

## **Multiliteracies in Maine: The Play Me a Story Program**

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### **Significance of the project: An interdisciplinary focus**

The Play Me a Story program at the Portland Stage Company is being implemented in a context that is rapidly becoming culturally and linguistically diverse. For instance, the English language learner population in public schools in Maine has almost doubled in just twelve years (ESL and Bilingual Programs, Maine DOE, 2012). The rapid changes present challenges that require solutions to go beyond traditional methods in teaching and, in particular, a new understanding of how students learn and acquire proficiency in the English language, whether they are native or non-native English speakers. In seeking new solutions, the Portland Stage Company's Play Me a Story team approaches the task of teaching literacy from new angles, including a practical and novel application of the theory and pedagogy of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996).

Multiliteracies work for all learners, whether they are native English speakers or English language learners (ELLs). To students of all linguistic backgrounds, the program offers a variety of ways to interact with content, explore new ideas and concepts, and create meaningful output. The program caters to a wide array of students' learning styles. The learners discover new ways to achieve their goals through the acquisition of new skills, mastering such new skills in order to achieve success. It encourages students to discover new ways of meaning making through the different activities and games offered. It helps them learn by using a variety of learning styles. In terms of delivery, it varies from silent observation to verbal expression and from passive to active participation. It pushes students slowly out of their comfort zone so that they can discover new ways to master new skills to achieve success.

Literacy is not only reading and writing; it is also the ability to put the skills learned into shaping the person's course of action and understanding the world surrounding him/her. Through the Play Me a Story program, students experience text in a new light. They watch the words come to life, discover that words can mean different things and have various shades of meaning, and witness words creating a new world when they come together. They discover that they can access the world of text and the world of their imagination as well as create a new world of their own. They live the stories with the Portland Stage Company's help and unlock the doors to their creative minds. Literacy gives them power, and it lies not only in the ability to read and write but also in their capacity and ability to put these skills into shaping their futures, thereby shaping the world into what they would want it to be.

It shows them that reading is fun and that learning can be an adventure. They can turn every book they read into a trip to that magical world. They will need to pack their prior knowledge for the trip but they know that they will come back with much more than what they have brought with them. They will come back with the gifts of new words, new concepts, and new views. This way, literacy shifts from being a task, a heavy or undesired one at times, to becoming the treasure that they wish to hunt for every day. This program gives learners the tools to make the world a more exciting place for them as they embark on the life-long journey of learning.

Specifically, the program is based on the principles of tolerance, mutual understanding, and constructive dialogue that are made possible through many modes of instruction and interaction between learners, with a particular emphasis on verbal, visual, musical, emotional, and multicultural literacies. Therefore, the program is unique and, indeed, a place where new techniques and approaches to teaching diverse students are implemented. We believe that a better understanding of these practical ramifications of the theory of multiliteracies can be beneficial to applied linguistics specialists and anyone who works with diverse student populations locally and nationally, as this would allow them to help learners access the linguistic and cultural capital that may otherwise remain inaccessible.

The urgent need to explore such ramifications and ways of helping students construct meaning is augmented by the fact that the refugee and immigrant communities in Maine often originate in cultures that are quite different from the mainstream US culture. These communities are also quite diverse, and within them, we find people of all walks of life, including asylees, children who grew up in refugee camps overseas, migrant workers, adult immigrants, and others. In terms of literacy, proficiency in the English language ranges from “absolute beginner” to “native English speaker,” and while many are fully bilingual, some are not literate in their first language, adding another level of complexity to the situation. Furthermore, while English as a second language (ESL) services are provided to public school students in Maine (the impact these services have varies from one locale to another), English language learners sometimes find themselves mainstreamed as quickly as possible. Fundamentally, it is an environment in which great things are possible, and the Play Me a Story team is interested in establishing a foundation to build on for years to come. Furthermore, it can be argued that traditional teaching and methods that are primarily oriented toward native English speakers and/or students who are local do not always work for culturally or linguistically diverse students. Thus, the Play Me a Story program is an endeavor that has equity pedagogy and equal opportunity at its very core. That is why the project is conceptualized not only as a project aimed at the development of techniques and materials but also as an opportunity to connect with the fundamentally American values of fairness and equal rights.

Among the themes that are of interest to us, four are central to the project and indicative of this grounding in both equality and multiliteracies.

First, it is an opportunity to experience a different taste of reading. In the Play Me a Story program, learners realize that stories are not just words or text. They can be brought to life by adding energy to the characters. It engages students with the reading and helps them fall in love with reading. Multiple opportunities are created for the learners to revisit the idea of reading for fun, i.e., they realize that reading books and stories can be entertaining, enjoyable, and educational at the same time. One of the key aspects of the program that makes it a success is the idea that students will learn when having fun. Introducing and systematically building on the idea that reading can be for pleasure or fun, the program seeks to remove emotional and affective obstacles that prevent students from reading on their own.

Second, the program is an opportunity to explore meaning making in a mixed session (native and non-native English speakers working together) in which the pedagogy of multiliteracies is used. Because interaction is built into the learning process, both native and non-native English speakers learn to collaborate while helping each other learn in a comfortable, safe environment. While they are helping other, they are learning about other cultures. In turn, it means that they are learning about the world and come to realize that there is more to it than the immediately familiar and recognizable.

Third, from our point of view, it is also an opportunity to learn more about how learners access “linguistic and cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 76) in such a program, including drawing and writing. From the composition perspective, under the general umbrella of literacy, the program has a strong expressivist side to it, i.e., it is a chance to understand how learners perceive events and different concepts on a unique, personal level. Additionally, it is an opportunity to explore connections between how proficient they are in the language and how they put words to meaning, emotions, and feelings when expressing their ideas.

Fourth, it is an opportunity to derive from the experience specific recommendations for the ESL and mainstream classroom. Portland Stage leads this effort by offering multiliteracies-driven workshops both in its Saturday morning sessions and weekday visits to K-12 public schools in Maine.

## **Materials**

These workshops use a variety of visual literacy materials, including adapted picture books and illustrated stories. The materials used in the performance part of each session (actors reading from the script and performing in front of the audience while images are projected onto the screen behind them) represent a wide range of age-appropriate visual narratives. The visuals used are typically engaging and interesting, i.e., they both illustrate what is being read and add

a level of complexity to the narratives. Among the themes used in the narratives, many are found in more than one narrative (e.g., being different, overcoming obstacles, facing fears, expanding one's horizons, and so on). Similarly, the topics vary from seemingly simple explorations of the world around us to serious discussions of issues that affect many. Furthermore, the materials represent a variety of authors and contexts, and thus, some of the stories are "local," and others come from many different cultures. The content is unapologetically literary and representative of great literature traditions. Thus, the materials allow learners to explore American and world literatures in a manner that is exciting. The learners get to experience the content of the story themselves, especially during the second part of each session. The remarkable amount of inventiveness that goes into this process means that learners use their imagination and create new things, all of which takes a lot of thinking and creativity, not just imitation (Poe, 2010).

The design of the program is emergent, i.e., many traditional methods are used (such as readers theater), but there is a significant emphasis on adapting the materials and approach to specific groups of learners with whom the program works. Thus, the process of generating knowledge in the Play Me a Story is naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), i.e., the direction is determined not by distant observers but people who play essential roles in the project. Additionally, learners produce artifacts (e.g., multiliteracy narratives) that can be potentially used for a form of alternative ethnography, creating a dynamic interaction between the curriculum design and research to be conducted in the program (as opposed to a quick and simple study). Furthermore, one of the key principles elucidated in the program is reliance on creative experimentation with literacy materials (e.g., Hanauer, 2010), which is something that the actors and the learners do, as opposed to pre-packaged programs that were not created for the specific students with whom the program works. Finally, as noted earlier, the program relies heavily on visual literacy and other literacies (visual, emotional, multicultural, and so on), as opposed to just text, and knowledge generated in the program will similarly provide the academic community with insights into the benefits and challenges associated with the introduction of such learning modes and materials into curriculum.

## **Actors**

Actors serve as role models to students. They help the learners see that reading is more than just the written word. The learners realize that they can bring characters to life, learn from the characters, and even change the characters. The actors encourage them to read. This is made direct and explicit before, during, and after each section when the project leaders and the actors themselves specifically state that the learners, too, can enjoy reading on their own.

Instruction is combined with narration done by professional actors and interactive activities in which all learners present participate. The actors demonstrate that it is possible to

adapt to various new environments and interact with the context in which one finds oneself in a way that is meaningful and productive. The actors translate this idea into simple activities that learners can actually do and enjoy. They also demonstrate the power of acting through voice and teach learners how to express emotions by “becoming” the characters in the story. For example, when reading from “Tacky the Penguin” (Lester, 2006), learners can be as “mean” as a hunter and as “nice” as the penguin protagonist. Actors model the work of imagination, in some instances, e.g., when students cannot imagine what “mean” looks like. Fundamentally, the actors are fully engaged in a dialogue with the students during warm-up and other stages of the session, leading by example and helping students process the content, via scaffolding, and claim ownership of their own literacy praxis. For example, during one of the workshops, the actors lead the students in ridiculing the Bogeyman (Prelutsky, 1976). Sometimes, the actors work together (team teaching); collaborative work of this type also includes lesson planning and materials design. Thus, for instance, particularly noteworthy in this regard is the focus on advanced vocabulary in the program. The actors introduce new words to learners and help them use these words in a variety of contexts. This is done in a systematic manner and coordinated among the actors.

### **Theoretical framework**

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the focus on play. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (2008a) describes play as the vehicle that makes learning possible. According to his swimmer metaphor (2008b), learners are influenced by their context and the input they receive but also determine the direction in which they move. Vygotsky describes the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the cognitive space in which learning takes place – learners who are not yet able to do something on their own become able to do it with scaffolding provided by the instructor. This allows us to speak of the ZPD as an obstacle course, where the interactions with the more experienced members of the community (such as the actors and workshop teachers in the Play Me a Story program) enable play’s preparatory function. Specifically, the skills and knowledge that the learners acquire via play can be transferred to contexts and situations outside the classroom. Thus, the interactions that take place in the Play Me a Story program are not only educational but stimulating in terms of imagination, experimentation with realia, and the acquisition of learning strategies.

There is relatively little academic literature on the work of the type that is being done in the Play Me a Story program, which presents us with a challenge. However, the program builds directly and indirectly on scholarly research that has been done with learners experimenting with drama, visual literacies, and language learning in cooperative learning settings. For example, these include projects in which collaborative teams created scripts for readers theater (e.g., Forsythe, 1995, Kerry Moran, 2006), connected language to functioning in their

environment and interaction to have a “common, shared experience” (Rieg & Paquette, 2009, p. 152), and were aimed at accessing learners’ “linguistic resources to negotiate diverse perspectives and generate knowledge” (Medina & Campano, 2006, p. 332). Especially in the last decade or so, “skills of comprehension and visualization along with reviving [learners’] enjoyment of reading” (Brinda, 2008, p. 488) have become of interest to practitioners. Thus, it has become possible for students to “analyze, recreate, and communicate their beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and environment in order to develop and present a theatrical performance” (Colby & Haldeman, 2007, p. 48).

For example, the Play Me a Story program uses the concept “hero” (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 4) in both the performances that the actors do and the workshops that follow. Writing on work that has been done with young learners, Hoffman (2004) believes that hero play has a positive effect on students’ self-esteem, mutual respect, and ability to resolve conflicts peacefully, i.e., going beyond just tolerance, from the cultural and linguistic diversity point of view. In fact, heroes can stimulate imagination and enable learning via play (Marsh, 2000) when the materials, activities, and outcomes are adapted according to norms that the community finds acceptable. Hero play, from the cognitive point of view, e.g., where participants take turns to act out a role in a dialogue or become leaders (if only for a few minutes) in order to learn something together, can be viewed as “opportunities to challenge the usual boundaries constraining socio-dramatic role-play” (Marsh, 2000, p. 209) – the Bakhtinian dialogue continues (Gallagher & Ntelioglou, 2011).

Furthermore, as one of the program’s main foci is on language and literacy development, including empowering second language learners, narrated visual narratives are the format of choice for many of the performances. Visual narratives allow the audience to receive input that is both visual and verbal, where “the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative” (Crawford, 2004, p. 26). Writing about multiliteracy materials, Krashen (1985, 2004; Krashen & Ujjiie, 1996), one of the most famous language acquisition experts, believes that they make language learning possible. Mouly (2011) believes that multiliteracy materials “provide context,” “guide the readers’ attention,” “help readers build connections,” “are an interactive medium,” and “help readers see story structure” (pp. 12-14). As noted earlier, creativity makes it possible for the learners take the tools home (body, voice, and imagination) and continue using them on their own.

Fundamentally, the input learners receive is provided in a guided and meaningful manner, which makes the processing and acquisition possible; every session is unique, but underneath, we find a structured approach that is carried on from one session to another. In turn, this methodical approach enables the learners to engage in using their imagination and multiliteracy skills systematically, which makes it possible for them to provide output (as

opposed to only receiving input). Opportunities to provide such output are now recognized as an indispensable component in language learning (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Importantly, learners in the Play Me a Story create visual narratives themselves, i.e., they do listen, read, speak, and write. Because “children’s narratives not only represent experience, as they know it to be, but also represent experience, as they would like it to be” (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007, p. 279), it is postulated that the effect on the learners’ future can be profound. In essence, the input the students receive is connected to the output they then create. For example, learners get the opportunity to change the flow of events in a story, the ending of the story, the characters, or even the whole story. Fundamentally, the notion of readers as authors who gain control over the stories they read helps them gain a sense of responsibility and accountability. For example, one of the activities used in the program is “the detective.” The students are asked to find a person, observe his/her behavior and interaction with people and objects, and take mental notes, all of which engages them in activities that put them in charge of the sequence of events (which is in itself indicative of the program’s recognition of many intelligences and learning styles – see below).

### **Pedagogy and Play Me a Story**

Writing on literacy and theater, Andruske (1994) notes a direct connection between students participating in drama activities and their self-esteem. She notes the following: through theater, learners become aware of their self-worth *as well as* illiteracy as it exists in their community and among their peers. In the Play Me a Story program, students are asked to solve problems and critically reflect upon what they read and hear. For example, when listening to and then acting out the story “And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon” (Stevens, 2001), learners have to figure out how they got lost and embark on a quest with protagonists who experience a variety of challenges. According to Andruske, learners can be empowered when engaged in literacy-oriented theater activities, which in our context means that participants in the Play Me a Story have their voices heard. Furthermore, Andruske writes about participants in her study experiencing belonging to communities and deriving pleasure from being able to express themselves as empowered individuals, which was also observed by Freire (liberatory education, 2005). In the Play Me a Story program, students learn a lot from the stories and analyze characters’ behaviors critically; they go deeper than just surface reading (i.e., they look for meaning); and they explore connections between cause and effect to understand how attitudes impact decisions. Interestingly, Andruske also notes that learners in her study offered peers solutions and literacy strategies, taking on an active role in this process. Thus, for example, one of the visual narratives used in the program, “Frederick” (Lionni, 1973), focuses on a protagonist, a mouse, whose poetry inspires peers.

Furthermore, connections made in the program to personal schemata (pre-existing knowledge) and realia (environment and cultural objects) build directly on the state-of-the-art philosophy of literacy education today. For example, the program builds directly on Gardner's concept of naturalist intelligence (Gardner, 1983). The program lets the learners experience what the characters go through. For example, when working with "Penguin and Pinecone" (Yoon, 2012), learners take the pinecone to the environment it is from, once again embarking on a quest. Awareness of nature and going through the same experience as the character helps the learners think about the protagonists' inner world, thereby adding empathy to the meaning making process. Working with "Black Dog" (Pinfold, 2011), one group of learners makes a tunnel and other obstacles and landmarks mentioned in the visual narrative, while the other group goes "into the tunnel" and "under the bridge." In activities based on "The Insomniacs" (Wolf, 2012), students experience the world through someone else's eyes. In this story, the protagonists go out during the night and find out that there is life even at night, so they adapt. Then, they discover that there is also life during the day. In the workshop based on this family's experience, learners pretend to be rock and stones, form a cave, sit in a cave, see bats, and even scream. Fundamentally, they pretend to be a part of nature and then those who inhabit the environments discussed. This allows them to use naturalist intelligence to understand the concept of change and adaptation.

In the Play Me a Story, there is a heavy emphasis on American poetry. For example, when discussing Frost's poem (Frost, 1923), students first imagine trees, snow, horses, and visualize what observing these feels like. They then put simple movements to words, mainly using their hands. After repeating the verses a couple of times using these moves as they say the words again, they end up memorizing the verses; when they forget a word, the movement of their and others' hands reminds them of the part they missed. They associate words with movement, which makes meaning making and remembering the words much easier. In other words, they use their imagination in order to be engaged kinesthetically and understand the concepts.

As noted earlier, during first part of each session, as the story is being read, learners observe actors bringing characters to life. During the workshop part of the session, they reflect on this and reproduce what they observe (although, again, their participation is not limited to imitation). From the literacy point of view, students act as researchers documenting what they observe, taking what can be described as "mental notes," and then participating in performing actions based on these notes themselves. This is then reflected in what the students write and draw. Essentially, academic work of this type, intertwined with pleasure, means that students learn while laughing and having fun. For example, a workshop based on "The Bear Snores On" (Wilson, 2002) involves students making connections between imagination and laughing. All pre-reading preparatory effort, schema activation activities, and the sometimes informal



interactions involve students playing simple games. Kinesthetic activities (e.g., passing the hula hoop around and manipulating it, and so on) and drawing are driven by a great deal of collaboration and teamwork. For example, students working on the story “And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon” (Stevens, 2001) draw on paper plates and use fake mustaches to recall and express their mental notes. In another example, learners working on the narrative “Creepy Carrots” draw different shapes and sizes of carrots and pick colors for them, using the storyline itself as the starting point (interestingly, this can lead to a conversation about why we eat vegetables even if they are occasionally scary). In yet another example, the mirror activity employed in some of the workshops involves learners working together to observe and follow each others’ lead. All of these require skills that we ultimately identify with academic literacy, ranging from curiosity and inquiry to analysis and research writing.

A good example of this can be found in how the theme of overcoming fear is manifested in the Play Me a Story program. Many of the visual narratives and poems used in the program have an uplifting and inspiration quality to them, and this is made possible because adversity is what the characters face. Performances and workshops are often tied to a specific time of the year, such as various seasons, and Halloween stories create an excellent opportunity to talk about persevering. For example, learners find out that the beastly gruffalo (Donaldson, 1999) is not that scary, after all. Learners meet a variety of initially scary creatures who turn out not to be so frightening (e.g., Pinfold, 2011; Prelutsky, 1976).

As the learners deal with the unknown in the environment, the development of stories teaches them how to process and respond to the unknown. For example, in “Black Dog,” the more the protagonist is able to observe the scary dog, the smaller the dog becomes. When the family gets to know the dog, it becomes just a puppy. The protagonist in “Tacky the Penguin” (Lester, 2006) faces his fears and saves everyone from a real danger posed by hunters. The protagonist in “Guji Guji” (Chen, 2004) saves his family members from crocodiles, which in his case involves some critical and autoethnographic analysis of his identity. In another example, a bear who picks on smaller animals (“Big Bad Bruce,” Peet, 1982) ends up not having the ability to bully other animals, undergoing a remarkable metamorphosis. Other animals are not afraid of him anymore. In essence, the actors guide the learners through documenting the process of overcoming one’s fears, which is a fundamentally liberatory education-oriented approach.

Another example of instruction that is based on pedagogically sound principles is the inclusion of friends in the workshop. Over time, learners form a bond with each other and the actors, i.e., the collaborative work described earlier acts as a chance to build interpersonal skills and relationships. Students experience language as a tool that makes these interpersonal communication tasks doable. That is why the activities create an excellent foundation for academic work that the students will do in their regular classes. Lesson plans are designed in

such a way as to capitalize on the bond between learners. For example, the move/freeze (as a character) activity involves students working individually and in a group. The detective activity described above (searching for evidence, looking for clues together, asking people, and understanding how to observe and collect data) can be easily translated into science projects. The various charades-inspired activities stimulate imagination and facilitate retrieval of information from long-term memory in collaborative settings. The list goes on and on – as all activities in the Play Me a Story link reading and writing to other types of literacies.

## Conclusion

As the learners use their body, voice, and imagination to observe, analyze, interpret, and express thoughts on the world around them, they become able to go beyond passively absorbing information provided to them. The Play Me a Story program creates opportunities for students to focus on both reading and writing in the traditional sense and goes beyond tradition in how literacy is taught. This multiliteracy approach is clearly indicative of the program's awareness of the changing linguistic and sociocultural landscape not only in Maine, but also in the United States in general. Importantly, activities used in the program work well in mixed classrooms where native English speakers and English language learners interact with each other and learn together. Thus, the Play Me a Story program has potential as a beacon program for teachers who work with 21st century learners.

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