Martians Invade the Classroom: A Workshop in Language Learning

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There are many instances in literature of characters being drawn through everyday portals into fantastic worlds. Lewis Carroll's Alice falls down a rabbit hole into her adventures in Wonderland; C. S. Lewis' Lucy goes through a bedroom wardrobe to enter Narnia; and Jack climbs a beanstalk up into the clouds to find the Giant's castle. But perhaps there is no instance so astounding as when the radio found in the family parlor became the vehicle for thousands of Americans to be transported into what they believed was an actual account of a Martian invasion of New Jersey. On October 30, 1938, listeners across America became both audience and actor in Orson Welles' dramatization of H.G. Wells' novel *War of the Worlds*, as they both heard and reacted in panic to a so-called news flash.

The Power of Drama

Drama has great power to draw audiences and participants into fictional worlds (O'Neill, 1995). We can experience this power whether we are in the comfort of our own home, a seat in a dimly lit theater or a language learning classroom. Using drama, the teacher can provide the arena in which students can become both audience and actor in a fictional world, enabling students to become lost in their imagination and less self conscious about speaking in front of others. Through drama the student can be transported into another space in which language can be stretched, challenged and enriched from the outside in, as well as the inside out.

In the language learning classroom drama can work well regardless of the level of language proficiency the student brings to the experience. Drama in role protects the participant from the fear of using language incorrectly. In the lower grades puppets and masks provide the safety and distance that young children need by allowing them to project their voice onto a physical object. Older students can gain comfort speaking before a group by adopting a new persona and becoming caught up in a group process.

Despite its proven effectiveness as a pedagogical tool in Great Britain and more recently in the United States, American educators have been somewhat reluctant to adopt drama in educational settings as a teaching strategy in their classrooms. The reasons for this vary but a primary fact may well be lack of familiarity with this approach. Often the teacher misinterprets drama as *putting on a play* and may feel uncomfortable with such an undertaking. The truth is that improvisational drama can be very easily put to use with little or no background in drama or theater. In fact, it may even be to the teacher's advantage to have no experience on the stage, since their preconceptions of what drama should be, might compel them to turn simple drama activities into theatrical productions.

In this paper, we wish to outline a workshop developed with 5th graders in the Jersey City public schools. The drama activities we chose were selected to stimulate the imagination, create a passion in the children to ask questions and allow them to speak with relative comfort before the group. The choice of Orson Welles' historic radio dramatization of H.G. Wells' novel, *War of the Worlds*, was made for three reasons: 1) the story was included in the classroom literature book and therefore enabled us to build upon content already in the curriculum (Cooper and Pikulski, 1996); 2) the story could be easily adapted to a format that included reading, writing, questioning, and public speaking; and 3) the historical occurrence provided material for a number of simple drama activities that could be learned by the classroom teacher and hopefully applied to other stories in the future. Below we have broken down the workshop into a series of steps that can be adapted and used by the classroom teacher.

Step One: Stimulating the Class's Interest

The success of role-play in the classroom depends entirely upon the students' commitment to the drama.

If the students do not enter the imaginary world of the story, the workshop will be forced and unproductive. In order to stimulate curiosity and involvement we begin by employing a simple puzzle. The teacher writes a cryptograph on the blackboard constructed of ideograms and broken lines. It is a format that children are familiar with from watching television and through such guessing games as *hangman*. The cryptograph may look something like Figure 1.

The teacher allows the students to ponder the cryptograph for a moment and then explains that she has written a message on the board that the class will work on together to solve. Children are invited to raise their hands and suggest a single letter. If the letter is included in the cryptogram, she fills in the appropriate space and reveals the letter(s); if not, the letter is written down next to the cryptograph in the *graveyard* so that the letter will not be suggested again. Eventually, a child will decipher the intended message: "Are there really such things as UFOs?"

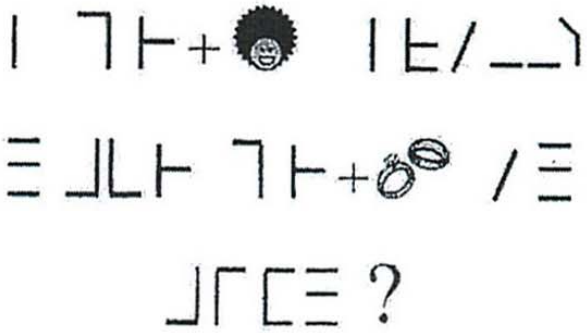


Figure 1.
Cryptograph: Tabone and Albrecht use incomplete and symbolic orthography in their lessons. The message in the above is "Are there really such things as UFOs?"

Step Two: Introducing *War of the Worlds*

After discussing the question of the existence of UFOs and life on other planets, the teacher introduces the topic of Orson Welles' radio drama of 1938. The teacher may wish to begin with a simple statement, such as, "During the 1930s before there was television, people used to listen to programs on the radio. It was the night before Halloween and Orson Welles, an actor and future movie director, decided this would be a good time to play a scary trick on the people who were listening to his show. He began the show as if it were just a regular music program. At a certain point he broke into the program with a news bulletin that strange explosions were being observed by scientists on the surface of the planet Mars. He then brought onto the show what people thought was a real astronomer, named *Professor Pierson*, and asked him some questions. "If I brought Professor Pierson to this classroom, what would be some of the questions you would ask him?"

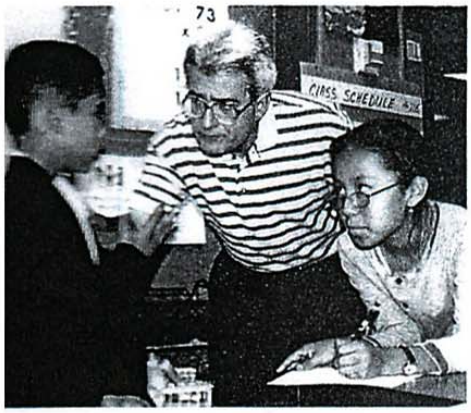
After the students have shared a number of questions, the teacher may wish to stop and ask them to write out three or four on paper. This is a good opportunity to teach children about the"*5 Ws and 1 H* that are used by news people all around the world in asking questions. The teacher asks the children to come up with at least one question for each of the *5 Ws* (what, where, when, why, who and how). The teacher then asks the children if they know what a press conference is and then suggests to the children that they become reporters. The teacher then asks the class what modifications can be made to the classroom so the space can look like a place where a press conference could be held. The teacher explains to the class that they will be moving into an imaginary situation and that when she steps to the side of the room, out *of the spot light*, she will make some changes to her appearance in some minor way. (She could put on a sports coat or a laboratory frock, for example; however, no change of attire can work just as well. Remember this is informal drama and not a theater piece). She explains that when she returns to the front of the room she will be in role as Professor Pierson.

Professor Pierson (the teacher in role) begins with a short statement explaining that she is an astronomer at the Princeton Observatory in New Jersey and has personally witnessed the explosions earlier this evening. The Professor downplays the questions of the children by assuring them that the explosions are purely natural in origin and certainly do not suggest the existence of life on the planet Mars. The teacher's tone could evoke very subtly that she is hiding what is truly going on. (You are probably aware that many current television programs and magazines have turned this theme into a lucrative business). After a series of questions, Professor Pierson steps to the side of the room and *out of the spot light* to return to her work at the observatory in Princeton.

She leaves the drama space briefly and returns out of role. The teacher then discusses what has just happened by asking a number of questions such as, "What are some of the things that Professor Pierson had to say? What did you think about what she was saying? Do you trust her?" The teacher then asks the students to write down some of the things that they learned from Professor Pierson about the strange explosions as if they were reporters covering the story.

Step Three: *Science Beat*

The teacher explains that there is going to be a science show about the strange explosions of incandescent gas on Mars and asks the students what other types of guests they believe should be on the show. Next the teacher and students can again make some minor changes to the classroom that would suggest a set for a TV program: perhaps a desk with a globe or a plant on it flanked by a chair on either side. The teacher (in-role) announces:



Carmine Tabone listens to an explanation articulated by a student.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another edition of *Science Beat* the show that investigates curious phenomenon in the world of science. Last week we discussed Global Warming and asked the question, 'Is the earth really getting warmer?' On tonight's show, we will be discussing one of the most unusual stories to take place in recent years in the world of science. I am referring, of course, to the strange explosions on the planet Mars that were witnessed earlier this week by astronomers from around the world. In order to help us to get to the bottom of the matter, we are privileged to have with us tonight, a number of world famous scientists and other guests." The host may wish to ask her guests a few background questions about their careers in order to relax the child and to help establish character before asking their opinions of what has occurred on Mars. The class, as the studio audience, can then ask questions.

Step Four: The News Bulletin

At some point during the discussion on *Science Beat*, the host receives a piece of paper from an assistant. The host stops the action and, in a very grave voice, announces: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I have just been handed a news bulletin and I will read it to you:"'The Governor of New Jersey has confirmed that aircraft, apparently of extraterrestrial origin, have landed on a farm owned by a Mr. Joseph Wilmuth near the state capital in Trenton.' We will now interrupt our regularly scheduled program and go directly to our action reporters who are on the scene at Grover's Mill, New Jersey."

Step Five: On the Scene at Grover's Mill

The teacher divides the students into pairs and explains that one of them is a reporter and the other, a State Police officer, on site at Grover's Mill. The New Jersey State Police have blocked off the site to keep people from panicking and the reporters are trying to gain access to the area. The reporters should take notes on what they observe as well as on the information she or he receives from the police.

At this point, the teacher asks the class who are some of the other people at the site that a reporter would want to interview. Together they can list the possibilities on the board and once again using the 5 Ws and the 1 H, the students can draw up a list of questions they might want to ask of those on the scene. The teacher can then divide the class into new pairs and who continue the work of interviewing eyewitnesses who may be willing to speak of what they observed before the police arrived.

Step Six: Preparing the Evening News

The teacher announces that the students have very little time before the evening news starts and that the reporters must prepare their stories immediately. In classes where there are children of different cultural backgrounds, the teacher may wish to leave open the possibility of a child writing the report in a different language. The students write up their reports and then prepare to present them at an improvised news desk that has been set up in the front of the room. The teacher may wish to assume the role of co anchor so as too clearly establish a news format and to keep the action moving. "Good evening. This is Jill Jenkins with the six o'clock news. The Knicks win, the Mets lose, more rain is on the way, and right now I turn it over to Carl (or Carla) Phillips for tonight's lead story about an extraterrestrial landing in Grover's Mill, New Jersey. Carl(a), take it away." This brief introduction by the teacher clearly invokes a familiar television format and allows the child to speak comfortably and believably in role to the rest of the class.

After a few of the students have finished with their reports, the teacher suggests to the class that they look at the coverage on another channel. The news could also contain actual footage of the interviews whereby students can reenact scenes of their meetings with eyewitnesses including police officers, scientists, neighbors,

and Mr. Wilmuth and his family. In classrooms where children have written their reports in a different language, this is a good time to allow them to read their reports. This confirms the validity of languages other than English, and allows the English-only children the opportunity of hearing a foreign language report.

Step Seven: Closing the Action

Stepping out of role, the teacher returns to the story of Orson Welles and the infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast of 1938. On Halloween Eve, Mr. Welles fooled more than one million people who were listening to his radio program into believing that Martians had actually landed in New Jersey and were making their way toward New York. People were so scared that they were running through the streets with wet towels wrapped around their heads to protect themselves from the poisonous gases that Orson Welles said the Martians were supposedly using to kill people.

The teacher then asks the students to open their readers to Howard Koch's script used by Orson Welles in his presentation of the *War of the Worlds*. The teacher can then assign parts to different students, including the making of sound effects, and then direct a dramatic reading of the script (a fragment of the script is included in Cooper and Pikulski, 1996; the entire script is included in Cantril, 1982).

Robert Albrecht guides two of his students in a drama technique.

Step Eight: Extensions Across the Curriculum

To extend the interest generated by this drama workshop across the curriculum, the teacher could have the students create a newspaper that chronicles the story of the Martian invasion complete with headlines, feature stories, comic strips, interviews, advice columns and drawings of the events. The workshop also leads naturally into a whole host of art activities including picture books, portraits of Martians, sculptures of creatures from other planets and so on. Teachers wishing to continue with the theme of extraterrestrial life can explore the outer space drama workshops developed by Neelands (1984), O'Neill and Lambert (1982) and Wilhelm and Edmiston (1998).

The workshop also lends itself to opening up several areas of social studies. The students may be assigned to do some archival research at their local libraries and asked to do a report on how newspapers covered the event on the day following the historic broadcast. The ability of this historic newscast to terrify the audience has often been linked to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. The teacher may wish to use this workshop to communicate some of the fears that people had during the era immediately preceding World War II.

Most obviously, the workshop can be a jumping off point for a discussion on the role of media in contemporary society. Students may wish to debate whether limits should be placed on the kinds of things that the media are allowed to broadcast. The teacher may also wish to play the actual recording of the broadcast (readily available on cassette) to the class and ask them to analyze what it is that made the broadcast so believable.

Reflections

By participating in drama students can become highly motivated to participate and become emotionally involved in their work. Morgan and Saxton (1994) write, "Everything that goes on in the classroom must connect with students at both an intellectual and feeling level" (p. 7). With practice students can learn to find the right attitude and vocabulary for their fictional character. The kinds of language that are used in drama will depend on what context has been created and what kind of character is in the improvisation. The policemen on this scene who was seeking to protect the public from panicking will probably have a different point of view than a reporter from a tabloid who is hoping to fan the flames of the public's curiosity. Wagner (1998) points out in her research on the effectiveness of the use of drama in the learning of language skills that the meanings that we exchange with each other through language are found embedded in the social situation that has produced them. This is one of the reasons drama is so effective for language learning because it "directs the attention of the students not just to the subject of the discussion, but to the very language they are using" (Wagner, p. 69).

The drama workshop provides students with language opportunities not often found during formal school periods. Drama talk is expressive and creates dialogue as opposed to being essentially informational as in the traditional classroom setting. In our drama, the whole class can be involved at the same time and be

able to try out language, even foreign languages, to the extent to which they are comfortable. Drama sets the context and provides the students and the teachers with the opportunity to create, enlarge and enrich the ongoing *script* that they themselves are developing. In our workshop the reporters are not really sure, nor are the police on the scene, whether or not aliens from outer space have or have not arrived. It is only as the drama unfolds that the language decisions the actors/audience make reveal what *in fact* is going on, always with the possibility that some new information will appear forcing participants to respond in some new way.

Carmine Tabone demonstrates an emotional response.

Thus drama forces the student to think and speak on their feet, which is how language is tried out, tested and assimilated in real life situations. Very young children who are less inhibited about making mistakes often play at being characters and trying out words and sentences without feeling self-conscious. As children grow older, they become more uncomfortable speaking in front of their classmates. We have visited classes where some children are unable even to share their own names in a group setting when we first begin. Teachers have remarked that they are amazed that some of their students who never verbally participate do so readily in our workshops.

Research shows that drama with students is effective across the continuum of formal schooling from early childhood through university programs. Wagner (1998) reports on twenty-two studies showing the positive results of drama on oral language development and five studies on drama's effect on second language acquisition. Planchat's study (1994) found that second graders who participated in drama workshops had better speaking skills than a comparative group that did not have the drama work. Kao (1994) found that Taiwanese first year college students made notable progress in English after participating in drama.

Improvisational drama is essentially play. Drama invites the students to use language to play with spaces in the story that are latent with possibility. Wagner's research (1998) has lead her to believe that classroom drama is one of the most effective ways to stimulate lively and apt conversation. The teachers role is to help the group work with what is known and extend the drama to create new story moments with language, similar to an art teacher who gives the students an empty canvas on which to work with directions, boundaries and encouragement to paint.

Finally, while there are many wonderful books that have been written on the use of drama in the classroom, we would suggest that attending drama education workshops and seminars is an essential first step to gaining a working knowledge of the many uses of drama across the curriculum. Participating in a drama workshop versus reading about one is similar to seeing a play versus reading the script. Just as a production brings words to flesh, a drama workshop comes alive through the process of the group at work. The workshop we have outlined is a simple first step encouraging teachers to lead their class through drama into the world of the imagination.

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