



Getting the Buggers into Drama

Natalie Martin

In her introduction to *Getting the Buggers into Drama*, Sue Cowley claims her book will give 'an overview of the practicalities of using drama with young people' and present non-specialists and more experienced drama teachers alike with 'hundreds of ideas for games, activities, scenarios and themes for teaching drama'. Having read some of Cowley's previous books (*Getting the Buggers to Behave* and *How to Survive Your First Year in Teaching*), I was familiar with her tone and expected a simple, yet effective, no-frills guide to teaching drama that would impact on my practice.

For the teacher with little specialist knowledge, interested in introducing drama into their practice, this book serves as a useful beginner's guide. The basic drama techniques which feature in chapter two, 'Ways of working', are clearly explained: Cowley lists many simple concepts including improvisation, thought-tracking, freeze-framing and hot-seating, giving a brief outline for each, including examples of how they can be used in lessons. Also included in the same chapter are examples of trust games, focusing activities and warm-ups. However, this chapter, although described as a useful 'reference and reminder for more experienced staff', is probably worth missing out if you're not a complete beginner. And herein lies a more general criticism of the book; while it claims to appeal to all, as a drama specialist in my second year of teaching, I found it contained little new or original material and seemed generally to be more suited to those new to teaching drama – perhaps even those new to the subject altogether. The majority of practical suggestions are very basic; they are not, as the introduction suggests, 'exciting and innovative' and will be familiar to drama teachers with even only a *little* bit of experience.

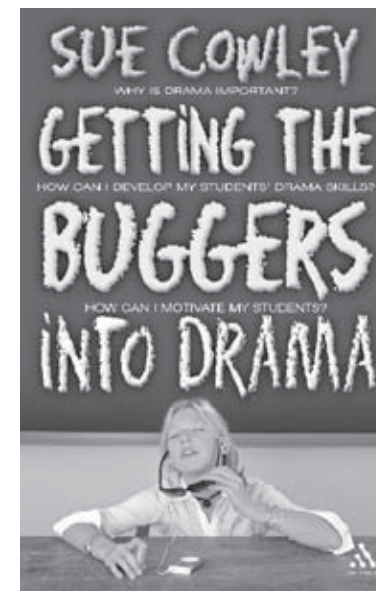
In its favour, the short chapters, use of sub-headings and easily accessible tone do make the book a minimal-effort read and it is easy to navigate around sections and access the information you are looking for. And, unlike many books in this genre, exercises and activities are explained succinctly, preventing the reader from having to sift through lengthy explanations and convoluted rules. Cowley is clearly aware that as a busy, stressed teacher, the last thing you want from a book of this nature is an over-academic,

long-winded treatise. Yet, the further I ventured into it the more I became frustrated by its superficiality, and I began to see its simplicity as a disappointing weakness rather than an effective strength.

The book covers a lot of material, with chapters ranging from basic ways of working, to staging a school production and developing cross-curricular drama. However, it does not cover any of these in sufficient depth. The further I read the more confused I became as to whom Cowley's target audience actually was; some areas of the book are inaccessible to those with limited experience, while others are completely irrelevant to specialists. It appears that in attempting to write a book that appeals to everyone, Cowley has produced a book that doesn't adequately cater to any particular group: while anyone interested in teaching drama will be able to find *something* appropriate and useful in it, they will also find themselves wading through a lot of superfluous material.

Having said this, while I didn't feel Cowley's book taught me much I didn't already know, I did feel somewhat encouraged to break out of my usual habits and refresh my lesson plans. I could imagine introducing some of the activities from chapter six, 'Role play and characterisation', to key stage 3 and 4 groups. Chapter nine, 'Themes for drama', also contained material I would consider using in lessons. It consists of several short, easy-to-follow schemes of work. These are mainly issue- rather than skills-based and appropriate for drama teachers with a range of experience. The lesson plans based on *The Estate*, in which students create an entire community on a housing estate, including the families, friends and individuals who inhabit it, would be particularly effective at KS3 in an inner-city school, and worth experimenting with.

If you are new to teaching drama and don't know where to begin, Cowley's book will be a useful 'quick-start' guide for you. It covers all the basics in an easily accessible format, doesn't overcomplicate and provides a range of practical suggestions ready and waiting to be tried out in the classroom. I definitely would have welcomed some of the ideas and suggestions when I was training and would



recommend passing it on to non-specialist colleagues with an interest in drama.

However, if you have a background in drama or some experience of teaching the subject, this book isn't going to offer you anything new. Even as a relatively new teacher, I felt that Cowley's book did little other than reaffirm what I had been taught during my PGCE and learnt as an NQT. It may present you with variations of your tried-and-tested methods, and allow you to reflect on your practice, but it won't make any significant impact on your teaching and, as a result, is not worth giving up your precious free time for.

Biography

Natalie Martin studied drama and theatre arts at the University of Birmingham before going on to complete a PGCE in drama at the Central School of Speech and Drama. She is now in her second year of teaching at Meadowhead School in Sheffield.

need to know

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