Finding strategies to connect English language learners with their new school environment, let alone with their studies, is a multilayered challenge many teachers face. Through a drama and playwriting project, one teacher discovers a strategy to engage her class of Spanish-speaking eighth-graders that both taps into and strengthens their academic skills. Along the way, the project also honors the students' culture and their individual pasts, connects them to their present, and offers them points of entry for a successful academic future.

English Language Learners, Classroom Drama

Dana Loy

We're happy when that first Mexican child arrives, adding to the school's diversity. But when her cousin comes, and another, and when they form a critical mass that changes the balance of the class roles, we teachers are understandably concerned. During the 1990s I worked with a group of Hispanic kids in Albuquerque, and, curiously, those new students became the catalyst that shaped my teaching more than I could have predicted and in ways that helped me fall in love with my profession.

When the new school year started and I noticed the large number of immigrant kids in my classes, I worked with a sympathetic counselor to reschedule the eighteen Spanish-speaking eighth-graders together into one bilingual class. Although I don't think the segregated classroom is necessarily the best approach, this was an opportunity to zoom in on the students and their needs. My idea was to teach writing through the study of literature and as a process—just as I did in my regular classes—and I wanted to incorporate what I'd learned about playwriting and creative drama.

During the summer, I had participated in an intensive writing project workshop that showed teachers ways to bring playwriting and creative drama into the classroom. I was inexperienced in theater but was interested in the effect it might have on students' writing and on my teaching. Through an extension of the summer workshop, I signed up for a visiting artist to work throughout the year with students in my bilingual class, who together would write and develop a script and later perform it in a university theater.

In September, our guest artist, Michelle Holdt, helped us develop goals for the year. During the first semester, the students would write stories that could be dramatized, learn the basics of playwriting, and practice working together as actors. After winter break, they would polish the script, rehearse, build props, and perform. This was an experiment, and I hoped it would improve the students' reading and writing skills in both languages and that the skills would be transferable to other subjects and experiences.

Along with drama and creativity exercises, playwriting dominated the first quarter. It was hard to find plays that could provide good models for the students, most of whom had never read a play or seen one performed. Finally I came across Arte Público Press's *¡Aplauso!,* a collection of bilingual plays for youth, and one became the inspiration for the setting of the play our class would later write. They decided their play, like the one in the book, would take place on the Mexican side of the border between the United States and Mexico. A group of young people would be waiting with their families for someone to take them across to the United States, and to pass the time, they would tell stories to each other. The play would be called *En la Frontera* or *On the Border*. We talked about how short stories could be dramatized, and about the basics of playwriting. The students

were ready to begin writing stories with the understanding that near the end of the first semester we would decide which would be included in the play.

Stories from Home

Within Mexican culture exists a rich oral tradition. Families and neighbors pass long evenings gathered around the kitchen table eating *pan dulce*, drinking *atole*, and telling story after story. Neighbors drop in and add to the telling. I wanted my students to draw from this tradition (and to recognize and remember this part of their cultural heritage) so our class began work on a letter asking parents to share their stories with their kids. It would be the students' job to record the stories. Writing the letter—all of us working together to first write it in English and then to translate it to Spanish—was a real-world language exercise. Unlike most letters sent home via middle school students, there was little chance of this one being lost or undelivered since the students themselves helped write it.

The responses came in the form of stories, and the students couldn't wait to bring them back. We gathered in a circle on the floor, and they read to each other. This took days, since every story raised questions and tapped into other stories and memories that had to be told. Then came the job of taking these very rough drafts—notes, really—and crafting a piece of writing. I showed them how to help each other through constructive comments, editing techniques, and examples of revisions. They read their works in pairs, offered and received feedback, rewrote, edited, and revised until they were ready to produce the final copy and turn it in. Because they had a personal connection to their writing topics and because they were sharing them first with each other and not with me, they gradually stopped worrying about making errors. And just as in my regular classes, these kids had varying levels of literacy and writing ability, but because we were taking the time to build a climate of trust through the storytelling, through the whole-class letter-writing, through going into depth and taking our time with every step of our work, those less-skilled writers were willing to share their stories, too.

While they gathered, wrote, and revised the stories, we studied bilingual tales, using Teresa Pijoan's *La Cuentista* with its short stories that could be read in English and Spanish. The student writing began to reflect these models. In *"Las Noches de Verano"* ("Summer Nights"), Julio remembered sleeping with his father in the back of their pickup truck. The story began as a one-paragraph reflection, and after six drafts and occasional suggestions from other students and me, it grew into a longer, expressive piece about nostalgia and longing. Another boy described how it feels to be a child left in Mexico during Christmas when your parents have gone for an indefinite period to find jobs in the United States. The common thread of meaning that ran through many of these stories was a deep sorrow; a sense of loss; a feeling of mourning for what they had left behind—beloved pets, best friends, grandparents now alone to tend their farms. None of the students wanted to be in the United States, and few would have the option of going home to visit, since that would mean another illegal crossing back into this country when the visit had ended.

Emilio wrote one story about the mythology of his region of Mexico and another that hinted at the pain of immigrant life. When I commented that those were the kinds of stories we should include in the play, he began to show more care in his writing, working hard to clear up the many mistakes of grammar and spelling in Spanish and painstakingly translating into English. His voice became bolder, and he was eager to participate in the creative exercises.

In his research on the participation of Hispanic youth in drama, Johnny Saldaña, a theater professor at Arizona State University, found Hispanic students more "shy" and "resistant" than others. Among my immigrant students, kids who were rambunctious in the halls became timid in the face of classroom drama. But as the project progressed, many of them changed, and especially one group of girls. In an earlier assignment to "draw what you think you will be doing in your life ten years from now," they had sketched themselves sweeping and scrubbing. Now, working with their own material written about their own lives, the girls became serious about the job of scriptwriting.

One scene for the play emerged from an improvisational activity with these girls. Assignment: You are a mother, a daughter, and a school principal; the setting is a middle school in the United States. The principal doesn't speak Spanish. How would you behave in this setting? Why are you there? What would you say? How would you feel and how will your words and actions show these feelings? The girls briefly planned then performed their scene before the rest of the class. This was their idea: A mother brings her daughter to enroll her in a middle school where no one speaks Spanish. No one can help them. The daughter wants to leave, the mother insists that she stay, and the scene closes with their conflict. You can sense the girl's fear of the school and the

mother's helplessness and desire to do what is right for her daughter.

A discussion followed the improvisation. What worked; what didn't? The girls regrouped and tried it again. This time, other students transcribed the dialogue as the girls spoke, and eventually it became one of the strongest parts of their play. It was an emotional, real expression of a fear shared among all of these students. I believe that giving voice to the fear helped the students to face it head-on. How does it feel to be a Mexican immigrant girl in a school where no one speaks Spanish and where prejudice is clear and scary? I thought of drama teacher Dorothy Heathcote's observation that with improvisation, a student avoids the "chance element" of real life and is free to experiment "without the burden of future repercussions" (Johnson and O'Neill 1984). For adolescent minority students looking for success in a dominant, sometimes hostile culture, improvisation offers a unique opportunity to try on different personas.

The year progressed, and we moved on to acting and movement. Michelle, our visiting artist, brought in ideas for creative activities aimed at breaking down inhibitions, developing acting skills, and building community. The students watched in awe as Michelle disrupted the usual routine of school through a game called "What Are You Doing?" It goes like this:

Person A mimes an activity. Writing a letter, for example.

Person B: "What are you doing?"

Person A: "Playing baseball." (The answer must be different than Person A's actual activity.)

Person B then mimes playing baseball.

Person C: "What are you doing?"

Person B: "Walking my dog."

Person C then mimes walking a dog.

And so on.

This activity helped the students to think creatively and use their bodies in self-expression. It kept them wondering what would happen next, unsettling the usual routine.

"What are you doing?" Michelle asked Miguel as he mimed playing soccer.

"Chasing a rat," he replied.

We all stepped back, wide-eyed, as Michelle went flying across the room, jumped onto a desk, and towered over us in search of *un ratón*. The students glanced at me, their eyes asking, "Can she do that here in the classroom?" They giggled and looked at each other with a new understanding: *In this drama project, the classroom rules are different. We can act in ways that are appropriate for what we need to do.*

Another useful game was "mirrors," a calming activity that reminds students and teachers of our human connections to one another. In mirrors, two people face each other. The leader makes slow, deliberate movements, and the partner simultaneously makes the same movements. With the two partners' palms just inches from each other, they can feel one another's warmth and energy. Their eyes stay locked. After sustaining "mirrors" with a student for a minute or so, a teacher, as the student's partner, connects to that person in a new way. Additionally, this is a way for Hispanic kids to practice looking adults in the eye, which is often considered rude in Mexico.

One day I explained that we would play a kind of "follow-the-leader," and that the leader and all followers should move freely and with expression. The first leader took us in circles in the room. But the next leader, after a trip around the room, headed for the door, led us into and down the hall, out the doors and into the New Mexico sunlight, spinning, whirling, jumping, and skipping. We went over a fence, around the school, past the main office, and back into the classroom. Their faces were radiant. "Let's do it again!" For a few moments, we had disrupted the deadly routine that school so often can be.

As every teacher knows, there are problems with disruption, and yes, some kids got too wild with these kinds of activities. But most were *involved*, coming to class early and having to be shooed away at the end. And while I continued plugging away with the English lessons, my real questions were not about language acquisition but about the broader picture. How, for example, does creative drama change the classroom environment? What role does it play in making teaching and learning more humane? Wouldn't a student in such a classroom try harder, and wouldn't the teacher try differently? I was learning to be a different kind of teacher. Still relatively new in my profession, I was discovering ways to push myself away from the front of the room and create a more collaborative place for all of us to learn.

Life as Drama

During the second semester, our attention turned to dramatizing the short stories, assigning parts, and moving toward performance. We decided to select four of the many stories the students had written and connect them through a narrative. One of Emilio's stories, told to him by his mother, was from the Mexican state of Zacatecas. It sounded old and mythic and concerned the domination of Spanish

priests and the subjugation of native people. When the students selected this story to be a part of our play, told in both languages, Emilio immediately volunteered for the lead role and within days had memorized all of his lines. He became impatient with his friends who were goofing off in class, and because they liked Emilio, they began to try harder, too.

In early May, just four days before the performance, we visited the university theater for a technical rehearsal. The students sat quiet and diminished on the stage while people they didn't know and couldn't understand bustled about making sound and lighting adjustments. They were silent on our trip back to the school. I wondered how I might have better prepared them for this experience.

The next day, several students had an announcement: They might not want to do the play. An argument followed between those who were personally invested and those who weren't. Some said they shouldn't perform because it was a bilingual play and the audience wouldn't understand the Spanish. Others argued that Spanish was their language, this was their play, and they were proud of it. This was an honest and final confrontation that caused me to think, one more time, about what this project was really about. Before me sat a group of young people, frightened of performing before *gringos* and feeling very far from home, who were beginning to understand the personal importance of their work. They were hammering out an agreement in a way that showed the sense of community that had grown in this classroom. During the course of the project, they had shed much of their embarrassment, worked creatively as a team, laughed together, argued, encouraged one another, and sat in collective stillness as the power of their writing lingered after a reading. Together they had become brave and willing to take risks, valuable skills for anyone, and invaluable for adolescent immigrants.

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On the night of the performance, they all showed up with friends and parents. They had agreed to wear black pants and black T-shirts, and they sat in a group making nervous talk until curtain time. Then they took their places, and the play began.

> *NARRATOR: The setting of our play is Mexico, at the border, where a small group of people is waiting for a guide who will lead them into the United States. Among the group are five teenagers who do not want to go. They already know they will miss their friends, their homes, their grandparents, all that is familiar. The economic necessity that forced their parents into this migration is also changing the lives of these young people.*
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> *NARRADOR: ¡Hola amigos! Es un milagro que puedan estar aquí. Esta noche estamos en la frontera esperando el coyote. ¿Saben qué es un coyote? Pos, miren, es una persona que nos trae pa'ca, pa' los llunites estates, tu sabes, pa'l otro lado. . . .*

The performance passed quickly. They remembered their parts before an attentive and respectful audience, and at the end, they joined hands and bowed before waves of applause. Later, when I asked them to write a reflective essay about the experience, the applause was what they remembered most. They also said they had become less self-conscious, more able to work collectively, braver.

> Emilio: *Lo que más me gustó fue cuando nos aplaudió la gente porque creo que les gustó la actuación. Hablamos de nuestra cultura y nuestra historia y eso me gustó.* ("What I liked best was when the audience clapped for us, because I think they liked our performance. We spoke of our culture and our history, and I liked that.")
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> César: *Creo que porque era la única obra bilingüe fue muy emocionante para todos.* ("I think that because ours was the only bilingual presentation, it was very emotional for everyone.")

When I read their essays, I began to think about how my students, through drama, had learned a new way to express themselves and had become bolder and more confident. At this critical stage of their development, they joked with each other that "if we could do this, we can do anything."

New Applications

Two days after the performance, the students came in angry about an incident in the school cafeteria. They all had

different stories, and they were talking fast; this was something important to them, and I wasn't getting it. So I asked them to stop *telling* me about what had happened, and to *show* me through improvisation. We hadn't used improvisation since earlier in the year before the students had started to break out of their shyness. But now that the rehearsals and the performance were behind us, the students viewed themselves, I think, as members of the world of theater. Act out what happened in the cafeteria? No problem.

Quickly they assumed roles for the improvisation. Jorge played a Hispanic man who worked in the cafeteria, and Miguel played a student from Mexico surrounded by other students. The incident involved the man telling the kids, during lunch, that they are in the United States now and need to speak English. The students said he pushed the Mexican student, who made an obscene gesture and was suspended from school. The students were angry. In the improvisation, they became actors; their anger was genuine and convincing, but one girl said no, that's not exactly how it happened. So they improvised it again with different students. This time, the cafeteria worker put out an arm to keep students from passing, and the Mexican boy, already angry about the language issue, tried to force his way past. The reenactment demonstrated how people interpret events in different ways. This gave them a reason to pause and consider what had really happened, which apparently lay somewhere between the two versions. The improvisation helped them to express and release their anger, to reflect upon it, to see that the situation was not clear, and to organize their concerns in a way that led to a meeting with the counselors and the principal, who later spoke to the cafeteria worker.

By the end of the year, I knew that the creative drama and playwriting project had brought my students together and encouraged them in meaningful ways. It allowed for a shared experience that they always will remember. Some wanted to become involved in high school drama, and some would carry their new skills into the larger drama of their lives. I think they transformed what they thought school was about, which may have helped them stay in school longer and increase their chances for academic success. The experience changed me, too, as I thought about my future students and what this experience might mean for them.

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