

# Silent and Strangled No More— Dramaturgy as Pedagogy:

## An application of John Dewey's *How We Think* to student playwrights

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article addresses the need in education to inspire students to write. The author provides educators with a practical model to approach playwriting as professional theatre companies do—the process of dramaturgy. The dramaturgical process is broken down into 4 distinct levels with an emphasis on the third level, which involves the 5-step scientific method. It is revealed that this process of dramaturgy is in keeping with the philosophies outlined in John Dewey's *How We Think*. Educators adopting this model will contribute to the development of both student writing and future generations of playwrights for professional theatres.*

There are two paintings by Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch that exemplify the journey student playwrights often take when crafting their first scripts: 'Anxiety' (1894) and 'The Voice' (1893). The first features a haunted girl amidst a sea of skeleton-like figures who stand menacingly behind her on a bridge. Her hands are clasped around her neck suggesting her strangulation. The environment around her includes a swirling, blood red sky above a blackened, terrifying abyss. In contrast, the second painting is of a woman standing by a calm, moonlit lake. She stands alone. Her arms are confidently clasped behind her back thus exposing her body to the world. Her position draws attention to the swirling, grey-blue masses around her stomach, shoulder, clavicle, and throat. She could be the same girl in the first painting. But this girl has completed a journey of emancipation. She is now free from anxiety and suppression, thus allowing her voice—the swirls—to emerge. She is the student who has faced and conquered the fears and entrapments of writing a play. She is a student playwright.

If ever a teacher has found himself correcting a student's script with a red pen, if ever a teacher has found herself suggesting how a character should behave, if ever a teacher has recommended how a student's story should end, if ever a teacher has searched for answers for a writing student who does not know what to do next, such a teacher is not alone. It takes courage for a teacher to resist the urge to provide the *right answers* to students and to instead create an opportunity for students to discover their *own* answers to difficulties associated with writing. What follows in this article is one teacher's practical application of the concept of dramaturgy, linked to John Dewey's *How We Think*. How did such a paper come to be? A university professor assigned his Master of Education class the task of reading Dewey and finding refreshing, personal, practical applications of the theories. This paper is the synthesis of professional classroom observation and experience in a high school drama program with prior personal experience as a student of playwriting at the National Theatre School of Canada. It is the fusion therefore of the professional and personal beliefs and experiences of one teacher.

The key concept, dramaturgy, has been defined by Playwrights' Workshop Montreal (n.d.) as:

*'the editorial process of analysis, assessment and inspiration for playwrights and their scripts. The process responds to the unique vision of each individual writer, the discipline of the theatre and the ability with which a playwright can communicate his/her ideas to the public. The work is informed by all disciplines of stage craft, acting, direction, choreography, music and design'.*

Professional theatre companies and training schools have a long history of employing this process. In so doing, they have been applying many key concepts of John Dewey's *How We Think*—specifically, the 5-steps of the scientific method. It is time for educators to do the same.

This paper is an invitation to educators to use the dramaturgical approach with their students as a means of strengthening the students' voices and allowing their visions and stories to emerge. It describes how high school teachers can apply the process of professional dramaturgy to better their practice, and by doing so, how they can implement Dewey's ideas into the modern curriculum. Three key questions will be addressed:

- How do teachers and students transform into dramaturgs and writers?
- What are the four stages of the dramaturgical process and how do they relate to Dewey?
- Why is this process valuable beyond its initial use in the classroom?

## TRANSFORMATIONS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The teacher as dramaturg is the bravest role one can accept. As Dewey (1997[1910]) points out, teachers tend to 'have a habit of monopolizing continued discourse' (p. 185). This habit is in direct conflict with the dramaturg's approach of subtly questioning and allowing the writer to speak the majority of the time. The teacher must surrender the image of master and accept the role as fellow learner. She must allow her students the time and space to discover those answers and articulate them. She is on the journey with the student rather than the expert travel agent who has planned the journey, but is not actually with the traveller.

She must also relinquish the notion that there are only right and wrong answers—any teacher who knows exactly how the play *must* be written might wish to write her *own* play. The students must be the ones with the knowledge and power to control the direction of their plays. The teacher must become both the resource person capable of naming 'technical terms' needed for clarity and also the patron of the arts who praises, feeds, and appreciates the curiosity and thoughts of the students. In this second role, she truly embodies Dewey's (1997[1910]) vision to keep alive 'the sacred spark of wonder,' protecting the spirit of inquiry 'to keep it from becoming blasé from overexcitement, wooden from routine, fossilized through dogmatic instruction, or dissipated by random exercise upon trivial things' (p. 34). The preparatory training Dewey (1997[1910]) envisions for teachers would produce good dramaturgs, those who have 'sympathetic and intelligent insight into the workings of individual minds, and a very wide and flexible command of subject-matter—so as to be able to select and apply just what is needed when it is needed' (p. 54). Often, this magic touch, this ability to know what to do and when to do it, is needed at the very beginning of the writing process.

Many high school students are paralyzed by fear of writing. They have been conditioned and taught to regurgitate the technical teachings of grammar and writing and to stand in awe and appreciation of the great literary works of Master Writers such as Shakespeare and Sophocles—no wonder these students doubt their abilities to write! Their curiosity and sense of playfulness (two of Dewey's (1997[1910]) prized human qualities) have been replaced with the need to attain skills. They learn 'imitation, dictation of steps to be taken, mechanical drill' (p. 53). They doubt the need to write a play because the great dramatists have already done it and done it well. They fall into John Locke's category of those who hold a wrong belief because of their deference to and dependence on authority (p. 25). The teacher must thus find a way to restore belief, confidence, and curiosity to struggling students. The need to free the playwright's voice is similar to Dewey's (1997[1910]) perceived need to train thought. This training comes in the form of dramaturgical sessions that consist of four key stages: (a) inspiring them, (b) praising them, (c) training them, (d) sending their voices out. The titles assigned to the four stages focus on the student—the process is about *them*. The number and names of the stages are what have worked for me in my classroom and demonstrate my personal beliefs and understanding of the dramaturgical process.

## THE FOUR STAGES

### Stage 1: inspiring them

The first sessions may be inspirational in nature. Lessons that focus on the need to have good stories told are one aspect of restoring faith in students. Teachers who can find diverse and relevant pleas for writers will easily fill this first step. Feed the students information. Examples include: Norman Jewison's (1999) Academy Awards acceptance speech in which he implores filmmakers to seek out and find 'good stories' (the full text of which is

found at the *Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database*); and the annual report of the Canada Council for the Arts (which sparked the beginning of dramaturgy in this country) in which the health of the theatre is determined to be 'vitaly dependent upon its playwrights and upon the quality of the work they produce' (Playwrights' Workshop Montreal). Empowering students with this knowledge, this inspiration and need for their work is critical.

### **Stage 2: Valuing Them**

Once they believe their stories matter, they reach the second stage, wondering about what to write. The answer can be found in the teacher as dramaturg. Ask a question similar to Dewey's first step in the process of thinking: What perplexes you? When the students answer this, they can begin a search, an investigation that will shed new light on their topics (Dewey, 1997, p. 9). The teacher must then accept them as authorities of their own stories. The teacher must accept that they have been transformed into writers.

The brave teacher has already begun acting as dramaturg by illuminating the students and inspiring them to write. Students now become writers and bring their work to the table—literally. The teacher must now fully be the Dramaturg and conduct the session accordingly. It begins with praise. When writers write, the dramaturg must acknowledge the achievement of writing itself. The writers have already begun a process akin to Dewey's (1997) concept of reflective thought; they have already overcome 'the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value' (p. 13) and have begun to turn over ideas or situations in the scenes that require further investigation and illumination. This is an act deserving of praise. They are now entering the third and most structured stage of dramaturgy.

### **Stage 3: Training Them**

The main dramaturgical session lends itself to an application of the scientific method laid out by Dewey (1997). He suggests five steps that take random, disjointed, or nonessential events and structures them through examination in order to decide if they are true (p. 150). To illustrate the process, the case of Chloe (a student from a past year) is helpful. Our work together as dramaturg and writer can be analyzed according to Dewey's five steps: (a) felt difficulty, (b) location and definition, (c) suggestion of possible solutions, (d) development of reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion, (e) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection.

- a) *felt difficulty*: Chloe brought in a draft of her play for me to read. Upon completion, I was uneasy and concerned about it being performed for a festival in our classroom, which is ultimately what she wanted to do with the script.
- b) *location and definition*: I was able to locate the cause of my unease in the last scene of her play. Her main character, Morgan, kills herself after a long journey encountering abuse from several characters. I had to articulate to Chloe that the message she seemed to be sending out is one of despair. Morgan only conquers her abuse by ending her life. Is this the message she wants to give an audience? Is this the message I can allow a high school play to give out?
- c) *suggestion of possible solutions*: I questioned Chloe: Why does Morgan kill herself? Does she *have* to kill herself? What would happen if she didn't kill herself? *Can* she live? Why does she kill herself at this precise moment? It is critical to recognize that at this stage, dramaturgy should only be in the form of questions. The writer has the right to answer them or ignore them.

- d) *development of reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion*: Chloe articulated back to me these thoughts: she knows plot structure and recognizes the crisis (the moment Morgan decides to kill herself) pays off in a highly theatrical scene for the audience at the climax (the shooting); it has to happen at that exact moment of the story because her encounters throughout the story have built to this decision and Morgan has been pushed to her limit; to not kill Morgan would be to make a fairy-tale ending for a messy topic Chloe felt needed heightened attention; she would rather keep the suicide and not produce the play in the school environment rather than change the ending and have the play done in the festival because to her, this was truthful and people should deal with it since life does not always have tidy endings.
- e) *further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection*: Once the ending was accepted (I did not insist she change it), the play was read in a dramatic reading to her peers (fellow writers in the class) to gauge their reactions and thoughts. Her classmates loved it. They accepted the suicide as truthful. We proceeded to the next step, and allowed the script to go into design and rehearsals. The director chose to stage the suicide in silhouette to heighten the artistry, not glorify the action of suicide. Ultimately, the audience (adults and students) were concerned about the seriousness of the play in its production in the festival, but Chloe had achieved her goal of making them think; they had to deal with the issues she raised.

As a dramaturg, I had used the scientific method to achieve both analysis and synthesis of Chloe's work (Dewey 114; Dewey 115). (1997[1910]) The analysis came by drawing attention and placing emphasis on one specific part (the suicide) of the plot thereby making it significant. Then, we examined the scene in context of the rest of the play to see if it rang true, a process of synthesis.

The reflective process achieved through the dramaturgy affected three people. First, as a teacher, I had to face the difficulty of my uneasiness with the ending—I had to suspend my judgment of it and allow the playwright to consider my questions and ultimately choose her ending since she was the authority. For fear of parents', students', and administrators' reactions, this proved to be 'somewhat painful' as Dewey (1997[1910], p. 13) suggests. For Chloe, it was reflective thinking in its clearest form; she had already overcome 'the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value' (Dewey 1997[1910]), p. 13) by initially writing the scene, thus recognizing that though other teen-suicide stories have been told, hers was unique, urgent, and necessary to tell. She also was able to trust me enough to turn over the questions I asked as possibilities to different endings, but ultimately chose the one most truthful for her. By sharing the choice through rehearsals and a public performance, she challenged both actors and audience. Their unease and discomfort was not enough to make them reject the play (in fact they embraced it), but was enough to make them think about the story and discuss the issues of abuse. Her conclusion was correct.

#### **Stage 4: Sending Their Voices Out**

A production such as Chloe's is just one possible outcome for a script after the dramaturgical work is complete. Other options to consider include further rewrites and sessions, distribution to individuals or theatres for feedback, dramatic readings, and workshops. The importance of stressing to students that the process is not over (even if evaluation in a course is) is important. When the work of the dramaturg is concluded, the playwright has the opportunity to share the play (and his or her new knowledge) with others. The playwright must therefore be articulate and informed about the play in order to defend or change it if necessary. If the teacher as dramaturg has modelled this, then the student has learned a disciplined method for addressing problems as they arise. The

student can use the same five-step process to make decisions on an on-going basis. This is the main reason why students should be encouraged to write plays. It represents Dewey's (1997) connection between discipline and freedom:

*Any mind is disciplined in a subject in which independent intellectual initiative and control have been achieved. Discipline represents original native endowment [the playwright's story] turned, through gradual exercise [dramaturgy], into effective power [the play to an audience]. So far as a mind is disciplined, control of method in a given subject [playwrighting] has been attained so that the mind is able to manage itself independently without external tutelage [sans dramaturg]. The aim of education is precisely to develop intelligence of this independent and effective type—a disciplined mind. (p. 63)*

The disciplined minds of student playwrights are powerful forces. Students who can ponder, question, explain, argue, and suggest answers are becoming articulate and empathetic adults of the world. They are becoming the reflective thinkers we need to shape and lead society. They are the future generations of professional playwrights who will capture the imaginations and social conscience of our times. There is no greater mission for teachers than giving opportunities and training that aim to free the strangled and silent voices of students! The journey of the student playwright is guided by the teacher as dramaturg. Together, they find a path from the bridge to the lake.

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