

FICTION IN DRAMA EDUCATION OFFERS
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL -
PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN DRAMA
EDUCATION



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Abstract

In philosophy fiction poses deep problems. The existence of fictional objects is questionable and that makes it difficult to use the concept of truth in fiction. How can we understand fiction if we cannot make reasonable judgments about it? The philosophical theory I develop in my PhD research suggests that understanding fiction rests essentially on our ability to use words differently in different contexts. This means that fiction offers multiple ways to read with large scale of difficulty. In education it is a challenge to find a method that takes into account the different learning abilities of the pupils, especially of pupils with special needs. My goal is to show that using fiction in drama education helps in developing metacognitive skills in a way that takes into account all learners. Using the concept of truth in constructing understanding of fiction is in essential position. The fact that supports the conclusions of the present study is that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulties in understanding fictional stories and in pretending. Pretense is often considered as a central characteristic of understanding fiction but people with ASD can engage in fiction when meanings are rigid like in mathematics. Thus, it is not pretending but metarepresentation that is required. The scale of understanding fiction ranges from rigid understanding of meanings based on personal experiences to very abstract poetic use of language with endless references to other texts. Drama educational practices can offer all these, and metacognitive abilities are in essential position.

Keywords: Drama education, fiction, truth, understanding, use theory of meaning, inclusion

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1. Understanding fiction

The purpose of this research is twofold. Firstly, I aim to show that my philosophical theory on understanding fiction (Nyberg 2015) has practical implications. Secondly, I am searching a method for educational purposes that takes into account all learners. My personal experiences on special education and the theory on fiction I develop have produced an idea that drama educational practices have the right elements for being such a method. By the aid of philosophical analysis and empirical research on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) I argue that this is the case. Thus, in short, my goal is to show that using fiction in drama education is a method which helps in developing metacognitive skills in a way that takes into account all learners.

Fictional discourse raises philosophical problems because of names like ‘Sherlock Holmes’ which have no real life referent. Some of the names like ‘London’ in Sherlock Holmes stories have real life referents and thus the text consists in constant interplay with fiction and reality. In reading fiction it is thus useful to distinguish between different contexts. For example, some of the things said in a science fiction are scientifically accurate. This means the need of metarepresentation and metacognitive skills. By metarepresentation I mean second-order presentation of first order cognitive contents (Proust 2007). Using fiction, truth and drama education, offer large scale of simultaneous tasks with multiple degrees of difficulty. This practice helps in promoting inclusive values in social contexts like classrooms. In social contexts the challenge is to create such a learning environment that helps all the students feel more included while the individual learning processes are still at focus. From the point of view of special education this means taking into account individual differences and possible disabilities in learning. Inclusive practices give better learning possibilities for all students no matter what the level of their performance is. It is worth noting that the central ideas presented in this paper are applicable despite the controversiality of the philosophical ideas of my theory. As an example of different abilities in learning I use studies on autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Although some of the results of those studies support my theory I want to emphasize that the point is in different cognitive starting points of learners not in deficits. The goal is in developing such pedagogical practices that gives good learning possibilities for all.

1.1. Inclusion

My experiences on special education and teaching pupils with special needs support the idea that educational practices should be inclusive. However, the notion of inclusion is

problematic since it seems to be impossible to give its universal definition. There is no mutual understanding of the use and meaning of the word inclusion. For the present purposes it is illuminating to refer Ainscow's (2010) view that inclusion is about organizing the school to be responsive to the needs of all its pupils. These characterizations come close to the idea of accessibility and especially universal design for learning (UDL). Rose (2001, 66) describes UDL as injecting flexibility into the materials and methods used in the classroom. This means maximizing the learning opportunities for all the students. Rose acknowledges that there is great challenge for a teacher in choosing suitable materials and methods since flexibility can be obtained in numerous ways. My task is to show that drama education together with my theory on the function of the concept of truth in fiction offers tools for inclusive pedagogical practices. Drama education is exceptional practice for learning interdisciplinary topics. When we are dealing with interdisciplinary topic it is a matter of a degree how variously we grasp its multiple dimensions. Developing our ability to recognize these dimensions is crucial for better learning and understanding for all, special needs or not.

1.2. Truth in Fiction

What are the philosophical challenges of understanding fiction? The philosophical problems in dealing with fiction are much about truth. The motivation for the minimal theory of truth (Horwich 1998a) and the use theory of meaning (1998b) comes from the difficulties that theories of substantial reference and truth pose to understanding fiction. The minimal theory of truth together with the use theory of meaning can avoid those difficulties. Both theories are equally important for my theory. My account of understanding fiction relies in general from empirical point of view, on metacognitive strategies and loosely on constructivist theories of learning because I stress learner's personal history and knowledge. The complexity connected to full or better understanding of a fictional text or some other form of representational art requires metacognitive abilities i.e. skills to think one's own thinking. In any mental activity or knowledge domain, metacognition is a tool of wide application for solving various problems (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002). One of my central claims is that using the concept of truth is important in constructing understanding of fiction and that is when both metacognitive skills and our personal prior knowledge are essential. Understanding is a matter of a degree and the more we have relevant knowledge and master the language and words in question, the better we understand the text and work of art in question.

The classical philosophical attempts of Russell (1905), Frege (1892), Meinong (1905), Zalta (1983) Walton (1990) etc. to solve the problems of understanding fiction fail or so I argue (Nyberg 2016). This is because of the confusion of considering truth and meaning as dependent on worldly entities or corresponding structures of language and world. Minimal theory of truth and the use theory of meaning resist taking meanings or words as directed to the world. Use theory meaning accepts that the word ‘dog’ is used in a right way if it is used in the presence of a dog but this is strictly speaking not to say that the word ‘dog’ is about’ a dog (Horwich 1998b, pp. 16-17).

The minimal theory of truth claims that it makes no difference in saying that it is a truth that “dogs bark” or simply saying that, dogs bark. To say that ‘snow is white’ is true, or that it is true that snow is white, is equivalent to saying simply that snow is white (Horwich 1998b, pp. 103-104) I take as an implication of this that when a sentence is uttered our natural disposition is to consider the sentence as it says, as true. It is the use of the words and our prior knowledge that gives the further information about its interpretation. There is no further question whether it is true in fiction. ‘Dogs bark’ is true if and only if dogs bark. In contrast to traditional theories, deflationism seems to make truth independent of metaphysical questions by avoiding terms like fact and reality and its meaning is constituted implicitly by its use.

1.3. Intertextuality

Following Julia Kristeva (1993) It is illuminating to keep in mind Julia Kristeva’s words that every text is built on mosaic of citations and every text has absorbed other texts and every text is a variant of other texts. Texts have three dimensions: the author, reader and other texts. Thus the implicit or explicit references to other works of art work as meaning constituting parts as well as author’s intentions. In order to understand a work of art we need to have certain knowledge on these referential relations. Thus, from a reader’s point of view to interpret a text i.e. to discover its potential meanings is to trace those relations (Kalogirou & Economopoulou, 2012). Reading is thus a process of moving between texts (Kalogirou & Economopoulou 2012).

In order to understand and judge fiction, the intertextual characteristic seems to pose insurmountable challenge, at least for those who are stuck in rigid meanings and robust truth predicate. Mathematical terms may serve as an example of rigid meanings since they are very likely treated in a very similar way in different situations. By robust truth predicate I mean truth with substantial properties like correspondence relation between language and

reality. In my approach the relations between language and reality are constructed in contexts. This idea traces itself to Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1999) but at this point it suffices to stress that words may be used differently in different situations which implies that one has to follow the cues available in order to play the language game successfully. Informational texts are easier to understand in this respect since their contexts are more explicit and thus easier to recognize. Mathematics belongs to this category of informational texts because mathematical terms are very likely use similarly in different situations. Following the idea of intertextuality, in fiction multiple language games may be played at the same. This underlines the challenge of understanding fiction. Fiction may produce endless relations to other texts. My view stresses how understanding is about recognizing the relevant contexts for better understanding. Understanding is thus a skill to use words in the right way.

2. Fiction, metacognition and meta-representation

Meta-representation is needed in better understanding of fictional discourse where words have different kind of uses than they usually have. Metarepresentation may well be characterized in a way the term was originally used i.e. as an ability to represent the representational relation itself (Pylyshyn, 1978). As Proust (2007) brings out, not every metarepresentation is metacognitive. Proust's example is a statement about a photo failing to convey the luminosity of Leonardo's Last Supper. Metarepresentation is expressed because photo represents the fresco and fresco represents a religious scene. The ways to understand such a picture are numerous depending on e.g. background information. My approach deals with right uses of words and this highlights that mastering the use of a word is a skill and a matter of a degree. With better skills of using the words plus metacognitive skills understanding is better. The concept of truth is the indicator revealing truth in certain context or language game.

Thus, one may follow the rules of the game played without recognizing the connections to other games and then the understanding is limited although successful to some extent. As an example of this counts that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are capable of engaging in mathematics. The existence of mathematical objects is disputable and for that reason it is claimed that mathematical objects are useful fictions. People with ASD have difficulties in meta- representation (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Firth, 1985) and this is claimed to be the reason why children with ASD have difficulties in pretending (Leslie, 1987). In general, these difficulties should be rather referred to as

cognitive differences, not deficits. The differences with children with ASD in performing mathematical tasks challenge the idea of pretence play. In mathematics the uses of the terms are more rigid and this could explain why they are capable of engaging in it. If this is right it implies that understanding mathematics does not essentially require neither pretending nor meta-representational capacity. This is because people with ASD have difficulties in pretending and meta-representation. This view also suggests that the ontological status of objects is not decisive. It is the use of the words that matters, whether they are used differently in different language games. Words of fiction are used as successfully as terms with real life referents if the use follows the basic regularities. I am not intending to make claims about the ontology of mathematical or any other objects. The theories I rely on stay neutral on such matters. In the following it is showed how the pretence account of fiction fails.

2.1. Pretence

Pretence theories about fiction claim that we are not asserting the propositions within fiction. This also implies that we don't believe the sentences of such discourse. Thus, we are merely pretending the truth of the sentences or the existence of the objects involved. Pretence theories admit of different versions (e.g. Currie 1992; Evans 1982) but Kendall Walton's (1990) theory is allegedly the most influential one). Walton derives our understanding of representational arts from children's games of make believe. This means that representational works function as props in games of make believe just like dolls and toy trucks serve as props in children's games. Walton's view is generally considered as convincing. Walton declares that "Make-believe-the use of (external) props in imaginative activities- is a truly remarkable invention" (Walton 1990).

Make believe or pretence is considered as essential in order to understand fiction. Pretence is defined as acting in a way that is contrary to how the world is. Garvey (1990) states that pretending by its definition requires acting symbolically or non-literally with objects in a way that is contrary to reality. This is also expressed as consciously projecting a mental representation onto reality (Lillard, 1993) According to developmental theorists the pretence emerges during the second year of life. It is considered puzzling that it emerges so early when children are learning to construct their own concept of world and reality (Randell & Nielsen 2007) In my approach the focus is in using language and thus many aspects like mental representations are left out.

The following example from Stanley (2001) shows how so called hermeneutic fictionalism deals with philosophically problematic discourse.

“Suppose John and Hannah are playing cowboys and Indians. In so doing, Hannah and John are pretending. John is pretending to be a cowboy, and Hannah is pretending to be an Indian. Suppose that during the game, Hannah squeezes her fist in John’s direction, and John collapses to the ground. Within the game, it is true that a cowboy has been shot by an Indian. That is, it is fictionally true that a cowboy has been shot by an Indian. But this fictional truth is made to be the case by an action “in the real world”. For Hannah’s squeezing her fist in John’s direction is an action “in the real world”, as is John’s dropping to the ground. These ‘real’ actions make it fictionally true, true in the pretense of cowboys and Indians, that a cowboy has been shot.”

This view implies that the sentences containing these pretended entities cannot be true. They are either false or untrue. One solution is to call them fictionally true. These kinds of accounts of fiction are challenged by the autism objection.

Autism objection is based on the assumption that people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) lack the capacity to pretend (Stanley 2001). However, people with ASD are capable of engaging in mathematics, sometimes with very high mathematical abilities. Mathematical objects may be considered as fictional (e.g. Field 1980; Yablo 2001). Mathematical fictionalism claims that mathematical objects are useful fictions. At least their existence is highly disputable. Anyway, people with ASD can use them. Therefore, we could conclude that hermeneutic fictionalism is false. This argument is thus supposed to undermine those fictional discourses people with autism have capacity to engage in. Mathematics is apparently one of those discourses.

The essence of the argument relies on the concept of pretence. A fact that puzzles psychologists is that even two years old children are capable of performing pretend play (Randell & Nielsen, 2007). One may question whether such a play includes acting consciously in a way contrary to reality. It may be that when one is acting contrary to how the world is one can be only following certain rules, not pretending. Metarepresentational capacity is needed in understanding fictional discourse where words have different kind of uses than they usually have. In mathematics the uses of the terms are more rigid and this explains why people with ASD are capable of engaging in it. This view implies that understanding mathematics does not require pretending nor metarepresentational capacity to the same extent. Terms are used as successfully as terms with real life referents if the use follows the basic regularities. The ontology of the objects is not decisive. It is the right use of

the words that matters. All this suggests that understanding precedes pretending and thus those children with ASD having difficulties in pretence play can be thought to have difficulties in adapting to situations where things have other than their usual meanings. Pretence can be a part of a successful engagement in social situations and this stems from the skill to read contextual cues e.g. social situations. Once we have understood the game or a fictional situation in drama we can modify our behaviour suitable for it. The difference to the views commonly stated in the context of developmental psychology is that the point is not in knowingly stating a false proposition in respect to real world but in following the rules of the game or fictional drama situation. Rules may be followed without metarepresentation but distinguishing explicitly contexts and intertextual relations requires it.

2.2. Referential relations and meaning as use

Words have their basic acceptance properties (Horwich 1998b), but the right use in certain context is determined by the circumstances and rules of the language game played. Some contexts may thus be ‘scientific’ in the sense that the use of the words in question is very limited and accurate, like in mathematics, but understanding is partly consisted in recognizing what is the context i.e. the use in question. In fiction there may be several contexts available at the same time as the concept of intertextuality suggests. Those relations are not of course recognized by all. Only experts have knowledge on some of them.

I do not aim at showing that multiple referential relations make it impossible to say something true of a fictional text. The challenge is to claim truths despite of these obstacles. The point is that understanding means capability to recognize referential relations to other contexts or language games. Those ‘referential relations’ are not strictly speaking referential, because they are parts of the acceptance properties of the words or concepts in question (Horwich 1998b, p. 69). In language games words have meanings with certain rules which may create relations to other contexts. Understanding is a practical ability of using words but we can admit that is a form of ‘knowing that’ if we realize that the knowledge is implicit (Horwich, 1998b). This means that our use of a word is governed by a certain basic regularity and that is how we ‘implicitly’ take the word to have a certain meaning (Horwich, 1998b, p. 8).

In short, all this means that using drama education and fiction for dealing with e.g. cross curricular themes opens large variety of possibilities to give tasks that are suitable for all pupils. Texts always require reader to fill in gaps. Text does not tell all there is, and this is one essential part where fiction is connected to the world we live in. Personal experiences are

in use when gaps are filled though the teacher may provide pupils with alternatives. Personal experiences are the starting point when pursuing more abstract uses of words.

It has been claimed that it is one of the criteria of a good story that it transports us to a narrative world (Gerrig 1993). However, a poor story may do this as well but it is considered as one of the important aspects of experiencing a narrative. What is going on in a story is what a reader is to find out. We always actively supplement the information we receive and thus the amount of prior knowledge is essential in order to understand. The most complicated cases like allegories or political satires make it visible how the understanding requires constant interplay between different contexts including reality and metafictional contexts. In order to understand fiction it might be necessary to recognize whether the proposition in fiction is true or false in real life. Such a situation is e.g. when some real life person has properties in fiction she/he does not have in reality. Thus, it is not enough that we give an account of truth in fiction. It is the same world where we are and fiction is told.

2.3. Interplay between texts in practice

The manners of approach that give equal opportunities to learn are such that take into account the personal starting points. The same drama educational project can be source for multiple learning experiences. The teacher can provide these opportunities by sharing roles and tasks of the project in a way that intertextual links come visible. As the play or project is a mosaic of citations the fragments of it show how words should be used in some particular context. How can we know whether an expression should be taken seriously or not? I take it as a natural starting point that we consider a sentence to be true. How would it be possible to judge a sentence as non-assertive if we don't first consider it true? It might be essential in order to understand what a story is about to realise that some expressions of the story are true in real life. For example, understanding a Sherlock Holmes story might require basic knowledge on the city of London or natural laws. There is no prior label in sentences of fictional story or lines of an actor which sentences should be taken seriously. Many fictional stories like those about Sherlock Holmes are a mixture of real life events and fictional events. A play for example might have a character whose lines are such that recognizing their truth-value in real life is essential in order to understand the actions or the nature of this personality. What makes understanding more complicated is when sentences are true about another fictional story. My point of view is about using language in a right way in the contexts at stake. Understanding is thus a matter of a degree and the ability to use the words in different contexts shows better understanding. The concept of truth makes these different

uses visible. The same expression can be true or false depending on the context. This may sound self-evident but in fiction this is disputable. Sherlock Holmes Stories in Strand magazine were published with the following note in the beginning of a story:

“Being a reprint from the reminiscences of
JOHN H. WATSON
Late of the Army Medical Department”

Experts of the texts published in Strand magazine could recognize that the name ‘Watson’ is not used accurately if it is claimed that the story is in reality a reprint from the reminiscences of Watson. If the reader does not take this meta-fictional context, the story is a reprint from Watson’s reminiscences. It is true that the story is a reprint from Watson’s reminiscences if and only if the story is a reprint from Watson’s reminiscences. In the story it is a reprint from Watson’s reminiscences. The one who makes this claim has a better understanding of the word Watson if she recognizes that the claim is false in e.g. scientific context. The stories were not reminiscences of Watson but created by Conan Doyle. Experts have better skills to use certain words and recognizing different contexts requires metacognitive abilities. One may join the conversation by following the rules of the language game but the better understanding comes from acknowledging the context. A fruitful assumption in using fiction as a tool in drama is that all fiction is about reality. The distance to reality varies poetry being the most remote form of fiction.

To sum up my arguments, it is by the semantical ascent done with the concept of truth by which we come aware of the interplay between reality and fiction and different contexts. In order to do these steps, prior knowledge or some investigation is needed. This means taking into account our personal learning history, experiences, knowledge on genre, context etc. Some of these dimensions are useful in interpreting the work in question and some are crucial in order to make claims. For a teacher all this means e.g. choosing such cross curricular themes that provide large scale of sub-themes ranging from personal level to higher order comparative tasks. Thus, the understanding of fiction varies from restricted understanding of words based on personal experiences to understanding that recognizes links between various texts. Comparative perspective shows the connections between texts and shows more advanced skills to use words. These perspectives apply to both planning the learning curve and analysing the outcome.

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