Volume/Jahrgang 19, Issue/Ausgabe 1
https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.19.1.9

The power of drama to overcome crisis

Saeyoung Hyun

In this report, I explore how process drama helps me, as a teacher, to overcome challenges arising from the sense of disconnection. Two challenging situations I address are the crisis in my teaching career caused by being disconnected with students, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the social crisis that aggravated the disconnection. Reflecting on my open class conducted under unfavourable conditions for incorporating drama into class, that is, a classroom with high school seniors and tightened social distancing rules, I investigate how bringing drama into my classroom offered chances for interaction and bonding between the students and me; how my fellow teachers who are new to drama perceived the benefits of using teacher-in-role. After describing the changes in both students and myself brought about by the open class, I analyse what caused the changes in students, based on the nature of drama, and myself, from an existential perspective. Drawing on my experience, I conclude with the hope that drama can help other teachers, who are experiencing difficulties similar to the ones I went through, overcome their moments of crisis.

1 Crisis in my teaching career

Among the 20 students in the classroom, about half are lying face down on their desks and sleeping. Of the students who are awake, seven students, with their heads down, are taking online *hagwon* (private academies) courses using their tablets or doing *hagwon* homework. The remaining three who are listening to my class also keep their heads down and take notes except for occasionally lifting their heads to check the time by looking at the clock hanging behind me. This is why, although I conduct face-to-face teaching, I have very little opportunity to see the students' faces. All that can be heard from the classroom is the sound of my teaching, making it hard to tell whether there are students present or not. I wake up the sleeping students and find that the textbook, used as a pillow, is filled with notes, which implies that they have already learned everything at *hagwons*. Based on years of experience, I have learned that students do not respond to my questions, so I refrain from asking questions during class. Regardless of whether students are paying attention to my class or not, I focus on preparing them for the *Suneung*, the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT).

The scene above depicts the atmosphere of my English class in a high school senior classroom in Seoul, Korea. Though this class represents the lowest level of participation among the four classes I teach, students' disengagement, demotivation, and in-class sleeping are common phenomena across all the classes I instruct. Teaching students who are inattentive has been

the biggest stressor since I began the teaching career in 2011. Efforts such as commending students, acknowledging their good behaviours, and offering rewards when they showed a hint of engagement were in vain. I felt rejected and was upset. As demonstrated in Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) study, encountering negative emotions in the classroom diminished my sense of self-efficacy, leading to burnout. As the emotionally challenging situation persisted, I implemented a new strategy, that is, ignoring the students' behaviour, which is one of the strategies recommended by experienced teachers in Korea (Ahn & Lee, 2020). Like teachers who are burned out are detached from their students (Burić et al., 2019), I showed symptoms of depersonalization which is one of the three burnout variables in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981): becoming more callous toward students and not really caring what happens to them. I became unaffected by students' behaviours. I did not get upset anymore in class.

As an emotionless teacher, I could not build up rapport with my students. Being isolated and disconnected with students, I questioned the purpose of my existence as a teacher and contemplated whether to leave the teaching profession. What worsened the situation was the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a huge disruption in education systems.

During the early phase of lockdown, I pre-recorded my lessons and broadcasted them during the class time through online class platforms, which implies that there was no interaction with the students at all. After a sudden shift to remote instruction, the way of teaching had to be adapted once more to conduct interactive synchronous online classes via Zoom. Being present at the same time in an online classroom did not lead to communication between me and my students. As in the study on student participation in virtual classrooms (Ho et al., 2023), I experienced the awkwardness of silence and a sense of detachment by encountering black screens instead of the faces of students who chose to turn off their cameras. We were connected online but disconnected still.

2 Overcoming the crisis

Just as the deep-seated human instinct to connect with others induced the virtualization of socializing during the pandemic (De Rosa & Mannarini, 2021), the urge to connect and interact with my students sprang up inside me in times of crisis - a crisis not just in terms of public physical health but also personal occupational well-being. Taking into account that previous strategies I used to engage disengaged students were not effective, the whole structure of my lesson and the atmosphere of the classroom had to be changed. The only way that I could think of was to integrate process drama into my class.

But bringing process drama into my class was the last thing I wanted to do for mainly two reasons (which are going to be covered in the following section in detail): my students were high school seniors and social distancing rules were becoming tightened. One more factor that made me hesitant to use drama in my teaching was that it was a challenging endeavour that required immense courage, especially considering that teaching and learning with drama is a new approach not only in my workplace but also in the Korean education system where drama is not integrated into the curriculum (Kim & Kwon, 2022). My experience is similar to that of student teachers in Göksel's (2022) research in which they reported how daring they felt when applying drama to their teaching. But unlike novice teachers, I am an experienced teacher accustomed to traditional lecture instructional style, and given that there were colleagues, many of whom with more teaching experience than I did, observing my class, I needed the boldness to break the image that those who had known me for a long time had of me.

Despite the unfavorable conditions, I decided to hold an open class to introduce process drama to other teachers, mainly English language teachers, including school leaders, all of whom are new to drama pedagogy, and to investigate whether drama can help overcome the crisis. Some factors that led me to make the decision were research findings that indicate drama-based instruction activates student engagement (Cawthon et al., 2011; Dawson et al., 2011); my personal experience of becoming more attentive and engaged when attending drama workshops; my belief that drama can wake students up, keep them alive, and engage them in student-student and student-teacher interaction.

The following describes the adverse environment for conducting a drama class, an overview of how the class was structured, and some insights into the experiences from the class.

3 Context of the teaching experiment

The students in the class were high school seniors, the ones mentioned in the introduction. Every November, high school seniors take the *Suneung*, the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). As this test marks the pinnacle of a student's entire academic journey in Korea, a high school student's life is centered around this pivotal, life-defining exam. The last year of high school is predominantly dedicated to preparing for the examination. On the exam day, stock markets, public offices, and various businesses delay their opening by an hour to ease traffic congestion. Celebrities record motivational messages and share them online. Local police officers provide free escorts to test centers for students running late. The military suspends aviation exercises, and flight takeoffs and landings are temporarily restricted during the English listening test.

Approximately 80% of Korean students extend their studies beyond regular school hours by enrolling in *hagwons*, private cram schools providing preparatory classes for the exam (Ewe, 2023). Students' reliance on these *hagwons* is incredibly high, as shown in national spending on private education that reached 26 trillion won (Ewe, 2023). The life of a Korean high school student is exceptionally challenging due to intense competition, a heavy workload, a tight schedule, and the stress stemming from the uncertainty and the pressure of gaining admission to their desired university (Jang, 2016). As high school students are directly influenced by the *Suneung*, teachers tailor their classes to help improve students' exam scores. Unfortunately, these uninteresting classes related to college entrance exams demotivate students, producing in-class sleepers (Ahn & Lee, 2020).

Along with the aforementioned information about the typical situation faced by third-year high school students, it is necessary to take a closer look at the students who were the target of my class. These were the students who never showed any engagement with me and my lesson. During regular class hours, not only did they never answer any of my questions but also remained unresponsive when I shared interesting stories. Even as I started the class and greeted them, there was no response. They neither rebelled nor chattered. The utter silence alienated me from them. This class consisting of students who were physically present but totally disconnected with me was the most challenging class among the four classes I was in charge of, but I decided to conduct an open class for these students. This was because I knew the individual characteristics of these students better than any other class, which was possible because I was their homeroom teacher. As the homeroom teacher of these students, I had looked into the personalities of each student through one-on-one consultations where they at least answered my questions. Considering that the purpose of my open class was to engage students and interact with them, which could be achieved by designing episodes where each student can unfold their talents, I believed that conducting a drama class with participants whom I knew best was the right decision.

It is noteworthy that prior to my open class a colleague suggested choosing a different group of students, indicating how challenging it might be to hold an open class for this group. I did consider choosing a class where students would show more enthusiasm during my lesson, but I decided to explore the application of drama in teaching within the reality of the classroom setting, rather than creating the optimal conditions for teaching to yield better results. I wanted to see if it was possible to incorporate drama into a situation that seemed challenging for any form of instruction. I was curious to observe the reactions of 18 students and 10 teachers who were experiencing a drama-integrated English lesson for the first time and find out whether drama would prompt communication and build a sense of connection.

Prior to the class, the South Korean government implemented stricter social distancing measures nationwide in response to its most severe coronavirus outbreak. The most stringent Level 4 restrictions, including a prohibition on gatherings of more than four people before 6 p.m. and only two people after 6 p.m., were enforced on 12 July 2021 in the greater Seoul area. In principle, schools have to transition to remote learning under Level 4, but considering the preparation period required for adjusting academic operations, Level 4 measures were applied starting from 14 July.

My open class was scheduled for 13 July 2021, which was just one day before all schools were set to close. Given that the unique quality of face-to-face interaction cannot be replicated by other forms of communication in a virtual environment (Bannink & Van Dam, 2021; Lau et al., 2020), I considered myself fortunate that I could share the same physical space with my students. Of course, it is not impossible to conduct drama classes online. Studies on virtual drama classes (Lim & Park, 2023; Göksel & Abraham, 2022; Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2022) have revealed the potential and positive effects of conducting drama lessons through online platforms. However, there is also research that highlights the limitations of drama classes in the virtual space: challenges for participants and drama instructors to convey themselves through various expressions posed by the constrained mobility in the digital space (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2023) and the lack of reciprocal energy exchange and interaction present in the live presence of individuals (Davis & Phillips, 2020).

There were limitations to conducting the class while adhering to the Level 4 social distancing rules. I could not plan activities in which students participate as a whole group. Only small group activities, each group consisting of three members, were organized. As movement and physical contact among students had to be restricted, activities that involve physical expression were hindered. The biggest obstacle was that everyone was wearing face masks. Bearing in mind that recognizing emotions becomes difficult when a large part of the face is occluded, I tried to convey emotions through the eyes region and embody characters by using other nonverbal means such as voice intonation, gestures, and postures.

4 Lesson plan

The class took place during regular class hours. The work covered during the class was a literary work included in a high school English language textbook: *Transients in Arcadia* by O. Henry. The following shows how I designed the five episodes (Table 1).

Episode / Activity	Task
1. Constructing the setting	Students imagine they are in a hotel in Manhattan, New York.

	Students perform what they imagine they would be doing in the dining room in this hotel.
2. Introducing the first character	The teacher explains how teacher-in-role works. The teacher, in role as Madame Beaumont, gives general information about herself and the hotel. Students, in role as hotel guests, tell stories of Madame Beaumont. Students draw Madame Beaumont and write about her using expressions extracted from the text.
3. Introducing the second character	While the teacher reads a part of the story that features Farrington, a student who takes the role of Farrington acts it out. Students draw Farrington and write about him using expressions extracted from the text.
4. Characters getting to know each other	Students work in groups of three. One is a narrator, the other two are characters. While the narrator reads the passage, the characters act it out. The teacher, in role as Madame Beaumont role plays with a student who takes the role of Farrington.
5. Revealing the truth	Teacher, in role as Madame Beaumont, tells Farrington the truth. Students, in role of Farrington, write a diary about their feelings towards Madame Beaumont. The teacher, out of role, reveals Farrington's response.

Table 1: Lesson Plan

5 Insights

In this section, I provide some anecdotal insights into the experience of conducting a process drama in my setting. First, by examining the changes in students' behaviour and the efforts I made to bring about those changes, I describe how the previously disconnected relationship between the students and me begins to form a connection. Then, I explore the effectiveness of teacher-in-role, the strategy I focused on to facilitate the connection, by looking into how my colleagues responded to the drama convention.

5.1 Building connections

Not a single student fell asleep during the 50 minutes of the class. Everyone raised their heads and looked at me. Whenever I moved around the room, their eyes followed me. No matter which student I looked at, our eyes met. Students' voices could be heard. It was not to the extent of being noisy or bustling, as the atmosphere was generally calm, but compared to the usual class time, which was quiet and unresponsive to the point where one might question the presence of students in the classroom, it was surprisingly vibrant.

I created opportunities for each student to express their thoughts in the way they might feel most comfortable and confident, aiming to maximize interactions among students and between students and me. Activities tailored for students trying to pursue fine arts or those who simply enjoy drawing as a hobby involved drawing the background of a story as well as creating characters. For students who find speaking English challenging, activities featuring nonverbal acting without dialogue were designed. For students who are comfortable speaking in front of others, I organized role-playing activities where they, in role as a character, could engage in a conversation with me, also in role. From the stage of lesson preparation, I had already been trying to connect with each student individually, envisioning them in my mind. This was quite different from my usual approach of preparing lessons by focusing solely on textual analysis without much consideration for the students.

Students responded positively to my efforts. Despite their shyness, they performed their roles excellently. In a system where students are often judged based on their grades, a student who might have been perceived as someone not proficient in English stood out during the drama sessions, becoming the center of attention and receiving applause. Students who had neither answered my questions nor made eye contact during the regular class time played a crucial role as co-creators of a fictional world. They communicated with me not only verbally but also through non-verbal methods such as drawing and improvisational acting, contributing significantly to bringing the text to life.

One student volunteered to take on the role of Farrington, while I played Madame Beaumont, and we acted out a scene. Although there was a script, I left room for the student to express herself non-verbally. The student approached me closely, looked me in the eyes, and smiled. I never verbally explained to this student how the relationship between the two characters was developing, but she grasped from inhabiting the drama world that the scene we were acting out was a moment where a friendship was growing between the characters. Through this process, the physical and psychological distance between us became very close.

Nevertheless, there was still a reticent student. Even when she could have said a word or two, not necessarily to me but at least to her group members, considering the watchful eyes of

other teachers observing my class, she seemed to have no intention of participating in the activities. She was an exceptionally quiet student who did not project her voice well, even during one-on-one meetings. I wondered whether she could understand even a bit of the characters or the storyline being discussed during the class. Observing this student, I thought there might be cases where drama classes are ineffective. My perspective, however, turned out to be wrong when I read her piece written in role as Farrington, the male character in the story, during the writing-in-role activity. Her poetic and creative piece expressing the character's emotions toward Madame Beaumont revealed that she understood the situation the character was in and empathized with the character. When I read aloud the piece in the classroom, everyone erupted in cheers. It was the first time she had received such attention and applause during class. Categorizing her as merely quiet, I almost failed to recognize her talents. She had been a student who felt more comfortable expressing herself through writing rather than speaking. Without this activity, I might have evaluated her as a student who does not participate in my class and is not willing to communicate with me.

The activities I designed to invite students to co-create the drama world with me provided opportunities for students to showcase their various talents in diverse modes. Throughout the process of expressing individual talents, each student came alive, engagement was heightened, and interactions occurred, resulting in building connections between me and my students and among the students themselves.

The most memorable feedback was from a student who ran up to me after the class, as I walked through the corridor, and told me looking earnestly into my eyes. "Teacher, your eyeballs are pretty!" Upon hearing this, I was pleasantly surprised for two reasons. Firstly, the student who usually sat at the back, keeping her head down and only showing the top of her head, came up to me and initiated a conversation. Secondly, the evaluation was not about the eyes but specifically about the eyeballs. If this student had said, "Your eyes are pretty," I would have taken it as a compliment about my appearance. However, a reference to my eyeballs signifies that the student lifted her head, looked at me, and took an interest in what I said and did. Through drama, I realized how psychologically close and connected this student and I have become. Since the open class, my teaching practice went back to the teacher-centered instruction, but this student has never fallen asleep during class again, which is such a dramatic change hard to believe. Although it is uncertain how much she concentrated on the class content, she did at least raise her head and look at my eyeballs during class.

5.2 Facilitating the connection through teacher-in-role

What promoted the collaboration in creating a fictional world was me taking on a role as one of the characters in the story. Both students and teachers considered me acting in role the

most impressive aspect of the class. During the post-lesson evaluation meeting where each teacher who observed my class took turns providing feedback on my lesson, although I did not specifically ask the teachers for their views on teacher-in-role, all the teachers made a comment about the strategy, which they found surprising and shocking, with one even describing it as revolutionary. They regarded the teacher taking on a role as suspending the teacher's authority and stepping away from the typical teaching practice of giving instructions to students. They viewed that it was this "'disruption' of the familiar teacher-student relationship" (Aitken et al., 2007, p. 7) that elicited participation from the students. What was surprising was that the teachers had grasped the effectiveness of the teacher performing as a character, as reflected in their comments such as "by acting, the teacher enters the world of fiction" where "students can inhabit" and "creates the story together with the students" rather than the teacher unilaterally delivering the story to the students.

Acknowledging the benefits of using teacher-in-role did not necessarily mean that they were going to try out the strategy in their classes. Among the five teachers interviewed, three refused to be in role mentioning that they lack acting skills and cannot memorize scripts. This resistance to employing teacher-in-role could be tackled by arguing that the purpose of teaching in role is not to display acting skills but to invite students to co-construct the imaginary world (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). But the question is whether drawing a distinction between teaching in role and acting in the theatre (Morgan & Saxton, 1987) would lighten the burden of acting for those reluctant to take a role since, as Ackroyd (2004) claims, acting and teaching in role are closely related.

Although having no experience in drama pedagogy, let alone having heard the term process drama, the teachers identified the purpose of teacher-in-role: a teacher staying within the context of the work instead of acting as an external facilitator can encourage active participation from students and collaboratively build a dramatic world with them (O'Neill & Lambert, 2006; Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

6 The changes in students and myself after the drama-integrated class

The day after my open class, full remote learning was implemented. In the virtual classroom, I dissected and analysed English passages to prepare for the college entrance exam, which was scheduled to take place four months later. My classes returned to focusing on exam preparation like before, but students showed more involvement in my lessons. While in the past I received no responses from students whether I asked a question to a large group or singled out someone, after the day I applied drama in my class, there was at least one student who answered, whether verbally or in writing, with some raising their heads and making eye contact with me. I would not say the classroom atmosphere became lively and excited, but it

seemed that the students were at least aware of my presence. Even such seemingly small changes gave me great strength.

Just as significant as the increase in the frequency of interactions between students and me during class was the change that I demonstrated. As I believed that the connectedness in the classroom which was generated in the open class would persist, I no longer perceived myself as being rejected by students when there was silence during class. I came to accept Song's (2021) argument that silence might not just reflect a lack of participation; it could also suggest feelings of intimidation or indicate that students are engaged in thoughtful processing.

Realizing that I am not isolated from my students, I gained the courage to do things I previously would not have dared to try. While I could not dedicate a whole session to a drama-based lesson, I did incorporate a glimpse of dramatic tension in short segments during class. For example, when dealing with exam preparation questions about inferring the speaker's feelings from a text, I read aloud with emotion. Other than my voice reading the text, no other sound could be heard. Based on the surprised expressions of the students who looked at me and the applause that erupted after I finished reading the text, I assumed that the silence during my reading stemmed not from indifference but from tension.

6.1 The nature of drama that enhanced students' engagement

To explain the positive changes that occurred in the students, I explore what nature, that is unique to drama, contributes to increasing student participation. It is the fictional frame that drama creates in which a secure environment for students is established, which in turn fosters greater engagement and commitment to their work (Wells & Sandretto, 2016). And it is the teacher stepping into role that can most effectively move students into the fictional world (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). As the teacher assuming a role shows that she believes in the imagined world, students also voluntarily suspend their disbelief, enter the shared world, and engage in the drama experience (O'Toole, 2009).

Although acknowledging the benefits of using teacher-in-role, actually putting it into practice required a lot of courage. Taking on a character implied that I had to let go of the usual way of embodying myself as a teacher with higher status in terms of knowledge and authority. I was afraid that pretending to be a story character might look ridiculous. However, students let go of their usual mode of passive listeners and willingly became equal creators of the fictional context. I should have had more confidence in drama since, as O'Toole (2009) mentions, students are aware that the fictional life operates prominently in the foreground, while the real world, which is not completely forgotten but can be reintroduced at any time, is largely inactive.

The teacher being in role can be theoretically said to undermine the traditional structure of teacher authority and student reliance (Tam, 2017) and allow students agency, thereby leading to their enhanced engagement (Aitken et al., 2007) but applying this theory to explain the changes in my students seems to require further long-term and in-depth research. It is not easy to determine based on just one-time lesson whether the increased participation of my students is attributed to the implementation of process drama characterized by teacher-in-role or simply due to the fact that I moved away from my traditional didactic teaching style. In a context where teaching and learning with drama is an approach totally novel, it may be an obvious outcome that my drama-integrated class sparked students' interest and engagement.

6.2 The existential perspective to the understanding of the change within myself

Along with identifying what led to the students' change, what I want to focus on is understanding what brought about the positive changes in myself. As in Göksel's (2022) study, conducting drama lessons empowered me, which made me grow in terms of my relationship with the students and classroom management. Then my question is what enabled this growth? What is the theoretical underpinning of the psychological change within myself that led to the empowerment of me as a teacher?

To answer this question, I reflected on my psychological state during the time I was showing signs of burnout. Encountering students who are disengaged and uninterested, not only did I become emotionally exhausted but also began to think that what I do is not meaningful enough to justify students' attention. Thus, I had lost meaning in my work, consequently considering myself insignificant. Like in my case, the idea that the condition in which teachers are unable to find a sense of existential significance in their work causes burnout can be explained from the existential perspective (Pines, 2002) that assumes that burnout roots in individuals' need to feel that their actions are valuable and important. Based on the existential perspective, my experience of burnout originated from a "deficit of fulfilment" (Längle, 2003, p. 111), that is, failing to find existential meaning towards my work.

However, since the open class, the feeling of meaninglessness has faded away as students became engaged in and focused on what I did in class. I came to perceive my work and myself as important and meaningful. This positive shift in how I evaluate myself as well as my work is in line with Pines' (2002) view that the level of interest and attention students show impacts the teacher's existential level. With an elevated existential level, I transformed into a teacher who is attentive to students' attitude and motivated to infuse drama techniques in my lessons. The change I displayed supports Lavy's (2022) argument that when a sense of meaning at work is enhanced, or, to put it another way, when existential fulfilment increases, work engagement

is heightened. Coming back to the question of how I should explain the transformation that occurred within myself that empowered me as a teacher, I conclude that the empowerment of me as a teacher originated from existential fulfilment.

7 The potential of drama to build connection

Engaging in drama amid the pandemic offered creative chances for interaction and bonding between me and the students. As can be inferred from Tam's (2020) study, in the context where the feeling of isolation, fear, and uncertainty is widespread, the value of drama shines. Of course, there is no guarantee that the positive results of my one-time open-class will be replicated in every classroom context. However, just as bringing drama into the classroom helped me navigate the most significant crisis in my teaching career caused by being disconnected with students, I hope that drama can support many teachers going through similar struggles.

Given that bringing drama into the classroom is challenging, especially in the context where drama pedagogy is unfamiliar, it does not seem easy to encourage other teachers to apply drama in their own teaching. However, it does not seem impossible when I reflect on my colleagues' feedback on my open class such as "I want to try drama activities too but I don't know how to." or "We need more classes like this. I think I can carry out drama activities myself, as long as it doesn't involve me acting as a character." I believe that if teachers who wish to use drama in their lessons come together to design drama activities, reflect after classes, and exchange feedback with one another on a more regular and long-term basis, it will strengthen the connections between teachers as well as help integrate drama more effectively into the classroom.

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