpoints into account.

Wisdom is not given; rather, it must be forged in dialogue with others. As Bakhtin argues, "selfhood is not a particular voice but a particular way of combining many voices within" (Morson & Emerson 221). A social conscience develops in relation to the viewpoints and voices that people

respond to and answer. Reading and dramatizing ambitious texts, like *King Lear*, allows us to discover more of our humanity as we inquire into the views and deeds of people at the edges of life-and-death situations, as they encounter deeds of good and evil done by others and by themselves, and as they confront the possibilities of madness and destruction, redemption, and creation.

Conclusion

Teaching, in part, is creating spaces where all people can interact and all voices can be heard, including those of people who may often feel silenced or overpowered. Because wisdom can be fostered in interactions with any other person, I begin with the democratic assumption that all participants should have the opportunity to speak, move, and act. The international students, Jason, and Kay, were all people who for different reasons might easily have felt unable to participate as equals in classroom conversations. Using dramatic inquiry, I was able to work with them to create spaces where their views and ideas could be expressed, enacted, taken up by others, and transformed in a growing ensemble.

By learning alongside characters as they grapple with the dilemmas of their life journeys, students and teachers can explore what wisdom might be held in dramatic narratives. In university and school classrooms, dramatic inquiry can be used to create inclusive democratic spaces where students and teachers may become a little bit wiser before they are old, not only about the worlds of complex texts, but also about themselves.

References

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