

Making the Body Visible through Dramatic/Creative Play: Critical Literacy in Neighborhood Bridges

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Executive Summary

This report describes and examines the meaning and use of critical literacy in The Children’s Theatre Company’s Neighborhood Bridges (Bridges) program. Critical literacy is an orientation to reading that includes an understanding of how texts (oral stories, books, media) position readers (listeners/viewers), how readers position texts, and how texts are positioned within social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Critical literacy is central to the philosophy of Bridges, which involves elementary and middle school students in storytelling and creative drama. An important goal of the program is to develop in children the capacity to analyze and challenge dominant social and cultural storylines as they create new storylines through imaginative retellings and reenactments. Of particular interest in this report is how critical literacy is facilitated via various opportunities for drama/creative play and Teacher Artist interactions with students during the four phases of a typical Neighborhood Bridges session. This report addresses the following overarching question and sub-questions:

What does critical literacy look like in the context of drama/creative play during the Neighborhood Bridges program?

- How do students use their bodies in drama/creative play that supports critical literacy?
- What tools (e.g. body, voice, space, and objects) are made available to students as they use drama/creative play for narrative storytelling? How do these tools allow for a critical probing or reimagining of dominant social and cultural story lines.
- What is the role of Teaching Artists (TAs) in facilitating the use of tools for critical literacy?

Although critical literacy is not a fixed set of practices, the findings in this report identify conditions and tools that support critical literacy as achieved through dramatic play as well as different ways to facilitate such tool use. The report summarizes and provides video clips to illustrate each tool, offers an illustration of an ensemble of narrative tools, and ends with a brief discussion of future directions for critical literacy specific to the creative focus of Bridges.

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Introduction

This report describes and examines the meaning and use of critical literacy in The Children's Theatre Company's Neighborhood Bridges (Bridges) program. Critical literacy is an orientation to reading that includes an understanding of how texts (oral stories, books, media) position readers (listeners/viewers), how readers position texts, and how texts are positioned within social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Critical literacy is central to the philosophy of Bridges, which involves elementary and middle school students in storytelling and creative drama. An important goal of the program is to develop in children the capacity to analyze and challenge dominant social and cultural storylines as they create new storylines through imaginative retellings and reenactments. Among the strategies found to be most effective for inviting and enhancing critical literacy are the following (Behrman, 2006, p. 490): (1) reading supplemental multiple texts; (2) reading from a resistant perspective; and (3) producing countertexts. These practices are central to the Bridges program. Traditional stories are paired with stories that provide supplemental or alternative storylines and perspectives. In addition to appreciating stories, students are encouraged to question, challenge, and probe stories as resistant listeners. Finally, through scene-making and writing, students create countertexts to the stories they have heard and discussed, often imagining and creating scenes or stories of their own from perspectives that challenge the dominant perspective in the original stories. In this way, "critical literacy means practicing the use of language in powerful ways" (Comber, 2001, p. 1).

This report seeks to expand our understandings of critical literacy beyond powerful uses of language to also include the powerful use of bodies, voice, spaces, and objects of a given context in order to forge new tools of narration. Also of interest in this report is how the Teaching Artists present and encourage the use of these narrative tools in ways that promote the students' ability to envision and produce multiple storylines.

Specifically, this report addresses the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

What does critical literacy look like in the context of drama/creative play during the Neighborhood Bridges program?

- How do students use their bodies in drama/creative play that supports critical literacy?
- What tools (e.g. body, voice, space, and objects) are made available to students as they use drama/creative play for narrative storytelling? How do these tools allow for a critical probing or reimagining of dominant social and cultural story lines.
- What is the role of Teaching Artists (TAs) in facilitating the use of tools for critical literacy?

Description of Neighborhood Bridges

Bridges is a 31-week program of storytelling and creative drama for elementary and middle school students intended to help them:

- develop critical literacy skills
- recognize their capacity to become storytellers of their own lives
- develop their abilities to write, speak, and think clearly
- achieve state and national standards for theatre
- improve their achievement in reading and writing

Bridges was founded in 1997 by Peter Brosius, Artistic Director of The Children's Theatre Company (CTC), and Jack Zipes, Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Each week, Bridges brings a teaching artist (TA) into participating classrooms to work collaboratively with the classroom teacher (CT). A typical two-hour Bridges session is composed of four parts:

The Fantastic Binominal: The TA and students spontaneously create a story through free association based on two arbitrarily chosen nouns and a preposition. Then students create their own stories and write them in their Bridges notebook. Each week 2-3 students are asked to present their stories to their peers. The TA and CT coach the students in using gestures and voice to dramatize their story.

Storytelling and Discussion: The TA and CT each tell a tale, often two different versions of the same tale, or tales related to each other. The tales are drawn from an anthology provided with the Bridges curriculum. Over the course of the year, tales are presented from several genres, including fairy tales, pourquoi tales, and myths. The stories are followed by discussion designed to help students think critically about the content of the tales and the implications for their lives.

Scenes and Theatre Games: Students work in small groups to create and perform brief scenes based on the stories they have just heard. The TA leads students in games designed to develop their skills in areas such as focus, diction, gestures, and collaboration.

Writing Games: Students participate in a reflective writing exercise to solidify the day's learning and incorporate the creative energy of their scenes into their own stories.

In addition to the weekly Bridges components students also do the following over the course of the program: create and perform one play at their school and a second play on-stage at CTC; write letters to and receive letters from a pen pal at another Bridges school; and attend a professional production at CTC and meet their pen pal.

Although students do some writing as part of their weekly Bridges' sessions, it is hoped that teachers incorporate some of students' Bridges writing into their regular writing instruction so that students have an opportunity to further develop their stories and their writing skills.

Each week, the TAs and CTs at each school meet for one hour to develop the lesson plans for upcoming sessions.

In 2009-2010, 16 CTs from 10 schools in Minneapolis and Saint Paul participated in the program. Across the 22 participating classrooms there were a total of 557 students involved in the program. Fifteen TAs participated in the program, including the Bridges Program Director and CTC's Director of Community Engagement.

Design and Methods

Participants

Researchers consulted with Bridges leaders to select three of the 22 Bridges classrooms for the sample. The main criterion for choosing the three classrooms was that the selected classrooms must be led by experienced Bridges TAs and CTs in order to increase the possibility of observing critical literacy in action. It was hypothesized that TAs or CTs less familiar with the program would be less likely to thoroughly implement this component of the program. In the resulting sample, all three classrooms were in Minneapolis schools. Grade levels of the three classrooms were as follows: two fifth grade classes and one fifth/sixth grade classroom.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

In March 2010, a single researcher made two visits to each of the three classrooms to observe a routine Bridges session. During each visit, the researcher recorded observations based on the general occurrence of critical storytelling with special focusing on the use of body, voice, space, and objects to craft stories that “do something to audiences.” A digital video camera and digital voice recorder were set up in the classroom to capture the embodied movements and audio of each two-hour Bridges session.

Data Analysis

Digital Video footage was analyzed using qualitative coding procedures informed by grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constant comparative methods (Glasser, 1965) and focused on two types of coding procedures: open and axial coding. Open coding, an iterative process that began during data collection, involved exploring possible categories or themes that emerged across data sources. Axial coding involved identifying the most salient categories based on open coding and rereading all data to code according to these categories. During this stage, the research team noted connections and contradictions among categories that led to combining categories, forming sub-categories, deleting categories that were contradicted by data, and assessing the relevance of categories to the research questions. This coding process led to the emergence of two sets of data-driven patterns and their related subgroups. These sets are elaborated in the next section on findings: (1) Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play (2)

Facilitating Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play. In this report, tool use focuses specifically on use of body, voice, space, and objects.

Once these two sets of patterns emerged, all video footage was reviewed and searched for examples of each. These examples were compiled within each category and then entered into a chart that listed the school, a brief summary of the example, the phase of the Bridges session in which the example occurred. The chart also included a column for comments that were sometimes included to provide more information about a particular example. Finally, examples that represented those most typical and atypical of the category were identified for further analysis and discussion in the next section on findings.

Findings

This section focuses on the salient patterns of critical literacy that were evident in the students' creative play with various emergent tools of storytelling and/or drama during the Neighborhood Bridges sessions and through the direct feedback and/or interventions from the Teaching Artists during these sessions. Of particular interest was how critical perspectives were evident in embodied work such as dramatic play, scene making, rehearsing, and scene performances.

Creativity and play appear to hold potential for student-initiated critical literacy. Although students were often given specific directives for theatre games and scenes, they were able to use their imaginations and bodies to narrate their own stories, thus speaking back to those they have heard or experienced. These critical enactments often took the form of amplification, humor or parody, which served to disrupt normative bodily habits and ways of being. In this sense, the young actors grabbed their audience's attention through interrupting commonplace notions of space, posture, movement, and vocalization, in ways that heightened attention to issues of gender and authority, two topics of particular interest to pre-adolescent students. Thus playfulness both in the process of creation and in the product (the scene) sometimes carried the most important messages that cut to the quick of students' concerns about the social worlds they inhabit and interpret. Interested in these moments when the body is made visible—rather than taken for granted—this study focuses on how creative play in conjunction with various tools of narration make explicit some of the assumptions that remain invisible via the use of language alone.

In addition to the focus on critical uses of the body (making the body visible) and the tools involved, this study also attends to the special role of the TAs to notice and work with the capacity for critical literacy that children bring to the table. So in addition to naming and describing tools for critical storytelling, this study also reports the different ways in which the TAs facilitated the experimentation and appropriation of these tools.

Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play

The first set of patterns that emerged involved students' use of certain devices or "tools" during their creative play and storytelling. These tools were used in ways that made their bodies visible as active entities in the process of storytelling. In many cases, the use of these tools offered opportunities for alternative perspectives or critical renderings of the original story lines. Among

these various tools, four categories emerged: 1) Repurposing Space and Objects; 2) Purposeful Enunciation; 3) Body as Narrative Tool; 4) Staging and Theatrical Terminology.

Repurposing Space & Objects

This category involved students demonstrating their capacity for repurposing the existing classroom space and objects into new spaces or narrative props for creative play and experimentation with storylines.

Purposeful Enunciation

This category involved students demonstrating the capacity to emphasize the enunciation of their words in order to highlight or disrupt dominant storylines.

Body as Narrative Tool

This category involved students using their bodies as an expressive medium for storytelling, communicating facets of narrative such as emotion, animation, tempo, and stillness.

Staging and Theatrical Terminology

This category involved students appropriating the constructs of the theater discourse and its notions of staging, costume and mise-en-scene into their creative play and critical rendering of story lines.

Facilitating Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play

In addition to noting the various tools for critical storytelling, this study also names the patterns of interaction that the Teaching Artists played in introducing, encouraging, and/or facilitating the use of these creative tools for storytelling.

A typical, two-hour Neighborhood Bridges session includes four phases: 1) The Fantastic Binominal; 2) Storytelling and Discussion; 3) scenes and Theatre Games; 4) Writing Games (See “Description of Neighborhood Bridges” section for more detailed explanation of these phases). While the patterns of tool use were observed in all four phases of the Neighborhood Bridges session to some degree, they were most evident in the scenes and Theatre Games phase. This may be due to the fact that the activities of this Bridges component involve the students in full-bodied movement and thus have a more explicit focus on the embodied—rather than verbal—components of storytelling. That said, the teaching artists used a variety of approaches to facilitate use of the tools. Among these patterns of facilitation, four categories emerged: 1) Explicit Dramatic Role-Play; 2) Pre and Post-scene Direction; 3) Audience Priming; and 4) Purposeful Retake.

Explicit Dramatic Role-Play

This category involved activities during any of the four phases in which the TA would lead the students through an activity that explicitly involved the students in practicing one or more of the tools for developing critical literacy. This explicit role-play often occurred during scene games when TAs would model specific ways to use their bodies, to convey emotions for example, and then would ask the students to practice the same moves.

Pre and Post-scene Direction

This category involved occasions in which the TA would offer verbal direction related to the use of a given tool or set of tools. In the case of pre-scene direction this facilitation may involve directorial suggestions to prompt the students' thinking about how their staging sets a story in motion. Post-scene direction may involve the highlighting of specific ways in which a group of students used a given technique to change the storyline.

Audience Priming

This category involved TAs interaction with the audience during the scene performances in which the TA asks the audience to become critical consumers of the scene by paying attention to both the story and the tools that the actors use in their storytelling. Common questions during this pattern of facilitation included: "What happens when he starts to act out the story with his body?" and "What does it do to you when he speaks in this way?"

Retake

The final category is that of retake in which the TAs asked a student or group of students to "redo" a scene. The purpose of redoing a scene may be for one or more of the following reasons: 1) To encourage improvisation and appropriation of tools; 2) To clarify and/or complicate the narration; 3) To promote deeper engagement with the story; or 4) To encouraging equitable and broad participation. Whatever the motivation for the retake, the process of redoing the scene ultimately encourages students to re-envision the scene in ways that open up opportunities to imagine alternative storylines or ways of representation.

Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play

The video and audio-recordings of class discussions included several instances of students experimenting with and then using the various tools, in some cases for the purposes of challenging storylines and in others for purposes of elaboration. Often these instances occurred when TAs introduced an alternative way of conveying meaning. The examples below exhibit instances in which the students are experimenting and/or appropriating the different types of tools in ways that allowed for creative disruption of the original storylines.

Repurposing Space & Objects

This category involved students demonstrating their capacity for repurposing the existing classroom space and objects into new spaces or narrative props for creative play and experimentation with storylines. In the following video clip, a group of students repurpose the space and objects of the classroom in order to revise the storyline of Icarus and Deadalus in their scene.



To watch full video clip visit:

https://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed.php?media_id=68362&live=true

In this example, the students used the classroom space in ways not ordinarily permitted. The front of the class, traditionally a teacher space, has been transformed into a student-centered place of storytelling—a stage. In all of the Bridges sessions observed there was a symbolic rearranging of the desks and chairs, often accompanied by collective chanting led by the TA, which signaled a transformation of the classroom space.

The transformation of the classroom space allowed students to re-imagine the floor and chairs as narrative props to re-write the ending of the story. Through repurposing the floor and chairs as an underground tunnel, the students wrote a route of escape into the story of Icarus and Daedalus. Instead of having the characters of Icarus and Daedalus remain captured in the prison of King Minos, as was narrated in the original story, the students revised the story to build in the opportunity for two new characters, Daedalus's daughters, to escape from prison through a tunnel. In escaping from the prison, the characters avoided the tragic death of Icarus. This tunnel of escape was created through creative repurposing of the classroom chairs as escape route.

Encouraged to repurpose the space and objects available to them, the students in this group were able to more readily imagine and produce an alternative ending that features girls as problem solvers who devise an escape route. In the post-scene discussion the students explained that Daedalus and Icarus re-imprisoned the girls after their first escape because the girls had escaped on their own without telling their male family members. But the girls persisted and escaped again, crawling through the “tunnel” of chairs they devised for their successful escape.

Purposeful Enunciation

This category involved students demonstrating the capacity to emphasize the enunciation of their words in order to highlight or disrupt dominant storylines. In the following video clip, students practiced the use of diction when speaking to purposefully enunciate their words.



To watch full video clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68100>

In this example the students practiced enunciation as a way of expressing clear ideas to the audience. In this case, attention to enunciation rather than increased volume was presented as an alternative way to convey meaning, an alternative approach to conveying power on stage. In other NB sessions, distinct articulation was presented as another way to represent and command power on stage, without having to yell or dominate a space physically. In this sense, the students experimented with alternative approaches to representing power and character complexity through manner of delivery. The ability to add connotation to the meaning of one's lines through the tenor and enunciation of words is an important tool for revising storylines, especially in the case of collaborative scene performances when character roles are quickly distributed and students are on their own to breathe vitality into what may feel like a static character.

Body as Narrative Tool

This category involved students using their bodies as an expressive medium for storytelling. In certain cases the body communicated transformation through symbolic animation. In other cases the rhythm and pacing of the body's motion communicated mood or emotion. In addition to conveying narrative mood, emotion, and tempo, the body also communicated silence and stillness. In the following video clip, a group of students used various forms of embodied animation to symbolize character transformations.



To view full video clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68363>

In this example, the group of students using movements with their body to represent a transformation from human to animal, and animal to animal. The students' scene is based on the Greek myth of King Midas who turns everything he touches into gold, including the food he eats and those he loves such as his daughter. In the students' retelling of the tale, King Midas' touch does not turn objects to gold, rather it turns people into animals. In the scene above, King Midas turns his wife and children into rabbits. To communicate this transformation to the audience, the student actors spin their bodies to symbolize the transformation. Whereas the turning of objects to gold has a tragic end for King Midas in the Greek version of the myth, the students' retelling omits the tragedy, including the ability to turn into animals as a fanciful and playful gift from their father King Midas.

The report from the first year of the critical literacy study ended with the following statement:

Thus playfulness both in the process of creation and in the product (the scene) sometimes carried the most important messages that cut to the quick of students' concerns about the social worlds they inhabit and interpret. The challenge for TAs is to work with the capacity for critical literacy that children bring to the table.

The example in the video clip demonstrates the capacity for critical literacy emanating from the social worlds that students inhabit and interpret. Perhaps the students constructed an alternative ending to avoid the sadness of imagining a father's loss of his daughters or in order to experience the power of creating a scenario that allowed the daughters to live rather than be silenced in gold. Whatever their inspiration, the creative ingenuity of having the daughters spin into rabbits shows the students to be master storytellers who confidently change the plot and interrupt the story's message to accommodate their emotional needs and world views, thus demonstrating their capacity for critical storytelling.

Staging and Acting Terminology

This category involves students appropriating the constructs of the theater discourse and its notions of staging, costume and mise-en-scene into their creative play and critical rendering of story lines. In the following video clip, students used staging to heighten the sense of conflict in the retelling of their story.



To view the full video visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68750>

In this scene, the tension between the Chancellor and Prime Minister, as two power brokers in conflict, is heightened by the split focus staging. The messenger and the Prime Minister's wife enter the Chancellor's space for negotiations. The Chancellor retains his power in the story despite his seated position at stage right. The students incorporated specific staging techniques into their scene-making that communicated the way power works in the story.

Facilitating Tools for Developing Critical Literacy through Drama/Creative Play

The video and audio-recordings of class discussions included examples that show the teaching artists (TAs) working to model and encourage use of the tools presented in the previous section. In some cases the tools were presented and practiced during the scene games. In other cases, they were highlighted or mentioned within the framework of a scene performance. In nearly all cases, the tools were presented as practices to "play with" or as a means of experimentation. These categories of tool facilitation are elaborated with examples below.

Explicit Dramatic Role-Play

This category of facilitation involved the TA leading the students through an activity that explicitly involves the students in practicing one or more of the narrative tools of disruption. In the following video clip, the students are involved in a theater game or dramatic activity that asks them to convey certain emotions using only their bodies and no words.



To watch full video clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68357>

In this example, we see the students pretending that they are different characters from the stories they have just heard, which in this case included the Greek myths of King Midas, Paris and the Golden Apple, and Icarus and Daedalus. The TA guides the students through the activity, calling out to them, "You are King Midas rising up ... Now pretend that you are touching something and turning it to gold ... and now you realized that the thing you just touched was your daughter ... No talking. Show me just with your body." In response, the students explore different ways in which their bodies can be used as tools of narration to convey meaning that either enhances or intentionally contradicts the words they are saying. In using their bodies as yet another mode of narration, the students increase their capacity to represent multiple interpretations within a single enactment.

In some cases, the dramatic role-play was more explicit. In the following video clip, for example, the TA uses the "2 people in the middle" activity to model, discuss, and practice different ways of showing power through body positioning.



To watch full video clip: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68355>

In this example the TA creates a space to play with spatial positioning, props, and stance as tools for narration. She also poses questions to the students such as, "What are the different ways we show power?" Rather than directly teaching the students what to do, the TA extends invitations through repetition, summary, and additional props for learning through doing. She asks the children a classic question in critical literacy: "Who has the power?" and uses this question as a starting point for exploring how power can be represented through the body and its positioning. When the students initially represent power as embodied in a strong, upright stance, at times with fists clenched, the TA "freezes" the scene and asks the class about the relationship between the body representing power and the body representing helplessness. She asks students to focus on what they see in the actors' bodies and stances, and then moves students to connect what they see with ideas about power. When students repeatedly connect power to strength and muscle, she tells the students to improvise or "play with it," telling them they need to negotiate which of them will have power and which will not.

Near the end of the segment, the TA challenges students to rethink dominant assumptions about power by introducing a new prop—a chair—that serves as a tool for critical literacy. When the TA directs the students to sit in the chair while another student walks around him, she does not tell the seated actor to assert power; yet this is precisely what happens. The seated actor's embodied response to the improvisational moment is to silence the walking actor and stop his movement, a response that helped students see that power is not always big, muscled, and brandishing a weapon. The TA explains that power is relational and shifting—an idea that can be "played with," thus explicitly reinforcing the ways in which critical perspectives can surface through embodiment and improvisation.

Pre and Post-scene Direction

This category of facilitation involved occasions in which the TA would offer verbal direction related to the use of a given narrative tool or set of tools. In the case of pre-scene direction this facilitation may involve directorial suggestions to prompt the students' thinking about how their initial staging propels a story into motion. Post-scene direction may involve the highlighting of specific ways in which a group of students used a given technique to change the storyline. In the following clip, students act out a scene from the tall tale of Paul Bunyan. Following the scene, the students discuss the acting choices and their effects.



To view the full clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68081>

In this example, the students act out the scene, which then serves as a text for discussion and critique in terms of actor choices and audience effect. In these post-scene discussions, the students as audience members comment on what they found to be effective. To get the discussion started the TA asks a variety of questions: What decisions did they make as actors? Which scenes did they add? What did they do to make this play? What did you find really effective in the telling of this story? Interspersed among peer feedback, the TA also offers feedback related to different staging tools that were used. In the example above, the TA comments that the group of actors made good use of “split staging” in which action is happening on multiple parts of the stage. Through use of split staging, student actors are able to represent multiple storylines at once as well as add stories within stories that complicate character actions and plot events.

Audience Priming

This category of facilitation patterns involved TAs interaction with the audience during the final scene performances in which the TA asks the audience to become critical consumers of the scene by paying attention to both the story and the narrative tools that the actors use in their storytelling. Common questions during this pattern of facilitation included: “What happens when he starts to act out the story with his body?” and “What does it do to you when he speaks in this way?” In the following scene we see the TA focusing the audience on the “actor choices” that are made and their effect on the audience.



To view the full clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68739>

In this scene the TA primes the audience to both enjoy and question the scene. As critical consumers of the scene, the TA asks the students to pay attention not only to the content but also its delivery. As the TA states, “I really want you to enjoy the story so watch carefully, and watch what kind of choices the group makes. So watch the story, really enjoy the story, but ask yourself why they made this choice and why they made that choice.” In priming the students to notice the "actor choices" the students are asked to attend to the different tools of narration that actors use when telling their stories. Whether the tool use is intentional or spontaneous, individual or collaborative, the priming questions help to focus the students on *how* the story unfolds. In noticing how their peers use different tools of narration, they are building their own repertoire of storytelling techniques.

Retake

Perhaps most significant among the patterns of facilitation is that of retake in which the TAs ask a student or group of students to “redo” a scene. The purpose of redoing a scene may be for one or more of the following reasons: 1) To encourage improvisation and appropriation of narrative tools; 2) To clarify and/or complicate the narration; 3) To promote deeper engagement with the story; or 4) To encouraging equitable and broad participation. Whatever the motivation for the retake, the process of redoing the scene ultimately encourages students to re-envision the scene in ways that open opportunities to imagine alternative storylines or ways of representation. In the following clip, a group of students presents the final scenes in the story of Paul Bunyan.



To view the full clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68107>

In this example the group begins the scene by acting out a group of "beesquitos" (a hybrid insect composed of both bees and mosquitos). The scene then transitions to the end of the tall tale. Instead of reenacting the log jam, which was part of the original tale, the students change the ending to include a scene in which Paul Bunyan is arrested for crimes of environmental violation. The post-scene discussion starts with a series of questions, similar to those describe above in the "Pre and Post-Scene Direction" (e.g. What decisions did they make as actors? Which scenes did they add? What did they do to make this play? What did you find really effective in the telling of this story?). Just as shown above, these questions guide the discussion to a focus on the storytelling practices.

In the case of this scene, however, the students are asked to repeat or re-enact different sections of their scene. After audience members note that they were a bit confused as to what the buzzing actors were trying to represent, the TA asks the students to redo the scene in order to make it more clear for the audience. To initiate the retake the TA says, "Can you do a 30 second huddle to revise how to make the beginning part more clear about the bees and mosquitos? ... Take in the audience feedback and select your changes as an artist." In this move to prompt a retake, the TA focuses on actor or artist decisions rather than scene correction. The students then redo the scene and audience members note the differences in representation for the beesquitos. Through focus on decisions rather than corrections the TA highlights the possibility of multiple interpretations and representations of a single story.

The use of retake further continues when the TA asks the students to redo the scene once again, this time focusing on the representation of the Paul Bunyan character as he is arrested. In the first and second takes of the scene, Paul Bunyan shows little resistance to being arrested. In the third take, the TA asks the student actor for Paul Bunyan to "Defend yourself as an actor ... What are you thinking about at this moment? ... Talk about how the police are being rough with you." In the third take, the student playing Paul Bunyan enacts resistance through squirming her body as the police characters cuff her hands. She also adds dialogue to her character stating "I'm chopping down trees in good ... The wood will be used to build homes and stores ... Stop being so rough with me!" In this second use of retake the students rework the scene once again not to correct interpretations but to add complexity to

the representation of a character and the overall message of the scene. Instead of depicting Paul Bunyan as an evil criminal, destroying the environment, the students' later renditions of the scene add depth to the characterization and explore the complexity of good and bad. Furthermore, the nuanced representation of the Paul Bunyan character, through both body as narrative tool and use of dialogue, challenges both the actors and audience member ability to apply a simplistic reading to the story.

Narrative Tool Ensemble

In most cases the tools for developing critical literacy through creative play were not used in isolation but rather were used in conjunction with other tools for purposes of amplification of certain features in the storyline. In the following scene we see the students incorporating a variety of narrative tools to present an alternative solution to the original story, “How Peace Was Found Again.”

In the original version of “How Peace Was Found Again,” the students were presented with a futuristic world that devastated by nuclear war is barren to almost all forms of life. Only two cities in the form of 500-floor castles exist. In these cities, warring Chancellors spend their days and night inventing new weapons to intimidate the enemy. While the Chancellors build weapon upon weapon, the women and children find a flower and books and with that discover that it is possible for plant life to grow once again. With this possibility comes the hope that peace may be achieved.



To view the full clip visit: <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/68747>

In the students' creative rendition of the story, we see them not only change the story by adding the character element of robots, but they also change the story through drawing on a variety of critical tools of storytelling, which contribute additional dimensions to the original story and the dynamics of the classroom. To begin, we see the students taking ownership of their stage space through purposeful placement of the three chairs to mark the boundaries of the stage. To highlight this new space, one of the students runs circles around the chairs. This repurposing of the chairs and space are practices that aren't normally allowed during regular class activities, as highlighted by the teacher's comments, “Here we go with the chairs again.” and “Are we being safe.” While these

moves add dimension to the storytelling at hand, they also mark the students' attempts to carve out their own space for storytelling, a time/space dimension that has its own rules.

In addition to repurposing of space and objects, the students using purposeful enunciation of the voice and deliberate use of their body movements to enhance characterization. In the case of the one robot character, Charles, he uses his voice and body to create the robot character. With little dialogue devoted to the robot, much of the storytelling is done through the purposeful enunciation of a single line "I am going to keep doing violence," which is delivered multiple times in a monotone voice. Furthermore, Charles stands stiff and tall to signify his nonhuman qualities. Later in the scene he moves his arms in a rigid, mechanical manner to further communicate that his character is a robot. The animated use of his body in this scene is a shift from his somewhat shy and reserved stage presence in other drama activities, suggesting that he perhaps felt that these movements had significance or purpose in telling the story rather than just playful, impromptu elements.

This presentation of the Chancellors, who in the original story are portrayed as war-obsessed men who took little interest in their wives and children, conveys an implicit evaluation on the part of the students, of the chancellor characters' personalities and values, suggesting that their excessive concern in militarization, weapons management and war makes them seem inhuman or lacking grace.

The practice of character elaboration through narrative tools of voice and embodiments is also evident in the character of the mother. The student who plays the mother, calmly and clearly states to her children on stage that they "are going to help her" with her plan to build the peace village. She amplifies this command with the firm use of her pointed finger aimed directly at the children's face. Distinct from the original version, in which the mother characters are presented as collaborating with the children and scientists to bring about peace, the student highlight a conflict of authority among parents and children, with the strong matriarch having the ultimate authority. While some may say this representation of the strong mother figure is reproductive of dominant views of child/mother relations, it also can be seen as revised representation of the female power. In the original story, the women live at the bottom of the castle. While it is the women and children who ultimately bring about peace through re-engagement with the books and teaching of literacy, their actions are presented as voiceless and without official power.

The presentation of the strong female character is further centered in the students' version of the story by presenting the mother as the central decision maker that leads to peace. By turning the robots off or unplugging their power it is the mother that renders the military force of rule as inert or lacking relevance. In other words, it is the mother, rather than the chancellors as presented in the original, who enacts the final decisions and solutions that ultimately end the war and bring peace.

Discussion and Future Directions

This report has focused on the presence of critical literacy practices with a specific focus on the drama activities and creative play of scene making. The central questions shaping this inquiry ask what critical literacy looks like in these contexts of creative play, in which the actors' bodies and voices, along with the classroom space and objects become modes of storytelling that have equal significance to that of the spoken word.

The scenes above, with their rich array of narrative tool use and TA facilitation, illustrate the power of creativity and play for student-initiated critical literacy, especially when that play involves using classroom space and objects and their voices and bodies in new ways. Although students were often given specific directives for theatre games and scenes, these moments of creative play provided multiple opportunities, both with and without TA guidance, to experiment with a broad range of tools for storytelling. In the scenes above, the critical enactments often took the form of body movements, voice enhancements or object placement, all tactics which served to grab the audience's attention through repurposing the classroom space. Seeing the classroom space in new ways disrupts commonplace notions of schooling, which may influence how students see themselves and how they interact with others at school, including the teacher and/or peers. It also may impact how students interact with the common objects that shape school routines, such as the desks, books, and texts that define the work of school. Through playful experimentation, the students broaden their repertoires of narrative expression and, ultimately, storytelling. This expanded tool set makes possible the imagination and critical thinking skills necessary for critical storytelling.

It is within these moments of playful experimentation and classroom shift, that the TA becomes paramount in developing the students' capacity for critical literacy. It is the TAs, with their knowledge not only of larger social constructs but also of the potentials of the body, voice, and space as tools of storytelling, who are able to identify, highlight, model, and encourage student experimentation with a broad range of storytelling tools. Whether the tools are those discussed in this report or other tools that are created in the moment by the students, the TA is able to highlight the complexity of storytelling and play as it occurs in the students' decisions for using or introducing new tools of storytelling.

The ability to highlight and maintain student engagement with the complexity of narrative is another key component to developing a critical stance, especially as it was observed through the feedback techniques discussed above, most notably the Retake. In these moments, the TA's are able to highlight the ways in which the students have taken the story, knowingly or not, into new directions of plot and characterization. Whether the complexity is highlighted through the feedback techniques described earlier or others that occur naturally in the rhythm of a Neighborhood Bridges session, the notion of sustained engagement with complexity hold much potential for understanding how students are able to foster critical literacy practices through Neighborhood Bridges.

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