“Today I Had Fun!”
Playing Outside A Box Inside A Role Drama

Scott Hughes
Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

Abstract

A good traveler leaves herself open to chance.
-- Alison Gopnik (2009, 126)

Teaching is a balancing act. Teachers—at once in time and space—attend to the sometimes congruent, sometimes incongruent demands of curriculum, professional expectations and the multiple needs of children. Amid all this, teachers also question how to teach, what to teach, why they teach, and whom they are teaching (Palmer, 1998). Asking these questions regularly is essential to good teaching practices (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). As a teacher...
with 17 years classroom experience[1], I pursue these questions with the aim of planning a day rich with a variety of engaging activities. I believe that children in the early primary grades need equal measures of physical play and creative pursuits, such as centre-based free play, in balance with a focus on skill development, such as literacy and numeracy. An image associated with centre-based free play might be one of groups of children scattered about the classroom, some playing with blocks, others with paint, while others might be listening to recordings of books at a listening centre. An image associated with the development of skills might be one of children sitting at tables practicing their printing or creating patterns with coloured math manipulatives. In the first image, children are working with the flexibility of physical movement and choice. In the second image, children are working at their seats, contained by their table space, following the directions of the teacher. The intent of sharing these two images, and the associated words of 'flexibility,' 'containment,' 'choice' and 'teacher-direction,' is not to posit a good/bad paradigm of these classroom activities. Rather, I share these images to remind us that children need all kinds of movement and engagement in their learning, and that teachers need to make pedagogical decisions that enable children to experience a balanced range of activities in a school day.

Despite my best intentions to maintain an equal balance of the physical flexibility associated with play and the containment associated with seat-work, my teaching practice has slowly tipped from the latter to the former. This tipping towards teacher- and curriculum-driven skills and programming, in favour of other developmental needs of children, is a result of a variety of external pressures. These pressures include curricular and systematic expectations (which are arguably misaligned with the children's age and development) such as accountability, standardized testing, and an over-emphasis on skill-based academics (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Elkind, 2007; Tyre, 2008). As this balance has tipped, it has been my fearful observation that the energy for engagement in my class has waned. We have trundled along in our routines, following our day plan, learning skills, trying our best, and fulfilling curriculum outcomes. Over the years, I have learned to manage the class in a manner that is calm, predictable, safe, and well ...controlled. I don't question the importance and necessity of following routine and addressing skills in Grade 1 —my life lessons as a classical musician and athlete have taught me the value of practicing technique and daily perseverance—and I don't question the need for a calm class atmosphere both for the benefit of students and myself. But, as my years of classroom teaching unfolded, I began to wonder what creative spark and energy flow was being lost in the action of tipping, in this over-weighting of the balance scales.

In order to reflect on this pedagogical tension, I began a Master's in Education in the Urban Learner Cohort program at The University of British Columbia in 2006. The Urban Learner Cohort program is designed for educators who wish to investigate matters of pedagogy, curriculum, lived experience, and personal agency within the contexts of their classroom and school community. I entered this program questioning how the arts might serve to strike a more equal balance between academic skills and creative outlets within the context of public education, how I might best support engaged happy learners in the classroom, and how I might reinvigorate my teaching practice with energy and inspiration. In this paper, I share my learning throughout my Masters by describing an action research project that I undertook with my Grade 1 students in 2007, which was oriented towards my on-going inquiry into these questions.

My original intent for this project was to work with students to create a multi-disciplinary show. It would be a show that was born out of the ideas and themes brainstormed by my students in response to a teacher-led directive and question: We're going to create a show!
What do you want to do it about? It would be a show that was planned, rehearsed and produced for public performance. I have worked with children to create such shows before with great success: success for the students, parents, teaching community, and for myself. Creating such a show with children would be a breeze! It would be fun! We would learn lots!

Stop.

The idea for creating a show for public performance would keep me in the role of teacher-in-control. It would be an art form that I was highly familiar with. I would direct the show, rehearsing planned scenes over and over with the kids until they had it just right. In the role of director, I would bring my classically trained musician's background to the students' theatrical experience, with the desire for repetition within rehearsal, the desire for lines to be delivered just so, and for choreographed dance numbers to unfold in synchronicity. Practice, practice, practice, after all, makes perfect.

Besides, I already knew the outcome of such a venture, having done it many times:

The kids will have great ideas. I will (ahem) help form those ideas into (ahem) better, more stage-worthy plans. We will practice, practice, practice. We will spend more time practicing herding on and off stage than anything else. Performance night will be a madness of hyper energy and excitement. The children will be dazzled by the stage lights. Some will love it; some will forget what to do. The parents will love it (but, are they laughing with the children, or at the children?). When it is all over, the kids will feel both proud and completely relieved. As will I.
New Directions

Instead of the planned, prescribed show, I invited something new to enter onto the stage of my teaching practice, and welcomed into my classroom the reflections of performative inquiry and the imaginings of role drama. This combination of theoretical framework and methodology opened the possibility for me to inhabit at once the roles of teacher, researcher, and participant in the action of learning. These multiple roles would allow me to fulfill my professional responsibilities, provide me with a framework to reflect as a teacher, and a platform for conducting my action research. Specifically, this framework would allow me to respond to my questions: What happens when students and teachers work together to create an on-going role drama during the school day? What happens when I let go of the control over children's learning outcomes? And, what would happen if I were to (without fear) invite magic and wonder back into my teaching practice on a daily basis? I framed my inquiry as a "what happens when" study to encourage the asking of questions based simply on curiosity: What happens when we do this…or that? What if we tried…? What now? Asking such questions allows the teacher-researcher to be open to any and all learning that has the potential to emerge from a lived, performative experience.

Performative Inquiry

Children are at the centre of teaching. Our choices as teachers are made in direct consideration of the well-being of children in our care in any given classroom moment. Van Manen's (1991) conception of a pedagogical moment reflects this. He suggests that in the busy momentum of teaching children, the pedagogical moment lies in the "concrete and practical response to the question, What to do here?" (44). Pedagogical action in response to a pedagogical moment is thoughtful, reflective, and is "always concerned with the child's self and development" (33). Van Manen further asserts that pedagogy is the relational sphere that coexists between adults and children, and reminds us that good pedagogy is conditioned by our sense of love, care, hope and responsibility for children. It is our awareness of children, and how we choose to respond in any given moment, that is essential to good teaching.

Appelbaum (1995) conceives of moments of pedagogical awareness and choice in terms of what he calls, 'the stop.' This is when the "onrushing momentum" (ix) of life is broken and we are opened up to new possibilities, new ways of being, of thinking and imagining. Appelbaum asserts that such moments are the "advent of an intelligence of choice …either to remain habit-bound or to regain a freedom in one's approach to an endeavor" (xi). The stop is that precise suspension of time we experience when deeply engaged in something—such as working in the classroom with 24 young children and their diverse needs—and we then are confronted with something remarkable and new—such as that moment when an excited child brings a curious seed pod to class in the morning, discovered on the walk to school, on a day when the day plan says "study fairy tales." Appelbaum speaks of this moment of choice in terms of standing before two diverging pathways, where: "One leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established. It is safe, secure, and stale. The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, then uncharted, the new, the dark, and dangerous. The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice itself stands on …the stop is the time of awareness" (16).

I turn to performative inquiry (Fels, 1998) as a theoretical framework for this research, because it embraces performed experience and pedagogical response within the complex process of learning as shared between students and teachers. One example of a performed experience in the classroom is a role drama, acted and improvised in response to a piece of...
literature or a social problem. The crux of performative inquiry lies in those singular 'Aha! Moments' or 'moments of recognition' that arise (whether in the immediacy of the experience or later upon reflection) as a result of being confronted with a new way of thinking. It is from such moments that learning and possibility emerge. Fels (2004b) explains that, "performative inquiry is a research vehicle that recognizes performance in action and interaction as a co-evolving space of learning and exploration" (5). In performative inquiry the teacher-researchers take an active, participatory role in the experience along with their students and lay themselves open to listening for and paying attention to the deep inner moments of awareness and discovery that emerges.

Gathering together van Manen's (1991) assertion that pedagogical action is a practical and caring response to the many pedagogical moments that arise when teaching children, Appelbaum's (1995) image of 'the stop' as being that precise, energized moment when we are confronted with new possibilities and choice for new directions, and Fels' (1998, 2004a, 2004b) notion of performative inquiry as a means to attend to remarkable moments of learning within a lived, performed experience, I would like draw attention to a clear connection. If we are fully engaged in an action, there is the possibility for learning to emerge from those moments in time when we are confronted with, and open to, choice. The Grade 1 classroom is rich with pedagogical moments, and role drama is rich with creative possibility. It is in this combined site of possibility—the classroom and the arts—that I centered my inquiry.

**Role Drama**

Role drama is a method for creating meaningful learning opportunities in class. In role drama, "participants take on roles or positions of responsibility and together, co-create an 'imaginary world,' which has a logical coherence in which decisions, actions, and words are performed spontaneously" (Fels, 2004b, 84). Participants in role drama are invited to think, act, and talk like another person or character. There is no script to follow. There is simply the frame of a situation (imagined or real) to explore. In this way role drama is improvisational—not unlike life itself. Inviting children to participate in role drama provides a platform on which they can examine their thoughts and experiences of others, and through this examination they can develop social and relational problem-solving skills.

There are two significant features that distinguish role drama from scripted drama: purpose and relational dynamic. The purpose of a scripted drama is public performance (such as in a theatre) so that an audience can engage in meaning-making, whereas role drama is process driven, with the aim of participants exploring issues of personal, social, or subject-based relevance (Cornett & Smithrim, 2001). The relational dynamics of scripted and role drama are also very different. In the creation of a scripted drama, a distinct relational dynamic exists: director and actor—the director directs, the actor follows, which is coincidently not unlike a traditional teacher-student dynamic. In role drama, the teacher takes a role within the drama, thus having the potential to subvert and alter a traditionally held student/teacher dynamic (Tarlington & Verriour, 1991).

**Method**

My method was simple. One January day after recess, I invited the students in my Grade 1 class to participate in a role drama by presenting them with a large box, sealed with packing paper. As I put the box in front of the class, I asked the question: "What do you think is in the box?"[2] I invited the students to assume various roles in order to discover, reveal, and
respond to their ideas. Each day for six weeks, between recess and lunch, the students and I co-created an imaginary world that resulted from this launching point. Each daily role drama session began with a brainstorm to remind ourselves what had happened in our emerging story the previous day, and to clarify our new roles and directions. Each session ended with a class-wide debrief to discuss moments of discovery, moments of particular excitement or difficulty, and personal moments of learning that the student's experienced. All discussions and debriefs were scribed by myself on large pieces of chart paper in bright colours. My data from the role drama sessions were collected in four ways: the charts resulting from the daily debriefs, writing samples from participant journals, the observations I made in role as either the reporter John T. News or the scientist Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar, and notes from my reflexive journal, in which I paid particular attention to moments of difficulty or resistance. All 18 students participated in the role drama project as part of my classroom-based arts program. I received assent and consent from 15 of the students and their parents to participate in the study. It is the data collected from these 15 students that formed the basis for my analysis.

The Role Drama: Acts I, II, and III

Setting: An early primary classroom.

*Grade 1 students are sitting angelically on the carpet.*

*Mr. Hughes is perched perkily on his comfy teacher-chair.*

*Mr. Hughes:* …and tomorrow, we will begin our role drama!

*Children:* GASP!! *(An audible gasp of excitement)*.
My Thoughts: [3]

I am reminded that children are engaged and excited by something new. Even though they have no idea what a role drama is (yet), they are ready and willing to jump on board. I am reminded of the importance of creating engagement when working with students. I am charged with being excited and inspired myself.

Act I: The Beginning

A sealed box[4] was delivered to the classroom from the office by the principal. It was wrapped in black paper and tape, bearing mysterious seals and symbols. Attached to the side was the cautionary label:

§ Ancient mysteries contained within.
§ Be prepared.
§ Please do not open until all precautions have been taken.

The story that emerged was about the mystery of the sealed box. The children formed into cooperative groups to discuss and brainstorm what might be inside the box, where it might have come from, what precautions must be taken, and what roles would be needed to study the box. As a class, we played the role of scientist, doctor, reporter, veterinarian, robotic engineer, language expert specializing in ancient languages, and archeologist to prepare for the unsealing of the box. The students, on their own initiative, prepared a medical and a veterinary clinic (for any potential emergencies), a stock-piled chemical arsenal (in the event a creature emerged that might attack), they interviewed the principal and evening custodian about the delivery of the box, and hosted a science conference reception to welcome scientists—famous the world over—complete with "Hello My Name Is" tags, nibbling on imagined cookies and juice, in anticipation of revealing the contents of the box.

Kid Thoughts:

Who gave us this box? (Jonathan)
Maybe it's a tiger or a mouse, because there are sounds coming out. (Mary)

What country did it come from? (Bella)
Alberta! (Brian)
Maybe we should get a scientist. We should wear protective clothes. We should be careful of the thing that is in there. (Betsy)

My Thoughts:

The principal was, of course, fantastic. He entered the room carrying the box. It was heavy, and he struggled in.

Principal: Mr. Hughes, this box was delivered to the school and it says, To the Great and Noble Members of Grade 1. That's you, right?

Mr. Hughes: Oh yes! Thank you for carrying it all the way up to the third floor. What is it?

Principal: I don't know, but it says it came from the Ancient Tar Pits of Alberta and I heard
growling coming from the box as I walked up the stairs.

Mr. Hughes' internal thoughts: *Oh goodness, don't suggest anything to the kids. I want them to create their own story about the contents.*

Stop.

*I'm supposed to be letting go of control. Haven't I already suggested a "story" for the kids to follow by putting a return address on the box that is from "The Tar Pits of Ancient Alberta" and including dinosaur bones inside the box? So bite your tongue and go with it.*

**Act II: Chaos**

The box was unsealed with much anticipation. Many hands were needed to draw incision lines, cut and retract the black paper. A photojournalist was on hand to record the momentous occasion. A brown cardboard box was revealed. Much vocal exclamation was heard over the discovery of words on the box, each word sounded out quickly by those closest to the action: *M-A-S-T-ER B/R, B-OYS B/R, G-IR-LS B/R.*[5] Smaller, wrapped boxes were discovered within. Scientists with stethoscopes and magnifying glasses took over, debating whether or not they heard sounds coming from within the small boxes. The opening of the smaller boxes was postponed due to the ringing of the lunch bell.

In advance of the opening-of-the-smaller-boxes session, I came up with the notion that the role drama work of the first week was, well, without enough direction. I felt I wasn't *involved* enough as a *teacher.* So I decided it was important to frame the work of opening the smaller boxes with a lesson plan that focused on cooperative learning. I wrote my plan out on the computer, scripting my questions, highlighting specific comments and classroom management directions. It was a well laid-out plan. I felt very prepared and quite pleased with myself: *Look at how well I do role drama. Look at how organized I am. I am going to get some great data today, I just know it.*

The session was, of course, absolute chaos. For the kids, the opening of those smaller boxes (boxes containing little paleontologist kits, with miniature excavating tools and plaster dinosaur bones packed in sand) had the anticipation and energy of Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and everyone's birthday all condensed into one half-hour of ripped-paper madness.

**Kid Thoughts:**

*It was fun to pretend to be an adult scientist: I liked walking around pretending to walk like a scientist.* (Mary)

*It was fun when we opened the box because some people said, "It's scary," and some people said, "It's okay."

(Eva)

*It is just plastic made to look like dinosaur bones. I think it is supposed to make us think we are archeologists.* (Brian)

*What is...what is a role?* (Jonathan)

**My Thoughts:**
Kablooie. Today I found it very difficult to be in role: I had difficulty relaxing. The students were very excited: it had the constant potential to spill into chaos. David was being a silly scientist, putting the paper on his head and spinning about with the magnifying glasses. Alex followed suit, as did two others. There was pushing and grabbing from each group as the kids struggled to get a piece of the paper. So much for sharing and cooperation. This drove me crazy and I didn’t bite my tongue enough.

Act III: Recovery and Discovery

After the chaos of the previous day, I changed tactics. My new lesson plan: Be Open to Possibility and Have Fun. Nothing more complex than that. For the final three days of this phase of the role drama, I invited interested students to join me in a brainstorming session each morning during shared reading. During these conversations, we reviewed what the scientists had discovered the previous day, and we thought about how those discoveries might be realized and played in the upcoming session. Through these morning collaborations, the students and I co-created a story that took on a life of its own, propelling the class and myself forward into each new day.

Let me pause for a moment to explain the story of The Sealed Box. The story was lived and played out by the student participants and myself each day. It was refined and reflected upon during the group brainstorms preceding each session, as well as in the debriefs following each session:

A rich man named Master BR had a big collection of museum artifacts that he wanted studied. So he sent them in a large box to our science laboratory called The Dinosaur Excavators (TDE) for the scientists to study. TDE is located in Burnaby. The box arrived via a late-night motorcycle courier, which was witnessed only by the night custodian. It is the job of TDE to prepare the bones for a museum exhibit. This museum exhibit would be a tourist attraction, suitable for tourists arriving by busload, with cameras around their necks. Roles that the children assumed included: scientist, medical doctor, veterinarian, archeologist, security guard, chemical expert, custodian, the sign and museum designer, the language specialist, and Miss. Kitty—the reporter and radio announcer. My roles were John T. News (reporter), and the scientist Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar.

Kid Thoughts:

It's a bit noisy but very exciting. (Patti)
I liked figuring out what the symbols meant because it made me think about being a scientist. (Brianne)

I preferred to be a person sitting in a park. It felt very good. (Jesse)

My Thoughts:

I think my favourite part of the two weeks was today when Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar passed out in the middle of the lab due to the sight of the blood. I got to totally ham it up, which I love. We all had a good giggle over that.

It is interesting that Tom has assumed the role of Security Guard/Army Guy (his words) and is handing out blue tickets to scientists in the lab who are misbehaving. Three tickets and you are fired! He has just made a deal with Dr. Sun Sun (who was caught bashing the bones) that he won’t give him a ticket now for this infraction, but if he does it again, he will
give him two at once. What mirrored surface am I seeing reflected back to me here?

As I walked about the lab in the role of Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar, I found it hard not to ask questions that were...well, teacher-ish: Content driven questions, questions that suggest a right or wrong answer. My multiple roles are: teacher, participant, and researcher. I perceive myself on equal footing with the students when I am in role as a drama participant, but I wonder what the students think. After all, I have chosen to be head of the science lab. What would happen if I took on a role that has no perceived authority?

Reflection

As I sift through the words and stories spoken and played out by my students during The Sealed Box, and as I look for the lessons offered by my reflective journal in search of my "better, truer idea" (O'Reilley, 1993, 114) of teaching and learning, three themes have emerged: The first theme is the power of possibility that comes from the shifting of teacher role, the second theme is of the releasing of control, and the third theme is of the living of engagement that contributes to meaningful learning. These themes are reflections of my learning as a teacher. In experiences of role drama, the reminder by Fels and McGivern (2002) that, "a collective sharing of experience and reflections among participants following the performative exploration: what happened...what insights of feelings or questions emerged, what might have been learned from the experience?" provides critical insights into learning. In this case, my learning is about my teaching process and how I respond to pedagogical moments. This learning is reflective of my purpose in undertaking this work to consider how I might best support engaged happy learners in the classroom, and how I might reinvigorate my teaching practice with energy and inspiration.

Shift

Teachers of early primary grades are called upon, everyday, to inhabit a multitude of roles to meet children's needs. At once, we assume roles of teacher, guide, coach, entertainer, nurse, advocate, lawyer, psychologist, parent, disciplinarian, nurturer …and so on. Such roles are necessary in helping young children navigate the complex world of schools, classrooms, and playgrounds. Aitken, Fraser, and Price (2007) assert that stepping outside of traditional teacher roles, such as illustrated above, allows new spaces of learning to open. This new space holds the seeds for authentic, personal and meaningful moments of discovery and growth. For example, the student who observed, "I liked figuring out what the symbols meant because it made me think about being a scientist" had the opportunity to think as a scientist, to think creatively about the meaning of the mysterious symbols on the box. In doing this she followed her own train of thought and creativity, unencumbered by teacher direction, and discovered her own space of meaningful learning.

The purposeful shifting into new roles and dynamics by both teachers and students is readily facilitated by creating opportunities for role drama in the classroom. It allows teachers and students to try on new social roles by stepping into someone else's shoes and trying on that new voice or way of being (Tarlington & Verriour, 1991). One student referred to this most explicitly when she stated: "It was fun to pretend to be an adult scientist. I liked walking around pretending to walk like a scientist." The experience of inhabiting the body of an adult and imagining how a scientist would walk and move through space was both powerful and enjoyable for this student. This trying on of new social roles has the potential to build empathy, understanding, and consideration for the life experiences of others. Jackson and Kerr-Norfflett (1997) state this most eloquently in terms of understanding multiple perspectives: "The simple realization that there are other points
of view is the beginning of wisdom" (2).

Shifting roles also allows students and teachers to develop responses to challenging situations. An example of this learning comes from observing the student who "assumed the role of Security Guard/Army Guy and is handing out blue tickets to scientists in the lab who are misbehaving." This student exhibited challenging behaviors in class and was learning positive behaviors with the aid of a token system. This student had the opportunity to become the behavioral authority, and in doing so experienced a sense of empowerment that could not exist in our traditional teacher/student dynamic. Haight, Black, Ostler and Sheridan (2006) describes this form of social role play as being a means for children to construct meaning from challenging situations, a way to "transform threatening events into occasions for mastery or even celebration" (210).

Most importantly, shifting into new roles and engaging fully in the role drama allowed new relational opportunities between my students and myself. Grumet (1996) asserts, "relation is basic to education" (16). In our daily brainstorms, it was the student's who created the imaginary worlds we occupied: the science lab and the museum exhibit, with all of the players in them. They were the Role Drama experts, not I. My job was to launch the conversation and to scribe the students' ideas. By being a fully engaged participant in the role drama I found myself having conversations with students that I might not have had previously, and listening to students in a new way. This was most profoundly experienced when as Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar I passed out on the floor and listened to the students' debate how to move me to the hospital. As a result of being in this role, I forced the disintegration of my status role as a teacher and inhibited myself from directing their conversation or learning.

The significance of shifting roles and of building new student/teacher relational opportunities is a contribution towards a respectful, trusting, caring classroom environment (Noddings, 1995). It encourages "a sense of collaboration and mutual risk taking" (Aitken et al., 2007, 16). Such an environment will create a foundation for rich, meaningful learning and is "essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 1994, 13).

Release

There is a delicate balance in navigating the space-edge between the positive energies of control and the dominating force of controlling. This balance is perhaps most epitomized in dramatic experiences of learning where children's creativity is foremost a driving force. Ravitch and Wirth (2007) caution that when teachers enter controlling roles and "steamroll" (84) their ideas over those of the students the chance for authentic learning from students and teachers alike is potentially lost.

I am reminded of the day I stumbled over the edge and imposed the needs of my teacher-researcher self on my students and their energetic ideas. Up to that point, the drama and its resulting data was certainly interesting, but apparently (my inner critic informed me) it wasn't serious enough. I was observing and chronicling conversations and anecdotes, but I didn't have any stats, or interview sheets, or Likert scales that the students were filling out. I felt I wasn't being enough of a teacher or enough of a researcher. Thus, I created a plan that I drew from the science curriculum in reference to the dinosaur bone kits. I imposed my ideas on the direction I thought the day should take, and what the children should learn. But the excitement of opening the small boxes overtook any hope of following my plan and sideslipped into chaos. The words "difficult struggle chaos silly" appear in my
reflections. I wanted the learning to be about cooperation and about learning strategies to record scientific discovery, whereas the students just wanted to get inside the boxes and discover their contents. They simply wanted to have fun. It was confronting this energy and new direction that caused me internal conflict. Do I stick to my plan (teach to an objective and get good data!) or follow the student's direction (have fun and discover the mystery!)?

As illustrated by the above example, my most powerful moments of 'stop' came when I found myself confronted with the need to direct, guide, manage, get involved, control the proceedings; moments when I ceased to be in my merged role as teacher/researcher/participant and I allowed the teacher or researcher to dominate; moments when I had to bite my tongue to prevent myself from answering my own questions in order to fill the silent void that children's careful responses require; moments when I had to bite my tongue so as to not get involved with the cleaning crew when they muddled through a tight physical space and say, go around the table go around the table, to maneuver the box into position; moments when I had to actively resist the urge to get involved and control the proceedings.

I am invited to re-imagine this edge of tension between control and controlling in a new constructive way through the words of Lynn Fels. She imagines this edge as being a space where "we bring forth possible new worlds" (Fels, 2004b, 80). This edge of learning is a wonderful, energetic, sparking, expanding, turbulent, exciting place to be. It is filled with hope and wonder, fear and desire, and holds at its centre the opportunity to learn and shift. Remarkably, children will find meaningful and necessary work with minimal adult guidance and intervention (Upitis, 1990). My work with role drama certainly supports this claim. When provided with the space and time to do so, children—like plants in nature—will blossom to become the people that they are meant to be, to discover what they are meant to discover (Brosterman, 1997).

Allowing children to find their own openings and discoveries in their learning requires that I suspend my need to impose controlling in the classroom. Good teaching, or "teaching on the verge of peril" (Schafer as cited in Smithrim, 2003, 58) requires teachers to attend to the interests and needs of the students and to trust that the learning will emerge. The most profound moments of fun and engagement came when I let go and released my control by allowing my character to become fully immersed in the unfolding story, such as a squeamish doctor passing out at the sight of blood. Releasing control does not mean letting go of safety considerations—a responsibility that all teachers of young children are charged with—but it does mean not imposing teacher-held beliefs and ideas on students (Ravitch, 2007).

I was not infrequently confronted with the need to bite my tongue as students suggested ideas during our daily brainstorms. For example, when the idea emerged that we were operating a laboratory called The Dinosaur Excavators located in Burnaby (of all places),[6] my immediate desire was to suggest the students come up with a more glamorous location. How about Paris, or New York? Think of the dramatic potential of an international location! The costumes! The accents! It was the act of resisting the urge to impose my ideas on the students that allowed them to create a story that was authentically theirs. It allowed for students to gain increased confidence in the validity and importance of their voices and ideas as positive members contributing to a democratic community.

Live
In co-creating the story of the sealed box with my students, I felt a daily buzz of energy and excitement that spoke of the students' engagement in their learning. They had fun. In our daily brainstormss, it was the students who created the imaginary worlds we occupied: the science lab, the museum exhibit, and all of the players in it. They were the role drama experts; not I. Shifting creative authority from me to the students gave power and energy to their ideas. It is this vital conversation and practice of students and teachers co-creating meaningful, engaged learning experiences that allows us to shift from notions of schooling to notions of education (Greene, 2001). It is this pressing necessity to shift release live inside education in community with my students that will spark magic and wonder, learning and discovery in the classroom.

The Canadian-based study on arts-informed education entitled Learning Through the Arts (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003) investigated the relationship between school-based arts programs and student engagement. One critical finding was that student involvement in the arts at school contributes to increased engagement in learning. Upitis and Smithrim note, "nearly all parents (90%)—regardless of school type—reported that the arts motivated their children to learn" (Upitis & Smithrim, 2003, 2). Active participation in the arts at school might not necessarily make you smarter, but increased engagement in school can have the effect of opening new doors and possibilities unimagined before, and encourage students to deeply value education, learning, and self-discovery.

Children love to play and have fun. These are two key ingredients towards engaging young children in their learning (Michnick Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer, 2006). Students become motivated to learn when they are deeply interested and passionate about their learning (Aitken et al., 2007). As illuminated in the Learning Through the Arts study, it is easy to make the connection that student engagement and active participation contributes to success in learning. Engagement begets success begets a sense of fun and the desire to learn more and (hopefully) the desire to "be involved in the lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity" (Upitis & Smithrim, 2003, 48).

After the disastrous results of my highly planned session, I recognized that the only specific outcome I could 'plan' for would simply be to have fun. That would be the plan from which the curriculum of the role drama would emerge. Having fun is, of course, vital to the experience of young children. Asking the question "did I have fun today?" is most often the barometer that kids use to determine whether they had a good day at school or not. A fun activity more often than not means playing in the block centre during activity time, or playing outside at recess. I value the importance and necessity of building in time during my day to address skills—after all, where would the concert pianist be without the benefit of scales and arpeggios—but how often have I heard my students wax enthusiastically about that fun printing activity or that scintillating phonics lesson?

Ferguson (2003) asserts: "We need a curriculum that makes kids happy to go to school" (2). What could such a curriculum look, sound, and feel like? How would it be supported? What kind of physical spaces would be needed for such a curriculum to be expressed? What kind of new school-based policies would emerge from such a curriculum? What would happen if our shared, collective mandate were simply: teach to a sense of fun and happiness? Imagine that. Imagine how that would change the experience of all who enter a school: kids, families, and staff. Imagine how that might change educational policy and expectation of what is understood to be important in the education of children.

**Why I Teach**
I teach to live. I teach to share. I teach to make a difference. I teach because that is what I was called to do. I teach to pay my bills and secure my pension. I teach because I love children. I teach because it is an important job. I teach because I feel I am making a valuable contribution to society. I teach because it is the right thing to do. I teach because I have been inspired to learn by the great teachers in my life: classroom teachers, sports coaches, and private music teachers. Most significantly, I teach to learn.

Investigating a question, following a line of inquiry, reveals new questions and new possibilities. Fels led to Appelbaum led to role drama led to van Manen. Questioning leads to inquiry leads to discovery leads to possibility. Through the inquiry of this role drama project I learned the importance that young children place on having fun in school. I have learned (and relearned) that as children work through and negotiate their personal discoveries, play really does equal learning (Michnick Golinkoff et al., 2006). I have learned the value of bravely asking children, what are you curious about; what do you want to learn about today? …and, to follow their lead. I have learned to lighten up in the classroom and to limit my controlling instincts because then student learning has space to emerge. I have learned a little about using the great tool of role drama to increase student agency and engagement in their learning. I have learned to listen attentively to my own 'stops' and moments of resistance, to help me be a better teacher. I strive to teach not to grand social ideals but to this child, this place right here, this moment right now. Mostly I have been reminded that children's learning and development requires patience, pacing, and time to unfold. And I have learned to trust that new horizons will continue to emerge inside the classroom as my students and I share in community of learning.

Epilogue: A Scene Culled from Memory

Spring.

The end of the day.

Today, we listened to the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: The Ode to Joy. The German text includes the words Freude and Elysium: Joy and Paradise. I asked the kids: What is Paradise? No response. So I changed the question: Where is Paradise? Hands went up immediately. JD, in his infinite wisdom, said: You know when you are inside the classroom? And then you leave to go outside to play? That's Paradise.\[7\]

Calm has filled the room—the kind of calm that can only descend after students have fled the classrooms and hallways for the freedom of Paradise outside the classroom. I am at my table, ruffling through some written reflections about the day's role drama. And I stumble upon a treasure, a gift that holds me, stopped by the simplicity of its words. I translate it from it from its beautiful, brave kid writing:

*Today I was working on a sign for the lab when I heard a loud YES!! Me and Bob rushed out of the lab. It was Dr. Larvae. I was relieved there was something in his hands. It was a dinosaur bone! We went back up the stairs a couple of minutes later. He had a special presentation for the bones. It was so cool. Everybody was happy today. Even the boss of the lab was happy about the bones. I liked today.* (Bree)

"Even the boss was happy." That would, of course, be Dr. Gerhard Wunderbar—happy about the successful excavation of bones by this capable team of Grade 1 scientists. But it
would also have been me, Mr. Hughes—happy that my students were engaged in meaningful, playful, mindful work. Happy that I was held—suspended—deep inside this experience. Happy that now, in this moment, magic and wonder was being unearthed (and picked and bashed and shouted and ripped and unveiled and created and acted and lived) and re-lived again in my classroom. I was happy that, stopped inside a treasured moment, Paradise was found inside the classroom.

References


Endnotes

[1] 14 years as a classroom teacher and three years as a special education assistant.


[3] "My Thoughts" and "Kid Thoughts" are quotations from the data that I collected during the study. I write them in italics in order to distinguish the data from the body of this article. All names used with children's quotations are pseudonyms.

[4] I prepared the sealed box during the lunch hour before I introduced the role drama to the students. I took an empty box, filled it with six small dinosaur bone kits, and wrapped it all up with paper and tape. Such kits are found in science resource catalogues, with small plaster dinosaur bones imbedded in a sand block, complete with replica tools such as one might find at an archeological dig. I chose to add the kits to the sealed box because my students that year were particularly engaged by bones and bugs and all things scientific.

[5] The box used in the role drama was a large Budget moving box, with labels to direct movers to unload boxes in the Master B/R, Girls B/R, etc. B/R means, of course, Bed Room.

[6] Burnaby is a suburban community just east of Vancouver.

[7] This clever, witty student actually said that.

About the Author

Scott Hughes is a PhD student in Curriculum Studies at Queen's University, and holds a M.Ed. from UBC. He is curious about teacher pedagogy, arts education, and supporting engaged learners in the early primary classroom. He has worked in public education for 17 years, 14 as a classroom teacher and 3 as a special education assistant. In his work as a teacher, Scott has co-created two large-scale musical theatre productions and video documentaries for children, titled Dreams (2000) and The Angel Diaries (2003), and has recorded a children's CD titled Happiness Runs (2008). Scott also works as a professional harpist. Selected credits include The Vancouver Opera Orchestra, The Calgary Philharmonic, The Vancouver Playhouse, and Winter Harp.