

Demo:Dram Workshops

Re-contextualising texts: Graffiti in the yard

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Demo:Dram Workshop summary

This workshop plays with the idea of using a lesser known text from an iconic Hungarian poet and placing it at the centre of a completely new situation. The drama develops around a graffiti appearing in the schoolyard during the night. It looks at the text from different perspectives and explores responsibilities of teachers, students and those who might have written such a text. The poem titled Crossroads touches on the subject of choices and also mentions suicide, so it raises questions of mental health and teenage life choices.



Pic 1: Graffiti in action (by G. Csoszó)

Target audience

The lesson was primarily designed for 12-13 year olds as this is the age-group when Sándor Petöfi, whose poem is used in this case is taught in Hungary. But the structure and the model can be used with a variety of age-groups.

What are the aims/overall goals of the workshop?

- Offering an opportunity to meet a text from different perspectives
- Opening a possibility to discuss the relationship between authorship and text
- Engaging in creating a narrative around a text

What are the objectives/stages of the workshop?

- Taking on different roles that define different responsibilities concerning an educational situation.
- Being able to keep their role in a pair or small group improvisation
- Developing a narrative based on a text.

Why this workshop; what is the rationale?

Young people and sometimes teachers too do not question the literary canon offered in their textbooks. This lesson offers the possibility of questioning the value and the impact of a literary text by placing it in a new context. The lesson aims to open questions concerning the value of text, the importance of authorship and the relationship of literature of past decades to the current life of young people.

Description of workshop process: what we did and how we did it

Discussion: To prepare the improvisation and taking on roles during the lesson we start with a short discussion about what could be difficult and what could help in taking on roles of different people in a story. The facilitator clarifies that to be in role people do not need to develop complex characters or performance skills, it is enough to take on the perspective of the role they are playing and react to the situation that is being offered. The facilitator explains that the participants will need to think from the perspective of different roles during the lesson.

Setting up the whole group improvisation: The facilitator tells the group that the story they are going to engage in happens in (and perhaps around) a school in Hungary (this could be changed to any country depending where you are doing the lesson) which is in a small town, but has a good reputation. The drama starts in the staff room, so it would be useful to discuss what this staff room might look like. It is useful to have a basic idea of the geography of the space, but it is not important to map it up in great detail. It is really useful to decide jointly on the school motto which is on one of the walls of the staff room.

Whole group improvisation with Teacher in Role: It is the first break of the day and the teachers are in the staff room when the Head teacher (the facilitator) comes in with an important question. The improvisation can start from a still image of the teachers in the staff room.

The Head starts immediately with the news that during the night a graffiti has been sprayed on the wall of the school yard – it is on a blind spot for the CCTV cameras, so they do not know who it was. It is not the usual tag but actually a longer text and the Head is asking if any teachers have an idea of who might have written it.

The Head reads the text and passes it around handwritten on a piece of paper, it is the following (it is important not to share it as a poem from Sándor Petöfi):

I STAND AT CROSSROADS...

I stand at crossroads
Where to go?
One goes West,
East the other goes.

It does not matter
which one I choose,
My life is miserable
whatever I do.

Why can't I know
which way death is?
That road I would choose
Immediately.

The aim of the improvisation is not to find a solution but to hear different thoughts and raise different questions about the text. The Head (TiR) should be genuinely unsure about what to do about it. Is it vandalism? Or a cry for help? Who could have done it? Are we sure it is one of our students? What will the other students think when they see it? What will the parents think when they hear about it? Should we let the police deal with it? Or just get it whitewashed and forget about it?

The group doesn't have to reach a decision, but the Head can ask the teachers to talk with one or two of their students about it to find out more.

Whole group still image: "During the break the students have discovered the graffiti on the wall. Let's make a still image about how they are reading this text." The facilitator can read the text again while the group has time to think about the image. Then they can set it up by stepping into the image one by one. When the image is ready the facilitator can ask what the students are saying to each other. This can be spoken out loud.

After this the facilitator can ask what is it that they are not saying out loud but might be thinking. These can also be spoken out loud by those who have ideas about it.

Pair improvisation: Referring back to the improvisation with the Head the facilitator asks the participants to try out what a discussion between a teacher and a student could look like. She/he can ask participants to join in pairs and decide which of them will be in role as the teacher and who will be a student. They should decide where the discussion is happening where they can talk freely. It is important to remind participants that this is an improvisation that they are playing for themselves, so they don't have to show it to others. Before the improvisation starts the facilitator can give participants 30 seconds of silence, where those who will be in role as teachers can think through what their questions will be and those in role as students can think through what their thoughts about the graffiti would be. The improvisation should go on for a few minutes, or as long as most of the group seems engaged in the discussion in role.

Discussion: It is useful to reflect on the improvisation – was it difficult to stay in role? Could they take the situation seriously? What helped and what made it difficult?

Group improvisation: the facilitator can ask those who were in role as the teachers in the pair improvisations to form a circle and start an improvisation in which the Head (Teacher in Role) asks the teachers about what they have found out from the students.

Group scene-making: participants need to create groups of 4-6 people and are asked to create a scene about what was the trigger that made someone write this text. For this they need to decide who wrote it on the wall of the yard and then think about what that happened to that person, or what did she/he see that was the last impulse to write such a text?

Sharing: The scenes are shared, but participants should not explain them, just share any information that is needed to understand what is happening.

Discussion: Any of the scenes could be the cause for someone writing this text. But does it matter who wrote it if we want to understand the text?

The facilitator can share that actually this text is published as a poem from an iconic Hungarian poet (for details see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sandor-Petofi>), but does knowing this make a difference concerning the value of the text?

Resources to support the workshop

The poem in Hungarian and the English translation:

Petőfi Sándor: KERESZTÚTON ÁLLOK...

Keresztúton állok,
Merre tartsak?
Ez kelet felé visz,
Az nyugatnak.

Akármerre megyek,
Mindegy nekem,
Mindenütt szomorú
Az életem.

Mért nem tudom, hol vár
A halál rám?
Hogy egyenesen azt
Választhatnám!

(Source: <https://petofisandor.blogspot.com/2009/01/keresztuton-allok.html>)

Sándor Petöfi: I STAND AT CROSSROADS...

I stand at crossroads
Where to go?
One goes West,
East the other goes.

It does not matter
which one I choose,
My life is miserable
whatever I do

Why can't I know
which way death is?
That road I would choose
Immediately.

(Translated by Adam Bethlenfalvy)

Post workshop ideas

The group could work on what text they would put in the school yard. What would it be and how would they place it in the yard? What effect could it have on students and teachers?

They could also choose another poem from another poet that they think could be written by someone today.

Further reading:

Further information about Sándor Petöfi: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sandor-Petofi>

Some Petöfi poems in English: <http://mek.oszk.hu/06500/06567/06567.htm>

