The Story Wheel:
An Ethnographic Study of Autistic Adults Exploring a Story-Drama Curriculum

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək^{w}əŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The clinical diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (APA, 2013) include difficulties with social communication and social cognition. Decades of autism research have been devoted to developing and implementing social skills training programs, some of which include drama as an instructional strategy. This dissertation project set out to contribute to that body of research, creating and testing a social skills program that used drama based on fictional stories to provide examples of social behaviour choices. The critical analysis of the research findings, using ethnographic methodology and the dual lenses of weak central coherence theory (Frith, 2003) and context-blindness theory (Vermeulen, 2012), extends the clinical, medical model of autism to create a por[trait of authentic, forthright individuals who are concerned with issues of social justice, who learn by making analogies to build context, whose conversation is associative and collaborative, and who stepped into the fictional worlds of the story-dramas and into the minds of the characters with empathy and commitment.

The Story Wheel curriculum is built on Northrop Frye's archetypal literary theory (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957) using the dramatic conventions approach of applied drama (Neelands & Goode, *Structuring Drama Work*, 2015) as a pedagogical strategy. Each of the four archetypes – romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy – are represented by three workshops based on Western literature, chosen to align with the culture and knowledge base of the participants, for a total of twelve drama workshops in the research project. This dissertation includes the curriculum outline, the literary choices, and recommendations for drama practitioners to create a successful and inclusive experience for their autistic participants.

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Dedication

I would like to acknowledge the mentors, colleagues, and students that contributed to the birth and development of the Story Wheel over the last twenty years and led me to the completion of this project: Keith Turnbull, who introduced me to Northrop Frye's wheel during an artists' residency at the Banff Centre; Stuart Omdal, Shadi Letson, Brian Beard, and the many exceptional faculty and students of the University of Northern Colorado's Summer Enrichment Program (SEP) who embraced "trash culture" and the Story Wheel and encouraged me to keep working on it; Dr. Warwick Dobson, who introduced me to dramatic conventions pedagogy and the field of drama in education; Dr. Monica Prendergast, who guided me through the research and dissertating process; and Dr. Sarah Macoun, who encouraged me as an autism researcher.

This dissertation is dedicated to the group of participants who took a chance on me and committed to three months of drama classes, and to my family – Dr. Jeff Curry, who provided support in so many ways; Jennifer Curry, my younger daughter who shared many summers with me at SEP as the curriculum grew and who has always supported me with her boundless creative energy; and my older daughter Kimberly Curry, whose own autism diagnosis started me on this research journey and whose self-awareness and insight into the autistic experience was invaluable.

Thank you all for your support from the bottom of my heart.

The Journey from Parent to Teacher to Researcher

My family is a collection of musicians, artists, writers, and teachers. I thought my child's creative, intense approach to life was the expression of that heritage and simply a product of the family's artistic genes. As she progressed through elementary school, though, I started to realize that I had never met a child like her, not in all my years of teaching music and musical theatre. I had never known a child who could invent an imaginary world complete with languages, have a complete meltdown about having a bath, spend recess time spinning alone on a tire swing, and use the car ride home from school to ask me philosophical questions like "How do we know that we're not already dead, and *this* is heaven?" --- all in the same day.

As she grew older, her quirkiness became more pronounced as she tried to adapt to the social world of middle school and high school, accompanied by episodes of rage at home as she released the pent-up frustration with her schooling. The frustration with her teachers, her peers, and herself for not "fitting in" escalated to the point during high school where we had to seek professional help for her self-harming behaviours. I brought her to a psychologist who listened to our stories about her childhood, her quirks, her frustrations with school, her despair at ever having friends, and declared it to be a textbook case of Asperger's syndrome.

The pronouncement that my child has Asperger's syndrome was at once relieving, perplexing, and terrifying. It was a relief that someone recognized her quirks are part of a neurological syndrome and could explain her puzzling behaviour. It was perplexing because I had sought an evaluation for my child several years before that, after reading about Asperger's syndrome in a parenting magazine, and had been told that it would not be necessary. "You

realize that Asperger's syndrome is on the autism spectrum," the child psychologist had said, "Well, she's obviously not autistic; she's *very* verbal."

To now have confirmation that she was, indeed, autistic was terrifying, because I knew almost nothing about autism except for the depictions of mute, unreachable autistic children in television shows. I began a journey of self-education and research into the phenomenon of autism that led to making the connection between autism, storytelling, and drama, using the literary theory that I had learned in my training as an opera coach.

I had learned about Frye's Theory of Myths (Frye, 1957) from Keith Turnbull in a short-term residency program for artists in avant-garde music theatre at the Banff Centre and had been developing an adaptation while teaching at a summer residential camp for gifted middle schoolers, the Summer Enrichment Program at the University of Northern Colorado. By combining popular culture with Frye's myth-types, using the model of Richard Simon's work on English literature pedagogy, *Trash Culture* (1999), I created a template for the summer camp students to use when studying literature in school and we used it to investigate their favorite stories in visual, dramatic, and musical art forms. The objective at the time was to create a pop culture interpretation of a classic story, and my goal for the students was to give them an analytic tool to assist them with their literature studies in school. During the fifteen years that I taught this course, the students produced collage posters, performed skits, designed storyboards for a film, and created social media pages for fictional characters – all within the objective of identifying archetypes and translating classic literature into popular culture.

Although this was a summer camp for gifted students, every year there would be numerous students who joined the class who were also autistic or had other learning disabilities. These students thoroughly enjoyed debating the nuances of heroic action, the elements of

comedy, the motivations of tragedy, and the wry wisdom of irony. The combination of their enthusiasm for archetypes, my observation of the autistic students' interest in creating fictional stories, and the search for social skills development for my child led to the creation of the Story Wheel curriculum and formed the framework of this dissertation research project.

There is a significant global population who share autistic traits (World Health Organization, 2021), albeit in their own unique manifestations, and, like my daughter, they struggle to navigate their way through unpredictable social expectations and indirect social communication. They deserve to develop their potential and live their best life, but to accomplish that, they need to be able to negotiate their way through a society which they may not fully understand, to perform cultural practices they may find uncomfortable or incomprehensible, and to use language in a way that may seem illogical or false. In short, they need to have the "social skills" to navigate through their neurotypical, or non-autistic, society.

The development of social skills is a prime objective of many therapeutic interventions and educational approaches for autistic young people, ranging from one-on-one applied behaviour coaching to performative drama. Behavioural interventions focus on skills such as turn-taking in conversation, maintaining constant eye contact during interactions, elimination of repetitive "stereotypy" or "stimming" behaviours, and appropriate responses to greetings and other social conventions. Drama therapy approaches use a variety of role-playing and acting exercises, both in individual therapy sessions and in groups, to develop self-awareness and emotional expression. Educational drama focuses on group interaction, and can include improvisation, modeling and mirroring, story drama, and scripted scenes to develop communication and collaboration skills. Autism theatre includes acting training exercises, but its

primary objective is mastering and performing a scripted play for an audience, through which to develop interpersonal skills, perspective taking and self-confidence.

It is difficult to find any evidence of social skills training that explains the cultural, sociological, and historical basis for social behaviour conventions, even though it is well documented that social customs are deeply ingrained and grew out of practical needs that became symbolic centuries ago, enshrined in the folklore of the society (Zipes, 2011; Campbell, 2008; Frye, 1957; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). If the autistic mind views the social world from the perspective of "an anthropologist on Mars," as Temple Grandin succinctly put it (Sacks, 1995) then developing social skills by investigating the historical and cultural reasons for a social custom would seem to be a practical approach to teaching awareness of the custom. The choice of archetypal literary theory (Frye, 1957) to build a curriculum offers the opportunity to use stories which present the history and development of social customs within a culture, while illustrating the commonality of human behaviour across cultures (Zipes, 2012).

The choice to use drama for social skill development is based on significant evidence that role-playing and story-telling activities, especially video games, are very popular with the autistic population (Bottema-Beutel & White, 2015; Fein, 2015; Mazurek, 2015). Online multi-player games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), single player games such as *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007) and pen-and-paper group games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax, 1974), create fictional narratives within a given structure, using characters created by the participants from a selection of character types. These role-playing games offer the experience of participating in a mythology as an Other, within the narrative structure of a traditional folktale (Propp, 1968). Psychologist Elizabeth Fein (2015) studied participants at a role-playing summer camp for young people with autism, affectionately called "Aspie camp",

and was struck by the way the activities based on a traditional quest narrative formed an analogy to the lived experience of autism, then referred to as Asperger's syndrome:

> The co-existence of strength and vulnerability encapsulated in these narratives captured essential features of the experience of living with Asperger's Syndrome – a condition that itself brought valued strengths… as well as disabilities. …[T]hese stories provided an opportunity to bring together these different elements of the autism spectrum experience and provided a meaning-making system within which they could co-exist. (Fein, 2015, p. 311)

My daughter, who has diagnoses of autism as well as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and giftedness, finds great satisfaction in online video games that essentially allow her to participate in an endless animated movie, choosing dialogue and actions and crafting a character that suits her tastes and interests. She also enjoyed participating in drama at high school, as long as the teachers were patient with her learning style. She has always been interested in world-building as an intellectual exercise, and aspires to publish novels about her exquisitely detailed science-fiction fantasy world. She says, about her connection to literature and story-telling:

> I liked computer games, even when I was younger. I liked the stories in the games. I was learning things **from** them as much as I was using things I'd already learned. That's what drew me to computer games, and later video games and online role-playing games. I also remember reading a lot, even though it's hard for me to get my brain to sit still long enough to read anything big anymore. I used to spend hours in the library just reading. I remember predicting plot twists and plot points with spooky accuracy! (personal communication)

To develop the Story Wheel as a drama curriculum, I chose drama-in-education pedagogy, specifically the dramatic conventions approach (Clarke et al., 1997; Neelands &

Goode, 2015), which offers strategies that align well with the current thinking on cognitive processing in autism. In their teachers' handbook, *Structuring Drama Work* (2015), Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode describe the purpose of drama-in-education as the ability to "enable meaningful content to be productively 'handled', demonstrated and experienced by those taking part in the dramatic activity, …[in which] the conventions of theatre are seen as vehicles for experiencing and communicating meanings symbolically" (p. 148). Neelands and Goode go on to state the learning outcomes of a skillful use of this pedagogy:

> An imaginative and tuned awareness of the possibilities of the conventions and the demands made by them allows students to isolate and simulate aspects of human experience for themselves. Increasingly abstract and complex concepts can be made concrete, communicable and open to examination through the student's discovery and experience of different matches of convention and content. *The effect of the experience of translating ideas and concepts into 'here-and-now' symbolic action is to transform pre-existing thinking about the content.* [italics original] (p. 148)

As an approach, the use of dramatic conventions provides a balance of pedagogical goals, from targeted skills to global development. Neelands and Goode identify the objectives intrinsic to the conventions approach as "instrumental objectives (specific goals), expressive objectives (unspecific goals), aesthetic learning, and personal and social learning" (p. 165), which sets this pedagogy apart from clinical social skills interventions which generally focus exclusively on instrumental objectives and personal/social learning without the aesthetic and affective elements of educational drama.

The Story Wheel curriculum, taught through the dramatic conventions approach, aims to resonate with the autistic participants – to develop understanding, make meaning, provide

context, and produce “felt knowledge” of the spectrum of human social behaviour – so that they may use this knowledge in their own social interactions.

This study set out to implement and evaluate the curriculum design, focused on these research questions:

Central question: What is the impact of drama-in-education pedagogy using archetypal literary theory on the development of social literacy, or the ability to determine the appropriate social interaction behaviour for the situation, for adults with autism spectrum disorders?

Sub-questions:

1. In which respects does this drama approach have a positive impact on the development of social thinking in adults with ASD?
2. How do the participants demonstrate an increase in social competence and confidence as a result of participating in these drama workshops?

Chapter One – Literature Review

Autism And Social Communication

The psychology literature generally agrees on the social skill deficits that define autism diagnoses, using the diagnostic criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (APA, 2013) as their basis. The DSM identifies "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" as one major area of diagnostic criteria, the other area being "restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities," (APA, 2013, p. 50). The focus of this dissertation is the area of social-communication deficits, described in detail in the DSM thus:

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behaviour to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers. (APA, 2013, p. 50)

The DSM goes on to describe the possible manifestations of these deficits, with a strong emphasis on social reciprocity as an area of deficit, defined as "the ability to engage with others and share thoughts and feelings" (APA, 2013, p. 53). Deficits in nonverbal communication are described as "absent, reduced, or atypical use of eye contact (relative to cultural norms), gestures, facial expressions, body orientation, or speech intonation" leading to "impaired joint

attention" (p. 53) as shown by a lack of effort to engage with another person or pay attention to their attempts to engage through gesture. Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships are also described in terms of social reciprocity, noting that young children often show a "lack of shared social play and imagination (e.g., age-appropriate flexible pretend play)" and adults may "struggle to understand" contextually-specific behavioral expectations or abstract, metaphoric language such as irony or "white lies" (p. 54).

In a meta-analysis of social communication interventions, Rao, Beidel and Murray (2008) list the above diagnostic criteria and add that youth with autism also have difficulty sharing affective experience or understanding the perspective of others, two skills that form the basis of Baron-Cohen's (2008) "mindblindness" theory. The theory that autistic individuals lack the ability to conceive of way of thinking about things that is different from their own, known as having a Theory of Mind, is a key component of social competence theories in the clinical autism research literature. Attwood (2007) supports Baron-Cohen's mindblindness theory and believes it to be central to the social-communication difficulties of autism.

Bogdashina (2005), however, traces social skill difficulties back to language acquisition difficulties in autism, examining the various theories around language development: behavioural, biological, cognitive, psycholinguistic and pragmatic/social-interactive. Each theory, from language as a learned skill to language as a reflection of developing cognitive ability, has merit, but, she points out, cannot account for the wide variety of language ability in the autistic population. Bogdashina instead focuses on sensory information processing as the pre-cursor to language and cognitive development, describing the progression of perception in four stages – sensory stimulus, sensory exploration, interpretation/perception, and comprehension/concept. She describes two types of consciousness -- sensory consciousness and thought consciousness --

which develop alongside each other and can be thought of as non-verbal and verbal domains of perception. From this observation, Bogdashina posits the following theory:

> Although we possess both capacities of interpretation and comprehension of the world all our lives, one of them becomes dominant in very early childhood and develops rapidly. In normal development, the dominant side of interpretation (and later on, communication and thinking) is a verbal (symbolic) one, whereas in autism we may observe sensory-based thinking or, at least, a later transition of dominance from sensory to verbal (symbolic) plane of comprehension. Very few individuals remain "fluent" in both "languages." (p. 47)

The "sensory consciousness" theory is borne out in first-person accounts by autistic writers such as Temple Grandin (1998), who describes her cognitive processes as "thinking in pictures." Grandin emphasizes the importance of considering sensory symptoms in *The Autistic Brain* (2013) and addresses theory of mind research by noting that the literature is extensive, "…[b]ut I've seen far, far fewer studies on sensory problems – probably because they would require researchers to imagine themselves looking at the world through an autistic person's jumble of neuron misfires. You could say they lack theory of *brain*" (p. 72). She continues,

> Because most researchers are normal human beings, they're social creatures, so from their point of view, worrying about how to socialize autistics makes sense. Which it does, up to a point. But how can you socialize people who can't tolerate the environment where they're supposed to be social – who can't practice recognizing the emotional meanings of facial expressions in social settings because they can't go into a restaurant? Like other researchers, autism investigators want to solve the problems causing the most damage, but I don't think they appreciate just how much damage sensory sensitivity can cause. (p. 72)

Prizant (2015) uses the term "social understanding" rather than "skills", describing the difficulties his clients have had with discerning the social rules for a situation and choosing their

behaviour accordingly. He points out that non-autistic people learn social rules by observing other people and imitating their behaviour in a particular situation, and that we often "teach the exceptions but forget to mention that generally *people don't talk about the rules, they just follow them"* [italics original] (p. 115).

In her work as a speech-language pathologist, Michelle Winner (2000; 2001-2002; 2007) has focused on the so-called "high-functioning" part of the autism spectrum to develop a theory of social cognition she calls *social thinking*. Winner (2000) describes her philosophy by stating "…a student can only learn the abstract concepts that relate to social thinking if he understands them himself" (p. 3), and notes that "virtually all of the high-level persons I work with, regardless of their diagnosis, desire social success and companionship" (p. 7). Winner developed a model of "specific components of the larger abstract concepts of personal problem solving and communicative effectiveness" (p. 3) from her research into socio-cognition difficulties and concluded that "[s]ocial skills are a behavioral manifestation of social cognition" (2001-2002, p. 73). In the twenty years since her book was published, however, Social Thinking™ has come under considerable criticism for its behaviourist methodology, functional labels, and emphasis on social conformity to a neurotypical standard (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2017; Richman, 2018).

Social Skills Training and Drama Therapy

By looking at several meta-analyses in the behavioural psychology literature (Bellini et al., 2007; Cappadocia & Weiss, 2011; McConnell, 2002; Miller et al., 2014) it is possible to identify predominant priorities, techniques, and research methodologies in social skills training approaches. The instructional methodology was primarily based on behavioural therapy (applied behaviour analysis techniques), didactic or direct instruction, modeling, and role-playing exercises, sometimes with neurotypical peers. Certain manualized curricula were used and

evaluated, but most studies were original programs created by the researchers. Outcomes were determined through observational data, parent interviews and questionnaires, participant interviews and questionnaires, and instruments such as the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS), and facial expression identification tests.

Most behavioural social skills training groups were designed to promote global social competence, although some studies were designed to develop specific social skills or identified target skills for the participants. The most frequently mentioned target skills were facial expression identification, conversation skills, reciprocity, and cooperation with peers, expressing and comprehending emotions, demonstrating Theory of Mind ability, and initiating and maintaining eye contact. The difficulties and limitations of the studies were noted by the reviewers as: the diversity of measurement instruments that makes it difficult to harmonize data across studies; the difficulty of determining the impact of specific components of the intervention on the outcome; and the lack of fidelity data (attesting to the implementation of the intervention as originally designed and intended) that would contextualize the outcomes. The lack of generalization to real life is also frequently mentioned; the participants could demonstrate appropriate social behaviour during the intervention but not in their real-life interactions.

In a recent study, Bottema-Beutel & Crowley (2021) also point to the prevalence of undisclosed conflicts of interest in behavioural social intervention studies that can lead to researcher bias, another difficulty with this field of research. The recommendations offered by the researchers included choosing the teaching technique or program to address the individual needs of the child, finding methods to promote more reliable maintenance and generalization of social skills, and increasing the frequency and intensity of social skill training (Bellini et al., 2007). McConnell (2002) suggests that more integration of research across sub-disciplines within

the fields of developmental psychology, behavioural psychology, special education, and psychiatry would yield a richer, deeper understanding of the many aspects of autism than the current "separate silos of academic and scholarly publication and thinking" (p. 369).

Drama therapy, which combines behavioural therapy with drama-based activity, is a popular therapeutic approach for children with autism spectrum disorders (Anderson-Warren, 2013; Chasen, 2011; Corbett et al, 2011; Corbett et al, 2016; Wilmer-Barbrook, 2013). Conducted primarily in clinical settings, drama therapy can be held in individual sessions or in groups, and uses dramatic strategies such as role-play, story drama, and movement, along with music and visual art elements, in session structures devised by the therapists. In a survey of practicing drama therapists in the UK, Anderson-Warren (2013) found that the majority of the respondents' clients sought therapy for difficulties with emotional expression, perspective taking, interpersonal connections, attention deficit problems, and the resulting anxiety which led to obsessive and aggressive behaviours. In describing their methodologies, the respondents offered comments such as, "The overriding method has been to create a metaphor (place/creature/role/image) through which personal exploration occurs, using drama therapy warm-up and reflective tools as an integral part of the process" (p. 13). The therapeutic goals mentioned in the survey included increased eye contact, shared experiences, greater physical co-ordination, and an improvement in emotional expression. Anderson-Warren's conclusion points out that "[d]ramatic structure…is the container in which the [therapeutic] practice can be adapted for meeting the needs of young people with autistic spectrum disorders" (p. 17), and that while the data showed positive results with anxiety issues, there was a lower success rate for other areas of mental health concerns, such as depression. She suggests that as further research builds a

more comprehensive picture of dramatherapy, a clearer understanding will emerge of the relationship between praxis and results.

Several manualized drama therapy approaches have been tested in pilot studies and, in some cases, published as resource material for teachers and therapists (Corbett et al., 2011; Corbett et al., 2016a; Corbett et al., 2016b; Guli et al., 2008; Guli et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2011; Nelson, A., 2010; O'Sullivan, 2016). The various approaches differ in the balance between therapy and drama/acting, from directly therapeutic to drama with a social skill component. A closer examination follows to compare theoretical bases and methodologies.

At the therapeutic end of the spectrum is Nelson's *Foundation Role Plays for Autism* (2010), which provides lesson plans and templates for developing scripts for real-life situations, such as dealing with bullies, answering the phone, and dining at a cafeteria. Nelson also includes lesson plans for teachers, parents, and peers, to address the challenges they face with an autistic child in the classroom or in the family. Generalization from the role-play is a central concern in Nelson's methodology, achieved through the use of instructional techniques based on applied behaviour analysis strategies. Nelson is clear that this approach is intended to simulate real-life situations, and to provide the opportunity to practice the situational behaviour before facing it outside of the drama therapy session. As a therapeutic tool, this book can be useful for prompts and topic suggestions, but as *drama*, it fails to meet the basic requirements for a dramatic experience: the use of role and character in a fictional (not simulated reality) context, the use of symbol, sign and metaphor to provoke new thought, and the use of dramatic conventions that play with time, place and human presence to allow flexibility of framing and perspective (Clarke et al., 1997; Neelands & Goode, 2015).

Other manualized social skills programs make a more concerted effort to incorporate drama into the activities plan but remain rooted in behavioural theory. The Social Competence Intervention Program (SCIP) developed by Guli, Wilkinson and Semrud-Clikeman (2008) blends creative drama with behavioural therapy and social cognition in a sixteen-session curriculum focused on social competence. The program is grounded in theories of social competence in children and social development in children and attempts to extrapolate from those theories into a group drama therapy program for children with autism and other social communication difficulties.

Taking their methodology from the field of drama-in-education, citing in particular the work of O'Neill (1982) and Neelands & Goode (2015), the curriculum of SCIP is divided into three units: input, integration, output. The input phase centers on developing interpersonal relationships within the group and identifying non-verbal emotional expressions. The integration phase looks at abstract and inferential language and uses improvisational drama to role-play and solve social interaction problems. The output phase moves into simulations of real-life situations, strategies for dealing with bullying, and group improvisation activities. Included in the book are several drama structures modeled on the process drama approach, which are semi-scripted as they are provided as examples. If this were to be a weekly group meeting, it would take *two months* of meetings before the students get to participate in a drama.

Another manualized intervention reported as a pilot study, the Socio-Dramatic Affective-Relational Intervention (SDARI) (Lerner et al., 2011), used "drama games" as part of a daily schedule of group meetings, outdoor play, self-evaluation time and snack breaks during a summer day camp for adolescents on the spectrum. Little is said in the pilot study about the drama pedagogy, save the mention of a few familiar improvisation exercises – Gibberish,

Emotion Ball, One Word Story, Machine – although no source for the drama games is given. The research report instead centers on the quantitative data obtained through several questionnaires and evaluative instruments, proclaiming that "this is the first known study in this literature to use advanced statistical modeling that accounts for the time-ordering of assessment (Hierarchical Linear Modeling)" (Learner et al., 2011, p. 38). It is, therefore, difficult to ascertain the extent of the drama activities, or the students' response to drama participation, as this report is primarily focused on its research methodology and outcomes.

Similarly, SENSE (Social-Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology) Theatre (Corbett et al., 2011) is a manualized program that in one research project paired teens on the autism spectrum with peer mediators in a musical theatre class (Corbett, 2016a). In the first few of the ten sessions of a summer camp program, the intervention consisted of "theatrical games, role-playing and exercises" (p. 663), then the following sessions were focused on learning and rehearsing a 45-minute musical play which was written to "incorporate all the different exercises, role-plays and improvisational activities" (p. 663), although neither the source nor the playwright/composer is mentioned. Again, the research methodology is quantitative, measuring changes in both behaviour and memory ability with numerous evaluation instruments. Corbett has also investigated the impact of theatre interventions on anxiety levels by testing the level of cortisol in the saliva collected from participants, in an effort to connect somatic responses to drama participation (Corbett et al., 2011; Corbett et al., 2016a).

Drama For Autism

Professional actor and Shakespeare specialist Kelly Hunter has received a great deal of attention for her work with autistic children, promoted as the Hunter Heartbeat Method and documented in *Shakespeare's heartbeat: Drama games for children with autism* (Hunter, 2015).

In collaboration with the school of theatre at The Ohio State University (The Ohio State University, n.d.), Hunter has been involved with heavily funded research studies at OSU and at the University College of London. This is remarkable given the ableist language throughout the book, the superficiality of the Shakespearean theme, and the passive nature of the instructional methodology.

The course design is built around the deficit model of disability and the desire to address deficits. Hunter explains, "At the heart of the work you are pinpointing *what the child can't do*, and doing it with them until they can" [italics original] (2015, p. 227). In the introduction, Hunter explains the importance of Shakespeare's language to her development of the methodology:

> By focusing on Shakespeare's definitions of seeing, thinking and loving, I stumbled upon the processes that those on the spectrum find so difficult to achieve. Children with autism experience varying degrees of difficulty with communication, all of which can be understood as a disassociation of body and mind. Expressing feelings, making eye contact, accessing their mind's eye and their dreams, keeping a steady heartbeat and recognizing faces are all part of the autism dilemma and all are poetically explored by Shakespeare. Embedding these unattainable skills within games derived from moments of Shakespeare, which the children could play and thereby benefit from, seemed like the most natural thing in the world and formed the basis for these games.

Hunter's method relies on a group of actor-teachers plus a leader to facilitate. There are three stages to each "game" activity: 1) *demonstration* by actors while the participants observe from the group circle around the playing space; 2) *playing* or practicing with an actor-facilitator either one-on-one or in a small group, which includes a lot of side-coaching and modelling from the adult actors; and 3) *sharing* the results of the recent rehearsal while the other participants

watch. This structural design means that for every drama activity or acting lesson, the students are sitting down and observing others for *two-thirds* of the lesson time.

The book is peppered with comments about what to do if the child refuses to participate, finds the scene/activity too stressful, cannot move in the prescribed way (such as backwards) or cannot understand what is being asked. The advice for these situations is consistently ableist and reflects a patronizing, pathologizing attitude toward autistic students: "Do not attempt the game if you feel the child cannot grasp the fundamental concepts, you will only be frustrated" (p. 140) and "Do not continue if it's clear you're not getting anywhere" (p. 103). While the Shakespearean characters and excerpts give a patina of highbrow culture to this curriculum, the drama activities are basic warm-ups and improvisational exercises, and a behavioural training component is always present in the activity descriptions, such as "Keep the turns short and controlled, giving praise if and when eye contact is made" (p. 24).

Two autism drama curricula are more successful at straddling the divide between drama education and drama therapy: Cindy Schneider's *Acting Antics* (2007) and Amelia Davies' *Teaching Asperger's Students Social Skills Through Acting* (2004). Schneider draws from Winner (2002) to form the theoretical foundation for her curriculum design – defining areas of social cognition disabilities as conceptual, inferential, language formulation and perspective-taking disabilities. Schneider (2007) builds her curriculum around what she calls "The Big 3": vocal tone, body language, and facial expression (p. 28). The drama activities, which range from warm-ups and paired activities to improvisation and scripted scenes, are chosen to reinforce these three elements of non-verbal communication, and key socio-cognitive skills are noted for each activity. The book includes support materials and information for starting a drama group, making it user-friendly for teachers new to drama or new to working with autistic students.

Schneider is quite successful in balancing the therapeutic and theatrical elements of this program, although it is important to note that actor training rather than creative drama is the predominant pedagogy of this curriculum.

Amelia Davies (2004) worked with Jeanette McAfee, a cognitive behavioral therapist, to develop her drama teachers' handbook, a product of her work as a professional actor and drama school instructor. Davies takes a drama education approach and draws from her training to create a curriculum that prioritises acting and creativity over behavior training. The warm-up exercises are familiar improvisation exercises that use movement, gesture, and voice (although not necessarily language); in fact, Davies calls them "standard first year acting drills" (p. xvi) and refers to Laban movement theory and Keith Johnstone's improvisation work as some of her influences. The second phase of the curriculum is story drama and creative drama, which includes group storytelling, character creation, scene improvisation that explores the concept of status, and *commedia dell'arte* scenarios to practice archetypal character portrayals. The final section of the book is a collection of short original plays, which are included as an appendix to the curriculum itself. Because she is an actor/teacher with a background in improvisational theatre, Davies makes clear that she approaches her classes of autistic students with the same mindset as she would any other class. In fact, she concludes her introduction with this observation:

> As far as I'm concerned, all my students are ACTING students. My classroom is an ACTING studio and the time spent in it is spent on learning highly classified ACTING secrets. Like, how to appear confident when you actually feel scared. How to hold someone's attention. How to make someone feel happy and comfortable. How to guess what people are thinking just by the way they hold their body.
>
> I never mention social skills or Asperger's Syndrome. Sometimes my students do, but we don't dwell on it. In my opinion, these kids could use a break from their autism

> diagnosis. The only time I mention it is to tell them that because of their diagnosis, they have a predisposition to becoming talented actors. (p. xix)

What sets Davies' work apart from the other autism drama manuals mentioned is that she prioritizes drama pedagogy over behavioural training or overt social skills instruction. By regarding her work as developing actors first and supporting autistic students second, she offers acceptance and validation to her students while exploring behaviour choices that are the foundation of any social interaction, allowing for experiential learning instead of didactic instruction.

Autism Culture And Drama

Autistic self-advocates and researchers have been actively re-defining social skills and social communication in the years between the publication of the above-mentioned curricula and the pilot project of this dissertation, which has inspired the formation of autism drama initiatives in the UK and in Canada that prioritize the autistic voice and point of view. Rather than offering drama workshops to focus on social training, these projects offer a social experience centered on drama workshops while accepting, even celebrating, that the participants are autistic. This reflects the ontological shift in autism research from the biomedical, clinical perspective that defines autism by pathologized behaviour and communication deficits to the phenomenological view of autism as a neurological condition that affects the way one interacts with and perceives one's environment. This shift is reflected in the development and rising use of new, more generalized, terminology to describe persons with any atypical neurological condition as "neurodivergent" and the atypical population as a whole as "neurodiverse." These terms are used to include persons with a variety of neurotypes, from autism and attention deficit conditions to

anxiety disorders and mental illnesses, and provide an inclusive approach to recognizing a person's atypical neurotype without identifying them by diagnosis.

Proponents of an inclusive, participatory research paradigm refer to Milton's (2012) "double empathy problem" as a guiding theory for their approach. Milton (2012) points out that "[t]o be defined as abnormal in society is often conflated with being perceived as 'pathological' in some way and to be socially stigmatised, shunned, and sanctioned" (p. 885) thereby creating a justification for declaring autistic communication to be deficient and lacking in social skills. His argument that communication problems, by definition, involve at least two parties and cannot be attributed solely to one side or the other discards the characterization of autistic communication as disordered or abnormal, thus calling into question the objectives of many social skills interventions in the research literature and in published facilitation guides.

Recent research published by Crompton (2020) and her team at the University of Edinburgh interrogated the "double empathy problem" and its impact on effective communication by conducting an information-transfer experiment with autistic and non-autistic adults with an activity modelled on the drama game "Gossip", also known as "The Telephone Game." The findings revealed that the story recall decreased at about the same rate with both the autistic and non-autistic groups, but lost details more rapidly and in greater number with the mixed group. The sense of rapport reported by the participants was rated lower by the mixed group than by either homogeneous group.

Crompton (2020) remarks that "the difficulties in autistic communication are apparent only when interacting with non-autistic people, and are alleviated when interacting with autistic people" (p. 7) and that "[t]he findings are inconsistent with the social-cognitive deficit narrative of autism" (p. 7). She further suggests that "autistic social 'deficits' are better conceptualised as

interaction and communicative challenges, operating bi-directionally for autistic and non-autistic people" (p. 7), lending support to Milton's Double Empathy theory.

Additional research by Crompton (2019) has identified some reasons why the homogeneous group of autistic individuals was able to maintain the integrity of the story in the information-transfer experiment. A series of interviews with autistic adults about their relationships with autistic and non-autistic people in their lives revealed three main themes in their discussions – "cross-neurotype understanding, minority status and belonging, each comprising several sub-themes" (p. 5). These themes point to a *cultural* conception of autism rather than a pathological one, and the discussion around "belonging" reinforces the autistic perception of autism as a culture.

Another recent project (Granieri et al., 2020) underlines the importance of recognizing autistic communication as a distinct mode without pathologizing the differences from neurotypical social communication. Granieri's team found that autistic youths were more interested in befriending other youths that displayed "atypical social behaviours," hypothesizing that " some aspects of typical social communication are overly-demanding or uncomfortable" (p. 5). They suggest that researchers designing social skills interventions for autistic youth set aside the typical requirements to adopt non-autistic behaviours, which can include emphasis on increasing eye contact and calming or stopping repetitive movements ("stimming"), and "instead focus on attuning to the level and use of nonverbal social communication that seems most effective with a given peer" (p. 7).

The interest in investigating communication has led some autism researchers to the use of conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis in their work (Bottema-Beutel, 2017; Muskett, 2017; Ochs et al., 2004). Muskett (2017) points out that conversation analysis "models

language and communication (and other behaviours) as fundamentally *social* rather than individual phenomena" (p. 120) and that "analytic focus falls on the *sequential organization* of interaction" (p. 120), an important consideration given the identification of a deficit in social-emotional reciprocity as a diagnostic criterion (APA, 2013). Bottema-Beutel (2017) refers to "interactional coordination" as "the enactment of meaning within social interactions" (p. 29) and refers to social interaction studies, including her own (Bottema-Beutel & White, 2015), which studied a group of autistic adolescents co-creating a fictional story with neurotypical peers, and that of Ochs et al. (2004), which took an anthropological approach to understanding social competencies in autistic children, as evidence that "speakers with ASD may enact meaning in ways that differ from their interlocutors" (p. 29). The use of conversation analysis in autism research informed the data analysis of this dissertation project, which examined the interactions of the drama students both in drama activities and in reflective discussions.

Recent research literature also shows a shift from the clinical focus on autism in children to explorations of the lived experience of autistic adults. Recognizing that autistic children grow up to enter higher education and build careers, a body of work is growing around the topic of transitioning to adult life, from finding support as post-secondary students (Thompson et al., 2020) and recognizing the needs of autistic post-secondary students from the instructor's perspective (Walters, 2015) to developing rapport and friendships as an independent adult (Bolis et al., 2021; Crompton et al., 2020; Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Milton & Sims, 2016; Seidmann, 2020).

While research literature around facilitating drama with disabled participants has been part of the drama education discourse for many years (Kempe, 1996; Kempe, 2013; Peter, 1995; Peter, 2009), several current and/or recent autism drama projects have taken the concept of

autism culture as the basis for their design, privileging the autistic voice and encouraging self-awareness and social connections. In Canada, Trudel and Nadig (2019) took a quantitative approach to evaluating social skills and role-play by designing a new objective measurement tool to evaluate social skill development in autistic adults -- the Role-Play Assessment of Social Skills (R-PASS). The researchers concluded that the rating scale was useful, but that "no significant differences was found on the self-ratings of the R-PASS" (p. 16) which stayed relatively stable pre- versus post-intervention for most of the participants.

At Trinity College in Ireland, Carmel O'Sullivan leads a longitudinal study of drama workshops with autistic young people, using fictional contexts and characters to draw the participants into the drama with an approach she calls "social drama" (O'Sullivan, 2016). O'Sullivan states that the 'Social Drama' pedagogy

> involves participants working collaboratively within fictionally created contexts, which are based on a problem posing and problem solving methodology. Highly imaginative and creative characters are presented in various dilemmas which attract the attention of participants, drawing them into the story and engaging them in an active exploration of someone else's life. Participants follow that character's life, and work collaboratively with their drama friends to resolve various 'tricky' situations as they arise each week. (O'Sullivan, 2016, n.p.).

O'Sullivan reports "a large improvement in children's general anxiety levels, body contact, imagination, self-confidence, and problem solving ability" (2016, n.p.) and is now working to identify and define sub-types of autism that are emerging from the project data. As with other researchers, she admits that the question of generalizing social skills to different social situations and environments remains a challenge.

In England, Nicola Shaughnessy's *Imagining Autism* project (Beadle-Brown et al., 2018; Shaughnessy, 2013; Trimingham & Shaughnessy, 2016) invited autistic children into an immersive performance space to interact with puppets, costumed play-based performers and digital media installations, exploring the world created within the space with sensory experiences of their choosing. Shaughnessy points to four aspects of neurodivergent aesthetics in theatre and performance: space and time, language/text, body, and media, calling the neurodivergent aesthetic "part of a new performance poetics" (2013, p. 332) and describing the work as "situated in a third space in between making and performance, challenging the distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic in its form and content" (2013, p. 332). A performance studies theorist, Shaughnessy's suggestion that drama for autism belongs in a third space and that there exists a neurodivergent aesthetic has informed the critical analysis of this dissertation research, to be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

The research produced from this dissertation project aims to contribute to the discourse around drama education with autistic participants and to propose a curricular structure that can be adapted to the parameters of the educational situation, the strengths and knowledge of the facilitator, and the culture, (dis)abilities, and interests of the participants. The three main elements of this study – the Story Wheel curriculum, the drama conventions pedagogy (Neelands & Goode, 2015), and autistic social skills research --- will be discussed in detail to find the points of intersection and investigate the impact of each element on the others. The participants' response to the drama activities and the Story Wheel curriculum will be documented in excerpts from the workshop transcripts to ensure that the authentic autistic voice is centred in the discussion and that the critical data analysis to follow honours the autistic point of view.

Chapter Two – Methodology and Recruitment

Ethnography (Atkinson, 2017) is the primary methodology for the analysis of this project, although it also draws from conversational analysis (Muskett, 2017; Tannen, 2005). Investigating the interactions of the participants and their response to the drama is at the heart of this study, for which ethnography is an appropriate choice as it is the analysis of social interactions, activities and events (Atkinson, 2017), which finds its corollary in the theatre world in the work of the dramaturg. Atkinson refers to the work of Erving Goffman (2005), an eminent and influential sociologist, when discussing the aptness of a dramaturgical metaphor for ethnography, stating that "[p]erformativity has become an especially prominent way of understanding everyday life, and it obviously relates directly to the dramaturgical tradition in sociological analysis" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 65). By analyzing the autistic participants' interactions while engaged in the drama and collaborating in discussions outside of the dramatic activities, I follow Atkinson's admonition that "[t]he unit of analysis is the encounter and the situation" (p. 46) but to fully unpack their response to the drama in a meaningful way, it is important to build a context for that analysis by considering the recent research into autistic communication styles (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Crompton et al., 2020; Morrison, 2020; Shield et al., 2020).

The findings will be presented as an ethnographic field report with thick descriptions and analytical commentary, followed by a deeper unpacking of the major themes that arose from the field report through the lens of Frith's cognitive theory of autism which proposes a weak central coherence, and Vermeulen's context-blindness theory, which was developed from the weak central coherence theory (Frith, 1989, 2003; Frith, 2012; Vermeulen, 2012).

Methodologies

Ethnography is defined by Atkinson (2017) as "a thoroughly *social* reading of social life," and he urges the use of what he calls "granular analysis" (p. 11) to go beyond thick descriptions to developing a detailed analysis of the multiple layers of social interactions, or "the grain of social worlds" (p. 12). He points out that "everyday social life is highly performative, in that social actors are engaged in dramaturgical work" (p. 14) in the sense that we are all evaluating our social interactions and interpreting communication so that we can choose the best actions and language for the situation. Ethnography investigates the way social actors interact with their world, through language use, knowledge acquisition and transfer, aesthetic conventions, rules and rituals, and sensory experiences. This is particularly appropriate for investigating the social interactions of autistic people, for whom sensory experience can be as important as verbal language when interacting with their world (Bogdashina, 2005).

An ethnographic reading of the participants' interactions in this project, however, must also take into account the theory that autistic pragmatic/conversational use of language differs from that of non-autistic individuals, as recently documented by Crompton (2020) and Heasman & Gillespie (2018). This raises many questions, the most salient one for this dissertation being the influence of neurotypical biases and social language differences between autistic and non-autistic storytellers on the definition of "social skills." If those differences exist, and if there is a bias toward non-autistic language codes when speaking to autistic individuals, it is reasonable to question whether clinical researchers are using an inappropriate or under-developed yardstick for assessing social communication in autistic individuals. The use of conversational analysis, therefore, supplants the use of quantitative coding in favour of a more holistic approach to the data.

Based on the landmark work of Deborah Tannen (2005), sociolinguist, and Erving Goffman (1959/1990), sociologist, discourse analysis has become a standard methodology in the field of ethnography. Elements of conversational analysis, or CA (O'Reilly et al., 2017), have therefore been used to assess the use of language among the research participants during the drama workshops to investigate their process of sharing ideas and unpacking connections. According to Muskett (2017), the two basic tenets of CA are the sequential organization of interaction, or the sequential context, and the way in which participants treat the previous utterance when forming a response. He points out that conversational turns that "fail to indicate awareness of the moment in time…in which they are produced" (p. 121) earn responses that frame them as "socially problematic" (p. 121). If, as Vermeulen (2012) suggests, a central trait of autism is "context blindness," then the lack of awareness of sequential context could well explain some of the conversational differences observed in autistic individuals and pathologized in social skills research literature. Muskett (2017) believes that CA offers an "opportunity for rethinking interactions involving people with communication difficulties" (p. 122) including autism, pointing out that

> …by focusing on participant responses, the *real social consequences* of communication behaviours within an unfolding interaction can be examined… This simple principle enables understanding of what constitutes interactional difficulties for speakers across different contexts, and the examination of roles played by co-speakers in the emergence and resolution of such difficulties. (p. 122)

Along with conversational analysis, questions of social linguistics are taken into account when analyzing transcripts of the drama sessions. Tannen's (2005) seminal work on conversational styles provided a theoretical lens through which to examine the distinctive discussion style that is documented in the the transcripts. Linguistic (im)politeness studies

(Culpeper et al., 2017) provide a lens through which the concerns about social expectations coded in indirect language, as expressed by the participants, can be examined and thus interrogate the clinical assessment of autistic use of pragmatic language.

Elements of participatory action research were also included in the project in that the participants were given opportunities to give feedback as the drama course progressed and individual lesson plans were re-designed as a result. Participatory research has become an important methodology in autism research as more autistic researchers have entered the field and called for a more equitable treatment of autistic individuals in research projects. This project sought to include ongoing feedback from participants, following the models of participatory research in the UK during the past decade (Chown et al., 2017; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Loyd, 2013; Ridout, 2017; Scott-Barrett et al., 2018). Recognizing that the workshops must be a safe space for the participants to feel comfortable to act and speak authentically, and with a primary goal of centering the autistic voice in the research, I conducted the classes as I would with any group of adults who are interested in storytelling, theatre and drama games.

Throughout the course of twelve workshops, I repeatedly sought their feedback and input regarding the structure of the drama workshops, and made changes to the original lesson plans accordingly. In the case of the unfamiliar literature choices, participant input led to including script treatments of the material or excerpts from the original text as part of the class materials and the basis for some of the activities. It also became clear that the original research design concept of a pre- and post-project interview was incompatible with the questionnaire (Appendix II) which was developed with the input of one of the participants, Eileen, who had taken a great interest in the project and offered her services as a volunteer consultant, and further amended to align with requirements of the human research ethics review board. To obtain useful data with

regard to self-reported improvements in understanding social interactions, a standardized quantitative instrument could have been used, but taking this action would fall outside the stated objective for the research design to remain qualitative in nature and to incorporate elements of participatory action research. Instead, the post-project interviews were expanded to invite discussion of their experience in the drama workshops and include commentary about their own social communication issues.

Recruitment

The focus of this inquiry is the response of autistic individuals, from their perspectives and in their own words. The stated criteria for participation were that they must be over nineteen years of age but with no upper age limit, without co-occurring intellectual disabilities or other neurodisabilities, with either a clinical diagnosis of autism or self-identifying as autistic.

I recruited participants from self-advocacy groups, disability theatre groups, and other neurodivergent social groups in the Greater Victoria, British Columbia, area. Potential participants were provided with a detailed description of the drama project in the form of an orientation booklet with text and images and invited to participate in an orientation session to learn more about the design and nature of the drama classes. The course booklet included details about the structure of each class meeting (Appendix I), the course outline and a summary of each story (see chapter 3) and was available in print or online in a recruitment website designed for the project (now offline). A small poster was created using the graphic logo of the course booklet and was distributed to local theatre companies which offered drama classes and to a neurodivergent theatre group sponsored by a local disability support agency. A business card was also printed up for distribution and recruitment purposes.

The most successful recruitment method was the personal contact with members of a local social group for adults with autism and Asperger's syndrome. Three participants came from this group and already knew each other. The website included a contact form for inquiries and brought in a few participants as well. The poster was displayed in the storefront windows of the drama class space and resulted in recruiting two participants, while another participant came from the neurodivergent theatre group. A personal contact through my work as a musician passed on the recruitment information to her two daughters, Wendy and Brenda, who then joined the participant group.

Method and Participants

The project started on October 20, 2019, with an orientation session and demonstration workshop held on October 13, 2019. The twelve-part series of drama workshops continued from October 20, 2019, through to January 19, 2020, with a two-week break for the holiday season. Each drama workshop was three hours long on Sunday afternoons, with a break for coffee and snacks midway through the session, provided by my husband who prepared a catering table during the first half of the day's workshop. The sessions were held in a converted storefront theatre space, set up as a black box theatre with a supply of folding chairs and a raised dais at one end of the space. It is located close to the centre of town and easily accessed by public transportation.

The participants, listed below under the pseudonyms which will represent them in the transcript excerpts, were between 25 and 35 years of age except Eileen, who is 50 years old.

The participants in the core group are:

Eileen	B.A. in English	Lives independently, works full time in office job, active in autism advocacy work

Noreen	High school graduate	Lives with parents, works full time, no previous drama experience, keen Dungeons & Dragons role-playing fantasy game player
Gloria	high school graduate	Lives with parents, has participated in drama day program for neurodiverse adults for several years, loves to perform and enjoys improvisation, songwriting, and creating in various visual art media
Wendy	B.Sc. in Computer Science, Dip. Library Technology	Lives with parents, works part time, trained and active musician, keenly interested in literature and drama
Brenda	Dip. Mech. Engineering Dip. Cabinetry	Lives with parents, studied singing for several years, avid fan of classical music and literature
Mikayla	high school graduate	Lives independently, works full time, joined the project in week 5 of the class meetings but was unable to attend all classes
Rory	high school graduate	Lives independently, works part time, loves Star Wars and role-playing video games
Patrick	high school graduate	Lives independently, has part-time employment Active in autism advocacy work, keenly interested in social justice issues, passionately vegan
Michael	high school graduate	Lives with parents, new to the city, has participated in community theatre in previous home town, intensely interested in the field of animation and has ambitions to be a professional voice actor
Paul	B.Sc. in Economics	Lives independently, works full time in office job, new to drama

The regular participants were a group of ten adults, with two additional individuals (Robert and Jane) who could not continue after the first two workshops due to changes in their availability, one participant of the ten (Mikayla) who joined midway through the workshop series and attended two workshops, and one additional participant who withdrew after five workshops due to health challenges and also withdrew their consent, so their contributions are not included in the data. The drama framework attracted participants who had either had previous experience

with drama participation (Gloria and Eileen) and/or music performance (Wendy and Brenda), or were interested in pursuing such an experience (Noreen, Paul, and Rory), so the prospect of participating in drama attracted a group of participants with a predilection for the subject matter and approach. Three of the participants (Rory, Patrick and Eileen) knew each other from the local meet-up group, and two other participants (Wendy and Brenda) were siblings, so their comfort level with social interaction was influenced by this familiarity. The participants' names are anonymized for the purposes of this dissertation, as agreed upon in the consent form (Appendix III).

Data Collection

The data collected during the study is comprised of audio-video recordings of the workshops, still photographs taken during the workshops, audio recordings and text-chat documents of post-project interviews, and written work created collaboratively by the participants. The data was collected by me as the researcher-facilitator and by one research assistant, anonymized here as David, a mature university student working on an undergraduate degree in psychology with an interest in applied theatre. The audio-video recordings were made with digital tablets, both as a roaming camera operated by the research assistant who moved through the classroom to document the small working groups, and as a static camera, placed on a stand on the periphery of the working space. I documented the still images created in drama activities on with a digital camera and saved the images, along with the video data and text-chat interviews, in an external hard drive that was kept in a secure location. The written work consists of posters that collected written contributions on specified themes, illustrative drawings, and the Ground Rules for making the rehearsal room a safe space, which was devised collectively by the

participants. The data also includes the lesson plans that I developed for the workshops and the booklets of text excerpts that I made for the participants.

The audio-video recordings were chosen for transcription according to their content, as some recordings stored on the tablets were short (less than two minutes) and contained no relevant data but instead a view of the wall or the floor with indistinct conversations barely audible. These videos were the result of accidental activation of the recording function as the research assistant familiarized himself with the tablet's functionality. The transcriptions, which I did myself, and the collection of written work were then analyzed in the manner of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) as themes emerged in the process of categorizing the data. These themes form the framework of the critical analysis in Chapter Five.

Ethics

This research project was approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board under federal Tri-Council (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR) ethics guidelines. Each participant was given a document that explained the collection, type, and proposed use of the data, and gave signed consent for photographic and video documentation to be used for analysis and dissemination (Appendix III).

The approach to research ethics in this project was grounded in participatory autism research models, including Loyd's (2012) drama projects with autistic youth, Antunes and Dhoest's (2019) ethnography study of autistic individuals in online spaces, and Scott-Barrett, Cebula & Florian's (2018) analysis of interviews with autism researchers. While Scott-Barrett et al. were looking at research with autistic young people, their observations about the importance of building rapport to maintaining an ethical stance equally applies to adult participants. They

point to awareness of power differentials, building rapport, and acknowledging the contributions of each participant as integral to robust research ethics and remind the reader of the concept of "fishbowling" (Milton & Moon, 2012), or observing and making judgments from outside of the lived experience, that skews the reported outcomes when autistic points of view are not included in the interpretation of the data. I also referred to Milton, Mills and Pellicano (2014), in which they challenge a set of ethical guidelines on the basis of a lack of the autistic voice and problematize the pathologizing language of the document.

With this in mind, the intake interviews were participant-led, and family members were welcome to sit in and contribute to the interview if the participant invited their input. Of the participants in this project, only Gloria and Michael attended the intake interviews with their parents although the parents remained in the background unless invited by the participants to comment. The post-project interviews were conducted both in person and via online text chat, a choice made by the participants according to their preference, during a window of two months after the final workshop to accommodate the availabilities of all involved. None of the participants invited their parents to attend the post-project interviews.

By receiving the orientation booklet and/or attending the orientation session, the invitees had a multi-modal experience of the project's design – through reading, small group activity, individual experience, and large group discussion. After experiencing the demonstration workshop, they were asked to sign the consent form (Appendix III) indicating that they were comfortable with proceeding with the drama workshops on the understanding that the research sessions will be recorded and analyzed. If the participant had not attended the orientation session but arrived at the first research workshop ready to join the project, they were asked to read and sign the consent form before the workshop activities started.

As the research project progressed, participants were asked to initial a copy of their consent form at the start of every class to indicate ongoing consent. They were invited to express feedback and opinions on the classes, environment and activities on a recurring schedule and discussions around questions of safety and comfort with the activities were held at the beginning of the class meetings. The workshops typically began with warm-up activities which allowed the participants to become more familiar with each other and develop rapport, especially in the first unit of the curriculum, and the group decided upon a list of ground rules for general behaviour expectations, a discussion which was led by Patrick, a member of the participant group.

This project was designed and analyzed with a flexible combination of methodologies – ethnography, conversational analysis, grounded theory, and participation action research – with the primary aim of allowing the autistic voice and perspective to emerge from the data. To avoid any neurotypical bias, I followed the recommendations of Chown et al. (2017) for inclusive autism research: to include an autistic researcher or research assistant; to maintain the social model of disability at "the heart of the project ethos" (p 728); to ensure that the autistic participants feel some ownership and control over the project; and to ensure that the project is focused on outcomes that would improve the lives of autistic people. The following field report in Chapter Four, therefore, privileges the autistic voice by providing numerous excerpts from the workshop transcripts along with images taken from the data.

Chapter Three – The Story Wheel Curriculum

The curriculum draws upon the domains of drama education, literary theory and autism research, as illustrated in the following graphic:

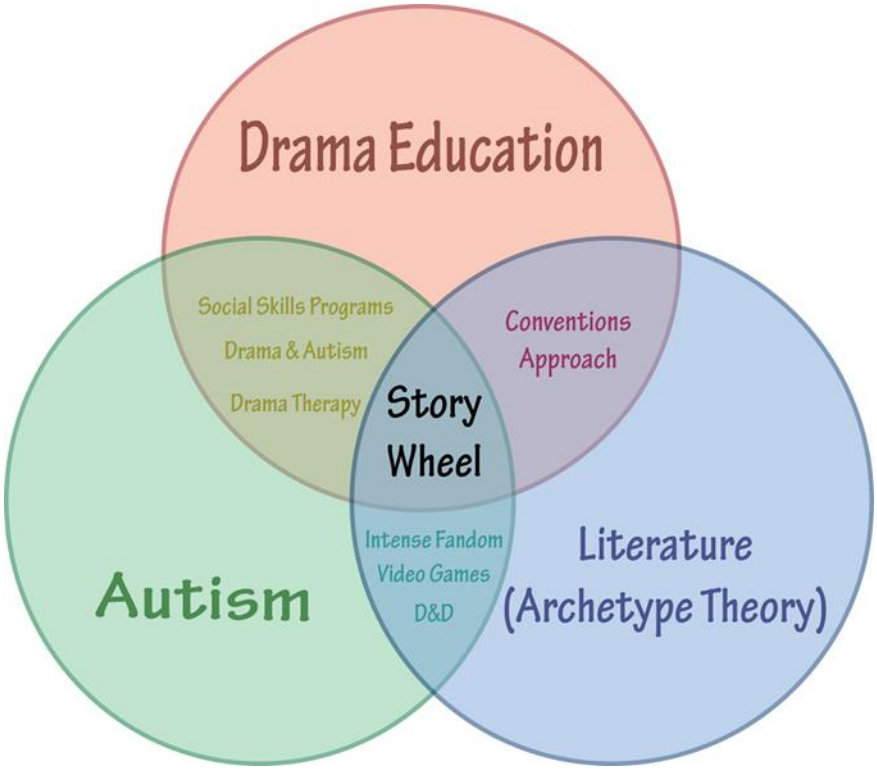


Figure 3.1

Based upon Northrop Frye's Theory of Myths (Frye, 1957), the Story Wheel is a sequential pattern that moves from one heroic myth-type to the next and show the relationship between them, a framework that provides the definitions of each type of hero/story without insisting on any kind of cultural context. It is Frye's theory that every human culture tells the same myths and legends, and provides its own cast of characters from the folklore and belief systems of that culture. It, therefore, can be adapted to many literary themes and choices and designed through the pedagogical lenses of multi-culturalism, feminism, (anti)racism, gender studies, Indigenous studies, and more. The choice to use classic Western literature for this

project was motivated by the knowledge that this particular group of participants were educated in the Western literary and religious traditions, were familiar with Western fairytales and folklore, and even if they were not familiar with the individual stories, they were at least conversant with the genre.

The structure is based upon Northrop Frye's archetypal literary theory, specifically the essay "Theory of Myths" in his seminal work, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye, 1957). Frye presents four types of hero-narratives – romance, tragedy, irony and comedy – that can each be divided into six distinct heroic narrative, and discusses the archetypes found in classic literature from Greek myths to English poetry. The concept of the wheel as an illustration of this theory originated with Frye himself as he recognized the circular structure inherent in his archetypal theory; several circular charts are included in his notes and sketches for *Anatomy of Criticism* (Ayre, 2001). My first encounter with this theory, during an opera coaching residency at the Banff Centre with mentor Keith Turnbull, also used the wheel structure, so that image has been a constant throughout the development of the drama curriculum.

When first developing this curriculum for gifted youth, I was searching for a way to make Frye's theory relevant for middle-schoolers and discovered the work of Richard Simon (1999). Simon (1999), an English professor at a polytechnical university, makes the connection between classical literature and popular culture in his book *Trash Culture*, an approach he developed in an effort to make classic literature relevant to students raised on modern media.

I have blended archetypal theory with the "trash culture" approach to create The Story Wheel and added a label for each of Frye's twenty-four myth-types in the style of modern film advertisements. The result is demonstrated in the following graphic illustration:

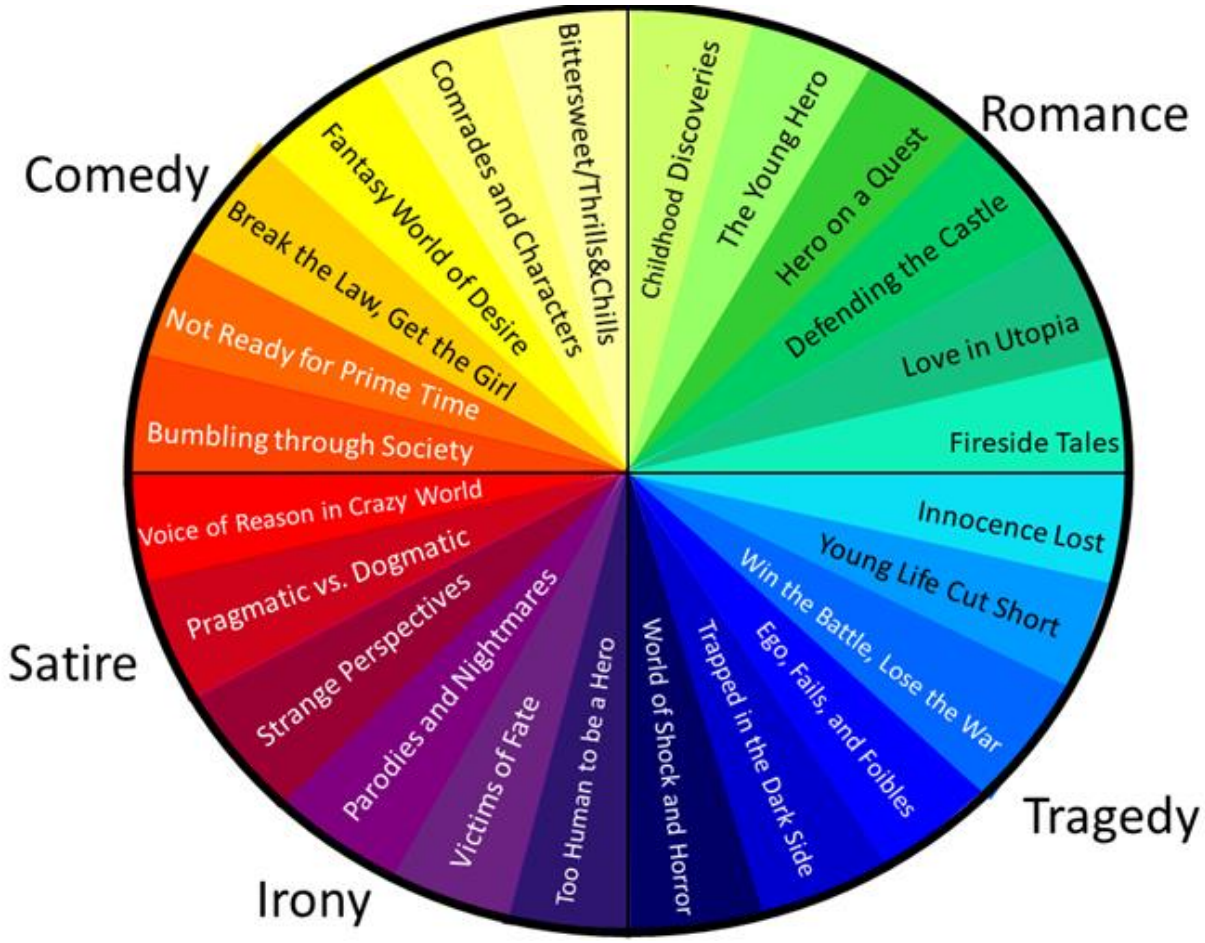


Figure 3.2

For the purposes of this research project, I condensed the above design into twelve segments by combining two adjacent story types, beginning with the first form of Romance. The course consists of 12 class meetings, in which each lesson plan is based on a story chosen as an exemplar of one particular story type on the wheel. The graphic below lists the general title for the story type and the chosen exemplar for each:

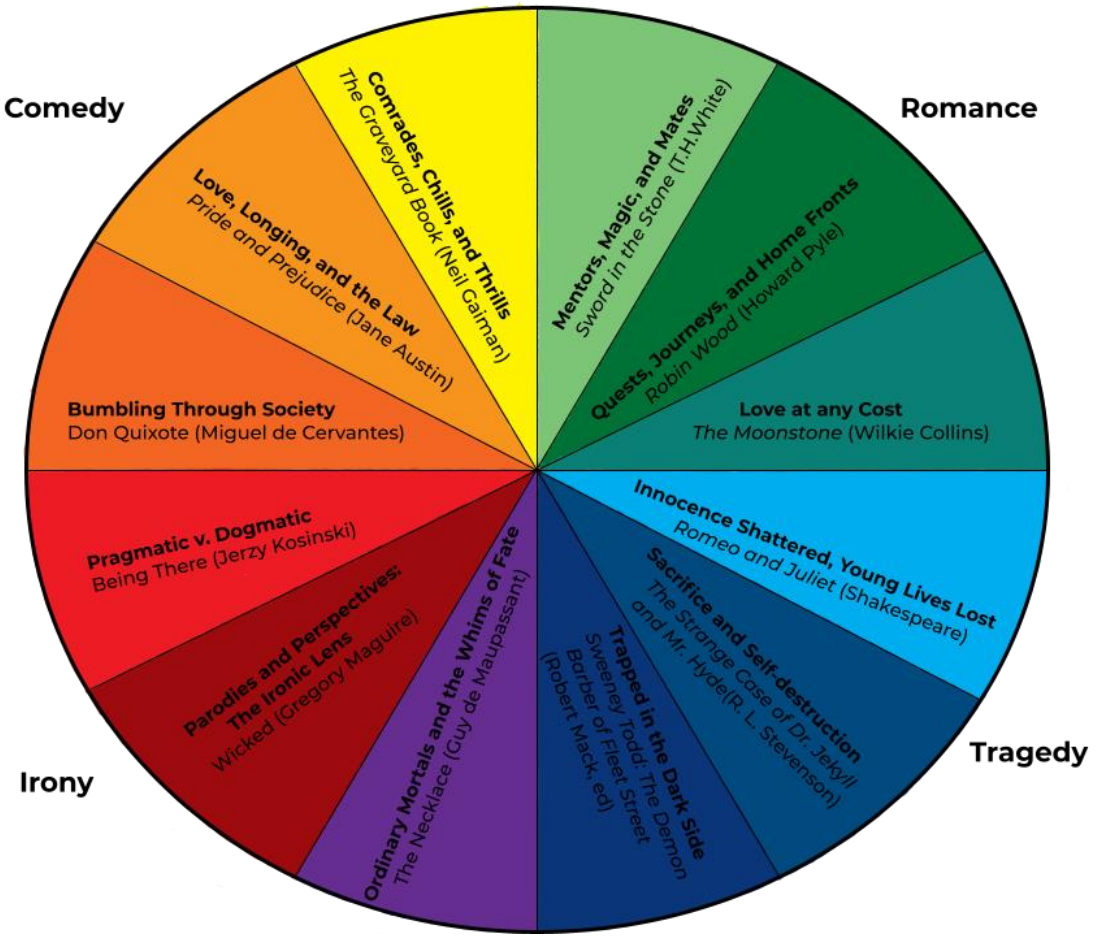


Figure 3.3

The choice of literary exemplars for the drama workshops was subject to the following criteria:

1. No works that have a popular culture fan base or "fandom" that would provide an opportunity to argue about what is "canon" to the story and what is not.
2. Preference for works that are in the western culture folklore tradition, as suited the heritage of the participants and the knowledge base of the researcher.
3. Preference for works that have multiple interpretations in a variety of media, such as theatre, film, animation, television, graphic novels and comic books.
4. Preference for works that can also illustrate an element of ethnography, that is, a particular type of social interaction.

The literary choices were summarized in the recruitment booklet, which provided a description of the curriculum. The story summaries as they appeared in the booklet are as follows:

UNIT 1: ROMANCE

Week 1 – ***Mentors, Magic and Mates***

The story type: We follow the young romantic hero and his companions, mentors, magical assistance, as he searches for his true identity. From Superman to Harry Potter, the young hero is a favourite of readers and audiences of all ages.

Tales of King Arthur from *Le Morte d'Arthur*

by Thomas Mallory

The Sword in the Stone

by T.H. White

Arthur is an orphan boy who lives with a knight, Sir Ector, and his son Kay. Arthur is happy to be invited to a gathering of knights as Kay's errand boy, and watches as the knights approach a large anvil with a sword embedded in it. They all try to pull the sword out and fail, but when Arthur sneaks over to the rock and pulls on the sword, it comes out in his hands! The astonished crowd declares that he is the new King of England!

Week 2 – ***Quests, Journeys, and Home Fronts***

The story type: The hero as a young man leaves his society and heads out on a quest, to face dangers and accomplish his mission. Much of the story takes place in the wilderness, as the hero is separated from his home and family by the quest adventure.

The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood

by Howard Pyle

In the England of long ago, the King has left to join the Crusades, and law and order has fallen victim to greedy Prince John and his tax collectors across the country. In Nottingham, a young landowner returns from the Crusades to find his land taken, his home destroyed, and the Sheriff of Nottingham terrorizing the people by demanding everhigher taxes. He vows to protect the farmers and villagers and return their money, even if it means breaking the law himself. Calling himself Robin Hood, he gathers a group of Merrie Men and embarks on a career as a highwayman and robber to take the tax money back from the Sheriff.

Week 3 – ***Love At Any Cost***

The story type: The adult hero has accomplished his quest and saved his people, and now is on the quest for true love. Many obstacles stand in his way – will he succeed in winning the heart of his beloved?

The Moonstone

by Wilkie Collins

In the colonial days of India, an English army colonel obtains a large yellow diamond, known as the "Moonstone" for its remarkable colour, and brings it back to England. Before he leaves India, however, Hindu priests put a curse on the stone, which is a sacred object to them. Upon the Colonel's death, a young man is sent to deliver the stone to the Colonel's niece, Rachel, on her eighteenth birthday and falls in love with her at first sight. The diamond is stolen that night, and the young man is accused of taking it. He must find the true thief if he hopes to win Rachel's heart.

UNIT 2: TRAGEDY

Week 4 – ***Innocence Shattered, Young Lives Lost***

The story type: The central character is young, innocent, and naïve, and surrounded by stronger evil forces that overpower him/her. The hero is used and manipulated, ultimately losing the optimism and innocence he once had, and possibly even losing his life.

Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare

"Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new munity,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life."

These lines of verse begin the most famous love story of the Western world, the love between two teens whose families have been feuding for generations. Keeping their love a secret proves to have tragic consequences.

Week 5 – ***Sacrifice and Self-Destruction***

The story type: The central character is an adult, experienced enough to know his strengths and weaknesses, who lets his pride and arrogance influence his choices in life. He denies any weaknesses and will not admit errors until it's too late to repair the damage. He is an honest, moral person at heart, and may sacrifice himself for the greater good.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

by Robert Louis Stevenson

It is Victorian London, in the late 1800s – a time of great advances in science, especially medical science. The eminent surgeon Henry Jekyll is intrigued by the new field of

psychiatry, and the idea that drugs can alter the brain and possibly cure madness. He develops psychotropic concoctions and experiments on himself, but the side effects throw him into a moral dilemma.

Week 6 – ***Trapped in the Dark Side***

The story type: The central character lives a life of rage and pain, and is driven to seek vengeance in a world he considers to be cruel and unforgiving. He has forgotten what it is like to be a moral, ethical person – if he ever was one – and is engulfed in a world of shock and horror.

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

Originally published by Edward Lloyd in 1847; new edition by Robert Mack

In mid-nineteeth century England, gossip and legends of harsh city life were passed around the countryside and published in weekly newspapers. Sweeney Todd is one of the most well-known of those "rural legends" – a man with no moral compass who is motivated only by greed and who represents all the dangers of city living. A barber with a collection of sharp razors, he dispatches the wealthy customers of his shop and steals their possessions, then disposes of them with the help of a pie shop down the street whose meat pies develop a new flavour.

UNIT 3: IRONY

Week 7 – ***Ordinary Mortals and the Whims of Fate***

The story type: The central character tries to be heroic, attempts to do noble deeds, but the obstacles of living in the real world get in the way. Sometimes the best intentions are thwarted by unforseen events or a lack of information leads the would-be hero astray.

The Necklace

by Guy de Maupassant

A Parisian woman with social ambitions prods her husband to take her to a ball hosted by his ministry in the French government. He gives her money for a dress, but she also wants to wear jewelry and borrows a huge diamond necklace from a stylish friend. At the end of the gala evening she is horrified to discover that the necklace has fallen off and she has lost it. How will she make amends to her friend?

Week 8 – ***Parodies and Perspectives: The Ironic Lens***

The story type: Irony is a parody of romance adventures – placing the hero in the real world with human limitations and needs. Irony becomes satire when assumptions are challenged as the storyteller takes aim at particular ideas and social conventions, inviting the reader to consider the idea from a different perspective. Looking at things we take for granted from the point of view of a stranger to our world is the act of looking through the ironic lens and finding some startling truths.

Wicked

by Gregory Maguire

The familiar story of *The Wizard of Oz* gets an ironic treatment when it becomes the story of the Wicked Witch of the West, and how she became known by that title. Green-skinned, sharp-toothed Elphaba is shunned and feared as a child, although her appearance is due to a magic elixir her mother drank when pregnant. Bright and independent, she learns at university that there is a minority of animals who can talk and think like a person, and that these Animals are threatened by oppressive laws. Elphaba sympathizes with the Animals, and embarks on a journey of political activism and social justice causes, at the expense of her own personal happiness.

Week 9 – ***Pragmatic vs. Dogmatic***

The story type: This type of satire is told from the point of view of a simple, practical central character or narrator. The character's logical, literal view of the world is contrasted with the spin put on observations and interpretations by people who have a particular agenda or belief system. Dogmatic society says, "that's just the way it is," and the pragmatic satirist says, "why?".

Being There

by Jerzy Kasinski

Chance the gardener has lived under the protection of a wealthy man for his entire life, tending the garden and staying within the walls of the estate in Washington, D.C. All he knows about the outside world he learned from television, until his protector dies and he finds himself out on the street. Through a series of accidental events, he becomes known as "Chauncey Gardiner", ends up at the White House as the president's advisor, and is the toast of Washington society. Chance views the world as a garden, but how does the world view Chance?

UNIT 4: COMEDY

Week 10 – ***Bumbling Through Society***

The story type: This comic hero does his best to live within his society and do great things, but the society and environment tend to get the best of him. His attempts at noble deeds are grounded in a desire for a better life and deliverance from dangers, but his heroic illusions are often no match for reality.

Don Quixote

by Miguel de Cervantes

Alonso Quixano loves books, especially the old stories of knights and their quests. He stays up late reading for so many nights, he starts to believe that he is actually a knight himself. Calling himself Don Quixote de la Mancha, he recruits his neighbour, Sancho Panza, to be his squire, and sets off in search of adventure. In Don Quixote's mind, inns become castles, barmaids become princesses, and Sancho Panza becomes his faithful sidekick in their many encounters with harsh reality.

Week 11 – ***Love, Longing, and the Law***

The story type: In the classic romantic comedy, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back, everyone celebrates. The obstacles to the hero's courtship may be family, society or rivals, but in each romantic comedy there is a barrier to their happiness, such as rules set by her family, that the hero must overcome. Sometimes the story takes place in two universes – the real world and a fantasy world created by magic such as a wish, a spell or time travel – and in the fantasy world, the central character learns what he/she needs to know to make their romance in the real world successful.

Pride and Prejudice

by Jane Austen

In early 19th-century England, society is defined by social class, education and manners – a difficult set of rules and expectations for the five Bennet sisters to learn but crucial if they are to marry well and have a comfortable life. The arrival of a pair of wealthy bachelors and a regiment of soldiers to their village gives the girls many opportunities to meet a potential husband and fall in love, but misunderstandings, misleading gossip and pride get in the way.

Week 12 – ***Comrades, Chills and Thrills***

The story type: The hero approaches the serious side of life with a light-hearted attitude and a close-knit group of friends. This type of comedy is about the characters and their relationships with each other rather than about the plot, as in romantic comedies. These stories may be set in battlefields, graveyards, or haunted houses, and give us a thrill before arriving at a satisfying resolution.

The Graveyard Book

by Neil Gaiman

Left an orphan when the rest of his family is murdered, a toddler wanders into a nearby graveyard and is raised by the ghosts who live there. He is given the Freedom of the Graveyard, which allows him to interact with the ghosts, particularly the Owens, his ghostly adoptive parents. Naming him Nobody Owens, or Bod for short, the ghosts enlist the help of a friendly vampire to provide food and clothing, and the assistance of another graveyard inhabitant to tutor him. Bod befriends a girl from the village, and comes to her rescue when the man who murdered his family takes her hostage, finding himself in the middle of a much bigger battle for the preservation of the good souls of the graveyard.

The progression of stories through the curriculum plan starts in Romance, in which the protagonist must leave his/her society to achieve the quest-objective, and moves through Tragedy, in which the protagonist is either destroyed by his/her society or turns against it, to Irony, which leaves the protagonist on the sidelines of society to critique it or try and fail to join it, and finally to Comedy, in which the protagonist's objective is to successfully function as a member of society.

Because archetypal literary theory (Frye, 1957) explores the relationship of the protagonist with his/her society, it provides an opportunity to investigate a wide variety of social situations and encounters, which aligns with the goals of social skills training (Gantman et al,

2012; Laugeson et al., 2012; Spain & Blainey, 2015). The applied drama pedagogical approach using dramatic conventions (Clark et al., 1997; Neelands & Goode, 2015) creates an interactive experience and the opportunity for autonomous learning, in contrast to the didactic approaches discussed in Chapter Two (Hunter, 2015; Lerner et al., 2011; Nelson, 2010; Schneider, 2007). The result of the combination of literary archetypes and applied drama workshops in a drama curriculum with autistic participants will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Four – The Field Report

The following chapter will discuss the proceedings of each drama workshop in detail, quoting extensively from the audio-video transcripts to center the authentic autistic voice and providing interpretive commentary from my observations. Pseudonyms will be used to represent the participants, as listed in Chapter 2, and my contributions to the discussions will be denoted by my initials, NC. A change in font will indicate a quote from the transcript, and font changes will also be used to indicate material created by the participants in writing-based activities.

This project was designed with an ethnographic methodology in mind (Atkinson, 2017), with which I could investigate the impact of the drama workshops on the socio-cultural understandings of the autistic participants. I planned to look for newly acquired insights, moments of realizations and increased abilities to cooperate and compromise. I expected to see the participants embrace the fictional materials and find connections to their own lived experience and looked forward to copious field notes full of happy discoveries on the part of the participants. Instead, they were far more interested in investigating the characters of the stories and discussing favorite topics than focusing inward on their own feelings or reactions.

The participants gamely entered into the drama activities for each chosen work of literature, and did not refuse or reject any activity outright. Familiar stories of folklore, such as the origin story of King Arthur or the legend of Robin Hood, inspired more energetic engagement from the participants, while unfamiliar stories required more work on the part of the facilitator to lay the foundation and supply the background. For example, anticipating that they would not be familiar with *Sweeney Todd* (Mack, ed., 2007), I found a script treatment (Jory & Dixon, 2019) and changed the lesson plan from a conventions approach to a table read, focusing

on the connection between vocal inflections and emotional expression and looking for subtext in the dialogue.

At the end of the *Sweeney Todd* workshop, which also marked the half-way point of the course, I asked the participants for their feedback, and they were in agreement that some written material and even video clips were useful for stories that were unfamiliar to them and that they found improvisation and devising scenes to be a challenge when the story was new. They also remarked on the difficulty of small group work in a large empty space that resonated and echoed the sounds of each group, so much that the resulting aural environment was distracting and noisy, painfully so for those who are sensitive to aural input.

I researched script treatments of the upcoming stories and added excerpts of the scripts to the lesson plans for the Irony and Comedy units. This changed the nature of the lesson plans but the convention activities were retained for a portion of the workshop, while scripted scenes took up the rest of the class time. The lesson plans also used more large-group activities to mitigate the problem of a noisy working environment, as the class was collaborating as a whole rather than asking students to concentrate on the work of their small group while another group was discussing and rehearsing a different scene in the same open space.

The choice of the dramatic conventions pedagogical structure (Clarke et al., 1997; Neelands & Goode, 2015) allowed for a wide variety of participation modes, from written collaborations to improvised scenes, but as the course went on and the pedagogical approach changed from strict adherence to the conventions approach to working on script analysis, character analysis and voice acting, the preference among the participants for active conventions or reflective discussions became apparent. Gloria, Paul, Noreen and Brenda were much more interested in acting and performing, while Patrick, Rory, Wendy and Michael enjoyed the

reflective discussions and chats between activities. The literary and pedagogical choices, however, proved ultimately to be less important than the socializing aspect for the participants, providing ample opportunities for the researcher to observe autistic socializing and learning styles.

The findings will be presented as an ethnographic field report, providing an overview of the curriculum and the participants' response to the drama pedagogy, and as the participants co-created this research with their ongoing input and feedback, they will be referred to as "students" in the discussions of each workshop. This will be followed by a granular analysis of the themes that arose from analysis of the transcripts.

UNIT ONE: Romance

Stories in the Romance unit center on the iconic hero on a quest, whether that quest is to learn his true identity, subvert the corrupt and evil persons in power, protect his society, or find true love. The students showed a keen interest in the questions of power imbalance, class distinctions, and oppression, which are central to the Romance story exemplars, and found many connections to stories which they already knew.

1. The Sword in the Stone

The first workshop of the course started by defining the terms that would describe the social roles in the chosen story for the day. Using the convention Spectrum of Difference (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 133), the class was asked to place themselves on the spectrum between King-Servant and Rich Man – Poor Artist. Their interest in social justice was immediately apparent in their responses when asked about their placement choices on the imaginary line. The desire for equality was reiterated by several participants, although Patrick

placed himself firmly at the powerful end of the spectrum. He explained his reasoning as, "[as King] I want to use my power to help other people. [as Rich Man] I would use my business to help other people and my earnings to help other businesses."

Noreen explained her choice to go toward the Poor Artist end of the spectrum with, "I'd rather do something that I really enjoyed and not make as much money than feel trapped doing something I don't want to do."

Brenda, meanwhile, placed herself beside Noreen and declared, "I'm protesting the word 'Business MAN,'" setting the precedent for her staunchly feminist perspective that became a feature of future discussions.

The workshop then moved to a text-based activity to set the scene for the legend of King Arthur by identifying the social strata of medieval England. Posters were attached to the wall and participants were invited to describe the roles of Lord, Knight and Squire, but Michael objected to the choice of roles.

"What about the King? They would have kings," he said, and when it was explained that the focus was on smaller regions rather than the entire country, he asked, "Wouldn't the title be Lord, then?"

Wendy stepped in to head off what she may have perceived as the beginning of a long argument by wryly pointing out, "We don't really have the room to set up the whole hierarchy," and Michael responded with an apology in the form of an explanation.

"I wasn't complaining, I was just…that's what you call someone if we're supposed to be in medieval England." His point made about the proper titles for the aristocracy to his

satisfaction, he joined in the activity to write descriptors for the three roles without further comment.

Their descriptors offered indicated a clear understanding of the class distinctions of wealth, political power and military might:

Lord: Wealthy, In Charge, Authority, Fascist

Knight: Defender, Brave, Duty, Strong, Violent

Squire: Loyal, Duty, Energetic, Peasant, Working Folk

Figure 4.1

From the descriptor activity, the class moved into still images in groups of three, portraying the three roles. In the image above (Figure 4.1), Michael (left) is the loyal squire, his feet and arms in position to bow, Patrick is the knight holding an imaginary sword aloft with an expression of

determination on his face, and Robert is the lord of the manor, seated with an intense gaze and leaning forward as if to issue an order or pronounce judgement. The rest of the class formed their own trios, and took those roles to the next activity.

I assumed the role of Merlin the wizard to introduce some exposition and move to the next activity, which was to announce the birth of king's son, who was in danger from the king's enemies. The class formed an Advice Alley (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 125) as "Merlin" walked among them with a bundle of cloth representing the baby, asking for their advice on protecting the infant. The suggestions offered by the participants reflected their familiarity with hero-origin legends and folktales:

ACTOR	TRANSCRIPT	ANALYTIC COMMENTARY
ROBERT	(leaning in conspiratorially): Just go to the King -- the King will take care of him. I work for the King, so I'll be doing it.	Casting himself in the role of advisor and protector within the context of the drama.
PATRICK	Put him in a basket and put him in the river.	Making reference to the Old Testament story of Moses, another exemplar of the hero-origin myth in Frye's theory of archetypes.
GLORIA	Well, there are some people down in the village who always longed for a child, and I'm sure that they would raise this baby to be a good person so he can become a good King.	Using language reminiscent of traditional fairy tale publications, adding assurance that the future King would be given moral training.
WENDY	Hide in the forest and raise him yourself.	Suggesting a strategy also derived from traditional folktales.
NOREEN	Um, I think I agree with Gloria there, and you should take him to the village and leave him there.	Tentative but willing to join in the role of advisor and taking a previous contribution as a model for her own.

BRENDA	Turn him into a frog. (some giggling from Gloria)	Demonstrating a wry sense of humour while also referring to a fairy-tale trope, earning a delighted reaction from a classmate.
EILEEN	You're a magician, for heaven's sake. Just find a wet nurse for him. I'm sure there are plenty of women in the village or here in the castle who are quite knowledgeable about raising babies…and use your magic to set protective spells around him so that none of the king's enemies can get to him.	Drawing on several fairy-tale tropes as well as her knowledge of the Arthur legend to give Merlin a short lecture about how to do his job as a wizard, including details of the setting.
PAUL	Well, if no one knows it's a boy, give it to someone who raises it as a girl until he's the right age to become King. No one will suspect that way.	Giving the familiar "girl disguised as a boy" folktale trope a twist with his suggestion to raise the baby as a girl, thus disguising his true gender.

In the next drama activity, the class switched roles to become knights gathered for a tournament in the convention Come On Down! (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 73), in which they took turns miming failed attempts to pull the sword from the stone. The improvisation in this activity included some humorous moments, such as Michael's comment after his attempt failed, "I knew I should have made that wish for the magic lamp," Paul's explanation for not trying to pull out the sword – "I just tried to bribe *him* into doing it for me" (pointing to Rory) – and Gloria's inspired and energetic moment when she changed the rules of the game:

> "Oh! I brought an ax with me!" (she moves forward to give it another try). "I think I can get this thing out! LOOK! It's not yielding under my ax! Stupid stone!" (She stomps to the rear of the playing space)

The final plot-based activity used the "Whoosh" story-telling strategy (Nelson, 2021) to portray the Archbishop of Canterbury's dismissal of Arthur's demonstrated ability to pull the sword from the stone, until he is forced to agree that Arthur must be the rightful king of England. The activity concluded

with enacting the coronation march for Arthur, during which I started singing the melody of God Save the King and the class joined in. Michael remarked that he'd heard that song before, in an episode of the animated television series *Ren and Stimpy*, and Wendy corrected him by informing him that it was the British national anthem.

In the reflective discussion that followed the drama activities, I brought up the idea that Arthur was a disrupter in his society and asked for comments about the concept. When I asked them if they had had the experience of being a disrupter themselves, several students showed a thoughtfulness about advocacy and self-awareness, although Michael was more concerned with keeping the peace and avoiding correction:

NC: Have you ever had the experience of being a disrupter?

Michael: Sorry…was I being one just now? I'm sorry.

NC: No, you're not. You're adding to the conversation, which I appreciate.

Patrick: Is a disrupter a bad thing, necessarily, or it depends what you're disrupting…

Wendy: Well…

Patrick: It's good to disrupt if it's a normative piece.

Eileen: As autistic people, a lot of us have the experience of trying to disrupt society's attitudes about autism.

Michael starts talking about not wanting to do that (autism advocacy).

Wendy: Changing your mind is hard work and a lot of people would rather not have to do it.

Patrick: A lot of people don't like change.

Robert: We can change our minds.

Michael: Yeah, but we all have limitations.

The reflective part of the workshop ended with a discussion of social disrupters in history, which became a free-for-all conversation about politics, signalling that it was time to conclude the workshop.

2. Robin Hood

In the Robin Hood workshop, the focal point was an anecdote in which Robin Hood and his Merry Men outwit the Sheriff of Nottingham and his posse. The students understood the concept of a social disrupter and situational ethics and enjoyed the activities that were clearly portraying one side against the other. The warm-up activities included Role-on-the-Wall (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 25), which asked the students to diagram the perceptions of self and other from the perspective of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. The contributions ranged from references to social classes and power to concern for emotional states. When asked to list things that Robin Hood thinks about himself, the students wrote:

The needs of the many outweigh the wants of the one
I am no better than my merry men. All people are important to me.
A necessary evil.
Come friends, to battle!

Their ideas of what Robin Hood thinks of Prince John included:

Prince John is a tyrant who cares about money more than the good of the people.
A bully for a ruler!
Misusing his brother's power.
He probably isn't even happy.

Their contributions from the perspective of Prince John were similarly interested in emotional states, expressions of social power, and lines of inner dialogue.

About himself:

Only God is more important than I am.
Miserable. Rigid. Perfect. L'état c'est moi.

Is not mentally well.

How will history view me?

How much longer must I sit here? The chair is uncomfortable and my arms are tired.

About Robin Hood:

A threat to my rule.

Robin Hood is a pest who should be squashed.

Robin Hood is a threat to stability and wants to overthrow me.

I'm better than you.

The drama activities began with creating a medieval marketplace and developing individual roles within that setting. They were then introduced to Robin Hood by the facilitator/researcher, performing as the town constable in a Teacher-in-Role convention (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 54), who convened a meeting of the townsfolk to advise them that the Sheriff of Nottingham is on his way to their village to look for Robin Hood and to discuss their loyalty to Robin Hood. In role as the town constable, I asked the townsfolk if they had ever received help from Robin Hood or knew of someone who had, which started a conversation about stealing from the rich to give to the poor and subsequently about political corruption and inspired some shrewd observations about Robin Hood's ethics:

Rory: He [Robin Hood] pays off politicians.

Paul: Why don't we have some fake gold made and then have them lure…have Robin Hood steal it? Then when it's passed around the village, we find out who had it originally.

Michael: I don't know if that's true, about Robin Hood paying off politicians. A lot of people pay off politicians.

Rory: Yes, but he also…Robin Hood also…likes to give speeches about moral purity and being against corruption. His own hypocrisy will be his downfall.

The speakers in this excerpt demonstrate a common feature of their discussions – a tendency to self-edit while speaking, as if they started speaking before fully forming the thought. In the excerpt above, Paul and Rory both stop and start their speech as they continue to work out their thought, and once the idea is mentally complete, the hesitations in their speech are gone.

The following activity was a Collective Character convention (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 12), in which the class was asked to form small groups and each group was given a speech from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Green, 1956) to create a group presentation. This became a challenge and a pedagogical learning moment, as there was much consternation about how to accomplish this task among the participants. Eileen, who often took a leadership role within the group, tried to help by reiterating the instructions while Noreen asked for help from her group to understand how the collective voice was going to be performed. One group did produce a group performance, dividing the lines of the text among themselves, while the other group took turns reading out the speech individually with their own paraphrasing added in places. From this it was clear that instructions for performative text-based activities need to be detailed and modelled for the autistic participants to feel confident they understand what is being asked of them.

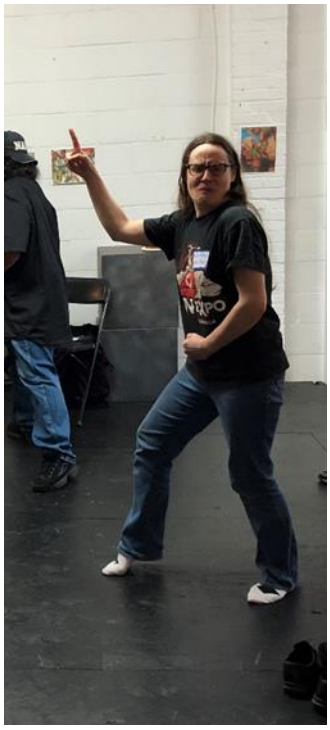


Figure 4.2

The participants then chose to portray either Robin Hood and his followers or the Sheriff and his henchmen in improvised scenes and a Still Image convention (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28). The images captured during the latter activity show an awareness of the use of facial expression and body posture to communicate their character's emotional state. They were asked to portray the moment in the novel in which Robin Hood's followers outwit the Sheriff and his crew and manage to take their pants away, and the Sheriff's people run away in embarassment.

In this image (Figure 4.2), Wendy portrays the mortified Sheriff, with

one hand held in front as if holding something to cover the absence of pants and the other pointing upwards as if about to make a declaration or a warning, while her facial expression is one of shame and consternation. Rory is in the background as one of the Sheriff's posse, showing the forward urgency of one who is leaving the scene.

In the reflective discussion following the drama activities, the students were asked about their impressions from the marketplace activity, and the responses reflected their impression of placing themselves in a historical setting and in role. Gloria remarked, "Being back in those historical times, I was actually really scared, like too scared to even lift a finger, because I thought whatever they would do…They would grab you and take you to get tortured." Patrick pointed out, "…back then, it was very structural classes….sort of like there's this group and that group, and they don't really come together. They're just separate."

During the reflective discussion, I pointed out that Robin Hood is a trickster, a classic folktale trope and storytelling device, and asked for their thoughts about tricksters. The participants offered comparisons to other mythical characters, such as Loki from Norse mythology and Anansi from West African folktales, and stories from their own experience or from reading about others' experiences. I asked about the trickster's relationship with the law, as in the example of Robin Hood, and the relationship of ethics to the situation, and Patrick was immediately interested.

Patrick: Laws are…There were lots of laws in the day. There were laws that wouldn't allow certain disabled people into certain coffee shops. They weren't allowed. There was an ugly law, apparently.

[he is referring to Unsightly Beggar ordinances that were enacted in the UK and the US in the late nineteenth century and prevailed until the mid-twentieth century]

Eileen: Right, and there were laws that people of colour couldn't do the same thing. So a whole bunch of them get together and take their power back. Disabled people or people of colour or women.

Patrick: Sometimes there were other groups that would help those people that are more…Like, they're not the oppressed group and help the oppressed group.

Eileen: You have to remember that Robin Hood, though Robin Hood is a hero, he was an outlaw.

Although the students' interest in social classes and power imbalances was evident in the previous story-drama, this workshop was the first indication of the intense interest in social justice shared by a majority of the participants. Eileen, who facilitates a social group for autistic people, and Patrick, who has been interested in disability advocacy for several years, led the discussion as they were the more experienced voices in the group. Those who had not had the experience of direct involvement in advocacy still demonstrated their understanding and investment in the issues of power imbalance and resistance to authoritarianism in the "self-portrait" warm up activity and in their performances during the workshop.

3. The Moonstone

The final story in the Romance unit was selected as an exemplar of the hero who has completed his quest, protected his society or is living in an orderly society, and is searching for true love. Considered to be the first real detective novel written in English, *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins inaugurated the technique of telling the story from the points of view of a variety of characters, each adding more details and fleshing out the story as the reader pieces together the puzzle of a stolen diamond and hopes that the protagonist, accused of the theft, recovers the stolen gem and clears his

name. A fine example of this particular archetype, this dense novel nonetheless proved to be a challenge when determining the appropriate drama activities that would invite the participants into the story.

The participants gamely engaged with the drama activities of the guided tour to set the scene, viewing a short video introduction to the story and examining, in role as the police officers investigating the theft, the characters' profiles posted on the wall. The facilitator then led a meeting of the police officers to determine where to start their inquiry and who to question first (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 47). The participants' awareness of social classes became apparent in this discussion, as shown in this excerpt from the transcript:

Gloria: Didn't the moonstone come from India?

NC: It did.

Rory: Then we investigate the guardians.

Wendy: Yeah, start by investigating the lower class people…

Michael: [interjecting and pointing at a picture on the wall]

HIM!

Wendy: [continuing]

…just to be safe. Investigate the lower classes, and then you don't get into trouble for investigating your betters.

Rory: No, it's not necessarily about pinning on them… [unintelligible]

Michael: [interrupting to explain his interruption]

I was more meaning the archetype that usually… "the butler did it".

In this excerpt the speakers demonstrate an understanding of social classes and the power structures of the novel's historical setting. This excerpt also shows a conversational style that will be examined in more detail in the following section; a tendency to offer a thought that is related to the topic at hand but is interjected into the conversation rather than waiting for a turn to speak or waiting for an

opportunity to respond to another person's comment. It is worth noting that no one objected to or even remarked on Michael's interruption but simply carried on their conversation and incorporated the possibility that "the butler did it" into their investigation plans.

The conversation about how Victorian-era police would conduct such an investigation continued while the class waited for me to set up for the next activity, and ranged from dusting for fingerprints to drugging suspects. Demonstrating a capacity for metaxis, or functioning in a liminal place of role/not-role (O'Toole, 1992), several participants used the general context of the story to investigate and develop details on their own, debating the historical accuracy of suggested details and mulling over possibilities. This continued to be a collaborative effort, in which it appears that the participants are interrupting each other but they do not acknowledge each other's contributions as such nor object to being interrupted, as evidenced in this excerpt:

Wendy: [still thinking about the characters who to interview in-role as a police officer]

And you want to get the family of entertainers first, because nobody else is going to be skipping town as quick…

Patrick: Yep…people are going to…

Rory: [interrupting]

Well, they…they're going to know something, I think.

Patrick mutters inaudibly.

Michael: We could take precautions and drug them so they can't automatically leave.

Wendy: Well, and if you *drug* people, they're not going to be able to give you much information.

Some murmuring of agreement from Patrick and Rory.

Michael: No, I mean…ugh…never mind.

Patrick: Don't know what you'd use to drug them.

Michael: Too bad there wasn't chloroform back then.

Patrick, Rory and Michael continue offering information to each other about medical practices of the time until they are interrupted by NC, who is finally ready to lead the next activity.

The participants became more familiar with the characters of the story through a Hot Seat activity (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 43), which allowed them to interrogate each character in turn. Each participant received a character information card and practiced their interview skills in small groups before taking the Hot Seat with the entire class. Michael heard the word "interrogate" and immediately made a connection to an image in his "mental archive", which is what my autistic daughter calls her memory of previous experiences, both in real life and with fictional stories:

Michael: If I'm going to interrogate, is there any way I can imitate someone who is on the high edge of a building?

Several voices try to answer him at once.

Wendy, staying in role and in the time period of the story, points out that if you hassle a gentleman "you're going to get in trouble" while Michael clarifies that he's thinking of interrogation "Batman style." Wendy tells him that they're not doing that in this activity.

The Hot Seat activity revealed acting abilities among the participants that included adding a British accent to their responses in character, characterizing with the voice, and improvising plot points when the character card seemed to be inadequate.

This workshop was not as successful as previous workshop in engaging the participants in role-based activities and in-depth reflective discussions, and that was due to the choice of this dense, intricate novel and the lack of skilled preparation on the part of the facilitator. While the novel does demonstrate the theme of the romantic hero seeking true love, the large cast of characters and intricately detailed plot necessary to a detective novel posed challenges when designing a two-hour workshop.

The most important finding of this workshop, therefore, was not the relationship of the participants to the drama activities or the literary material, but the documentation of their conversation between activities. It is here that the importance of being able to connect ideas through relating them to favorite stories, television shows or movies in the individual's experience first became apparent. Calling an autistic individual's memory a "mental archive" can be particularly appropriate, as most of the participants seemed to carry a bank of remembered sounds, images, and moments that can be called up to contextualize a moment in a new story or experience. Temple Grandin calls this process "associative thinking" (Grandin, 2013, p. 125) and has compared her visual memory to an internet search engine. "To an outsider, my thoughts might appear random," she explains, "but to me, I'm simply selecting which file folder I want to explore" (p. 125). My daughter also refers to her memory as her "files," and regards her memories of people and experiences the way an anthropologist regards field notes, an abundance of details filed away in categories.

Unit Two – Tragedy

The protagonists of tragedy, according to Frye, range from the good person who is overwhelmed by evil forces to the person who has themselves become evil and cannot remember or imagine what it is to be good. The stories chosen for this unit demonstrated idealistic youth overwhelmed by family disputes, a man whose addiction to a personality-altering drug becomes his downfall, and a legendary serial killer who is the personification of the evils of the big city. The foil to the heroes of the Romance unit, these stories were also greeted with enthusiasm by the students, several of whom play role-playing video games or Dungeons and Dragons (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) and were familiar with the concept of the evil persona and eager to engage with the drama.

1. Romeo and Juliet

This workshop design used a published teachers' guide for source material (Lundy, 2011) and incorporated text-based activities from the guide. The students familiarized themselves with the characters of the play through studying introductory monologues written in the modern vernacular in the teachers' guide, and then read aloud together excerpts from the play while guided by the facilitator to interpret Shakespeare's language into modern terms. When studying the duel scene between Romeo and Tybalt, Wendy suggested that the dialogue represented "Elizabethan trash talk" and Paul was intrigued by Eileen's suggestion that Mercutio's name was derived from the Latin word for mercury, implying that his personality was changeable or mercurial. He offered a description of the movement of liquid mercury, which sparked several comments about mercury from the group, from memories of seeing liquid mercury spill from a broken vial to questions about mercury poisoning. I gave them time to finish their sharing, and carried on with the next scene reading.

Reading from prepared texts revealed a wide range of literacy and acting abilities among the participants, from those who read their lines with character voices and gestures to those who struggled with decoding and pronouncing certain words. Michael, who was very familiar with the story and for whom reading is effortless, showed impatience with any stumbling over words from other participants and was quick to interrupt to correct the pronunciation but not the person. At no time was he reproached by others in the group for his side-coaching interruptions, however; the participant receiving the correction simply repeated the word and carried on with the line-reading, keeping any feelings of annoyance to themselves.

The following activity asked the participants to show their opinion of Juliet's plan to drink the potion to feign death by placing themselves on an Advice Alley lineup (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 125), while Wendy played the role of Juliet and approached each individual in turn for their advice.

Noreen and Patrick cautioned her about trusting Friar Lawrence and his potion, Rory and Paul reminded her that Romeo has been fickle in the past and is not to be trusted, Michael and Gloria assured her that she would finally be together with Romeo after a restful sleep, and Eileen improvised a long monologue that summarized the fight between Romeo and the Capulets and the reasoning behind Juliet's desire for escape.

The focus then shifted to the families left mourning after the bodies of Romeo and Juliet are discovered in Juliet's tomb. The class created still images (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28) of the two families, each portraying their grief or anger over the outcome. In creating still images of the families, the need for clarity of direction and focus from the facilitator became apparent, as illustrated in the transcript of this moment:

> The participants are standing in two groups, facing each other, representing the two families of the play. Patrick and Rory are standing together and make a few comments while waiting for NC to return with the camera:
>
> **Patrick**: [holds his head and sways forward and back]
>
> We need to be dramatical…
>
> **Rory:** [turning toward Patrick with a grin]
>
> How about some corpses?
>
> **Paul**: [suddenly, pointing at Rory]
>
> NO!
>
> **Eileen**: [seeing her opportunity to finally speak]
>
> We might possibly…kind of…make a tentative approach to the other family and say…"let's put this behind us once and for all"
>
> [moving her hand from behind her head, where she had been making a nervous gesture, extending her arm toward the group facing her as if to shake hands]
>
> Patrick and Rory are facing Eileen as she makes this gesture.
>
> **Patrick and Rory**: [immediately and together]
>
> NO.

NC: OK, so let's strike our first family pose in 3…2…1…

The participants, grouped as Capulets and Montagues, pose in portrayals of shared grief.

In one group, Eileen bows her head and clasps her hands in front of herself, as if in prayer; Michael buries his face in his hands, and Gloria and Wendy put their arms around each others' shoulders, bending forwards as if to prevent the other from collapsing.

In the other group, Noreen leans her head forward, covering her eyes with her hands; Patrick raises his fists to either side of his bowed head, covering his ears with his hands; Rory stands at attention with a bowed head; and Paul crumples forward, one hand on his leg and the other balled into a fist and supporting his bowed head from the front.

NC: OK, now let's find another one where instead of facing each other, you're side by side.

The participants almost simultaneously make a quarter turn, lining up behind each other in their family groups. NC adds more instruction:

NC: More like it's one line, all facing the same direction.

The participants shuffle into the new requested formation, lining up across the space.

NC: [as the participants are starting to develop their poses, Patrick shaking a fist and Paul crossing his arms]

…so let's make family groups, and you can think about what that might look like. Is anybody down on the ground? Is anybody sitting, kneeling, crying? Is anybody reaching over, wanting to punch somebody in the nose?

The participants take inspiration from these suggestions and create a tableau of the two mourning families. Some participants stay close to their original poses, while Wendy and Paul strike argumentative poses opposite each other and Gloria moves to the floor, kneeling in a pose of supplication.

The resulting image is below (Figure 4.3):

Figure 4.3

The reflective discussion began by asking the participants which character(s) they were most sympathetic toward, followed by asking for any known modern iterations of the story and whether they had personally experienced or observed any family clashes like the one portrayed in the play. The responses were again framed with references to other fictional stories as analogies for the focus of this workshop.

NC: Which character did you find you were most sympathetic with, or were drawn to?

Wendy: I have to say, Romeo.

NC: uh-hmm? Why?

Wendy: Because he's not so tunnel-vision-y, not so into "hate is the only thing that matters" or, alternatively, "I'm in love, and THAT'S the only thing that matters."

NC: Right. Anybody else?

Eileen: I've always been fond of Mercutio…I guess he's…he's…he's fun, and he's witty…and, I really like how he says these really funny things in response to

Tybalt….and, I *know* that he's a trouble-maker but…I…I dunno, he kind of reminds me of the Weasley twins in *Harry Potter.*

NC: Can you think of any modern…

Michael: [blurting out]

West Side Story!

NC: [continuing]

…modern versions of this play?

Patrick: There are many versions been made…

Wendy: [chiming in]

It's been made a lot of times…

Patrick: A very great…a very BAD version called "Gnomeo and Juliet." [chuckling] They're, like, *gnomes*! [Gloria giggles]

Michael: How can anyone watch…

Patrick: [interrupting]

It was really bad, but it was loosely based on "Romeo and Juliet".

Paul: [picking up on the theme of bad movies]

I don't know…the "Green Lantern" movie was worse…

Patrick: Well, yeah, but that's not based on "Romeo and Juliet."

NC: Have you ever known anyone to be in this kind of situation?

Patrick: Not this extreme.

Michael: NOPE! I know the second "Lion King" movie used a lot of what Shakespeare wrote…

Patrick: [over Michael's mention of Shakespeare]

I've heard about…

Paul: [in the background]

And Hamlet. [referring to "The Lion King" and responding to Michael]

The conversational style of interwoven ideas, first noticed in the previous workshop, *The Moonstone*, is evident here as the analogies spark new connections and the theme moves from modern iterations of Romeo and Juliet to bad movies to Shakespearean influences in animated films from Disney Studios. This style becomes even more apparent when the word "feud" triggers a flow of connections among the group, although their comments, while connected to the theme of "family feud", are not always connected to each other's:

Patrick: Well, not like a feud, but, like, it seems…it's changing now because…

[finally getting to his topic]

The monarchy in England -- but they used to be, like… only people who would actually be… like, they would date only other princes or…or…and so it became…and now there are a lot of other people who have come in, obviously, and so…

Michael: I think you could argue that makes sense about hillbillies.

Wendy: There's a lot of countries where, until recently, mixed-race marriages were illegal. I mean, *seriously* illegal.

Rory: There's also the Hatfields and McCoys.

As this was the first workshop to use printed materials, it pointed out the need for differentiated instruction as the participants demonstrated a variety of literacy skills. Michael's reading fluency led to a show of impatience as others hestitantly read their lines, a behaviour I attributed to his eagerness to proceed with acting out the scene but which could be problematic if the person receiving his unsolicited corrections found them to be upsetting or distracting. A workshop structure that introduces the written material in stages with enough repetition and scaffolding to make it accessible for all participants is vital to avoiding conflicts arising from different literacy abilities. The participants' familiarity with this particular story, as demonstrated by their discussion of the characters and modern variations, helped

those whose literacy skills were not as advanced as they could rely on previous experiences with the story of an ill-fated romance that is torn apart by a family feud.

2. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

To investigate the story of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), the class first identified the three social groups represented in the novel – the aristocracy, the scientists and progressive thinkers, and the merchants and working class – by writing descriptors on posters. They showed considerable knowledge about Victorian society in their contributions, which included the following:

Aristocracy: snob; demanding; discriminatory; class-ist; entitled; political

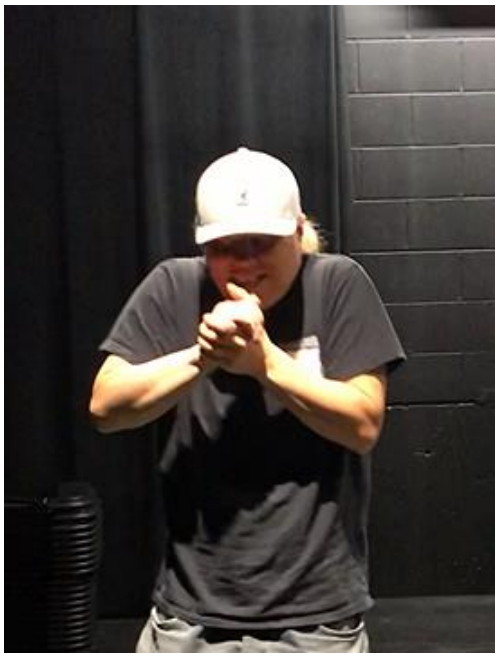
Scientists/Philosophers: free thinkers; eccentric; obsessed; inventive; mostly from higher classes (leisure time to think) but not the highest – still something to gain from changing the status quo

Merchants/Servants: underpaid; underappreciated; overworked; abused; uneducated, insecure – dependent on the goodwill of their superiors; were seen as worthless; taken for granted

The class then chose roles from the three social classes, and from those roles considered the conflict that Jekyll described between his fun-loving creative nature and his desire to be a serious student of medicine. I took the role of young Jekyll, the medical student, in the center the circle of participants, and expressed one of the two desires – to be creative or to be taken seriously as a scientist. Each participant responded to "Jekyll" in role in the convention If I Were You… (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 125), either encouraging or opposing the feelings expressed by "Jekyll."

The following activity, based on the convention Metamorphosis (Neelands & Goode, 2000, p. 62), introduced the character of Mr. Hyde, using an excerpt of the text as inspiration to sculpt a partner into a representation of the novel's description. After sharing their depiction of Hyde with the class, the pairs then developed a transformation performance, shifting their body from Jekyll to Hyde and trading

personas from one partner to the other. Using the “Whoosh” story-telling technique (Nelson, 2021), the class built scenes for every major plot point of the story, and then in a Time Line convention (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 57), each participant was asked to develop a mime presentation of one of the stages of Jekyll’s progression from discovering the drug to succumbing to its grasp. The participants formed a line across the rehearsal space and performed their moment in the story in turn while I video-recorded the progression. The participants viewed the video and gave their reactions, which continued in the reflective discussion. Below are a few images from Dr. Jekyll’s timeline (Figure 4.4), from Patrick as Dr. Jekyll making the discovery of the potion to Wendy as the doctor struggling with addiction, Noreen as Mr. Hyde, and Eileen as Dr. Jekyll realizing that he is out of potion and out of options.



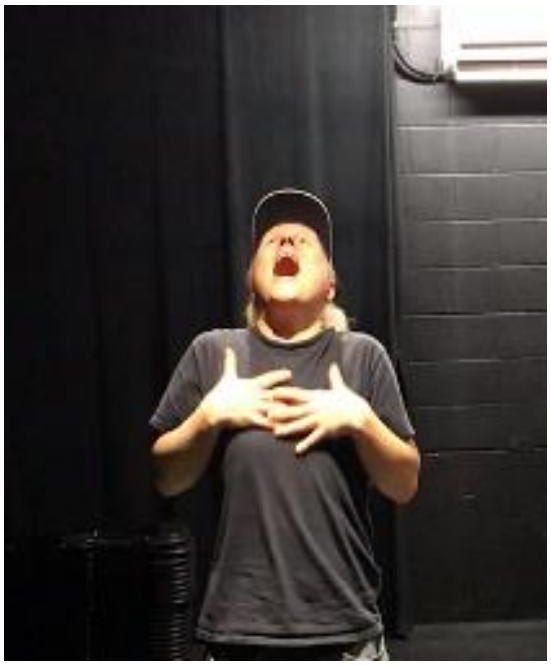


Figure 4.4

The reflective part of the lesson plan consisted of considering some statements about Dr. Jekyll and the question of responsibility of one's actions, placing themselves in a Spectrum of Difference (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 133) to show their degree of agreement with the statements: 1) Henry Jekyll was the architect of his own misfortune; 2) Henry Jekyll was a victim of circumstances; 3) Henry Jekyll sacrificed himself for the sake of science. Finally, each participant was invited to indicate their sympathy for Jekyll's predicament by standing in proximity to the chair that represented Jekyll, explaining their choice of distancing when tapped on the shoulder.

In the reflective discussion that followed, the participants re-visited the experience of building the timeline to examine the questions of morals and ethics in Jekyll's descent into drug-induced madness. Wendy pointed out that his use of the concoction allowed him to go places that the genteel Dr.

Jekyll could not have visited, until he was dependent upon the potion to escape from Hyde's persona, to which Michael replied, "And they didn't have addiction recovery centres back then."

Gloria was a staunch defender of Jekyll's innate goodness, proclaiming, "I don't think Dr Jekyll meant to hurt anyone at all. He accidentally turned himself into an evil monster," and, "He actually gave himself a much bigger punishment than what everyone else would have done to him." Rory questioned whether Jekyll turned himself into a monster, "or did he bring it out of himself?"

Paul was interested in the historical context of the novel's writing, remarking that in the Victorian age, moralizing about a simple pleasure could bring on feelings of guilt. "You get all these emotions and depression, repercussions and self-hatred," he explained. "He had to go too far in one direction and be something he wanted to be but also something he didn't want to be…But you can't determine someone's faults. It's too hard."

Eileen noticed that the novel was written at a time of scientific discoveries and innovations, theorizing that, "people might have been suspicious of what these scientists were up to and what strange things they were coming up with…and that was kind of confirming that 'Hey, these scientists are wackos. We don't want anything to do with them.'"

When asked what Dr. Jekyll's fatal flaw was, the group agreed that it was a combination of moral weakness, overconfidence, and arrogance. Rory added, "I also think he refused to accept responsibility for his own failings. I think because he was probably a loser who didn't have many friends, he was frustrated and that built up. He wanted to become something else. He thought he could become something better." This was an interesting comment to come from Rory, a generally quiet person who admitted that he does not have many friends and had been very introverted when I observed

him at the local meet-up group. By this point in the series of drama classes, he was becoming more engaged and talkative, which continued to develop as the course went on.

In the discussion around whether Jekyll was a morally good or corrupt person, the conversation turned to modern politics and current events which caused some tension between participants with differing political bents. Michael, who holds very conservative views, warned the group, "Don't bring politics into this," and Paul supported Michael's boundary statement by suggesting, "How about politics from so long ago that it doesn't really matter as much? Bill Clinton…" Other suggestions were then offered, including Nixon and King Edward VIII, who had different public and private personas.

The conversation about Jekyll's duplicitous life and the lies that made it possible led into a conversation about lying from the autistic perspective. As authentic, literal thinkers, the talkers in the group chewed over the question of what constitutes a lie and whether autistic people actually do lie:

Rory: I've told some lies.

Wendy: I think we're less sophisticated about it.

Patrick: Is acting different from yourself a form of lying? If you're not being your exact self in public, are you lying? Would that be a form of lying?

Eileen: Are you talking about masking (attempting to act non-autistic)?

Patrick: [to NC] I'm wondering…your opinions…. Would someone consider that a form of lying?

NC: I would consider lying to be deliberately misleading somebody.

Patrick: But if you're acting differently from yourself intentionally, wouldn't one say that is, in some way, lying?

Wendy: [somewhat sarcastically]

Is it a lie not to pick your nose when you kind of want to?

NC: What I mean is deliberately giving misinformation.

The question of whether Jekyll was a victim of unfortunate circumstances, or the architect of his own fate, sparked a number of comparisons to other tragic heroes of history and fiction – a now familiar feature of reflective discussions with the group. Wendy contributed an Indigenous aphorism that there are two wolves in a person's nature – altruistic and selfish – and the one that is stronger is "the one you feed." I believe that making these connections, from Madame Curie to Two-Face, a villain of Batman comic books, shows an engagement with the concept of the tragic hero and the ability to generalize the concept of flawed personalities across many different contexts.

The final question of the day asked what kinds of themes or main topics they found in this story, and Michael's answer summed it up succinctly: "A lot of moral ambiguity."

3. **Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street**

The participants had asked for more text and background for the unfamiliar works on the list for this course, and I was determined to keep the lesson centered on the original penny-dreadful novel (Mack, 1846/2007) rather than the libretto of Sondheim's musical theatre treatment of the story, so in the process of researching possible sources I found a playscript treatment of the original publication (Jory & Dixon, 2019). The lesson plan then became a table read of scenes from the script with a pedagogical focus on the communicative power of vocal expression, also known as prosody, an area in which autistic individuals are considered to be atypical (Bogdashina, 2005; Frith, 1989/2003).

This lesson plan format brought the variety of literacy skills of the participants into focus, something that had been noted in previous workshops but now became a central challenge for those with less experience with antiquated expressions and formal language. This again presented a problem with the pedagogical design, proving that with text-based activities it is best to make the material available

for study in advance of the class meeting. In the absence of participant preparation, however, the workshop's transcript shows the facilitator talking a great deal and offering a lot of information instead of designing the lesson to allow for experiential learning.

Each participant was given a folder with excerpts from the script and a pen with which to make notes, as I described the basics of script analysis for motivations and intentions. This caused some anxiety for Michael who found that listening to the reading and writing notes at the same time was an impossible task, and after some worried questioning, he abandoned the note-taking and simply read his lines with a clear indication that he understood the character's intention. His expressions of anxiety around the task showed me that there should have been more preparation and explanation on the part of the facilitator to ensure that all participants felt confident they understood the process. The rest of the participants, however, rallied around Michael, reassuring him that it was an optional activity, and Michael's self-advocacy statement that he could not "take notes and keep up with everyone" was respected by the group.

This workshop highlighted the communication styles and mannerisms of the participants, both when participating in the voice acting and when discussing the character analyses. The voice acting performances, which this workshop was designed to address, were surprisingly alive with variations in pitch, diction, pacing, and even English accents. Some coaching from me served mainly to encourage the participants to fully express the character they had already begun to develop. The members of the group that enjoyed the intellectual exercise of parsing meanings from the script – Eileen, Wendy, Brenda and Rory – joined in a collaborative discussion of the pawnshop scene, offering great insights about Sweeney Todd's character and demonstrating their understanding of his motivations by paraphrasing the lines.

Patrick showed a preference for adding gesture to his lines; in fact, adding gestures to underline the meaning of his words or to understand what is being said is a common practice for Patrick, as in this example:

NC: Right. So with his barking delivery, he sounds a lot more ticked off, right?

Patrick: Firm. (shaking his fist up and down)

Eileen: Statt…st…bleh… [sticks her tongue out in annoyance at getting stuck on the word]

Staccato.

NC: Yeah, separating the sounds.

Patrick makes karate chops with his arm and a flat hand

Rory enjoyed unpacking the motivations of the characters, sometimes launching into an explanation before he had thought it out completely with the result that he stammered out the beginning of his thought and self-edited while talking, a common feature of his verbal communication, as in the following example. The class was examining a scene in which Mrs. Lovett, the meat pie merchant, was inviting Williams, a man in desperate circumstances, to work for her, making it plain that he was never to leave the basement where the pies were made and cooked but that he could eat as many pies as he wished. The discussion centered on prosody, or vocal choices for the line readings:

NC: So how would you read that then? How can you work with the sound of the language and the sound of your voice to indicate that? You can't sound too "nice," that's for sure

Wendy: You can't sound too mean either, because that would scare him right off.

NC: Right. So, think about it. When people are doing a Wicked Witch of the West type character, what would they do? It's an exaggeration.

Eileen: Well, I kinda was thinking of how…if you watch a lot of British TV shows, depending on the era they're set in, there's often a housekeeper or a head of housekeeping, an Upstairs-Downstairs kind of thing, who is basically kind

of…even the people who are employing her are intimidated by her. How she's basically…she *runs* the household…*no* nonsense…just – "do it *my* way – there's *no* other way to do it – and heaven help you if you cross me."

Wendy: But…it's not like she's bullying them, exactly…

Eileen: No! She just sees it as doing her job.

NC: Right. So, Mrs Lovett's lines here…she goes back and forth from being helpful to being kind of mean, and back and forth..And Williams, on the other hand, is in a pretty desperate situation when he says he's just thankful for shelter, and food..

Rory: Yeah.

NC: So, even though he's not exactly sure what she's referring to, he's not going to argue with her, right?

Rory: Yeah, it's… kind of, um…it's…it's…he's…he IS confused, he's not quite sure what to make of her, and because of that, he just doing things…he's just agreeing with her to appease her.

NC: Right. I like that. So can you read it like that? I'm going to have the two of you read it again.

Brenda, who did not participate in every workshop but was in attendance this time with her sister Wendy, demonstrated her preference for quietly listening to the discussion and then offering a pithy short phrase that went to the heart of the topic, often pointing out logical fallacies in the story-telling. When examining the scene in which Sweeney Todd tries to pawn a string of pearls stolen from a customer to a jewelry dealer named Mundell, I brought up sub-text in a rather wordy way but Brenda cut through to the point:

NC: All right. I really like this scene and I think there is a lot of subtext going on here, in other words, there is a lot not being said but is going on in what they're doing there and how they're cooperating…

Brenda: [interrupting]

Mr. Mundell is also a crook.

Several murmurs of agreement.

The most remarkable finding of this workshop was the extent to which the students sought out connections to stories in their mental archive of experience, and how quickly those connections were made and commented upon. It was also noticeable that more of the class was entering into these discussions, offering analogies that occurred to them, where only a few had participated in such discussions in the first workshops of the series. It appeared that they saw the drama class as a safe space and by this, the sixth, workshop, they were more familiar with each other and with me which allowed them to be more collaborative and forthcoming. Some were fleeting comments, made quietly and to no one in particular, such as Patrick's comment about Mrs. Lovett's pies, "It would be more like Soylent Green pies," referring to the 1973 dystopian film *Soylent Green* (Fleischer, 1973) in which nutrition wafers are made from human remains, or Eileen's comment after I read out Sweeney's line to his customer:

NC: And then, "who are you? Where did you come from? Where are you going?" What's that about?

Eileen: [quietly]

Where did you come from, Cotton-Eyed Joe? [quoting an old country song]

The connection comments often received a response from another member of the class who shared that memory of the film or television show mentioned, joining in the comment to support and acknowledge their classmate's contribution. If no one in the group shared the memory, the room was silent and the discussion carried on without acknowledging the comment, as in this discussion of the technical demands of staging Sweeney Todd's barbershop:

> NC has just explained the novel's doubled barber chair that revolves through a trap door in the floor to dump out the bodies, and the choice of the playwright to require a stage turntable instead.

Rory: That reminds me of an episode of the Simpsons where Moe's …he could use a lever and turn the bar into a pet shop… [chuckling]

Patrick: [eagerly jumping in to explain]

Yeah, cause they had Prohibition. [Rory snickers]

They had Prohibition? So they had to pretend it was a pet shop, and Barney got caught in the gears.

Rory: Yeah. [chuckling]

Michael: [interrupting]

Has anyone ever…Does anyone… Does anyone know of a certain Disney movie about pulling a lever…?

Silence.

The Emperor's New Groove? …the lever…?

More silence.

NC: Now let's look at the beginning of this scene…

As in the *Moonstone* (Collins, 2001) workshop, one word triggered a connection for Michael, this time "lever," and he mentions it, hoping someone will recognize and validate his connection, in the style of a teacher questioning a class. Finding no one who shared his detailed knowledge of Disney Studios films, his question is met with silence.

The participants readily engaged with the archetypes of tragedy, from those who fell victim to forces beyond their control to the horrific criminal who is driven only by greed. Their analytical discussions about the motivations and human weaknesses of the tragic protagonists showed a great deal of insight, as demonstrated by the quotes above. In post-project interviews, Paul named *Romeo and Juliet* as his favorite workshop of the course, and Patrick also mentioned *Romeo and Juliet* as memorable workshop that allowed him to see the various points of view of the characters. Rory echoed the comments of other participants when, in his post-project interview, he remarked that,

> I think it's more interesting when characters suffer the consequences for their actions, either good or bad. And it makes them more relatable to the audiences. The romantic heroes tend to be without many flaws, are almost always moralistic and rarely make mistakes or do anything bad. Tragedies usually involve characters who try to do the right things for the wrong reasons, or end up lost and go down the wrong path. (personal communication, edited for clarity)

Unit Three: Irony

Frye (1957) describes irony as "a parody of romance", (p. 223), which is "consistent both with complete realism of content and with the suppression of attitude on the part of the author" (p. 224), defining satire as a subset of irony. Satire, however, requires an object of attack and a sense of humour, which brings satirical works closer to the realm of comedy while irony carries an overtone of tragedy. Frye describes the distinction in terms of the struggle between tragedy and comedy:

> Satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic: the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy. Irony with little satire is the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on a theme of puzzled defeat. (p. 224)

For this unit, I chose one work of pure irony – *The Necklace*, Guy de Maupassant's (1884/2015) classic short story of an expensive misunderstanding borne of two differing views of reality; one work of political satire – *Wicked*, Gregory Maguire's (1995) re-imagining of L. Frank Baum's (1900) fantasy novel *The Wizard of Oz* from the point of view of the original villain; and one work of social satire – Jerzy Kosinski's (1970) novella about a naïf who finds himself swept up into political life in Washington, DC, *Being There.*

I was interested to observe the reactions of a group of autistic adults to drama workshops that investigated irony, as I find so many of their observations to go to the truth of the matter and thus are unintentionally ironic. True to their authentic selves, however, they found the humanity in these ironic characters and looked past the conflict between the pragmatic and dogmatic at the core of satire and irony to rally around the protagonist and embody the character's truth.

1. **The Necklace**

The lesson plan for this workshop combined the dramatic conventions approach with textual resources, creating a play-devising experience for the participants. Folders with excerpts from the short story were made for each participant, so that they had the text to refer to in their drama activities. A recent translation from the original French into modern vernacular (de Maupassant, 1884/2015)made the story accessible and the characters relatable for the participants, so I used that edition and selected six excerpts that focused on the important plot points for our drama activities.

The workshop started by creating an image of the life of Matilde Loisel, the central character, and Mme Forestier, her wealthy friend, by combining elements of the dramatic conventions Defining Space and Guided Tour (Neelands & Goode, 2000, p. 15, 18). The participants formed two groups to imagine the living situation for each of the two women – a modest apartment for Mme. Loisel and a vision of wealth for Mme. Forestier – and from their vision created a real estate ad and tour for the other group.

The advertisement for the modest apartment was created by Eileen, Wendy, Rory and Brenda, using wording that is common in local listings:

1 BR, WC [water closet], walk-up. Charming historical district. Steps away from shops and restaurants. Unfurnished. Running water, gas. Wood-burning fireplace and stove. Half-month rent as security deposit.

Wendy, who is well-read and embraced the literary framework of the drama activities to an extent matched by few in the class, added "in Rue de Martyrs" for some additional Parisien flavour. This group also paced out on the floor the layout of the apartment and took little time deciding on the basic floorplan while remaining uninterested in decorating details such as wallpaper, despite my hints and encouragement. The other group and I took a tour of the apartment as Wendy and Eileen led us through the space:

Eileen: The bedroom is from here to here, down to about here.

Wendy: Then we've got a sitting room right here and a kitchen with the pantry and the water closet just off it.

Eileen: In the Rue de Martyrs.

NC: [trying to encourage details]

What's on the walls?

Eileen: [not taking the bait]

Whatever you want to put there yourself.

Wendy: We should have mentioned that it comes unfurnished.

NC: [persisting]

But the wallpaper. Is that going to stay?

Brenda: [putting an end to the question]

Up to you.

NC: [one more attempt]

It's kind of peeling in a few places.

Wendy: [stepping in to engage with the wallpaper]

If you want to replace it, we will of course require that you not replace it with something worse. There will be an inspection just to make sure, but otherwise it's free.

Patrick: [sensing the opportunity for a pun]

Is it a-peeling?

NC: Ha ha. Thank you.

The Rue des Martyrs group then moved into the space planned by the designers of Mme Forestier's residence: Patrick, Gloria, Paul, and Michael. Gloria, a talented artist who loves to draw stylized illustrations, had created two drawings for their real estate ad (Figure 4.5) – the exterior and the interior – and Michael made sure to start their presentation by giving her credit for her contributions. Patrick demonstrated his visual imagination with a detailed description of their creation:

> Marble floor, oriental rugs. There's a lobby for the servants. There's a playroom. There's stained glass all around the windows, some banners, lots of fancy paintings, maybe a coat of arms. The outside would be very lavish. A castle with big gardens around. It would be almost like Downton Abbey. There are probably servants' quarters. This particular part is a lobby. You'd walk through and see the chandeliers and different doors and probably a place to hang your fancy hat on the hooks, and jackets and coats.

Wendy asked about the kitchen, to which Patrick replied that there were probably two:

> There's a downstairs one for the servants and they cook all the meals, and a more fancy one upstairs. There are servants' quarters near the kitchen because that's where they live, but they're very small, for the servants. There are way better rooms upstairs for the people to live in. They have dumbwaiters where they pull up the food so they can get it quickly to the people, as fast as possible. It's very big. They make a lot of meals. They have parties and host a lot of

fancy balls. They need lots of stoves and big, open firepits for roast pig — I don't know the name of it — or a roast turkey on a spit or something.

In the lobby, these are the stained glass windows. That's the chandelier. There's a fireplace further down, probably a place to hang your coat and put your fancy hat on. Maybe a sword, crest, family crest or something. The floor would probably be marble, be really fancy marble, with maybe a rug from Africa or another country, imported or something. Really fancy…Persian rug or somewhere like that, really fancy one that somebody spent hours weaving.

Figure 4.5

This was a remarkable amount of historically accurate detail for Patrick to offer, particularly in light of the literacy difficulties he had displayed in previous workshops which would lead one to think that he did not read or have any experience with historical fiction. His ability to recall movies and television shows when making comparison commentary in class, however, was seemingly limitless, as if he had ready access to a mental library of images and video clips that he could call up at will, and he was in his element as he described the imaginary palace of Mme. Forestier. The group had clearly discussed the details, as illustrated in Gloria's drawings that include details from Patrick's description, but his recall ability was truly remarkable.

Eileen asked about the grounds of the palatial home, and the resultant conversation is another example of the "weaving together" of ideas, as one word triggers an idea in another group member and they toss around images in a playful, collaborative creative process. In this excerpt, the words

"grounds," "horses," and "pool" generated the threads of imagination as Patrick, whose said that numerous family trips to England in the past had helped with the details, collaborates with Rory, as they stand opposite each other, each regarding Gloria's drawings and tossing ideas back and forth:

Eileen: What are the grounds like?

Patrick: Very large. Big, vast grounds. Maybe stables for the horses.

Rory: Trees. Fancy terraces. Maybe an outdoor pool.

Patrick: Depends where it's located. If it's England, they probably didn't have pools.

Rory: There would be a pond.

Patrick: Your own little moat/lake or something, maybe a hedge maze, a place to ride horses.

Rory: There would be horse stables and maybe a track for horse racing.

Paul, who had been quiet throughout the "house tour" discussion, chose this moment to contribute his idea, inspired by television real estate shows and advertisements. Reserved and introverted in the first workshops, he had become much more comfortable with the other participants over the past six weeks, and his sense of humour and delight in comedy of the absurd began to show in this workshop:

Paul: Maybe you should blindfold people and take them around the house and then take off the blindfold like Oprah. "In here is…."

Patrick and Michael make "Tah dah" noises.

NC: Great, thank you so much.

Paul: Sorry…I have a jingle!

[pulls out his script book in which he has written the jingle]

[Sings to the tune of Land of Hope and Glory, Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*]

"Gold toilets and perfume, no business in sight. (unintelligible) china, a separate house maid just for low light."

The workshop then moved on to the next excerpt from the short story, in which M. Loisel, the mid-level civil servant, confronts his social-climbing wife about her gloomy mood even though he has managed to procure tickets to a government ball. Using the dramatic convention Voices in the Head (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 139), two participants read the dialogue from the text, while two other participants improvised the inner dialogue of the characters. In another example of indifference to gender divisions, Rory took the part of Mme. Loisel while Gloria gave voice to her inner dialogue, and Michael took the part of M. Loisel with inner dialogue improvised by Eileen. Gloria showed a particular propensity for improvising dialogue and expanding on the given text with colourful images and precise descriptions of emotions, adding her own kicker at the end of the scene. The improvised inner dialogue is indicated in italics, below:

Michael: What's wrong? You've been acting strangely for three days now!

Eileen: *Now what's going on? I thought she would be happy with the ticket to the ball and a new dress. I don't know what's going on now.*

Rory: [in a high voice]

I'm upset because I have no jewelry, not a single thing to wear. I look as poor as…. I think I would almost rather not go to the reception.

Gloria: *All these ladies going by me in such lovely frocks and jewelry like they come from the richest land in the whole place. Where do they even see it? As for me, I just look like a hideous slob. So humiliating! I wish they were the ones who were jealous of me.*

Michael: You can wear some fresh flowers. That's very chic at this time of year. For 10 francs, you can have two or three magnificent roses.

Eileen: *I don't know what to tell her. I didn't think she would spend all the money on a dress. I can't afford to buy her jewelry now. Flowers are nice. They don't cost very much.*

Rory: No! There is nothing more humiliating than looking poor in the company of wealthy women.

Gloria: [in a very high voice]

Roses and flowers!? Those come from the garden, where there are worms and dirt and mud and bugs! I would look like hideous filth and even more of a laughing stock. I would have to have a bath. Oh, the humiliation!

Michael: Don't be so silly! Go and see your friend Madame Forestier and ask her to lend you some jewelry. You're close enough for her to do that.

Eileen: *I hope Madame Forestier has something to lend her, because I'm out of ideas and I'm really regretting that I ever brought her a ticket to this ball, because I gave up my hunting trip for this!*

Rory: [noticing that the truncated story jumps ahead and his lines are cut]

Where were we?

Wendy: [coaching from the "audience"]

Right at the end.

Eileen: [taking the role of director for a moment]

You're going to go see Madame Forestier. Just say something about going to see Madame Forestier.

Rory: I have to go to Rat City to see Madame Forestier. [Pretends to be in tears.]

Gloria: *Madame Forestier! Oh, she lends me anything! Hee hee hee — bitch.*

Everyone laughs in surprise.

In the transcript above, Eileen and Gloria show an awareness of the emotional state of their characters, and are precise in their choice of descriptors, an important detail in light of the occurrence of alexithymia -- the inability to recognize and name emotional states – in a segment of the autistic population (Hill et al., 2004). This exercise provided an opportunity to practice imagining and naming the emotions that their characters are going through, and to envision the perspective of a character outside of their own lived experience. Rory threw himself into the portrayal of the female character by choosing a vocal register and affected diction to suit his character's gender and emotional state, and

improvised his final line when he discovered that it was not provided in the text excerpt, hence the reference to “Rat City.”

The Voices in the Head convention was also used for the conversation between Mme. Loisel and her wealthy friend, Mme. Forestier, portrayed by Patrick and Paul, respectively, again with no concern for aligning themselves with the gender of the characters. The inner dialogue was provided by Wendy for Mme. Loisel and David, the research assistant, for Mme. Forestier. The dialogue between the characters of the short story was improvised in this scene, as it was not included in the text booklets provided to the participants. The improvised inner dialogue of the two characters is indicated in italics, below:

Patrick: [Pretends to knock on door.]

Bang, bang.

David: *Oh, I wonder who this is? I haven’t finished painting my toenails. Ah, it’s Mme. Loisel.*

Paul: Oh, Louise. It’s so wonderful to see you. Come on in.

Wendy: *I wish I could live some place like this instead of that hovel.*

Paul: Look at my wonderful elephant tusks from Africa. Oh, my dear, why do you look so sad?

Patrick: I have nothing to wear to the ball.

Paul: You could wear flowers.

Patrick: No, that’s beneath me.

Wendy: *Everything is just terrible. I am so miserable, having to come here and beg my friends for charity.*

Paul: You can borrow some of my jewelry.

Patrick: That would be lovely.

David: *It’s just cheap.*

Patrick: This is lovely. I’ll take this.

Paul: Certainly, my dear.

Wendy: *Oh, this makes me look the way I ought to look.*

Patrick: Lovely, thank you.

In this dialogue, Paul draws from the previous description of the house's collection of artifacts from exotic places when greeting the visitor, showing a retention of detail and engagement in the fictional setting that his team had created. Both actors adopt language that is appropriate to their characters, with expressions such as "that's beneath me" for the social-climbing Mme Loisel, the repeated use of the word "lovely," and the use of "my dear" to address each other. Wendy, meanwhile, is adept at describing the inner dialogue of Mme. Loisel, identifying her emotional state and her ambition to "look the way I ought to look." This would be considered good work for any story-based drama class (Clarke et al., 1997; Miller & Saxton, 2004; McCaslin, 1990; Nelson, 2021), but for a group of people whose diagnosis has been connected to the inability to see another person's point of view (Baron-Cohen, 2008) or have any imagination (Quirici, 2015), this is remarkable for the the shift in language choices and the alacrity with which the actors adopted cross-gender roles.

Following the two scenes, the class drew together to discuss their reactions to each other's scenes. Eileen offered specific praise for acting choices that she observed, while Michael thought that the scene at Mme. Forestier's "could have shown a bit more emotion." Patrick accepted that critique with equanimity, commenting, "Possibly. I was tired today." The scene at the home of the Loisels was praised for the elaborate dialogue, especially the inner dialogue supplied by Eileen and Gloria. Patrick offered a critique framed in his habit of making referential connections to a show that he remembers, bracketing his comment with disclaimers to forestall any hurt feelings:

Patrick: Not to criticize the actors, but it seemed a little like almost comical, over the top. I don't know if that was intentional. It reminded me of British TV shows where

men dress as women and talk in overly high pitched way. Like *Little Britain*. Maybe it's not intentional.

Even though he just finished a scene in which he portrayed Mme Loisel, Patrick finds Rory's portrayal of the same character objectionable because he noticed Rory's vocal register choice ("overly high pitched"), so that his adverse sensory reaction to Rory's performance coloured his evaluation of their scene.

The following scene depicted the state Mme. Loisel finds herself in twenty years after the incident of the lost necklace, when she "came to know the horrible life of the poor" (de Maupassant, 1884/2015, p. 12). The class chose to explore the description from the short story in a Mimed Activity, in which Patrick read the excerpt from his folder while Paul mimed the hard life of Mme. Loisel. The roles were arrived at through a short negotiation, and as other characters were mentioned in the text, they would stop the mime and narration and ask who would like to take on that role.

Patrick: They let their maid go and they moved into an attic.

Paul: [To another participant off-camera.]

Do you want to be the maid and be let go?

[He gets a gesture of assent and adds a little direction.]

Right now, you're the maid and I'm saying goodbye.

Patrick: Do you want me to read the next part out?

[He continues with the narration.]

These role assignments were offered in the manner reminiscent of the way in which children will invite playmates into their pretend play, and, in fact, much of the scene work in this workshop had a casual playfulness about it, as evidenced by the response when Michael returned from a bathroom break,

asking if he had missed anything. Paul replied, “You’re supposed to be yelling at me,” making room for Michael in the ongoing improvisation.

The following improvised scene between M. and Mme. Loisel, arguing about their reduced status in life and Mme. Loisel’s dissatisfaction with her marriage, shows admirable attention to each other’s speech, an important skill in duo improvisation. Rory, who had invented Rat City for a previous scene, returns to that idea as he takes the role of Mme. Loisel while Gloria, who had voiced the inner dialogue for Mme Loisel, now steps into the character herself:

Rory: But honestly, there are people in Rat City who would kill to live in this apartment.

Gloria: Rat City? Oh, you’d better keep me away from those evil creatures! Rat City is full of diseases! I can’t stand rodents! Furthermore, if you want to make me even more happy, the way you say you do, then why don’t you make me happy?

Rory: I can’t make you happy. I’m not a genie. I’m not a magician. I’m not a wizard. I can’t wave a wand and just go poof, you’re happy. You have to make yourself happy. I’ve done all I can for you. I’ve provided well for you. But it’s not enough for you, apparently. I don’t know. You’ve got to do something for yourself, to make yourself happy.

Gloria: Well then, if you really were a genie or a magician, then that’s exactly what I would do. If only it were possible, if you were someone this magic. And if so, I would definitely serve myself. But I can’t, because…. Right now, why can’t you be the way I wish?

The workshop finished with a final scene in which the women meet after several years, in which Mme. Loisel has aged due to the hard work she has endured to pay off the replacement necklace. Eileen starts the scene by reading from the final excerpt in her folder, interrupting herself to announce the upcoming action of the scene. The text from the short story is indicated in plain font, below, while the improvised extemporaneous dialogue is in italics:

Eileen: One Sunday, she went for a walk along the elegant main street of Paris, to relax after working so hard all week; she suddenly noticed a woman who was taking a child for a walk. It was Madame Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still attractive. .

[adding an aside to explain the roles]

I am Madame Forestier. This is my child. We're going to run into Madame Loisel.

Wendy runs up to Eileen.

Eileen: I'm sorry. I don't know you.

Wendy: No, it's me. It's me, Mathilde Loisel.

Eileen: But Mathilde! What's happened to you? You look so unusual.

Wendy: [sobbing]

It's been a hard ten years. *It's kind of because of you*.

Eileen: Because of me?

Wendy: You remember that necklace you lent me?

Eileen: *Yes, yes I do.*

Wendy: I lost it.

Eileen: But you gave it back to me.

Wendy: No, I bought you a replacement. It was 36,000 francs and it's taken us ten years to pay it off. *Now we're free! We're free !*

Eileen: But the necklace I loaned you was just a fake. It only cost me 5,000 francs.

Wendy collapses dramatically on the floor.

In the scene above, the two participants use the given text as a foundation, adding their personal interpretation and expression to the dialogue. This requires an actor to be thinking in character and to be mindful from moment to moment, which they carry off with dramatic flair even while aware that they are performing a scene, as demonstrated by Eileen's brief aside to explain the roles to be played.

The workshop based on *The Necklace* (de Maupassant, 1884/2015) shows the most engaged and elaborate improvisation to this point in the project, particularly in the dialogue scenes that invited two participants to provide the inner dialogue of the characters. This is the first story to use real-world characters in a somewhat familiar setting, rather than the archetypes of the Romance and Tragedy units, and while the participants enjoyed portraying the legendary characters of Robin Hood and Dr. Jekyll, they embraced the Loisels on a more compassionate, human level. It is also worth noting that in this workshop much time was spent on world-building before embarking on the story itself, setting it apart from the lesson plan for *The Moonstone* (Collins, 1868/2001), which also involved real-world characters but did not allow time to create the world of the story and its inhabitants.

2. Wicked

The novel *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire (1995) is one of a series of fairytale parodies written by Maguire as allegorical socio-political satires. Borrowing from both L. Frank Baum's (1900) series of Oz books, the most famous being *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and the MGM film *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming & Vidor, 1939), Maguire re-tells the story from the point of view of the Wicked Witch of the West, creating a biographical account to explain why she became known as "wicked." In doing so, he interrogates the common definitions of the words "wicked" and "witch" and creates an allegory for living under oppressive authoritarian rule and the consequences of resistance – in fact, allusions to Hitler-era Germany are quite apparent.

The protagonist is Elphaba (the name a subtle homage to Baum as it is the phoneticization of his initials), a girl born with green skin and sharp intellect who is rejected by her parents in favour of her beautiful younger sister, a disabled girl who walks with the aid of magic red slippers. At university she encounters members of a minority ethnic group, sentient and sapient Animals who hold professional positions at the school. She recognizes in them the kinship of Otherness, and goes to their defence when

they are targeted by the oppressive Wizard, leaving university to join the resistance. Fleeing from Oz to avoid capture, she acquires a spellbook, a flying broom, and the moniker of "witch" which she eventually adopts, and finally the designation of "wicked" when she persists in resisting authoritarian rule wherever she finds it.

The workshop began with looking at the words "wicked" and "witch," labelling two posters on the wall, and inviting the participants to write words or phrases on posters that they connect with the two terms. The results included:

WICKED: Evil; Heartless; Crazy; Threatening; Killing children; Hates everyone; Corrupt; Moral judgment (religion); and a note reading "in German, the word for fairy-tale 'wicked' also means angry"

WITCH: Green skin; Ergot; Oz; Spells; Magic powers; Anti-semetic stereotypes; Persecution; Pharmaceutical herbs; Knows things other people don't; Men have always hated powerful women; Thought they were evil monsters

The comments attached to "Witch" show an interest in feminist history shared by several of the women in the group and the history of the word as an epithet applied to women who knew the pharmaceutical application of plants, including ergot, a grain fungus used to induce abortions in the Middle Ages. Wendy and Brenda are particularly interested in feminist theory and history, but their contributions were not the only ones to identify "witch" as an historically pejorative term for women. Wendy also pointed out that the big nose and ugly features usually associated with "witch" started as anti-semitic messages.

The comments attached to "Wicked" reflect both a religious/moral definition and fairytale tropes, such as "hates everyone" and "killing children" – themes familiar from the Brothers Grimm's fairytales and adopted in contemporary popular culture (Propp, 1968; Simon, 1999; Zipes, 2012).

The next warm-up activity introduced the idea of the Animals as an anthropomorphic device by asking the participants to think of a favourite animal and to join in a circle, taking turns showing the group how that animal would move in mime (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 87). I demonstrated by imitating a chicken hunting and pecking with quick, nervous movements. The results included three cats – each one different in its performance – a slow-moving tortoise, and a protest from Patrick, the passionate vegan, who declared that man is an animal so he would just portray himself. The second stage of the activity asked the participants to imagine a person who moves in the way their animal would, and I again demonstrated, portraying a supermarket shopper looking over the merchandise with quick, nervous movements. The participants humanized their animals in creative ways, except for Patrick, who repeated that he is already an animal so he saw no point in this exercise. He then declared that if anyone did not agree that man is also an animal, they were "species-ist" and proceeded to repeat this declaration several times while the rest of the group protested that it was just a game.

The final warm-up activity was to pair up and try the mirror exercise with a partner, first moving to mirror one's partner and then to move in the opposite direction or use the opposite hand. The participants found it easier to move in the opposite direction than to mirror their partners.

The lesson plan moved on to text-based activities, using excerpts from the novel that I had chosen, typed up and placed in a folder for each participant. The excerpts were grouped into three categories: 1) information about the character Elphaba from her point of view; 2) descriptions of Elphaba from other points of view: 3) descriptions of other characters or objects relevant to the original Baum story and evidence of satire.

To develop the participants' understanding of Elphaba, two excerpts were chosen for scene study work and group was led through a cold reading of those two scenes: the birth of Elphaba (Maguire, 1995, p. 20) and the descriptions given by the women attending the birth; and the conversation between

the other girls in her university dormitory as they gossip about Elphaba (Maguire, 1995, p. 74). After reading through the gossip scene, I asked for impressions:

NC: So what do you think of these girls and their attitudes?

Wendy: They suck but that's kind of usual in younger people from sheltered surroundings. They haven't had a chance to learn empathy yet.

Rory: Well, they've probably grown up in a life of luxury. They haven't been exposed to, um..

Wendy: Difference.

Rory: Differences, not just people but also economics, um, like poverty…

NC: Right, and in the book Elphaba ends up with a roommate who has led a very privileged life.

[fills in plot points regarding Elphaba's roommate, Galinda]

…and when their professor, a Goat, explains to them what's going on with a ban on Animal mobility, they both decide to run away from school and take a trip to the Emerald City and confront the Wizard.

Wendy: And they're going to advocate for social justice.

At this point Patrick, who had been quietly contemplating the idea of a green-skinned person during this discussion, now interrupted to inquire about the skin colour, and it's clear from his questioning that his experience as a disability self-advocate is informing his query:

Patrick: Is her skin green because it's naturally like that or is it like, a sickness, like does she have a disease…

Wendy: [interjecting]

She was born that way.

NC: Yes, she was born that way…they describe her as a little green pat of butter

Patrick: But it's…so she's still healthy…

Wendy: Yes, it's just a congenital skin colour.

Rory: But isn't it…

Michael: I thought it was about them drinking something.

NC: Yeah, her mother drank this magic elixir…

Wendy: Oh, right.

NC: in a green bottle…

Peter: There was a guy who ate too many carrots and his skin turned orange…

NC: But in this case, her mother drank something that made the baby green.

Patrick: So, it's not like African-Americans, like, her mother wasn't green so it's not natural skin…

NC: No, it was the result of this potion.

Patrick: OK. Got it.

Patrick needed to understand the nature of her Otherness in order to make sense of the story and the oppression that she endured, so the drama activities to move the plot forward were put on pause to allow him to interrogate her unusual skin colour. First he needed to know if it was an illness or a disability, then the suggestion that it was "congenital" led him to wondering about ethnicities defined by skin tone, but after I explained that the novel makes it clear that it was a magical elixir given to her mother before she was born, he worked hard to make sense of that. He mentioned a corollary – a story he remembered from a news item long ago – to contextualize this plot point, but went back to the idea of congenital skin tone and the associated prejudice that is part of modern society before being assured that it was, indeed, the result of the magic potion. Once satisfied that his concern for her well-being had been resolved, he signalled his satisfaction with "OK, got it," and we carried on with the workshop.

This is a significant moment for Patrick, who, earlier in the class session had pushed the group discussion into an animal rights detour that continued into the coffee break. Once onto a topic that is a passion for him, Patrick tends to perseverate, or repeat the same phrases several times over – sometimes to push his point across but more often because his thought processes seem to get stuck on that one

concept and he has difficulty moving on to another point or topic. During the coffee break, he had had a heated discussion with Wendy and Brenda, who were defending the operators of the city's horse-drawn carriages while he repeatedly proclaimed that it was harmful for the horses. For him to now ask for clarification, investigate possible explanations, find an analogy that could confirm the likelihood of the novel's explanation, and seek reassurance that his concerns about racial discrimination were unfounded is a much more straight-forward and logical progression, complete with a closure signal. After this exchange, he was engaged in the following drama activities and gave his full attention to the remainder of the day's drama workshop.

The workshop continued with a Collective Character activity (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 12) based on the exerpt in which Elphaba confronts the Wizard to protest the treatment of the Animals. Class participants were invited to choose either the Wizard or Elphaba and stage the scene when Elphaba confronts the Wizard, excerpted from the novel and provided in their booklets. The group split into two smaller groups – Wendy, Brenda, Noreen and Patrick chose Elphaba and Rory, Gloria and Michael chose the Wizard. They spent some time discussing their portrayals as a group before running the scene with each other, and I coached the Wizards while the Elphabas were deep in discussion, busily marking their texts with highlighter pens. Rory decided that the Wizard should be sitting on a throne, feet and arms apart to take up space and grip the throne's armrests, remarking that the Wizard reminds him of the emperor and wizard Palpatine, a ruthless authoritarian ruler in his favourite movie series, Star Wars. As we worked through the excerpt and studied the dialogue, I mentioned that in this moment, the Wizard is getting impatient with Elphaba, triggering a reaction from Michael:

> NC keeps talking through the scene and the action, while Gloria goes to answer her phone. While she talks, Michael gets fidgety and finally closes his booklet and digs out his phone (to look at the time?), and NC mentions the Wizard getting impatient with Elphaba.
>
> **Michael:** That's funny…that's what I was feeling about Patrick…

Patrick: [from another part of the space]

Did you call me? Sorry…

Michael: [quickly] Nothing!

Michael gets up and hands his booklet to NC, saying that he's sorry and that he needs to take a break. He leaves the space.

The rehearsal space for the workshops always included a quiet corner furnished with a table and chair, with a few fidget toys scattered on the table, for anyone who needed a break. Michael, however, preferred to disappear into one of the bathrooms, and would use that as a refuge when things got stressful, as he did now. I carried on with the rest of the group, knowing that he would emerge when he was ready to re-join the class.

When the groups were ready they performed the scene and the effect was truly theatrical – the Wizard group sitting on acting blocks on a raised platform, often speaking in unison, facing the Elphabas who lined up side by side and took turns with the lines. After running the scene, I asked the Elphabas about their plan for the group performance, and was impressed with Wendy's response: "I'm not sure how it came across, but the goal was to represent four aspects of her, so one was logical, one was angry, one was sad, and one was stubborn advocate." It was clear that Wendy took "logical", Brenda "angry", Noreen "sad", and Patrick "stubborn advocate." I asked the class to run the scene again, exaggerating their portrayals and reminding them of the exaggerations they had worked on in the day's warm-up exercises. The notes from the transcript describe an awareness of body language, vocal tone and emotional expression that would be welcome in any drama student but are remarkable in light of the common assumptions of autistic social communication abilities. To illustrate that observation, below is the excerpt from the novel followed by the transcript to contextualize the notes on the performance.

(Elphaba and Galinda visit the Wizard to protest the treatment of Animals and the murder of Doctor Dillamond, their professor and an Animal)

"Gossip is instructive," said the Wizard. "It tells which way the wind is blowing." The wind then blew in the direction of the girls, and Elphaba danced back to avoid being spattered. "Go ahead, girls, gossip."

…. [Elphaba said] "You didn't call us here to ask for our gossip; we came with our own agenda."

"Please," said Elphaba, at once hard and soft, proud and pleading. "Please, sir. The hardship on the Animals is more than can be borne. It isn't just the murder of Doctor Dillamond. It's this forced repatriation, this – this chattelizing of free Beasts. You must get out and see the sorrow. There is talk of – there is worry that the next step will be slaughter and cannibalism. This isn't merely youthful outrage. Please, sir. This is not untrammeled emotion. What's happening is immoral –"

"I do not listen when anyone uses the word *immoral*," said the Wizard. "In the young it is ridiculous, in the old it is sententious and reactionary and an early warning sign of apoplexy. In the middle-aged, who love and fear the idea of moral life the most, it is hypocritical."

"If not immoral, then what word can I use to imply wrong?" said Elphaba.

"Try *mysterious* and then relax a little. The thing is, my green girlie, it is not for a girl, or a student, or a citizen to assess what is wrong. This is the job of leaders, and why we exist."

"But then nothing would keep me from assassinating *you*, did I not know what wrong was." (Maguire, 1995, p. 173-174)

The transcript from the video recording of the scene recorded the use of body language as the participants enacted their collective character, beginning with the Elphaba group:

> Patrick ("stubborn advocate") emphasizes initial consonants and on "own agenda" rocks up on the balls of his feet to underline the stressed syllables.
>
> Noreen ("sad") puts her hand on her chest and softens her knees as they all say "Please, please, sir."
>
> Wendy ("logical") reads "It isn't just the murder of Dr. Dillamond…" with a matter-of-fact affect, chin up and holding her script like a choral music folder.
>
> Noreen continues a pleading quality by alternating dynamics in "You *must* get *out* and *see* the *sor*-row" while Brenda ("angry"), who reads that line with her, maintains a nasal bright quality and flat affect.
>
> Wendy maintains a chin-up, eyebrows-raised, expression, while Brenda is frowning, mouth turned down and chin thrust forward. Noreen is droopy with her head down and knees soft,

and Patrick is standing firm with feet apart and intently reading the script. He was more prepared for his first line this time, which was delivered with more feeling than his subsequent line.

Noreen reads “Please sir, this is not untrammeled emotion” with a slight shake of the head, and Brenda joins her on the declaration that the Wizard’s actions are immoral.

The Wizards (Gloria, Rory, David…Michael has disappeared into the bathroom) read the next line, led by Gloria who is loudest and most emotional: “I do not listen when people use the word *immoral*!” Gloria savours the word “immoral” by rolling the R and lingering on the L.

Rory’s delivery is connected and legato, droning like a judge delivering a sentence, leaning on the consonant sounds of “hypoCRitTiCal.”

Wendy responds, very calmly, “then what word can I use …”

The next line from the Wizards is so synchronized it is easy to understand the words; all 3 enjoy the sounds of “my green girlie” and snarl in unison, building a crescendo together on “this is the job of Leaders and why we exist!” again led by Gloria.

Brenda jumps in with extremely clear diction: “But then nothing would keep me from assassinating YOU, did I not know what wrong was” especially enunciating “*assassinating.*”

In this scene, the Elphaba actors physicalized the aspect of the character that they had chosen to represent with gestures and postures aligned with those emotional states, while the Wizards were intent on using the voice as their primary mode of expression, not only with amplitude but with articulation.

The final activity invited the participants to pair up and create a Still Image (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28) based on the following excerpt describing the enforcers of the Wizard’s regime, the Gale Force, breaking up the resistance.

> (Elphaba is explaining the state of the authoritarian regime in Oz to Fiyero and warning him to stay away from her, as she is an underground freedom fighter)
>
> “They [the Gale Force] march in those boots all over the poor and the weak. They terrify households at three in the morning and drag away dissenters – and break up printing presses with their axes – and hold mock trials for treason at midnight and executions at dawn. They rake over every quarter of this beautiful, false city.” (Maguire, 1995, p. 187)

Of the pairs, one was to portray a member of the Gale Force while the other was to portray a member of the resistance. I asked the group if they could create still images as if they were newspaper photos accompaning a story about the Gale Force and the resistance. Patrick, who is keen on social justice, and Wendy, who had read the book, were immediately interested in clarifying the point about newspapers.

Wendy: Are we talking an authorized newspaper or one of the ones that is getting broken up with axes?

Patrick: 'Cause the other newspapers would be whitewashing…

NC: No, the REAL images. So what would that look like?

Wendy: I'll be a dead body.

Rory: [referring to the text]

Wouldn't the Gale Force be hauling people out onto the street?

NC: umhm..so what would that look like? Grab a partner and I'll give you a few minutes to figure something out.

Gloria: Sorry…I'm kinda stuck here…

Rory was also familiar with stories of political conflict as an ardent fan of the Star Wars movie franchise, and entered into the idea readily. Gloria, who is more playful in her approach to drama, had some trouble understanding the concept but Wendy offered to pair with her and together they worked out an image. I worked out an image with Patrick while the other pairs worked with their partners.

As the pairs presented their still images, the comments from the group showed an awareness of facial expressions that was insightful, perhaps informed by the context of the drama. Comments about portrayals of the Gale Force officer included:

He is under stress.

He's not even enjoying it, he's just doing his job.

She seems to be enjoying it.

A comment from Gloria about Patrick's demonstration of non-violent resistance – lying on the floor – encouraged him to continue to expound on his favourite topic until I changed the subject by moving to the posters on which they had written words related to "Wicked" and "Witch" at the beginning of the workshop. I asked the group, "Knowing what we know now about Elphaba and the world she lived in, would you say she was really 'wicked'?" and received an unexpected explanation of perspective from Patrick, who first drew on an analogy from Star Wars and then moved on to history:

Patrick: It's like Star Wars, where he saw it from his point of view, he didn't think…eventually becoming Darth Vader, he didn't think anything was wrong…from his point of view, the Jedi were evil, just different points of view.

Rory: Well, yeah, and the Jedi…they had Anakin spy on Palpatine…

Patrick: Hmmm yeah.

Patrick: [a little louder]

It's all about your perspective, your point of view. Like, if you see something that is evil, it's all about your point of view. I mean, that..*Personally*, I think that Hitler was bad…that's my personal opinion, but in *his* mind, he saw the Jews as bad…

Wendy: [tries to interject] Yeah.

Patrick: [continuing]

I'm not trying to debate that, I'm just saying that's his point of view. Like*, my* point of view is that he was evil, but his point of view -- he would see it as something good.

Patrick sits back and crosses his arms over his belly and crosses his legs. He continues to illustrate his point with a gesture toward his head and a few muttered repetitions of "you can think that if you want."

I was also interested in their response to a quote from the novel, in which a noble character that Elphaba encounters gives her some advice that sums up the theme of the novel: "Nothing can mask what is in your face. Nothing is written in the stars. Not these stars, nor any others. No one controls your

destiny" (Maguire, 1995, p. 238). Wendy suggested that it means "you make your own choices," and Rory added, "yeah…you walk your own path." This started a discussion about indoctrination of young people into extremist religious/political movements and the ways in which to address that in friends and family members. Patrick summed it up with, "I think it's important to get people to get to the realization themselves, not tell them the end, but, like, get them to think for themselves, and say 'what does that look like to you?'"

The entire workshop was dominated by Patrick and his interest in activism on behalf of animal rights and disability advocacy, which I inadvertently allowed to happen. During the above discussion, Paul, Gloria, Brenda and Noreen sat silently and were not invited to contribute, Michael had retired to the bathroom for the latter part of the class, and Patrick steered the conversations toward his pet causes. Brenda commented in her post-project interview that she was disappointed that the discussion got side-tracked, because she had been looking forward to unpacking the history of women branded as witches and the way it was portrayed in the novel.

As the facilitator, I should have noticed that the anthropomorphic warm-up activity had sparked an activist response in Patrick and stayed aware that any activity around the theme of a/Animals, which was a key theme in the lesson plan as they represented the oppressed minority, would likely provoke Patrick. He, therefore, needed to have boundaries set for him so that the class as a whole could stay focused on the story and collaborate on the drama improvisation activities, and those boundaries should have been clarified the first time it became apparent that the Animals would be a trigger for him. Moving some of the warm-up activity towards the "wicked witch" ideas that had been generated by the written activity may have also mitigated Patrick's tendency to launch into animal rights speeches by changing the subject.

3. Being There

This workshop was the least successful of the twelve workshops in the course, for a variety of reasons. The lesson plan included viewing scenes from the film version of the novel, which was prevented by technical logistics problems. The research assistant was not available and consequently little video data collection was made during the session. But the central problem was the choice of material and the challenge of investigating metaphor and satire with a group of literal, logical thinkers who have their own favorite fictional worlds.

The novel *Being There* by Jerzy Kosinski (1970) skewers political pretentiousness and posturing by placing a sheltered, naïve character among the wealthy and well-connected in a story set in Washington, DC. Without naming a particular intellectual disability as an aspect of the protagonist Chance, Kosinski nonetheless portrays him as such – dependent on his guardian and housekeeper for shelter and basic needs and spending his days tending the enclosed garden in back of his house or watching television in his bedroom. This sheltered life is his entire experience until, as a middle-aged adult, he is forced to leave home after the guardian's death with only the guardian's clothes and luggage as his possessions and is unexpectedly rescued by the wife of the United States vice-president after a minor accident. Mistaking his introduction, "Chance, the gardener," to be the name "Chauncey Gardiner," she assumes from his tailored suit that he is a wealthy businessman and brings him into the inner circle of her husband's political connections.

I chose this story because the theme of a person who does not understand the social expectations of their surroundings has some resonance with the experiences of autistic people, recounted in social media posts, blogs, and books (Seidmann, 2020). Chance does not understand the concept of metaphor, but when he speaks about the one thing he knows – gardening – the politicians assume he is speaking in metaphor and soon he is acclaimed for his wisdom and thrust into the spotlight where even more

inexplicable expectations are put upon him. This seemed to be a good example of the Strange Perspective type of social satire (Frye, 1959) as well as providing a character's experience that could conceivably parallel that of the participants'. After spending a good deal of time on studying the novel and making a booklet of excerpts without finding a strong central theme around which to build the workshop activities, I began to doubt my choice of material but chose to proceed with a focus on the concept of metaphor.

The workshop started with an exercise in defining and exploring metaphor as a story-telling device, a variation of the Analogy convention (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 66). Several proverbs from a variety of cultures were posted on the wall, and the participants were invited to look them over and choose one to interpret. In pairs, they developed a scene enacting their interpretation, which demonstrated that without a cultural context, metaphor is a difficult cognitive task, especially for literal thinkers. One example was the Kenyan proverb, "When elephants fight, it's the grass that gets hurt," interpreted by Gloria and Noreen in a scene that involved them throwing a couple of folding chairs on the floor and stomping around. They explained that they were being the elephants and that the chairs were the grass. When asked for a non-literal interpretation of the proverb, they were puzzled and had no idea, but after an explanation was offered, they both immediately grasped the meaning.

For a workshop designed to explore the use of metaphor as a story-telling device, this activity showed me that the lesson plan did not take into account the varied cognitive processes of autistic individuals, many of whom use language in a literal way and do not recognize oblique references. More importantly, it brought into focus the key aspect of social satire according to Frye – that to be recognized as satire, there must be an "object of attack" (Frye, 1959, p. 224), a philosophy, policy, or social class that is the target of the metaphorical lampooning. Because the participants did not recognize the symbolism of the elephants of their proverb, they could not enact the social significance of the saying.

This became emblematic of the entire workshop; without a context and its associated "object of attack," attempts at satire fall flat and fail to make the point. The audience of a satirical piece must have shared enough experiences with the novelist or playwright to be able to recognize the target of the satire and appreciate the craft with which the writer has framed their critique. *Being There* (Kosinski, 1970) is a critique of modern political rhetoric and media, specifically in the United States, and therefore assumes a familiarity of that world that some of my participant group do not share.

The novel also uses the device of the "magic" representative of a marginalized community who brings to light the problems of the dominant society (Quirici, 2015), similar to the popular novel/film *Forrest Gump* (Groom, 1986) and the film *Rain Man* (Morrow, 1988), which both use an intellectually disabled character as a catalyst to inspire the characters around them. This device, especially when using disabled characters, is less satire than it is "inspiration porn" (Young, 2014), a term coined by the Australian disability activist Stella Young to describe the nobility ascribed to disabled individuals for simply managing their everyday lives.

A better use of this time in the drama curriculum would have been to examine a few examples of social satire from the perspective of the "stranger in a strange land," a popular trope in television comedies, for instance, and then devise a short sketch to satirize a social concept of the participants' own choosing. Possible exemplars could be the classic story of "Gulliver's Travels" (Swift, 1726), or the television series "3rd Rock from the Sun" (Turner & Turner, NBC, 1996). The lesson plan could also use the construct of the Story Wheel, a concept originated by Frye himself (Ayre, 2001), to look at the forms of romance that are found opposite satire on the wheel and devise a satirical re-telling of a romantic adventure story.

Unit Four – Comedy

According to Frye's (1959) theory of mythical archetypes, Romance sends the hero away from his society to achieve his quest objective, Tragedy sets the hero in opposition to his society either through a power imbalance or by his own design, and Irony exposes the vulnerability of the quasi-hero who is marginalized by his society or prefers to stand on the sidelines making satirical commentary. In Comedy, the hero operates *within* his society to achieve social acceptance and romantic success, in forms ranging from physical comedy, in which the society has more power than the hero, to the fantastical, in which magic spells and supernatural characters assist in the hero's pursuit of love and acceptance.

To explore Comedy, I chose these exemplars: 1) the physical comedy with a low-status protagonist – *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 1615/2003), 2) the classic romantic comedy – *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813/1963), and 3) the fantasy comedy that uses horror devices in a comic manner – *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008). Again, the level of familiarity with the material and the quality of teacher preparation affected the level of engagement observed in the participants.

1. **Don Quixote**

The autistic approach to comedy: The Props Game. Every workshop started with a variety of introductory activities, chosen from whole-body movement activities, improvisation games, poster activities, and writing projects, to serve as an introduction to the story of the day and/or the social theme of the day. For the workshop built on *Don Quixote,* I chose to start with an improvisation game borrowed from the popular television series "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" (ABC, 1998) to introduce the idea that we can re-purpose and re-name objects to suit our imaginative play, as Quixote does throughout the novel. I laid a collection of props, objects and fabric yardages out on the raised platform

in the space and modelled a variety of uses of them, from using hula hoops as mouse ears to brandishing a piece of black fabric as an "invisibility cloak." The participants were then invited to enter into the performing space and show us a creative way to re-imagine the object. This proved to be enjoyable and engaged all in attendance, so the game continued for thirty-five minutes as the participants progressed from literal to more imaginative play with the objects; demonstrating a detailed visual imagination and, as has been discussed previously, using analogies to make connections between ideas,

Several participants started out by using the props in a literal manner, and gradually developed more imaginative and metaphorical contexts for the props. One such example is Eileen, who initially used a pool noodle to complain about her food in a restaurant ("Waiter, these are not the noodles I ordered!"). After some time observing others and trying out literal ideas with other props, she tried this:

> Eileen gets up and picks up a feather boa. She holds it as a bundle in her hands and addresses it.
>
> **Eileen**: [in a flat, resigned tone]
>
> All right, cat. Where's the bird?

This is a more complex joke that implies a previous action and requires the audience to imagine the context of the situation to appreciate the punchline.

Another example of moving from literal to metaphoric is Gloria's experiments with a squishy blob toy, starting with pretending to cough it up onto the floor and progressing to imagining it as an internal organ removed by a mad scientist.

Although not every autistic individual is a visual thinker (Bogdashina, 2016; Grandin & Panek, 2013), for Paul this is a central part of his creative process and each time he offered a joke with the props it required considerable set-up to achieve the desired visual effect. In his first effort, he had spotted a pair of giant knitting needles and had a joke in mind for them, so he recruited the assistance of several participants to create a set for his mini-scene to set up the joke, while the others watched and

made observations to try to guess what the upcoming punchline would be. Even though he apologized throughout, Paul followed through on his vision, organizing the rest of his volunteers with the determined focus of a theatre director. The transcript of this exchange follows:

Paul: I need someone else to help with the one I wanna do…

Eileen: I'll help you. What do you wanna do?

Paul: Just pull up the….

[he gestures, and runs to pick up the black fabric]

Just pick up the other end.

Eileen picks up the fabric and it is stretched out between them. Paul, holding the fabric by the corner in one hand, reaches over and picks up the two squishy toys, handing one to Eileen. Paul then grabs the knitting needles, and picks up the other corner of the fabric.

Paul: It…um…sorry, it's going to be hard….um…

NC: Do you need a third person?

Paul: Yeah, maybe. If you could go here…

[hands her one corner of the fabric, and pulls out the squishy toy]

Now, put it in the center here…

[Eileen tosses hers onto the fabric as well]

…sorry, this is taking too long…

NC: No, it's OK.

The fabric doesn't hold the weight of the squishy toy and tilts, dropping the squishy toy on the floor.

Gloria: OOPSIE! [she runs from her seat to pick it up]

Paul: I'm going to need a few more people, sorry…

Gloria moves to beside Eileen and picks up a corner of the fabric.

NC: Now I'm dying to see what this is!

Paul: [still focused on making his vision happen]

And, um…

Patrick: [as the squishy toy pulls down the center of the fabric with its weight]

It's going to be a black hole.

Paul: [getting flustered]

No, um…this is supposed…um…

NC grabs both corners of his end of the fabric, freeing him to carry on with his creation.

Michael: [also noticing the fabric sagging in the middle]

Are you putting ingredients in for, like, the Black Cauldron?

Paul: [still holding both giant knitting needles]

If I could get someone to hold up this end as well, because I need to be in the center?

Noreen steps forward, and takes the side edge of the fabric.

Paul: [directing Noreen]

Uh, sorry…more like this…in the middle there…

Michael: [trying to volunteer from the sidelines]

Do you need me? Do you need my forearm?

Michael steps forward, asking a question that is unintelligible. Rory also gets up to help.

Paul: [Continues to give instructions to Noreen while Michael is asking questions]

…and at the other end of the table…

Michael: [noticing the shape of the squishy blob toy]

Oh, are we trying to do a heart transplant?

Paul: Sort of…not quite…I thought this would be easier…so it's not as funny as it should be…

Paul instructs Michael on the placement of the squishy toy on the black fabric, now stretched taut between four people.

Paul: Michael? Put it there, like I am, right in front of you?

[Paul arranges the two knitting needles in his right hand, pointing downward.]

…and I'm like, um…And I'm, like, "are you sure you're not going to try the chopsticks?"

Much laughter as the class catches on.

Paul: And that's all it was. It took forever to do so it's not as funny as it should have been.

Despite Paul's harsh self-assessment, he accomplished several social goals in this moment. He engaged the entire group in creating the scene and triggered imaginative thinking in them as they sought to identify the joke that he was building. He stayed focused on his goal and brought the other participants into his vision by giving them clear directions while acknowledging their suggestions and guesses by responding to them with validation for their efforts, and he gave the group an opportunity for collaborative play, which they all enjoyed.

As noted in previous workshops, several participants relied on their memory of other stories to build a context for the day's story and commented on the connections as they occurred to them, inviting other members of the group to validate their percieved connection by expressing a shared thought. Michael and Rory are particularly interested in using their "mental archive" to build contexts for imaginative play by relating it to the fictional universe that is familiar to them – in Michael's case it is animated films, especially Disney Studios productions, and in Rory's case it is the Star Wars movie franchise. In playing with the props, the favoured story universe would often provide inspiration.

A significant shift in the tendency to make connections to a favored story or genre occurred when Paul, again in the role of scene director, had Michael join him, placing Michael in a chair and draping the black fabric around him. Michael's reaction was to exclaim, " Oh, I get what you're gonna quote! *Sweeney Todd*!" To make this connection, Michael had to reach back into his memory of previous workshops in the research project to recall the story of the murderous barber and connect that with the image he was now helping to create. Michael then demonstrated his recall and used it to inspire the resulting improvised scene:

Paul: Who's willing to sit down in a chair in the middle, there? Um, but…it should…it should be a man, because it's, um, it's sort of, it's a parody on a movie?

Patrick makes a move to stand up, but Michael is quicker.

Michael: I'll do it.

Paul directs him to place his chair in the playing space, and Michael brings his chair over near the props table.

Michael: Do I, um, sit down?

Paul: [at the props table]

Yeah, just sit anywhere…in the chair…and I'm just gonna…

[he lifts the black fabric and moves to drape it on Michael, now sitting]

Michael: Oh, I get what you're gonna quote! *Sweeney Todd?!*

Paul: Not quite.

[he goes back to the props table]

Michael: Are you gonna try to kill me?

Paul: [slyly] Maybe.

The black drape has slid down on Michael, and Paul asks him to fix it around his neck "like a barber."

Paul stands behind him holding up the two giant knitting needles.

Paul: I am your barber.

Laughter from the group.

Michael: [quietly] Noooo….

Paul puts the knitting needles down.

Michael: Am I supposed to say 'No'?

Paul: You can if you want.

Michael: [with more energy]

NOOOOOO…

Paul: [from behind him, having picked up the knitting needles again]

I am your barber!

Paul grabs a feather boa and puts it on Michael's head, and picks up something to represent a mirror.

Paul: [brandishing the knitting needles]

Look in the mirror. Don't you want a haircut?

Michael: [Really into the moment now]

NOOOOO!!

Paul: Really? It would be really fun.

Michael: [taking off the feathers and fabric]

Am I done?

Paul: Yeah, I guess so. Thank you very much.

Throughout this scene, Michael checks in with Paul to make sure that he is supporting Paul's idea for the improvisation, both of them moving in and out of role with ease. Michael also checks to make sure that they have finished the scene, and receives acknowledgement for his contribution as well as a closure signal from Paul.

As the lesson plan included working with excerpts of a playscript treatment of Cervantes' novel (Amlin, 1996), the group also worked on their voice acting skills in a few short open scenes, each for two actors, which are brief generic conversations without a specific context. I introduced the activity as an opportunity to practice indicating different emotional moods, and suggested the adjectives "whiny" and "bossy" for the characters in the first open scene. I asked the group, "How do you do 'bossy'?" and Michael suggested that "bossy" would sound like a character on an animated television show that he knew, while from Rory I received this response:

Rory: [calm and conversational, as if describing the language]

Well, it would be something like: I want you to do this. Right now. That's the way I see it…the way I want it done. [gesturing with a pointed finger]

Before I could even ask about how one performs "whiny," Gloria was demonstrating a whiny reading, indicating an eagerness to get to work on the scene dialogues.

The activity proceeded with side-coaching to allow the actors to repeat and reinforce their readings, trading roles in the dialogue, studying the importance of punctuation in the script and passing the scenes from one pair of actors to another. Some time was spent on analysing line readings in terms of pitch and articulation and relating those choices to the effect they have on the emotional communication, particularly in regard to the expression of sarcasm. Paul offered complex ideas for the characters' motivations to build the scenes, and showed again his interest in performing a feminine gender by draping a feather boa around his shoulders and inviting Michael to join him in a scene. Their shift from being a drama participant to living the moment in role is seamless and imperceptible, more analogous to casually engaging in imaginative play than actors developing a role:

> Paul has more ideas about a scene, and gets up and drapes the feather boas over his shoulders. He asks Michael to join him in the playing space and tells him that they're "getting ready for the big dance and we're [unintelligible] ."
>
> **Michael**: [starting the dialogue of Scene 3 again]
>
> So?
>
> **Paul**: [a little flustered]
>
> Sorry-sorry, Number 2, sorry.
>
> Michael switches to Scene 2, and starts the dialogue.
>
> Paul adds blocking to his reading and full-body characterization, and Michael picks up on that and responds with movement that counters Paul, as well as adjusting his vocal tone to a higher pitch and softer dynamic.
>
> Within half a dozen lines, they have adopted the characters of two girls getting ready for a ball, and are demonstrating softer, more relaxed postures and body movements.

The workshop then progressed to work on a few scenes excerpted from a playscript version of the classic novel, adapted for young audiences (Gray, 1996). The transcript of the work on a scene in which Don Quixote attacks a puppet theatre at a country wedding, in the mistaken belief that he is seeing a real damsel in distress calling out for her knight, raises some important considerations for pedagogy design when working with a group of autistic actors: the need for careful observation and fidelity to the details of the script; the need for clear role assignments and blocking directions, which may have to be repeated several times to build understanding; and awareness that not every actor has a good sense of proprioception and will need extra support when learning blocking. In addition to those considerations is the need for strong praxis which is the foundation of every drama teacher's work – to recognize and support the varying levels of literacy, self-awareness, and self-confidence that each student actor brings to the rehearsal.

The opening of this rehearsal illustrates the confusion that can happen when the vision for the scene is not clearly articulated at the outset – all the actors are anxious to be involved but two are focused exclusively on identifying their involvement and moving in two different conceptual directions while the facilitator/director is still in the first stages of explaining the scene:

NC: Now we've got six peasants, Don Quixote, and Master Pedro. Master Pedro has two puppets, Melisandre and Don Guyferos. We've got something for everybody here. Who wants to do Don Quixote?

Gloria's hand shoots up.

Rory: [studying the booklet]

Where are we?

NC: At the next page, where it starts "Festive music is heard." Gloria, do you want to do Don Quixote?

Gloria: Yes, please.

NC: Master Pedro, the puppeteer?

[Seeing some confused faces]

That's on the next page, but I'm just trying to organize this now. Michael is Master Pedro. Melisandre the puppet.

Paul: That sounds good. I'd like to be a puppet.

NC: Nicole, would you do Melisandre? And then Paul, would you do Don Guyferos?

Michael: But here, it says they're voiced by Master Pedro.

NC: Yes, if we were doing it on stage. But we don't have puppets.

Michael: Not to say I don't have a decent vocal range.

NC: Here's the thing. We don't have puppets. So, we're going to have people portraying the puppets.

Paul: What's my part?

NC: Don Guyferos.

Paul: Oh, I see.

Michael: What if it looked like I'm still voicing them?

NC: That's what….

Michael: Is it supposed to look like [inaudible]?

NC: We're going to read…. You're getting ahead of me. We're going to read through this first, and then we're going to put it up on its feet.

Michael: Is it supposed to be like ventriloquism?

NC: No. The rest of us are going to be peasants.

In this excerpt from the transcript, it is clear that Michael was distracted by the mention of puppets in the script and needed to resolve the conflict between the script's requirement of puppets and the fact that this rehearsal would not be using puppets, and that his questioning is borne from his

discomfort with departing from the script. Paul, meanwhile, was immediately interested in portraying another feminine character and I did not acknowledge that but assigned that role to Noreen, one of the women in the group, primarily because she was shy and would not volunteer herself for roles or scenes but needed an invitation to participate – however, Paul's expression of interest should have been recognized. His interest in taking the role of a puppet was acknowledged by assigning him the role of the dashing knight puppet, but in examining the transcript, the question of which role sparked his interest takes on new significance in light of his previous interest in performing the feminine. The challenge for the facilitator in this instance is that both participants are working out their particular concerns at the same time, requiring more awareness on the part of the facilitator to ensure that each participant feels heard and that concerns are resolved.

When the scene study moved from reading to movement, Gloria showed that working from a script is a new experience for her and asked for clarification before starting the scene, explaining that she wasn't sure what to do. Once she was oriented to the the task, however, she carried on with her role as the group ran the scene with movement according to the stage directions, acting with exaggeration and gusto.

The discussion following the scene study revolved around elements of comedy, particularly the physicality of comedic performance and the crucial attention to rhythm in movement and speech. As I talked about comedic elements, Patrick illustrated my points by naming exemplars, such as Rowan Atkinson's *Mr. Bean* (ITV, 1990), John Cleese's television series *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975), and the silent film comedy duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. I then brought up the question of personal aesthetics, which figures prominently in the depiction of Don Quixote as a feature of his delusions and indicative of his preference for his own imaginary world and asked the group for their opinions about people who adopt distinctive personal styles. The resulting discussion became a collaborative free

association conversation about costumes and work attire with a playfulness reminiscent of the warm-up game that started the workshop session. No rules or even opinions were issued; instead, words and ideas were tossed around like a creative "pinball" game of words. The transcript of this discussion will be examined more closely in the following chapter.

2. Pride and Prejudice

Frye (1957) describes comedy as "the movement from one kind of society to another," (p. 165) and compares the classic romantic comedy to a court case, in which the suitor must overcome obstacles set by those in authority over his love interest and make his case to them to win his beloved.

> The action of comedy in moving from one social center to another is not unlike the action of a lawsuit, in which plaintiff and defendant construct different versions of the same situation, one finally being judged as real and the other as illusory…Proofs (i.e., the means of bringing about the happier society) are subdivided into oaths, compacts, witnesses, ordeals (or tortures), and laws… (p. 166)

Frye also divides comedies into two forms, based on the chosen means of comic development: "one is to throw the main emphasis on the blocking characters; the other is to throw it forward on the scenes of discovery and reconciliation. One is the general tendency of comic irony, satire, realism and studies of manners; the other is the tendency of Shakespearean and other types of romantic comedy." (p.166)

In this lesson of the Comedy unit, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813/1963) serves as the exemplar of the romantic comedy focused on courtship rules and rituals and the challenge of finding willing suitors for wilful girls, following a tradition marked by Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Congreve's *The Way of the World*. For the lesson plan, I used a playscript treatment of Austen's novel, *Pride@Prejudice* (Kramer, 2013), written for high school student performers, which was designed for a small cast to play multiple characters and to address the audience as they assumed a role.

With this material, the "voices in the head" and "action narration" conventions are included in the script, which provided a starting point for class activities.

In the first part of the workshop, the participants became acquainted with the characters through reading scenes selected from the script with side discussions as the readings progressed. Paul, who in the first workshops of the series had remained on the periphery and had not participated in group discussions, now freely interject his opinions with a wry and quick humour. Wendy and Brenda, both literary enthusiasts and familiar with the novel, joined in the interpretive discussions with Eileen, who also proved familiar with the novel. Patrick and Rory were less familiar with the source material but knew of modern media interpretations, and Michael demonstrated that he knew of the novel and its modern iterations by remarking that it was "too bad you're not doing that one particular version of Pride and Prejudice – *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* [a novel by Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009]."

The commentary that accompanied the scene readings indicated a general understanding of the characters' motivations and their ethical implications, along with an expression of empathy for the characters who struggled with the social expectations depicted in the novel. The conversations also revealed a growing perception among the participants of the drama class as a safe space in which to be authentic regarding gender identity, sense of humour, and interactions with other class members. The analytical moments became a thread throughout this workshop, rather than sought only during a reflective discussion, and led to lively and (usually) intentionally humorous wordplay among the participants. The reflective discussion then generalized their observations from the novel to their lived experience as an autistic individual and their concerns for others living with disabilities.

Each of these themes will now be examined in closer detail with examples from the audio-video transcript. In each example, the text of the playscript is indicated in italics and the participants' comments in plain text.

As the scene readings progressed, several participants interjected their opinions about the characters' behaviour, such as when Paul comments about Mrs. Bennet's line to a potential suitor at a ball:

Wendy: [reading Mrs. Bennet]

I was certain you would want to meet her. Truly, I believe Jane is the most beautiful of my five daughters.

Paul: Oh, that's a bad thing to say with the other daughters listening.

Wendy: Yeah, she's not a great person, or a great mom.

Paul: That's right.

In the following example, the group is parsing a conversation between Elizabeth Bennet and her closest friend, Charlotte, on the day after a ball, at which Mr. Darcy showed no interest in becoming acquainted with Elizabeth or her sisters, much less in dancing with them. I asked the participants to go through the scene and suggest a re-wording and/or subtext for each moment. The transcript that follows is the resulting conversation, with an analysis of the commentary provided as a sidebar.

NC: Let's translate this into modern language. When Charlotte says, "Poor Lizzie, to be only just tolerable," is she serious?	Asking for interpretation of her emotional state
Some voices: No, not really.	
Paul: Because Lizzie is very beautiful.	Recognizing the absurdity
NC: So, what would you call it?	
Eileen: Sarcasm.	Labelling the absurdity
NC: Or…?	
Wendy: Teasing.	Qualifying the label

NC: Teasing, yeah. Sarcasm can sometimes be pretty mean. They're talking about how Mr. Darcy dissed her at the party. In your own words, what is she really saying?

Wendy: That he was mean to you, but you can sort of see where he was coming from. It's not about you. It's about him.

Working on articulating Mr. Darcy's perspective

Eileen: He comes from a well-respected family, and he has a lot of money, and it's understandable that he should be proud and maybe look down on other people.

Some voices: Yeah.

Brenda: Affluenza.

Connecting to a term used in contemporary journalism a few years ago

Wendy: Exactly. It's not you. It's his affluenza.

Rory: Yeah, he's an upper-crust asshole.

Assessment of his character

Paul: His motto is: "I started at the top, and I'm still there."

NC: And Elizabeth said: "I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine." What does 'mortify' mean?

Wendy: Literally, it derives from killing.

Starting from the literal, going to the metaphoric

NC: Michael says it means you wounded their pride, right? Mortify comes from the word for death.

Paul: Think of a corpse.

Playfully making an unhelpful analogy

Wendy: I don't mind him being a jerk. It's just that he was a jerk to me.

Restating Elizabeth's line, articulating her position

NC: Yeah. There you go. What else does she say?

Eileen: She's never going to dance with him.

Showing empathic understanding.

Wendy: He had one chance. He lost it.

NC: There you go. And then Charlotte says: "Well, I do think that Mr. Bingley admires Jane."

Eileen: Now they're going to gossip.

Anticipating action based on observation.

Wendy: About her sister's prospects.

NC: And what is Charlotte's opinion of her sister's prospects?

Eileen: That Bingley might like her, but maybe not "*like*-like" her.

Using a modern teenage term for affection

Wendy: So, she really needs to get a move on and convince him to stick around or she will lose him

Eileen: Step up her game.

Making predictions for the character, advice for future actions

The participants recognized the Otherness of Mr. Darcy in his awkward social behaviour and tendency to blurt out comments that irritate Elizabeth Bennet. After reading the first scene, in which Darcy is brought to the country ball by his friend, Bingley, Wendy pointed out that his discomfort with being at a social event with no one familiar except Bingley was a familiar feeling. Eileen supported her insight and Michael defended Darcy's actions, while Patrick and Ryan were more interested in finding fault:

NC: Okay, so that is the end of the first scene. Visitors have come to the little village for a party, and what kind of impression do they make?

Wendy: Bingley made a good impression. Darcy made a bad impression.

NC: Why?

Paul: Because they are true to character.

NC: Well, what did Darcy do?

Wendy: He sulked. He chose not to socialize.

Michael: I don't think it means he's a bad person just because of that.

Wendy: No, but they all felt snubbed. So, they decided to dislike him.

Rory: He *is* a bit antisocial.

Wendy: And he also said that he just doesn't like dancing with strangers, but that got brushed off because they would rather feel insulted.

Iris: [reading from the script]

"There is not a woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to him to dance with."

Wendy: Yes, but that was "*You know I detest it unless I am acquainted with my partner."* He hates dancing with strangers, and they are all strangers.

NC: This business about dancing with anybody there being a punishment — do you think he really means that?

Wendy: Well, he doesn't want to dance, so any one of them, he doesn't want to dance with them. It's general, not particular.

Patrick: He sounds kind of sexist.

Rory: He wants somebody who is, like, really good looking.

Wendy: He wants someone who is <u>not a stranger</u>.

Eileen: And Mr. Bingley's sister is already spoken for.

Wendy: It sounds kind of like <u>us</u>, doesn't it? We don't want to just go putting our arms around strangers.

NC: But do you think Elizabeth gets that?

Eileen: Probably not.

Wendy: Of course not. Otherwise, there would be no drama.

Later in the workshop, the participants read through a scene in which Elizabeth and Darcy spar in an argumentative dialogue, first as written, and then again with two actors improvising the inner dialogue while two others read the lines for the two characters as a Voices in the Head (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 139) activity. Following that exercise, the discussion again turned toward their sympathies for Darcy's position, which carried on into the next scene study (script in italics):

Paul: You know, these people are not very good. Let's just figure it out while they get mad at each other. Now I'm having a conversation between inner voices, and it's like: what do you think they should have done if they were smart?

Wendy: If they had social skills in the first place, which is kind of the problem. I think Darcy might be little autistic.

Eileen: I don't know if he's autistic. I think he just doesn't care for social fripperies type of thing. He's above them.

NC: We're going to read through scene 5, just to get your take on it. Who would like to read Elizabeth this time? And Darcy? Now, Darcy's cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam has come with him to this one. They're having dinner at the manor of a very important lady, Lady Catherine DeBourgh. Because Fitzwilliam and Darcy are cousins, they kind of tease each other, but they're bros. They've got a bro relationship. Elizabeth is visiting.

NC: *As Easter was approaching, Lady Catherine expected the pleasure of a visit from her nephews, Mr. Darcy and Col. Fitzwilliam.*

Paul: [reading Elizabeth]

Who do I address this to?

NC: When the men walk into the room.

Paul/Eliz: *I am particularly unlucky in meeting, so far from my house, a person so well able to expose my real character. Indeed, Mr. Darcy may provoke me to retaliation and such things may come out as will shock your relations to hear.*

[pausing his reading]

Wow, she said that out loud? She has balls.

Rory: [reading Darcy]

I am not afraid of you.

Paul/Eliz: *You should be. You will be.*

Gloria: [reading Fitzwilliam]

Pray let me hear what you accuse him of. I should like to know how he behaves among strangers.

Paul/Eliz: *Prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time I ever saw Mr. Darcy was at a ball, and at this ball, what do you think he did? He danced only four dances. I am sorry to pain you, but it was so, and more than one lady was in want of a partner. Mr. Darcy, you cannot deny the fact.*

Rory/Darcy: *I had not, at the time, the honour of knowing any lady present beyond my own party.*

Paul/Eliz: *True, and nobody can ever be introduced in a ballroom.*

Eileen: Is that sarcasm?

Some voices: Oh yes.

Paul: I'll make it more obvious.

[alters his line reading]

True, and of course, NObody can ever be introduced in a BALLroom.

Rory/Darcy: *Perhaps I should have sought an introduction, but I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers.*

Paul/Eliz: *Col. Fitzwilliam, shall we ask Mr. Darcy the reason for this? Why a man of such sense and education is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?*

Gloria/Fitz: *I can answer your question. It is because he will not give himself the trouble.*

Rory/Darcy: *I certainly have not the talent which some people possess, of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.*

Paul/Eliz: *My fingers do not play the piano in the masterly manner which I see so many women do, but I always supposed it to be my own fault, because I would not take the trouble of practising.*

[Looking up]

That's a good line.

Rory/Darcy: *You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you play can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform for strangers.*

NC: What do you get out of that, about Mr. Darcy?

Wendy: He is at the very least a massive introvert.

Eileen: He has trouble following along in conversations, and he can't…. Honestly, now, he *does* sound like he's autistic. He can't catch their tone, so he doesn't know how to tell if they're joking.

Rory: Or being sarcastic.

Eileen: He isn't interested in their concerns. For example, if Patrick and Rory are talking about *The Simpsons*, and I'm not interested in *The Simpsons*, then I don't know how to pretend to be interested in *The Simpsons* very well.

Paul: Some people might like *The Simpsons*.

Eileen: I don't dislike them. I'm just not very interested in them.

Michael: [now distracted by the mention of *The Simpsons*]

I kind of thought *Futurama* was funnier.

Wendy: [also getting distracted]

Futurama poached all the good writers.

Patrick: We're getting a little off topic.

The discussion was steered back to the scene they had just read, and Elizabeth's analogy of piano practice for social graces became a touchstone for commentary about their own experiences of coaching to overcome social awkwardness:

Eileen: But Elizabeth thinks he can overcome this with practice. She figures he doesn't….She uses the example of "I could play the piano better if I practised more."

Patrick: You could practise to act as though… It would be like acting.

Wendy: There have been a lot of programs to teach autistic people to act less autistic. Some of them have some effect.

Patrick: You could act less autistic, but you really wouldn't be. You would just be putting on a front.

Wendy: You would just get better at faking it. Because some people think that's what you should be doing to get mainstreamed.

The above exchange shows a great deal of self-awareness, along with their assessment of social skills programs that are currently in use. The admission that social skills programming encourages acting, or "putting on a front," in Patrick's words, reflects the autistic perspective as reported in recent research into camouflaging or masking behaviours (Hull et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2021) and reinforces the assertions reported in the research literature.

Throughout the course of the research project, there have been moments of unintentional humour sparked by a participant's comment connecting the topic of the moment to something in their archive of experiences in a way both unexpected and hilariously relevant. The participants' whole-hearted embrace of the characters and society of *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813, 1963), however, plus their comfort with each other after several weeks of drama classes, led to moments of intentional humour that reveal the autistic sense of humour in action. Most of their humour is based on word play and on repeating catch phrases or idioms learned from television, film, and social media, rather than on movement or facial expressions, and they demonstrated both an ability to toss in comic quips with alacrity and to use sarcasm for comedic effect.

While building a Still Image (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28) of the ballroom scene at the opening of the play, some discussion arose as Eileen was posing the gentlemen that included some humorous byplay:

Rory: I'm Darcy.

Eileen: You want to be away from…. You don't want to meet the women. You want to be off by yourself.

Michael: I'm not kissing her hand.

Paul: Oh God, no.

Rory: You don't know where it's been.

Another Still Image exercise (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28) brought about a comic interchange that played on one image – "meat" – first introduced by Paul, who was portraying Jane Bennet at the ball, to which I responded, and which was then taken up by several others in the group to land with Eileen who lobbed it back to Paul, completing a circle of wordplay:

NC: We need a Mrs. Bennet and Jane and Elizabeth, and we need Bingley and Darcy.

Paul: I was Jane originally.

Wendy: [adding to the cast list]

And some random bystanders.

Paul: [continuing]

And the mother is serving me up like a piece of meat. Maybe we should make that metaphor more explicit, and I'll dress up as a piece of meat.

NC: It's been done, Lady Gaga did it. Who is going to be Mrs. Bennet?

Gloria: That wasn't real meat that Lady Gaga wore, was it?

Wendy: It was, yeah. Just for the shock value.

Brenda: Not just for the shock value, but mostly for the shock value.

Wendy: [Rather sarcastically to her sister, Brenda.]

Oh yes, because rubbing raw meat all over yourself is just so comfortable.

Paul: Have you ever done it?

Wendy: [Giving him a sideways glance.]

No, I have not.

Paul: Neither have I. I think it could be really nice. Probably not, though…

NC: Where's Elizabeth?

Eileen: I will be Elizabeth.

Paul: So I am…?

Eileen: [to Paul]

You're the piece of meat.

Episodes of comic wordplay happened throughout the workshop, and indeed proved to be a common feature of conversation in other workshops during the research project. Detailed analysis of such conversations follows in the next chapter.

After improvising a scene between Elizabeth and Charlotte in a paraphrased modern vernacular, Paul was interested in unpacking Charlotte's pragmatic approach to marriage and launched into an

explanation that seemed to reflect his own thinking about love and marriage. For a participant who was very shy and reluctant to participate in group discussions during the initial class meetings of this project, this was a remarkable revelation and an indication that he felt the class to be a safe space where he could discuss his thoughts about love and romance:

Paul: Your character is not expressing it as much to themselves, but how Charlotte doesn't even want the ring. She just wants a comfortable, safe life and doesn't really care about the man. Sometimes she's portrayed as a lesbian. That explains why she doesn't care about the man. That makes a different interpretation. There are many different ways of playing the role. In any case, she just wants a comfortable life. She doesn't care as much about the romance and stuff. Of course, Elizabeth cares about the romance, or…not the romance, but someone she can respect and have a friendship with. Jane cares about the romance but also gets lucky at the end.

NC: For sure. I think you guys actually did a really nice job. I just wanted some feedback from the group. I thought you did a really good job of teasing each other and being expressive with the voice and putting forward the ideas expressed in our script in your own words. I thought that was really lovely.

Paul: It's not that I didn't like what you said. I wanted to say more. Can you remember that line from Titanic where Rose is like, "Mother, I want a husband I love," or something like that? She's like, "We are women, and we don't get to choose our lives" or something like that.

It was not clear where Paul got the idea that Charlotte is "sometimes…portrayed as a lesbian," but it was an intriguing comment given his performances of feminine gender in previous classes as well as this workshop. Gender identity is a recurring theme in Paul's contributions to the class discussion, and in this instance, he felt comfortable enough with the group to expound on his thoughts about a woman's role and responsibilities regarding love and marriage in the context of the novel, and perhaps within his own explorations of gender.

At the conclusion of the workshop, I asked the participants for their interpretation of the novel's title and their perceptions of the "pride" and "prejudice" as presented in the scene studies. Several participants made astute observations about the role of ego in social encounters and the danger of making assumptions about people based on superficial knowledge of their wealth, education, or looks. Wendy pursued that idea by comparing it to her school experience as a twice-exceptional child – both gifted and autistic – and Patrick brought up an analogy from his "mental archive" of disability advocacy examples:

NC: Why do you think Jane Austen called this novel "Pride and Prejudice"? What's the "pride"? *Where* is it?

Patrick: Of yourself? I don't know.

Rory: I think it's ego.

Eileen: I think Darcy's pride.

Wendy: Elizabeth's too. It's all about how she hates him because she thinks he didn't respect her in the first place.

Rory: It's image.

NC: That's ego again.

Eileen: Darcy thinks he's better in life, that his station is better than Elizabeth's family, both by reason of economics and by reason apparently that he thinks they're very silly.

Wendy: [who has previously been critical of Mrs Bennet]

They're kind of terrible.

NC: Is that the "prejudice" part, then?

Wendy: Yeah.

Rory: Is it the "prejudice" part like how some people are automatically assumed to be a certain way?

Wendy: Once she has decided that he is a jerk and she doesn't like him, she's got selective perception. She will only take in the parts that support her opinions.

NC: So as a romantic comedy, this is interesting to me because instead of all these blocking characters that are traditional in romantic comedies, these two manage get in their *own* way a lot. The blocks are their own personal pride and their wounded egos and their prejudice…They cause a lot of the conflicts themselves that prevent them from getting together.

Wendy: This is one of the more feminist romantic comedies, because it really comes down to…. she says, "I won't let you treat me this way," and he goes away and stops treating her that way, and then she is willing to have him. It's not just her getting over herself.

NC: Right. Does this remind you of anything you've run across, where people will act out their own hurt feelings and make assumptions about people that get in the way of having a relationship?

Wendy: It reminds me of elementary school, not about romance, but just…. Everyone knew I was gifted. Nobody knew that I was disabled, so what they expected of me was not what I was capable of. They blamed me for that.

Patrick: There was this funny commercial. I can't remember what it's for. This blind person is walking with a cane, right? This person, when they turn their head, he goes like this [*waving his hand*] in front of their face, not realizing that being blind doesn't mean black and white. You can still see the shape of the hand.

Wendy: Some can and some can't.

Patrick: The point is that they were assuming that every person who is blind is completely blind. Being legally blind doesn't mean you can't see anything whatsoever. The other person does that when they look away. It's just funny. You shouldn't assume that blind people don't know what you're doing. A lot of the time, being legally blind, people can still see a lot of shapes of the person, but that's still considered legally blind.

While Patrick's comment seems at first to be off-topic, he is actually indicating that he understands and sympathizes with Wendy's story of erroneous expectations by offering an analogy from his memory archive of disability advocacy stories, which is his personal passion area.

3. The Graveyard Book

Finding an appropriate literary exemplar for the final workshop of the research project was a challenge, as this type of comedy is driven by relationships between the characters and presents serious social situations in a humorous light, something found more frequently in television, film, and theatre

than in classic literature. Wishing to avoid literature that has a strong fan following, such as the Harry Potter series of books, even though they do incorporate elements of this type of literature, I investigated the works of young adult literature by popular authors Philip Pullman, Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, and settled on Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008). This work draws from nursery rhymes and supernatural creature legends for its story of a toddler raised by ghosts in a graveyard and his encounters with the supernatural as well as with the villagers outside the graveyard. The graveyard occupants' concern for the boy, which includes education, feeding, and moral guidance, prepares him for the story's climactic conflict in which he protects a girl from the village from the dangerous entity that threatens her life.

Gaiman (kwc.org, 2006) has said that Chapter Four of the book – *The Witch's Headstone* – was originally a short story and the genesis of the novel, so that chapter was chosen for the workshop. Copies of the chapter in graphic novel form were distributed to the participants, in the hopes that the illustrated story would aid in developing familiarity with the world of the characters. Scenes within the chapter were read as a table read, and a drama activity followed each scene reading.

As in the workshops for *The Moonstone* (Collins, 1868/2001) and *Being There* (Kosinski, 1970), this lesson plan was marred by choosing too large a segment of the book for study and would have benefitted from spending more time on world-building and focusing on fewer characters but in more depth.

The workshop began with an abbreviated world-building in the form of an orientation to the world of the story that I gave in the style of a storyteller, drawing a map of the graveyard on a flip chart as I talked. Gaiman uses a convention of Victorian literature to consistently refer to the villain of the piece as "the man Jack," and mention of this confused some of the participants, who had to discuss it for

several minutes to make sense of the expression. Patrick, in particular, was concerned about the implication that it was a false name or an epithet attached to the character, and interrogated me about it:

NC: The man…Jack. And he's always referred to as "the man Jack"

[Goes on to point out that in nursery rhymes Jack is ubiquitous, almost a placeholder name.]

Now if you think about it, in nursery rhymes, fairytales and folktales, how often does the name Jack come up?

Wendy: Probably more often than any other.

Patrick: Depends…is it The Man Jack or…The Manjack… or THE. MAN. JACK? It depends on what you emphasize…like, The..Man…

[said with knee pops each time for emphasis]

NC: That's the way Gaiman wrote it, meaning "the man whose name is Jack."

Patrick: Oh, OK, so it's not someone who has another…

Iris: [interrupting a little testily]

That's what they call him.

The first scene to be examined introduced the young protagonist, Nobody Owens, known as Bod, and his other-worldy mentors – Mr. and Mrs. Owens, his erstwhile parents; Silas the vampire, who sees that he is fed, clothed, and taught about the world outside the graveyard; Mr. Pennyworth, his tutor for maths and sciences; and Miss Borrows, his tutor for reading and grammar. After a cold read, the participants were invited to take the part of one of these characters in a Hot Seat activity (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 43), framed as a television talk show with the facilitator in-role as the show's host and interviewer. Because there had been little preparation aside from reading through the text, the participants were ill-equipped to handle the improvisation required in this activity, although they did their best without arguing or abandoning the scene. As the facilitator and interviewer, I resorted to leading questions and feeding information throughout the exercise, which points up the need for

spending time on world-building to make it a comfortable and successful experience for the participants' improvisation skills. As in previous workshops, the participants relied on memories of previous exposure to the world of vampires and ghosts to create their characters and to ask questions of each other from the "studio audience." The opportunity to question a vampire inspired some challenging questions from the "audience" which Wendy, as Silas the vampire, handled with aplomb:

Eileen: [assuming a fussy, concerned-parent persona]

As a vampire, I assume that…as a vampire you go around biting people and drinking their blood and possibly killing them…do you think that's such a good example for a young child?

Wendy: [calmly, almost regally]

I meet my needs, I expect him to meet his needs. Would you like me to provide an example of starvation?

Patrick: When you turn into a bat and fly off, do you have to take your clothes off, and then do they grow back?

Some snickering from the group.

Wendy: [maintaining regal aloofness]

I do not see how that is any of your business.

Patrick: It's just, for this show…where they…this show about vampires, where they asked this guy, "do you have to take your clothes off?" "No, I just turn into a bat…"

NC: Any other questions from our studio audience?

Michael: Ummmm…is that…are all the things that people say about vampires *true*, about they can't go out in the sunlight, and having no reflection, and…

Wendy: I find that rumours are never completely true.

Rory: What about going to the dentist? And they find out about your teeth?

Wendy: I believe my medical details are my own.

The questioning brings up *Twilight*, a recent and very popular series of books and subsequent films about vampires. NC decides to take the bait and give them one *Twilight* question.

NC: So I guess we have to ask the obvious question to Mr. Silas – do you ever sparkle?

Wendy: [with great disdain]

Do I ***look*** as though I sparkle?

Brenda: Only when he goes to a rave.

In a similar vein, the questions for Mr. Pennyworth turn towards puns on the name and a mention of Batman's butler, Alfred Pennyworth. Rory, in role as Mr. Pennyworth, did find an opportunity to make a comment about a ghost's abilities from a uniquely autistic perspective:

NC: Now, uh, Bod has told us, in previous background interviews, that you teach him about Fading. Can you explain what Fading is?

Rory: Uh..it's just, uh, how to, uh, how to leave a crowd without anyone noticing.

NC: Aren't ghosts very good at Fading? I mean, we see them and then we don't see them?

Rory: Hmm, well…I do not believe in ghosts. I'm just teaching him how to get out of awkward social situations with incredible ease.

Rory's comment could be interpreted as his own wish to have the ability to fade out of awkward social situations; certainly, making the connection and commenting on it would lead one to make that assumption.

Brenda, who usually reserves her spoken utterances for things she has been pondering for a while or sudden flashes of inspiration, volunteered to take the role of Miss Borrows the English tutor, giving brief answers to the questions. I fell into the trap of trying to feed her hints in the form of leading questions, only to have her turn to me at one point to say, very quietly, "I don't know what to say." Her self-awareness demanded respect from me, so the interview was concluded and she was released from the hot seat to applause.

The next scene in the story involved Bod meeting a witch who was buried outside the graveyard wall in unconsecrated ground and learning about her life, and the following scene took Bod to a tomb

where he meets a strange three-headed ghostly creature guarding treasure. For this scene, the cold reading focused on voice acting and finding vocal qualities suitable for a treasure-guarding ghoul.

The remainder of the workshop time was spent creating still images for moments in the story and the various characters' relationship to Bod, the protagonist. Gloria, Michael and Patrick enjoy physical acting work, and usually take the lead in this kind of activity, as they did in this workshop. In the photos below, the body awareness and expressiveness of all participants is evident.

Figure 4.6

From left to right: Gloria is Mr. Pennyworth, the tutor who is not happy with Bod's lack of attention to his studies, Paul is Bod the submissive student, Noreen is Miss Borrows the kindly English tutor, and Brenda is Silas the vampire/mentor

Figure 4.7

Left - Wendy as Bod, visiting an antique shop with the treasure he has taken from the tomb and intimidated by the shopkeeper; Right - Rory as the shopkeeper who is eager to get his hands on the precious brooch.

This workshop, as with the workshop based on *Being There* (Kosinski, 1970), was less successful as a drama experience due to the size of the excerpt chosen for the workshop, and for the lack of time spent on world-building. The workshop plan would have benefitted from more consideration of the question, "What does it mean to be _____?", a question that Dobson emphasizes in his drama education lectures (Clarke et al., 1997; personal conversation) and is a key component in Neelands & Goode's (2015) pedagogical guide to the conventions approach. Neelands & Goode (2015) describe the source material for a workshop as "selected according to its ability to bring the experience into the intellectual and emotional comprehension of the participants" and that "*[f]or the dramatic activity to be worthwhile the source needs to find a response in those taking part*" [italics original] (p. 152). They go on to state that, "*theatre, as an educational medium, …provides a means of bringing an experience into action and into context"* [italics original] (p. 153), an essential element for working with autistic

participants for whom building context is effortful and conscious work and cannot be taken for granted (Vermeulen, 2012).

In the case of *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008), and in particular the chapter *The Witch's Headstone,* the question driving the workshop should be "What does it mean to be an outsider?" as Bod is an Other (Canales, 2000) within his ghostly community and Liza, the "witch," was othered when buried outside of the consecrated ground of the graveyard because she worked as a prostitute. Bod's determination to give her a headstone is his recognition of her othering and her right to dignity, an issue which resonates with many marginalized communities, including the neurodiverse (Michael, 2021). Structuring the workshop so that the idea of community of the graveyard is established and contrasted with the othering experiences of Bod and Liza would be more effective than the sequential structure that I used, with care taken to allow enough time for context-building that the participants can develop an empathy for the characters.

Summary: Themes emerging from the data

In reviewing the video and audio data, several themes developed around the questions of autistic communication, perception, and socialization, which will be discussed further in the following chapter:

1. **Concern for social justice and the moral treatment of people and animals**

   Their interest in social justice demonstrated a sense of empathy for the Other, particularly an oppressed Other, and a keen desire to protect and advocate for other people -- not from a need to be recognized for their advocacy but from a deep concern for the welfare of their fellow human beings. This extended to their treatment of each other during the class meetings. There was little concern for the *judgment* of others in the class but great concern for the *feelings* of the other participants.

2. **Cognitive modes: Literal thinking, authentic action, and the capacity for metaxis or the liminal state between in-role/out-of-role**

   As authentic individuals who often speak and act seemingly without filters, they demonstrated literal thinking that sometimes got in the way of understanding the lesson but could also go directly to the core of the topic at hand. The performance of authenticity also extended to a casual fluidity of gender, both in improvisatory work and in script reading, in which participants would portray characters of the opposite gender with no objection or censure from the rest of the group.

3. **Using previously acquired knowledge to contextualize the fictional framework of the drama workshops, drawing analogies and making comparisons by relying on one's mental archive**

   Unfamiliar stories and new concepts were greeted with frequent comments about other stories that the participants already knew, which at first seemed to be an effort to move the discussion away from the story of the day's lesson but it became clear that making these connections was a way to build a context to learn the new concept/story.

4. **Displaying idiosycratic traits of conversation: self-editing while speaking, collaborative overlap or interruptions, talking in "weaves"**

   The discussions, whether moderated by the facilitator/researcher or amongst themselves, were marked by a collaborative, collective conversation style that at first glance seems to be a lot of off-topic interruptions but is, in fact, a collaborative overlap (Tannen, 2010) that enables the participants to develop personal connections through shared knowledges.

5. **Expressions of frustration with indirect, vague or coded social language and contradictory expectations for social behaviours.**

   In class discussions and post-project interviews, the participants shared their frustrations with oblique social communication that they found difficult to interpret in their daily lives. From determining whether a comment was meant to be sarcasm to understanding unspoken expectations, they described the social language conventions that they find baffling and expressed the desire for clear and direct communication.

These themes will be unpacked and examined through the lens of cognitive theories of autism, aided by discourse analysis, in the following chapter.

Chapter Five -- Critical Data Analysis

The research question driving this pilot project of the Story Wheel drama curriculum asked: What is the impact of drama-in-education pedagogy using archetypal literary theory on the development of social literacy, or the ability to determine the appropriate social interaction behaviour for the situation, for adults with autism spectrum disorders? The sub-questions asked about the positive impact on the development of social thinking and the ways in which the participants could demonstrate the impact in their social competence and confidence. After spending time with the participant group in twelve drama workshops and talking with the participants after the course was over, it became clear to me that the research question had an ableist bias -- in that I had not considered that the participants would already show competence in these areas -- and that I had been asking the wrong questions.

The research question driving this project was the investigation of the impact of drama participation on the development of social cognition and communication in autistic adults, and yet, as detailed in the findings of the previous chapter, the autistic adults participating in the project demonstrated an awareness of social interaction beyond that which had been expected, based on the diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Based on the research literature I studied, I looked for challenges with nonverbal communication, or body language (Attwood, 2015); instead they exhibited a wide variety of gesture, pose, and facial expressions that demonstrated their repertoire of body language and understanding of the appropriate application of gestures. I looked for challenges with conversational reciprocity (Paul et. al., 2009); instead they engaged in wide-ranging discussions, although demonstrating a tendency toward analogous or collaborative discussion while acknowledging each other's contributions. I had questions about the potential of challenges with taking an interest in their classmates and engaging in imaginative play (Quirici, 2015); instead, they supported each other in

many ways, from devising a set of ground rules for considerate behaviour to collaborating on improvisatory scene studies, and demonstrated their imaginative abilities throughout the drama course.

The participants' willingness to work in-role throughout the workshops also challenged the Theory of Mind, or mindblindness, theory of autism (Baron-Cohen, 2008), which asserts that the autistic individual cannot shift perspectives and conceive of another person's response to a situation or stimulus. Instead, the improvisation work in character, particularly in the workshops on *The Necklace* (de Maupassant, 1884/2015) and *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813/1963), showed thoughtfulness and empathy for the characters and an awareness of the social context of the story. When working from a script or text prompts, their physical involvement and vocal expressiveness demonstrated their understanding of the characters' emotional states and moral dilemmas, which they could then unpack in the reflective discussion.

In the post-project interviews, the participants described elements of social interaction that they do find problematic. One common observation was difficulty with perceiving sarcasm in conversational interactions. Patrick described himself as "not a fan of sarcasm." He went on, "I'd prefer if people [would] just be direct to me. Like, I can understand it, but if you felt like that why don't you just *say* that?" (personal communication). This preference for direct communication can be seen in the workshop transcripts, particularly in the metaphor exercise in the third lesson of the Irony unit, in which the students were stumped by metaphorical sayings from other world cultures because they did not recognize the cultural context.

Patrick's comment reflected another common complaint, which was dealing with oblique or coded social language and the expectation that they could parse the meaning and determine the correct response. Paul expressed his frustrations with subtle communications, saying "often it's hard to understand what they are thinking or what they really mean, like, expectations" (personal

communication). The question of interpreting social expectations came up in the drama workshops several times, particularly in the workshops in the Comedy unit in which the stories place the protagonist in conflict with their society and they must overcome the conflict without leaving their society to achieve a triumphant resolution. They were particularly intrigued by the characters of Elisabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813/1963), recognizing the social awkwardness of Mr. Darcy when finding himself in a verbal sparring match with Elisabeth:

Paul: You know, these people are not very good. Let's just figure it out why they get mad at each other. Now I'm having a conversation between inner voices, and it's like: what do you think they should have done if they were smart?

Wendy: If they had social skills in the first place, which is kind of the problem. I think Darcy might be little autistic.

Eileen: I don't know if he's autistic. I think he just doesn't care for social fripperies type of thing. He's above them.

With respect to nonverbal communication, while the participants were expressive actors with their physical and vocal portrayal of their characters, they expressed some bewilderment about the interpretation of body language in others in a social situation. Noreen admitted that, "I feel like I don't have a clue what's going on a lot of the time, and then I get anxious from that" (personal communication).

Noreen also remarked on sensory overload as a social challenge, particularly with noisy environments. "…[L]ike if there's a lot of people talking at once, and people are talking over each other in a conversation, I go 'whoa, I have no idea what anyone's saying,' it's all just, like, *input* and I can't pick apart anything, and …if there's too many people in the conversation I really struggle with processing everything" (personal communication). This was an observation made by the majority of the participants over the course of the project, especially as the class met in a large resonant space that amplified the chatter of small groups planning their scenes and still images.

Sensory discomfort was an ongoing concern during the drama workshops and proved to be a significant distraction for some participants, especially in terms of noise level and ambient temperature, as the workshops were held in the open space of a re-purposed storefront with minimal separation and wall heaters rather than central heating. Wood (2020), in her investigation of school-based social skills programs, noted that "[t]he issue of the communication of autistic children, in its various manifestations, inevitably intersects with the question of noise" and that this observation was "especially salient given my subjective appraisal of high noise levels in the schools…where my data collection took place" (p. 123). Bogdashina (2005) recommends conducting a sensory perceptual assessment when evaluating an autistic person's communication abilities, noting that "the *interaction style* we use with each particular person depends on their perceptual and communication profile" (italics original) (p. 215). An examination of several meta-analyses of social skills interventions (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018; Cappadocia & Weiss, 2010; Hall et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2014; Rao et al., 2008; Spain & Blainey, 2015; Tse et al., 2007; Viecili et al., 2010), however, does not find a mention of the sensory environment in which the training took place, except to note in some instances that the setting was either clinical or in a school – which can be a noisy environment, as documented by Wood (2020).

The lived experience of the participants and their social challenges do not align with the targets of most social skill interventions – not an anomaly but an illustration of the disconnect between the social skill deficits as identified by clinical researchers and the lived experience reported by autistic writers, bloggers, and social media contributors. Social skills manuals aimed at adolescents (Hall et al., 2018) include instruction in conversational skills including reciprocity, eye contact and body language, and relationships, while Spain and Blainey's (2015) meta-analysis of social skills training for autistic adults found that the studies focused on vocational skills, conversational skills, humour, developing friendships, and emotional recognition. The participants in this research project, however, demonstrated

a different, collaborative conversational style that was still engaged on topic, an enjoyment of physical and language-based humour, and an awareness of appropriate body language when portraying characters which they had studied. They spoke of their experiences with social skills training as children without enthusiasm and Rory recalled that his therapist would put a hand under his chin to encourage eye contact by tilting his head up, an experience he did not enjoy (personal communication).

Critical Lens: Weak Central Coherence and Context-Blindness Theories of Autism

The disconnect between the social skills interventions found in the research literature and the social behaviour documented in this research project can be best explained by setting aside the Theory of Mind or mindblindness theory of autism (Baron-Cohen, 2008), and turning instead to the theory of weak central coherence (Frith, 1989/2003), which has been further developed by Vermeulen (2012) to focus specifically on the lack of ability to use context, or what he calls "context blindness."

Uta Frith first identified the theory of weak central coherence in 1989, which developed from her work on Theory of Mind abilities in autistic children. She explained, "[t]here are many feature of autism that have nothing to do with social interaction, and these were also crying out for an explanation" (Frith U. , 2012, p. 2080). By considering the commonly acknowledged behaviours ascribed to autism, such as hypersensitivity to sensory input and intense focus on restricted interests, as cognitive strengths, she saw the autistic brain as having extraordinary ability to perceive details in its environment but having a weak ability to connect the details to make contextual meaning. In her words,

> I labelled this idea weak central coherence. It proposes that in an autistic brain, while the ability to discern a wide variety of things about the world around is strong, the drive to make these various things cohere is weak. (Frith, 2012, p. 2080)

Vermeulen (2012) took this idea, and Frith's discussion of it in her book *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (1989/2003), as the basis for his theory of context blindness. He quotes Frith as saying, "A drive

for coherence and the ability to make use of context are one and the same thing" (p. 316) and points out that Frith "equates central coherence with the 'effect of context on meaning' and weak central coherence as 'lack of an effect of context'" (p. 317). Vermeulen then goes further to point out that "the *use* of context in the process of giving meaning" (p. 317) is an important element in understanding the cognitive process in autism and central to his definition of what he calls "context blindness." He defines it thus: "Context blindness is a deficit in the ability to use context spontaneously and subconsciously to determine meanings" (p. 318) and extends that definition by stating that "context is the *totality of contextually relevant elements* within both the environment and our memory [so that] context blindness does not refer to *not seeing* the context, but more accurately to the *failure to use* context" (p. 318).

Vermeulen's theory, then, is that autistic individuals possess less context sensitivity than non-autistic people, and have more difficulty adjusting to variables within a context, which can impair their ability to make meaning and choose the appropriate social interaction behaviours. He attributes this to a weakness in subconscious information processing that leads to a reliance on conscious, effortful processing that is less flexible and immediate, and suggests that "giving meaning is primarily the result of fast, subconscious processes in the brain" (p. 330). As a result, he theorizes that the difference between an autistic and non-autistic brain is not a difference in thinking but in *perceiving*, and this happens at the subconscious level, or what is commonly called an intuitive level. According to his theory, therefore, "the essence of autism is in the mind, not in the behaviour" (p. 353).

An examination of the major findings of the Story Wheel Project through the lens of the weak central coherence and context-blindness theory provides a perspective on the social interactions of the research participants that lends support to conceptualizing autism as context-blindness. As described in the previous chapter, the themes that emerged from the ethnographic study are:

1. Concern for social justice and the moral treatment of people and animals

2. Cognitive modes: Literal thinking, authentic action, and the capacity for metaxis or the liminal state between in-role/out-of-role
3. Using previously acquired knowledge to contextualize the fictional framework of the drama workshops, drawing analogies and making comparisons by relying on one's mental archive
4. Displaying idiosyncratic traits of conversation: self-editing while speaking, collaborative overlap or interruptions, talking in 'weaves'
5. Expressions of frustration with indirect, vague or coded social language and contradictory expectations for social behaviours

Using the lens of the context-blindness theory (Vermeulen, 2012) and contextualizing these findings within the body of autism research literature, the following critical analysis will unpack the disconnect that exists between autism research of the past decades and the autistic individuals' response to this drama project. After examining each of the five findings through a theoretical lens and privileging the autistic voice in the discussion, this analysis will conclude with key considerations for including autistic participants in a drama class or theatrical production and provide a pedagogical guide for drama teachers and theatre facilitators.

Social Justice, Morality, and Empathy

It is a common assumption is that autistic people have an impaired ability to understand the perspective of others and consequently lack the capacity for empathy. The official diagnostic criteria describes the social communication criterion as "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts," including "social-emotional reciprocity, "difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts," "difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends" and "absence of interest in peers" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50).

This belief about the nature of autism stems from the early research published by Leo Kanner (Silberman, 2015) and Hans Asperger, whose German-language publications were translated and published in English by Uta Frith in 1991 (Asperger, 1991). Asperger's conclusions about the children he studied included his observation that they seemed to be lost in their own worlds:

> They lack the displays of affection which normally make life with a small child so richly rewarding. One never hears that they try to flatter or try to be nice. Indeed, they often turn nasty when one tries to be nice to them. Their malice and cruelty too clearly arise from this impoverished emotionality.
>
> Autistic children are egocentric in the extreme. They follow only their own wishes, interests and spontaneous impulses, without considering restrictions or prescriptions imposed from outside. They lack completely any respect for the other person. (Asperger, 1991, p. 81)

The theory of mindblindness, or the lack of Theory of Mind, is predicated upon this assumption, along with the ToM tests developed by psychologists and pioneering autism researchers Lorna Wing and Simon Baron-Cohen (Baron-Cohen, 2008), inspiring many social skills intervention experiments that attempt to improve the autistic subjects' awareness and concern for another person's point of view. In clinical observations of autistic children, solitary play or proximal onlooking are characterized as "challenging behaviours" (McConnell, 2002, p. 355) and social skills manuals are based on the belief that "perspective taking, empathy, and emotional reciprocity are challenging for individuals with ASD" (Hall L., 2018, p. 77) and that these skills must be trained.

The participants in the Story Wheel Project, however, showed little concern for themselves and often steered the conversation toward issues of social justice, both on a local and a global scale. Throughout the course, they demonstrated an awareness of privilege-based discrimination, power imbalance, unfair or oppressive laws, and bullying, whether overt or disguised as othering. Investigating the worlds of Robin Hood and Dr. Jekyll inspired discussions about morality and ethics: some defended

Robin Hood's treatment of the wealthy Sheriff while others questioned his situational ethics that rationalized his criminal behaviour; and some were sympathetic to Dr. Jekyll's choice to experiment on himself while others were critical of his repeated use of the formula, likening it to addiction. In the first class of the course, they were asked to place themselves on a spectrum from Rich Man to Servant, and the majority placed themselves in the middle because it made sense to them to be on equal footing with others of their society. Only Patrick placed himself in the role of Rich Man, but his reasoning, he explained, was that he could then share the wealth and use his privilege to help other people.

Patrick, whose passion area is disability advocacy and is actively involved in advocacy organizations, often led the class discussions toward issues of social justice and found like-minded classmates who joined him in the discussion. With his suggestion and guidance, the class developed a set of "Ground Rules" for behaviour that they developed collaboratively, agreed upon, and referenced in later classes:

1. Kindness please.
2. PG-13 language.
3. Respect others' sensory needs.
4. Ask before touching
5. Respect boundaries: touch, sound, space, beliefs, jokes
6. Safe Space

The "PG-13 Language" rule was particularly aimed at Michael, who was several years younger that most of the participants and in the first few classes had shown a propensity for jokey comments about sex and sexual behaviours which the rest of the group had swiftly objected to, asking him to tone down his language. A few months later, as the class was engaged in the comedy props activity of Week

10, Michael demonstrated the impact that the ground rules had made when he made a slightly off-colour comment and immediately apologized:

> Gloria, meanwhile, has picked up the squishy blob and tucked it into Noreen's sweater. Noreen has been silent and strictly observational this entire time.
>
> **Gloria**: [grabbing the blob from Noreen's sweater with a grand gesture and holding it above her head, cackling like a mad scientist]
>
> I GOT YER HEART!!! It's MINE now!!! HAHAHAHA!
>
> **Michael:** I thought you were trying to give her a breast implant!
>
> Gloria and Rory laugh at this.
>
> **Gloria**: [pointing at Michael in a "you dog, you" congenial manner]
>
> Oh, yeah…
>
> **Michael:** I'M SORRY!
>
> **Paul:** It's OK!
>
> Gloria returns to her seat beside Noreen, leans toward her and puts her hand on Noreen's shoulder.
>
> **Gloria** [to Noreen]
>
> Sorry.
>
> **Noreen:** [happily]
>
> It's OK.
>
> **NC:** There's no need to apologize, OK?
>
> **Michael:** Well, when you said PG-13 language, I just…
>
> **NC:** Yeah, I know, but we're all adults here, too.
>
> **Paul:** And besides, PG-13 would include jokes like that.
>
> **Rory:** Yeah.
>
> **Michael:** And also, that means that one of us is allowed to say the F word at some point?
>
> **Paul:** I don't know how that works.
>
> **Michael:** That's a rule with PG-13. You can say the F word once…

Rory: Well, it would be like banging your knee against something…

While Michael was continually worried about understanding and following rules, the rest of the group often helped him with seeing a rule in its larger context, as Rory does here with the "f-word rule" as it applies to movie ratings.

In their investigation into moral and social reasoning in autism, Shulman's (2012) team presented their young participants with illustrations of socially frowned-upon behaviours, such as tearing up books or pushing another child, and asked for their response. Their conclusions were that their participants' judgments "remained specific and individual" (p. 1374) and expressed concern that "the level of moral reasoning reflected in the explanations …may rest on analytical cognitive skills and not necessarily be expressed in live interactions" (p. 1374), a concern that is central to many social skills interventions. Attwood (2015), however, describes autistic individuals as "being honest, having a strong sense of social justice and keeping to the rules. They strongly believe in moral and ethical principles" (p. 130). Recent world events have brought an exemplar of the autistic sense of social justice into the spotlight, as Greta Thunberg, an autistic Swedish teenager, has gained global attention for her efforts to raise awareness and inspire political action around the climate change crisis. "I'm autistic," she explained to *New York Times* writer David Marchese, "and I say things in the way they are." (Marchese, 2020).

The widely-held assumption that autistic people lack the capacity for empathy is also being challenged in recent research and in autistic online spaces. Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019) have criticized theory-of-mind research tasks for their heavy reliance on spoken language and linguistic abilities to arrive at their conclusions based on the participants' performances, and as blogs and social media become an increasingly important space for autistic discourse (Seidmann, 2020), first-person

accounts by autistic bloggers also refute the assumption, describing instead an overwhelming flood of emotion in response to stories or observations about the people around them. Blogger Alex Earhart (2018) describes it this way:

> I don't lack empathy. I feel empathy in a deep, gut-wrenching, fatiguing, and heartbreaking way. Some people might call it being hyper-empathetic, others might call it being an "empath." All I know is that I feel empathy so strongly that I often have difficulty separating my own feelings from those of someone else. I absorb emotional "energy" to the point that I become absolutely weary from it. I feel other people's pain so innately that it can be so debilitating I have to try to unplug my feelings and let myself grow cold and unattached to survive. I don't feel too little; I feel too much (Earhart, 2018, para. 5).

Feeling empathy, however, does not lead an autistic person to intuitively knowing how to act upon it, especially as the appropriate action is wholly dependent on the social context. Vermeulen (2012) contends that "the ability to empathize involves much more than recognizing mental states," and that "to understand human behavior, in addition to theory of mind, you need context sensitivity" (p. 148).

Drama involvement provides that context and a safe space to experiment and investigate a variety of mental states, an important experience for those who have difficulty "drawing on the context to correctly identify those mental states" (Vermeulen, 2012, p. 149). In the Story Wheel project, the participants demonstrated in many instances that if the workshop design allowed time to construct the context – through world-building, character-building, and excerpts of the text where useful – they were quite capable of performing the point of view of numerous characters and presenting imaginative improvisation.

Constructing a literary context to maintain the emotional distance of fiction also allowed the participants to examine the lives of the characters and their social-moral choices without intense scrutiny of the participants' own cognitive abilities, as other drama-based social skills programs do. In contrast,

for example, Nelson's (2010) *Foundation Role Plays for Autism* present simulations of real-world situations such as dining in a restaurant or dealing with a school bus bully for role-play practice. The *Social Competence Intervention Program* (Guli et al., 2008), a manualized drama-based social skills program for children, focuses on facial expressions, body language and vocal prosody, and suggests real-world situations for improvisatory scene "homework" such as bragging about getting a high grade on a test or comforting a sad friend, before presenting lesson plan designs for five process dramas in the vein of the dramatic conventions approach (Neelands & Goode, 2015) as an appendix. In both manuals, the role play is not *drama* but real world simulations for a didactic purpose.

Cognition, Literal Thinking, Authentic Action, and Metaxis

As authentic individuals who seem to lack a degree of self-awareness or self-consciousness, what Frith calls "the absent self," (2003), the participants demonstrated literal thinking that sometimes got in the way of understanding the lesson but could also go directly to the core of the topic at hand. They expressed frustration with the oblique, face-saving coding of neurotypical social interactions and preferred to be direct and forthright in their expressions, although they adjusted behaviour when asked to, such as to be mindful of a fellow classmate's sensitivity about a certain subject. This directness also made for some unintentionally hilarious moments, when a participant spoke the truth of a situation or made an obscure but absolutely accurate connection between a moment in the story and a television show or movie that they remembered. The participants also demonstrated a sense of humour in comic improvisation activities and enjoyed the act of being outrageous or inviting comparisons to familiar pop culture stories. The performance of authenticity also extended to a casual fluidity of gender, both in improvisatory work and in script reading, in which participants would portray characters of the opposite gender with no objection or censure from the rest of the group.

A recurring feature of the participants' response to drama activities was their propensity for literal thinking and a tendency to get stuck on problematic details that needed resolution before they could relax and attend to the larger task. The metaphor enactment task in the workshop based on *Being There* is, of course, an obvious example as detailed in the previous chapter, but less obvious and more frequent were the questions and misunderstandings about executing the drama task that arose from thinking about the details in a literal sense. Of the participants in the Story Wheel project, Michael was the most concerned with the details of the physical environment and the most likely to display inflexible thinking, whether it was the chilly temperature of the workshop space, which he commented on frequently, or the deviations from the script in a drama activity. Michael was not the only one to have moments of concrete thinking get in the way of their participation, however. Noreen, for whom this was a first attempt at drama participation, sometimes asked for clarification when instructions for drama activities were given, as did Gloria when the lessons were based on scripts rather than improvisation because that was a new approach to drama for her.

It had long occurred to me, watching my child growing up, that autism seemed to be the product of a brain that is missing filters, and that while the missing filters for sensory input were easy to see, this concept also applied to speech and behaviour. These traits arise from gestalt perception, a well-documented common trait of the autistic brain (Bogdashina, 2010; Bogdashina, 2005), a term borrowed from gestalt psychology which in turn borrowed the German word for form or shape to describe a holistic way of thinking or perceiving. Psychologists' explanation of the missing filters in terms of gestalt perception certainly fits with my observations as a parent of an autistic child, and in a larger sense with the question of literal thinking that arose in the drama research project.

Frith (2003) theorizes that these traits are a result of weak central coherence in the cognitive processes of the autistic brain, which she describes as "a lack of a balance between top-down control

[mechanisms of attention], which is weak, and bottom-up processing of information, which is strong," (2003, p. 208). Gestalt perception takes in all the sensory information of an environment or situation, the "bottom-up" processing, without filtering for elements that may be relevant or irrelevant, important or unimportant, the "top-down" control of information and attention to important data. Language may also be perceived in a gestalt manner, interpreted through precise, literal definitions without filtering for context in the sentence or the usage situation. Bogdashina (2005) describes the experience for autistic individuals as, "they perceive everything without filtration or selection [which] results in a paradoxical phenomenon: sensory information is received in infinite detail and holistically at the same time" (p. 57). Bogdashina (2005) goes on to connect gestalt perception to the criterion listed in the DSM as "Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior" (APA, 2013) by stating, "gestalt perception leads to rigidity of thinking and lack of generalization…[because] each and every situation is unique….Even the slightest changes may confuse and upset them" (p. 58). The reason for this need for sameness, she explains, is that "to feel safe they create gestalt behaviours – rituals and routines. These ritualistic behaviours bring reassurance and order in daily life which is otherwise unpredictable and threatening" (p. 59).

In other words, when the brain is continually flooded with sensory input, it works on creating order from chaos by building systems, rituals, and routines, and by assigning interpretations to forms of communication which otherwise seem to be untethered from meaning. In Vermeulen's (2012) context-blindness theory, the autistic person is continually making a conscious effort to contextualize the sensory input and incoming communication in order to make meaning from it. This is exhausting, solitary work – the source of much anxiety about the potential for "getting it wrong" or for getting overwhelmed with input to the point of an emotional breakdown – which the neurotypical person takes for granted and performs without a conscious thought. However, difficulties with the physical

environment and problems with literal language and inflexible thinking can be understood through Vermeulen's (2012) context-blindness theory for different reasons. Difficulties with overwhelming amounts of sensory input from the physical environment can explain the inability to contextualize the input and filter for attention, but language-based difficulties can be due to a *lack* of input when there is not enough information for the brain to create an interpretation.

If contextualizing is always a conscious effort, then the more data to work with the better, and a lack of information regarding a task assignment was bound to result in misintepretations. Breaking down the task into small steps and scaffolding the lesson was a strategy that led to more successful workshop, as was presenting the task instructions in multiple modes of communication by talking, demonstrating, and distributing written information. The multiple media allowed the participants to triangulate the task instructions and build a complete understanding of the objectives and expectations. Allowing time for the activity to develop, as happened with the props improvisation activity in the *Don Quixote* workshop that went on for thirty-five minutes, allowed the participants to develop their own understanding of the activity and to exercise their creative thinking. For these reasons, choosing a small section or a few main points of a story for the lesson plan proved to be a better choice because it allowed time to break activities into stages and to spend time with each activity so that each participant had a chance to engage with the drama and make a contribution.

The ability to perceive many details in a situation also worked as an advantage in the drama activities as the challenge of maintaining a sense of the real self when also in-role posed no challenge for the participants. Their ability to negotiate what O'Toole (1992) calls "the tension of metaxis" or the tension "caused by the gap between the real and the fiction, and a recognition of that gap" (p. 166) was effortless and readily available, in the manner of children at imaginative play. Not only could they easily slip in and out of role, but gender divides posed no problem and they blithely adopted their roles without

consideration for aligning their gender identity with that of the role's gender. The playfulness with which they approached the drama activities and the earnestness of their engagement made it an enjoyable experience that any drama teacher would be grateful to have. Rather than adding suggestions for dramas as an afterthought (Guli et al., 2008) or drawing on Shakespeare for a patina of theatre in behavioural social skills interventions (Hunter, 2015), the Story Wheel curriculum centered the literary heroes and, through the dramatic conventions approach (Neelands & Goode, 2015), allowed the students to enter their worlds to experience their social dilemmas and victories.

Building Context through Analogies

Perhaps the most significant finding of the drama workshops was the documentation of common styles of social communication among autistic individuals. Social communication deficits are central to the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the topic of a large body of research literature investigating the nature, features and manifestation of these deficits. An ontological shift to studying social behaviour as a relational phenomenon rather than an individual attribute has attracted a great deal of attention in the psychological research field in recent years, leading to a call for more research using discourse analysis methodology (Bottema-Beutel, 2017) and dyadic and group studies (Crompton, Ropar, Evans-Williams et al., 2020; Crompton, Sharp, Axbey et al., 2020; Heasman & Gillespie, 2018).

Most studies of autistic talk and social behaviour, however, are led by researchers as interlocutors, focus on a short conversation between two people who are meeting for the first time, and/or are based on small sample sizes and younger participants (Loukusa et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2009). The length of this study allowed the participants to become familiar with each other to the extent that they felt safe to make jokes, express concerns or disagreements, and share thoughts about autism, gender and identity, along with their investigation of the literary theory and drama pedagogy that formed the

framework of the pilot project. It also provided insights into the style of communication used by autistic individuals as they make meaning from a situation or drama activity by building context, using talk as a means to tease out connections between the new concept and a previously experienced and similar concept. Finding connections and sharing them becomes a search for common experiences, what Heasman and Gillespie (2018) call "the generous assuption of common ground," and an appeal for validation and social rapport.

The fact that this social-linguistic processing work is done through talk gave me an opportunity to observe the social interactions of autistic adults, who possess a body of knowledge acquired through schooling and life experiences and yet admit to bewilderment in social situations where the neurotypical population appears to have the "blueprint" for social behaviour, as my daughter called it. The trait of literal thinking in autistic individuals leads to making meaning through finding analogies, rather than relying on the understanding that a concept can be worded in a variety of ways without losing its meaning (Vygotsky, 1934/1986).

The penchant for analogy was noted in the several workshops, such as the ones based on *Sweeney Todd*: *On the Razor's Edge* (Jory & Dixon, 2019), where the cannibalistic element was compared to a modern horror film, and on *The Strange Case Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), when a question in the reflective discussion brought about many suggestions of other duplicitous characters in folktales and fiction. I had asked the group to show whether they agreed or disagreed with statements of moral judgement about Dr. Jekyll by standing on a line in the rehearsal space, placing themselves along the continuum in an activity called Spectrum of Difference (Neelands & Goode, 2000, p. 87). Their reaction to the statements as shown in this excerpt from the discussion were illustrated in the form of analogies derived from history, popular culture, and indigenous folklore:

NC: Here's the third statement. Henry Jekyll sacrificed himself for the sake of science and the development of new drugs. He was a hero with a tragic end.

Gloria: Yeah!

Eileen: I don't think he was a hero, exactly.

Michael: What about Madame Curie?

Patrick: She died of radiation poisoning.

NC: All right. Thank you. …Let's come back into the circle and discuss the questions. I would love to get your thoughts on them.

Rory: Two-Face is a tragic hero.

Wendy: That really depends on what era of Batman you're talking about.

A discussion ensues of Batman movies and TV shows and the history of the villain's depiction.

NC: This is the quote that pretty much sums up the whole story. This is his conclusion.

"With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual."

Isn't that interesting how he splits that apart. The moral and the intellectual. The moral knows right from wrong, good from evil. Does the intellectual? Apparently not. Or maybe it means it doesn't matter.

"I drew steadily nearer to that truth that man is not truly one, but truly two. It was on the moral side and in my own person, in its own experience, that I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man."

What kinds of themes or main topics did you find in this story?

Wendy: I want to compare this to the parable or whatever of the two wolves. I think it's from First Nations originally. It is a truism that there are two wolves in your nature, one that is good and wants the best for everything, and one that is just selfish and destructive. The person listening to the story is supposed to ask: so which one is stronger? The answer is "The one you feed."

Temple Grandin (2013), who writes about her own experience of autism, calls this trait *associative thinking* and compares her brain to an internet search engine, describing associative thinking as a cognitive trait of people with brains like hers – "people with brains that have trouble with linear

thought brains that ramble, brains that have weak short-term memory" (p. 126). Autism researchers have investigated the use of analogous reasoning in autistic people by testing the ability to identify a connection between two images, either line-drawn (Scott & Baron-Cohen, 1996) or photographic (Green et al., 2014; Green et al., 2017). The report from the photographic study suggests that analogical reasoning may have some value in processing "social content," or the interactional relationship of people, objects or situations and proposes that "social analogical reasoning may be a metacognitive skill that can function at least somewhat dissociably from general deficits in social content processing" (Green et al., 2017, p. 405).

Laboratory-based, investigator-controlled experiments, however, do not reflect the natural interpersonal communication of autistic individuals which ethnographic observations have recorded, a research domain that Heasman and Gillespie (2018) call "neurodivergent intersubjectivity." In their analysis of conversations between dyads of autistic youths playing a video game together, they identified the trait of quoting analogous material from other sources as the "generous assumption of common ground" (p. 6). They point out that there are both positive and negative aspects to using analogous references in conversation, remarking that "the generous assumption of common ground produces highly coherent, affective and symmetric coordination – but without knowing the cultural references, it might appear fragmented" (p. 7). This was certainly the case in the discussion of levers in the *Sweeney Todd* workshop transcript, in which Rory found common ground when Patrick recognized his reference to *The Simpsons* but Michael received no response when trying to bring up the film *The Emperor's New Groove*. Heasman and Gillespie (2018) also found that in quoting analogous material, their participants would incorporate the accent, vocal register, and delivery of the original source, a feature also recorded in the transcripts of The Story Wheel. They note that "in playing with voices, players are able to develop shared language on the basis of their shared cultural resources which allows

them to creatively index and orient to novel problems [which] can lead to rapid rapport, with very closely aligned intersubjectivity" (p. 7).

Other social skills investigators may regard the use of analogous material as a deficit, however. Social skills interventions often target conversational skills, identifying problems in autistic conversation by including "irrelevant and tangential contributions" (Paul et al., 2009, p. 122), "utterances out of sync with the ongoing conversation" (Bottema-Beutel & White, 2016, p. 362), and "maintaining reciprocity" (Bellini et al., 2007, p. 153). Many interventions have been designed to teach conversational skills, focusing particularly on attention to the listener's interest and desire to continue on the topic as well as reciprocity in conversation, attributing the seemingly tangential contributions to a lack of theory of mind and inability to conceive of another person's perspective which leads the autistic person to talk about things of interest to themselves without regard for the topic at hand. If the tangential contributions are, in fact, analogies offered because they were inspired by the topic at hand, however, interpreting the tangents as an effort to build context and reflect meaning results in the conclusion that the autistic person is intensely engaged in the conversation, not disinterested. Vermeulen's (2012) "context blindness" theory is again relevant if the analogous material in conversation is reframed as clarifying and building context, and the conversation partner responds to the analogy to confirm or adjust the frame, thereby helping the autistic person understand the concept under discussion rather than pathologizing their attempt to find a way to make meaning.

Throughout the Story Wheel project, unfamiliar stories and new concepts were greeted with frequent comments about other stories that the participants already knew, which at first seemed to be an effort to move the discussion away from the story of the day's lesson but it became clear that making these connections was a way to build a context to learn the new concept/story. There was always a moment of delight when they made a connection between the story of the day and one that they were

more familiar with – discussing and even quoting the referenced story, complete with character accents. The participants demonstrated throughout the course that they make meaning and create learning by building context through connecting new ideas to their own archive of experience.

In other drama-based social skills manuals, only Davies (2004) comes close to incorporating collaborative context-building with her group story-telling exercises, while Schneider (2007) recommends scripted scenes which are designed to address real-world social situations in a fictional context or improvisation games to develop a particular social communication skill, such as recognizing body language. Bottema-Beutel and White (2016), in their study of autistic youths co-creating fictional narratives with typically-developing peers using conversational analysis, noted that there was substantial negotiation between the members of a story-telling group over the logical progression of the story, and suggest that rather than framing the struggle as proof that "individuals with ASC lack an orientation to listener needs and perspectives, …it may be more accurate to say that they are orienting to different features of the interaction as they seek out a more linear system of rules" (p. 375). None of the above-mentioned drama/story-telling interventions mentions the occurrence of analogous, collaborative discussions documented in the Story Wheel workshops.

Idiosyncratic Conversation Styles

If an offered analogy had some resonance for another participant, they would join in the playful work of teasing out commonalities by adding information from their knowledge of the concept – not in the turn-taking mode of typical conversation but in the collaborative style of actors improvising a scene. Interjections are accepted not as interruptions but as contributions to the discussion and validation of the previous utterances, in what linguist Deborah Tannen(2005) terms *cooperative overlap*. At other times, the mention of an analogy was used as an invitation to conversation, particularly by Michael who would

often preface his comments with “Does anybody know…” or “Does anyone here watch…” as he sought confirmation of his analogy and discussion of the comparison.

In this example, taken from the class transcript from week 3, *The Moonstone* (Collins, 2001), the class has just gone through a “tour” of the Yorkshire setting of the novel, ending at a patch of “quicksand” on the beach, represented by a grey bedsheet heaped on the floor. While I gathered materials and prepared for the next activity, the group started talking about quicksand – beginning with critiquing the heaped up fabric because “quicksand would be flat”, and moving on to discuss the qualities and dangers of quicksand. The discussion then took some surprising turns and detours:

> The class is standing in a circle, the audio-video recording starts mid-conversation, discussing quicksand. Throughout this exchange Paul is standing outside the circle with his arms crossed in a quasi-hugging fashion, Gloria is bouncing from foot to foot and then starts walking around the space, and Noreen is quietly staring at the floor…none of these three join the conversation.
>
> **Wendy:** …fast, then it’ll rip you in half; but if you pull slowly it’ll sllloooooowly give
>
> **Patrick:** (inaudible)
>
> **Rory:** I wonder if, like, pouring, like, hot water would work…
>
> **Eileen:** Pressurized water would, not just pouring water…
>
> **Patrick**: [interrupting]
>
> What’s pressurized water?
>
> **Wendy:** [Demonstrating with an arm gesture.]
>
> Like, really high speed water blasting.
>
> **Patrick**: [interrupting]
>
> Oh, oh, like a *blast*…like a pressurized blast…
>
> **Eileen:** Like pressure washers.
>
> **Patrick:** Oh yeah…but then it could blast off some skin or something…
>
> **Wendy:** Well, that’s still better than drowning or getting ripped in half.
>
> **Michael:** *Or falling in lava!!*

Eileen: In a crater like Darth Vader.

Rory: Or the guy in Volcano, where he jumped off the train, with, like, the guy and they…

Michael: [interrupting]

Unless you…unless you covered yourself…anyone here watch Ninja Turtles?

Gloria, Eileen, Wendy: Noooo, not really..

Rory: The cartoon or the movies?

Michael: I mean, like, any version

Several voices: I've seen some episodes…I know it…I used to…

Michael: You know what I'm referring to! I'm sure you'd be fine if you put yourself in that stuff first.

Rory and Patrick: [Still talking in the background]

…the ooze…the ooze…that blob…

Wendy: Ooh, the mutogenic thing?

Michael: Yeah! Mutegen.

Wendy: You know, that was a thing that really existed.

Silence for a moment.

Michael: Although, I wonder, if you had used whatever you had, like, if you were wearing some kind of metal, like, use it to protect…

Eileen: I think that metal would get very hot

Rory: Yeah.

Michael: No, I mean it would fuse and become part of your body.

Wendy: So, you would turn into some kind of mutant that *likes* the heat

[With a small upreach of the hands, like the beginnings of a shrug.]

Patrick: Like, like, *Wolverine* where there was the metal fused into…

[he demonstrates with his hands]

…like, his bones…

Michael: No, no, no, it's not like that!

Patrick: Well, Wolverine had bone claws inside of him first, first he had bone claws…

Michael: No! Inside of you, like…this guy, he would…

Wendy: [trying to help Morgan clarify]

It would just form on your body.

[Forming her arms into a suggestion of a turtle shell.]

Rory: [joining the explanation]

Like it goes on like a skin…

Patrick: Well whatever…Wolverine had bone claws when he was an X-Man…

Rory: [over Peter]

Would that be like Silver Surfer?

Patrick: [still talking]

…he wasn't born with claws…

Michael: [responding to Rory loudly]

No, I'm referring to one guy who got turned into a mutant but then he had these iron knuckles he was wearing and they got fused onto his skin…

Patrick: [unintelligible, tone of voice as if he's declaring something]

Rory: What's that?

Michael: In one version of Ninja Turtles…the 2012 version.

Rory: That wasn't Shredder, was it?

Michael: No, it was the guy that becomes Rocksomething…

Rory: Oh…Rocksteady?

Wendy: I could never remember which one was Rocksteady and which one was Bebop.

Rory: Yeah.

Michael: Rocksteady's the rhino.

Rory: Oh yeah, Bebop was the warthog. Then in the cartoon there was Brain…

Rory, Michael, and Wendy continue to talk about odd characters of the Ninja Turtles cartoon series.

NC: [gathering the group for the next activity]

All right!

In this excerpt, Michael moves the conversation away from quicksand when he brings up lava, making an analogy to another dangerous natural substance that determines the fate of a tragic hero and gaining affirmation from Eileen who names Anakin/Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* film series as the source of the connection. He continues to work on this idea, asking for help in clarifying his thinking from the rest of the group with, "Anyone here watch *Ninja Turtles*?" He receives a positive response from Rory, who signals his familiarity with the animated series by acknowledging that there exists both a television series and film series by that name. When Michael refers to "that stuff," Patrick and Rory start brainstorming words to describe the transformative substance in the fictional world of that series, which prompts Wendy to remember the correct term and offer it to Michael, who gratefully accepts it.

In need of an autistic perspective regarding this interchange, I asked my daughter for her take on this short excerpt. She conceptualized the cognitive process represented in the above exchange by suggesting a subtext for Michael's utterances: *Let me bring you to where my mind is! I have a thing in mind but can't put a name on it, so if I can help people make the same connection I just made, I'll find the word I'm looking for* (personal communication).

Going further into the discussion, the talk separates into comments related to the idea of lava from Eileen and Wendy, and comments related to mutant cartoon characters. Patrick seizes on the word "mutant" which reminds him of another example, Wolverine, and proceeds to mull over the characteristics of Wolverine while the discussion develops around him, repeating the idea of "bone claws" without regard for attention from the rest of the group. Michael is still searching for the exact analogy, meanwhile, and is assisted by Wendy and Rory who try different strategies to help him figure out which character it is that he is thinking of. Rory throws out names of characters as they occur to him: "Would that be like Silver Surfer? That wasn't Shredder, was it?" and after Michael gives a little more

information, “Oh…Rocksteady?” while Wendy disguises a hint as a self-reflective comment: “I could never remember which one was Rocksteady and which one was Bebop.”

My daughter suggested that the operational subtext for Wendy and Rory is: *I am joining you where your mind is, and I see what you’re trying to do. I will help you try to get there* (personal communication), conceptualizing the talk as supportive validation for Michael’s idea. The talk has gone beyond describing an analogy to quicksand and instead is focused on helping Michael crystallize his thought, and in doing so, Wendy and Rory have turned their attention to helping Michael complete his thought process.

In this next example, the topic of discussion is personal aesthetics as it is the reflective discussion following the workshop built upon *Don Quixote* (de Cervantes, 1615/2003). This excerpt fits the description of *talking in weaves* (a term offered by my daughter in a conversation about autistic conversation styles) more than the example discussed above, as it is a free-form, fluid group conversation in which the participants’ utterances result from individual word-association thought processes rather than from direct responses to another participant’s comment. Thus, rather than the turn-taking that defines conversation in normative studies (Bellini et al., 2007; Cappadocia et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2018; Paul et al, 2009; Paul et al., 2014), the participants are engaged in collaborative meaning-making and knowledge-sharing in a playful manner that includes sharing jokes and indulging in humorous commentary.

The following example (Figure 5.1) is taken from a discussion about the treatment Don Quixote received from the people he met on his travels and his insistence on maintaining his knightly persona regardless of the treatment he received as a result. I suggested that one can find people with similar tastes and interests, who might be interested in becoming friends, by noticing their personal aesthetic choices and the way they present themselves to their society. Eileen pointed out that personal aesthetics

need to be moderated according to contextual expectations, and the conversation then turned toward dressing appropriately for one's job, maintaining that theme as the underlying topic even though the ideas expressed ranged from superheroes to tuxedos. To illustrate the word-association in the transcript, I have highlighted the key words with colour-coding to delineate the "weave" structure of the talk.

Eileen: You go to Comic-con, or whatever, and you see these people dressed up in wild costumes, in context, it's totally normal. Out of context, you'd be like: "Why is that person doing that?"

NC: Yeah, they probably wouldn't dress as a goth princess to work in their government office.

Patrick: It would be awesome, though.

Rory: They wouldn't be allowed.

Patrick: Probably not. It depends what kind of job you have. If you work at Disneyland, you would be dressed up all the time.

Paul (agreeing): That's the uniform.

Eileen: It's sort of like the old joke. "They always tell me 'Dress for the job you want, not the job you have,' and now I'm sitting in a meeting with my boss dressed as Wonder Woman."

Patrick: At Disneyland, that's their job. They're actors.

NC: Do you know anybody who totally dresses the part for whatever they're doing?

Michael: Like 24/7?

NC: You know, they really take care to choose how they want to present themselves for whatever situation they're in.

Patrick: Some wear suits and ties. I don't know anybody who dresses like a superhero all day.

NC: There are some flamboyant people out there.

Patrick: I'm trying to think of what kind of job you would get paid for that's not an actual actor but at what job you would be paid to wear a superhero costume all day.

Paul: You get stuck in the elevator, and nothing's more pathetic than Batman's cape stuck in the elevator.

Patrick: It's like in *The Incredibles* when a woman describes why capes are a very bad idea.

Michael: To be fair, Batman's cape usually does have a practical function.

Patrick: It's a funny part of *The Incredibles*.

Michael: I know what you're referring to.

Rory: It depends on what kind of incarnation of Batman.

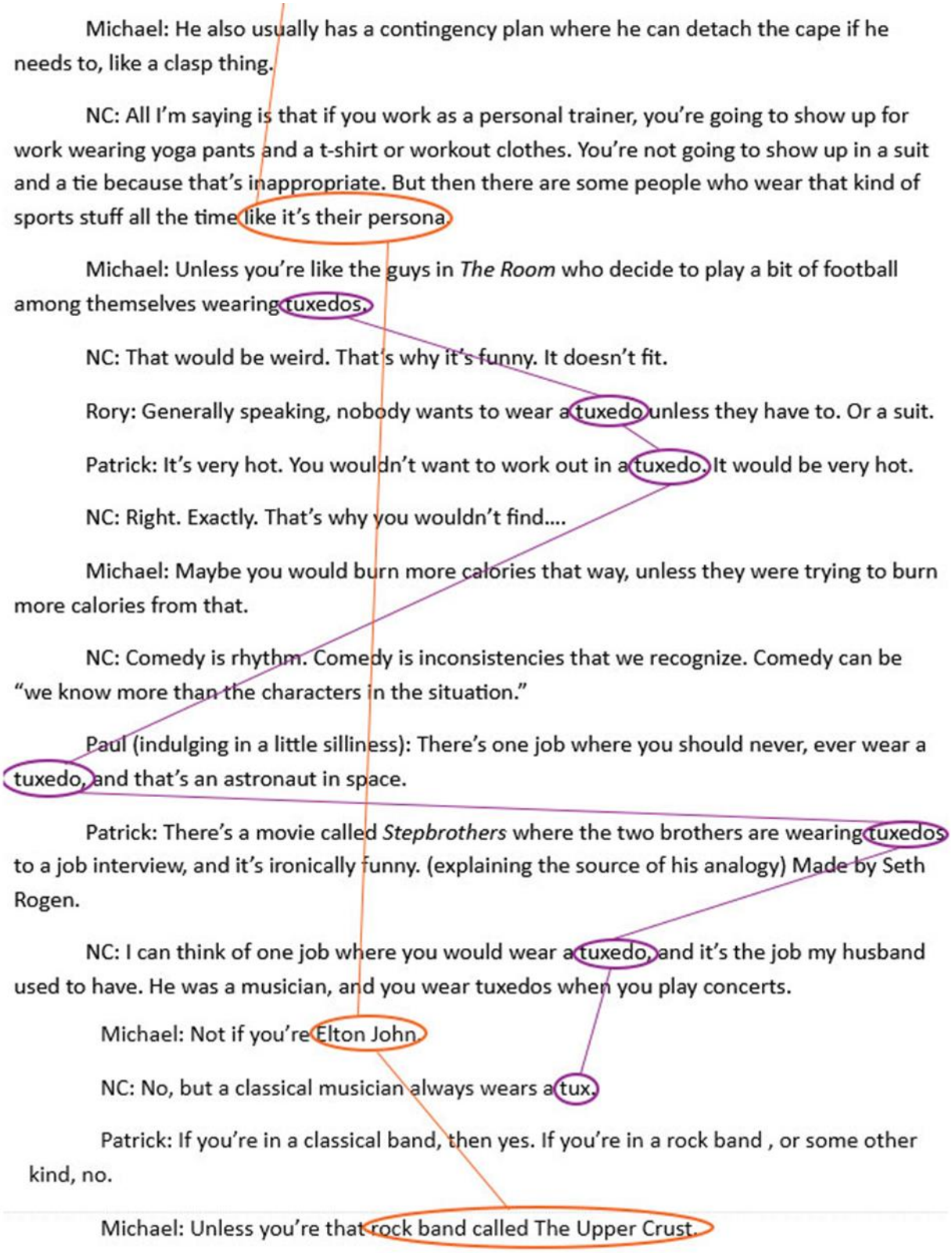

Michael: He also usually has a contingency plan where he can detach the cape if he needs to, like a clasp thing.
NC: All I'm saying is that if you work as a personal trainer, you're going to show up for work wearing yoga pants and a t-shirt or workout clothes. You're not going to show up in a suit and a tie because that's inappropriate. But then there are some people who wear that kind of sports stuff all the time like it's their persona.
Michael: Unless you're like the guys in The Room who decide to play a bit of football among themselves wearing tuxedos.
NC: That would be weird. That's why it's funny. It doesn't fit.
Rory: Generally speaking, nobody wants to wear a tuxedo unless they have to. Or a suit.
Patrick: It's very hot. You wouldn't want to work out in a tuxedo. It would be very hot.
NC: Right. Exactly. That's why you wouldn't find....
Michael: Maybe you would burn more calories that way, unless they were trying to burn more calories from that.
NC: Comedy is rhythm. Comedy is inconsistencies that we recognize. Comedy can be "we know more than the characters in the situation."
Paul (indulging in a little silliness): There's one job where you should never, ever wear a tuxedo, and that's an astronaut in space.
Patrick: There's a movie called Stepbrothers where the two brothers are wearing tuxedos to a job interview, and it's ironically funny. (explaining the source of his analogy) Made by Seth Rogen.
NC: I can think of one job where you would wear a tuxedo, and it's the job my husband used to have. He was a musician, and you wear tuxedos when you play concerts.
Michael: Not if you're Elton John.
NC: No, but a classical musician always wears a tux.
Patrick: If you're in a classical band, then yes. If you're in a rock band , or some other kind, no.
Michael: Unless you're that rock band called The Upper Crust.

Figure 5.1

There is a playfulness to the banter that is not always clear from a written transcript, but Paul's contributions point out the light-heartedness that was evident throughout the conversation. The exchange illustrates well the two characteristics of neurodivergent interactions identified by Heasman and Gillespie (2018) and discussed in the previous section – "the generous assuption of common ground and the low demand for coordination," (p. 10) -- which they suggest "potentially fit together into a functional system that allows rich forms of social relating which can explain how rapid changes in interaction dynamic are possible" (p. 10).

Linguistics researchers have identified two types of overlapping talk by their function, either *cooperative* or *competitive*, based on the speaker's participation and management of the topic (Konakahara, 2015; Tannen, 2005). Konakahara (2015) points out that "the main function of …overlapping utterances is to support the main speaker in the meaning-making process," (p. 41), while Tannen (2005) notes that overlap is a device "by which some speakers show solidarity, enthusiams, and interest in others' talk" (p. 98). This is certainly borne out by the data collected in the Story Wheel workshops, and yet it is difficult to find linguistic research which addresses the other conversational trait that emerges frequently in the transcripts – that of collaborative word/idea-association, or "talking in weaves." In terms of Vermeulen's (2012) "context-blindness" theory, this form of collaborative meaning making can be conceptualized as a communal construction of context, as each speaker affirms the previous speaker's contribution and adds a tangential thought that expands the topic without completely changing the subject.

Problems with indirect social language and expectations

The participants admitted during their post-project interviews that there are elements of non-autistic communication that they find puzzling, and that they continue to be surprised to learn of the ways their own communication is mis-interpreted by the non-autistic people in their workplace or in

casual encounters. Noreen, a quiet, reserved person, remarked on the reaction she gets from her co-workers: “to me I don’t feel like I’m intimidating, if anything I’m intimidated by others, but I’ve had people say that I come across as intimidating and I don’t see it, I’m like, am I making gestures that come across that way?” (personal communication). The post-project interviews also revealed a concern with oblique or vague social language that the participants found difficult to parse, finding that a much more difficult task than interpreting non-verbal behaviour. Brenda said, “I never know what to say when someone finds out about one of my hobbies and says, ‘I didn’t know you did that!’ To me, that’s a statement of fact and I don’t know what they expect me to say in response” (personal communication).

Patrick, the disability advocate who said has has learned a lot about social communication through “social osmosis,” share his feelings about indirect or insincere social communication:

> I wish people would just be more direct. Some people expect you to guess or play a sort of word game to figure out what they mean when they could just tell you. Or like inviting you to something out of obligation even if they didn’t want you there. If they’d just be honest and direct, I’d prefer to have my feelings hurt in the moment then later down the line.
> (personal communication)

Paul, who has an office job, expressed his frustration with the conflicting rules of conversation that he encounters on the job:

> People will give you advice, like how you’re supposed to act in certain situations, and then it’s not actually what they want. There’s a lot of self-delusion about how people think they behave and how they really behave. Like, they say to be honest, but then when you *are* honest, they tell you you’re being *too* honest. It’s hard to find the middle ground that’s expected. It’s hard to figure out how to navigate society, threading a needle takes time.
> (personal communication)

Deborah Tannen (2005) refers to the landmark work of linguist Robin Lakoff (1972) when she describes the Rules of Rapport, now a central concept of the field of linguistics and the study of social language and (im)politeness. The Rules, as Tannen describes them, explain why "speakers regularly and intentionally refrain from saying what they mean in service of the higher goal of politeness in its broadest sense, that is, to fulfill the social function of language" (2005, p. 17). The principles are:

1. Don't impose (distance)
2. Give options (deference)
3. Be friendly (camaraderie) (p.17)

Tannen then explains, "[d]istance, deference, and camaraderie, then, refer to styles associated with particular notions of politeness" (p.17). The rules of rapport reflect an awareness of power registers between speakers and conversational style choices that take the power differences into account, so that the way one addresses a person with a great deal of power over the speaker would be noticeably different from the way one speaks to a peer or to a subordinate. The emotions and stakes involved in the outcome of the situation are also taken into consideration when choosing a conversational style, something that is assessed and determined rapidly without much conscious thought when we perform the subconscious work of contextualizing the situation.

For autistic people who have difficulty determining or recognizing context, the rules of rapport are a blueprint for social communication that is unavailable to them and therefore the cause of much anxiety over misunderstandings. The drama classroom offers a safe space in which to explore the different registers or modes of politeness within fictional contexts and to investigate the myriad variations within the rules, teaching *if/then* thinking and situation-specific social behaviour choices in contrast to the generalized, decontextualized social skills interventions that aim to impose rules for behaviour without an explanation of their functional importance.

A common example of the difficulty with contextualizing social language is the autistic struggle to recognize sarcasm in conversation. In his post-project interview, Rory commented, "Sometimes people don't understand when I'm being sarcastic, and vice versa." Gloria honed in on the use of language as her primary difficulty with sarcasm:

> If someone is being sarcastic, I would definitely tell if she or he is sounding arrogant and aggressive, however if the person is being sarcastic, not with facial expressions or how they're sounding, but just saying it neutrally using the words or sentences that wouldn't make sense to me, then I wouldn't know at all if she or he is being sarcastic. (personal communication)

It's interesting that here Gloria is relying on non-verbal communication to identify sarcasm in conversation, although body language and tone of voice are considered to be social communication deficits in autism (Attwood, 2015; Baron-Cohen, 2008). For Gloria, the non-verbal cues of facial expression and tone of voice are more informative than the language used, and that she relies on these cues to establish context from which to determine a sarcastic intention.

As a form of non-verbal communication, however, body language can be baffling for autistic individuals who do not immediately perceive the context of the signals. In her post-project interview, Noreen said she was puzzled by comments from people she worked with that they found her intimidating because of her introverted nature and her tendency to sit curled up in a chair, which could be interpreted as a protective or defensive posture, but that interpretation had not occurred to her until I pointed it out. I shared with her that my daughter confided that, as a teen, she took mental notes every time I remarked on the body language signals of actors on the screen while we watched a television show, and Noreen's reaction was that of recognition.

"Wow, it's making me realize that I really don't, like…gestures and body language and stuff is still something that I just, like, 'whoop' over my head," she said, with the vocal equivalent of a descriptive gesture (interview). My daughter has also remarked on the question of facial expression

recognition and the importance of that social skill. “Being able to recognize a facial expression does me no good if I don’t know how I’m expected to react to it,” she has said (personal communication), summing up the critical importance of contextualizing and the potential for misunderstanding without being able to perceive the social context.

The drama-based social skills manuals which were reviewed for this study show a lack of consideration of the importance of context for developing an understanding of social skills. Instead, they include drama improvisation games that require immediate contextualization for the actors to choose an action (Schneider, 2007), circle games that require students to “catch” a facial expression that is “thrown” to them without understanding the reason or context for the expression (Hunter, 2015), exercises that use a large glossary of words for emotions as flash cards for facial expressions (Guli et al., 2008), or improvisation exercises for didactic communication goals (Lerner et al., 2011).

In contrast, the Story Wheel provides a fictional context in which the participants could experience the society, relationships, and behavior choices of the characters to make discoveries about social motivations and connections with the emotional impact of the characters’ circumstances. Neelands and Goode (2015) make it clear that their approach to drama in education provides four different kinds of learning: instrumental (specific goals), expressive (unspecific goals), aesthetic (related to the art form of theatre), and personal/social learning (relating to the self and to the relationships between self and others) (p. 165), a more complex and nuanced approach than a manualized drama-based social skills intervention, and the Story Wheel provides the literary framework that allows these learning opportunities to occur. When the context was well-established and developed in the drama workshop, the students became autonomous learners and through sharing their thoughts with the group helped each other make meaning from the experience.

Participant Response to The Story Wheel Curriculum

Drama provides the space to break down non-verbal communication into its various components and experiment with the influence of context on the performance of the components. Using open scenes as a warm-up gave the participants an opportunity to connect tone of voice with intention within a chosen context, as the anthropomorphic exercise did for body language and gesture. However, making those connections as a performer are not the same as perceiving them in one's daily life and therein lies the challenge for autistic individuals.

With respect to the conventions approach of drama pedagogy (Neelands & Goode, 2015), the responses varied among the participants, partly based on their personalities, previous drama experience, and preference for active or talk-based activities. Gloria, one of the more seasoned performers in the group, preferred active acting exercises to reflective discussions, naming the character scenes and props improvisation games as her favourite activities but also mentioning the Still Image (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 28) activities. She appreciated the video clips used to inform the group when working on an unfamiliar story, and loved seeing the results from taking still photos and videos of their devised scenes. Patrick, on the other hand, thought that "the ones that got us talking were the most beneficial." He suggested that if the story was unfamiliar, making some reading available ahead of the workshop would be helpful, adding, "the ones I was familiar with already were so much easier to do." This comment aligns with the observations made in Chapter Five about Patrick's reading fluency and serves as a reminder to facilitators to think carefully about choosing stories for familiarity and providing preparatory materials for those who wish to use them.

Paul, who grew in confidence as the course progressed, observed that, "I found the scripts were a little bit confining at times, it restricted the imagination and we weren't exploring it as much as other activities where we could just create it ourselves" but then named the Romeo and Juliet drama structure

as his favourite, which used excerpts from the text in several activities. Again, this may go to the question of familiarity and the need to build context slowly and thoroughly when working with less familiar literary choices. He named the character study activities as his favourite, "like, getting into the character and trying to understand motivations… I really liked the Voices in People's Heads activity, and trying to understand what people didn't understand in The Moonstone…trying to get who did it and what their motivations were" (personal communication).

Recognizing the five themes discussed in this chapter as core experiences for the autistic individual, which represent commonalities across a widely-varied heterogeneous neurotype, is the first step toward developing an inclusive approach to drama education with autistic students. The participants' response to the Story Wheel curriculum and recommendations for drama teachers working with autistic students will follow in the final chapter, along with recommendations for future research.

Chapter Six – Conclusion

Critical Autism Studies and Autistic Culture

The research question was designed to investigate the development of social ability and function, but did not take into account the controversy over the diagnostic criteria that are implicit in the term "development," as there must be the establishment of a baseline from which to *measure* development, and that baseline is rooted in the medical pathology model (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Instead, this ethnographic study belongs in the domain of critical autism studies, a term first proposed by Davidson and Orsini (2013) and embraced by researchers looking for a more inclusive research model (Begon & Billington, 2019; Chown et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2018). Woods et al. (2018) point out that "Autism Studies is intrinsically interdisciplinary" and that the field of critical autism studies "has to be interdisciplinary focusing on intersectionality, such as how culture contributes to certain interpretations of autism" (p. 4). Bagatell (2010) observed that "[v]iewing the practices of the autistic community through an enthnographic lens provides new perspectives on social occupations" (p. 51), a key consideration in this research project which uses ethnography to center the autistic voice and privilege the autistic view of social interactions. This dissertation strives to focus on intersectionality of communication and the role that drama education can play in bridging the communication gap between non-autistic and autistic communities.

At the center of this analysis is the issue of conversational *style*, as Tannen (2005) terms it, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the conflict between autistic and non-autistic styles. The question of conversational style has been investigated in recent research into rapport among autistic and non-autistic individuals (Crompton, Ropar, Evans-Williams et al., 2020; Crompton, Sharp, Axbey et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2020) along with studies into the impact of conversational style on impression formation in a social context (Dean et al., 2013; Geelhand et al., 2020; Shield et al., 2020). Social skills

interventions that attempt to correct the autistic person's conversational style into a more non-autistic pattern raises questions about the impact of such interventions on the mental health of autistic participants (Crompton, Hallett, Ropar, et al., 2020; Dean et al., 2013). Crompton, Hallett, Ropar, et al. (2020) point out that social situations which put the autistic individual into the position of having to "fit in" with the non-autistic majority or risk being marginalized and lose support are extremely stressful for the autistic person and can have a significant impact on their mental health. In their commentary on social skills training curricula, Bottema-Beutel, Park & Kim (2018) assert that the stigma attached to a person who is othered comes with an intense pressure to mask the apparently unacceptable traits that defined the Other and that "the effort involved in attempting to pass comes at a heavy psychological and interactional cost" (p. 959).

Milton's (2012) "double empathy problem," highlights the problem with my research question, which was worded to refer to "social literacy" or the ability to "read" a social situation, by problematizing the assumption that "there is a set of definable social norms and rules that exist for people to follow" (p. 884). By assigning normative values to non-autistic communication, not only is the autistic person declared to have an invisible disability and deficient social skills, but, in Milton's words, "the 'autistic voice' is made 'invisible' within the current culture of how knowledge is produced about 'autistic people', often excluding empowered 'autistic advocates' from the process" (p. 885).

To view autism as a culture defined by neurotype and communication styles reflects the current state of autism research as more autistic researchers are entering the field of psychology and more autistic voices are included in research design and execution. It follows, then, that if we regard autism as much a culture as a disability, much in the way that the deaf/Deaf community regards themselves as a culture, then what is called for is a shift away from social skills interventions intended to reduce autistic

traits and towards providing a space in which autistic and non-autistic people can learn to appreciate each other's socializing styles.

Drama-in-education and theatre can provide that space, referred to as "the third space" in post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), a concept finding traction with autism/performance researchers such as Shaughnessy (2013), who describes her performance studies project with autistic girls as a "play-based and person-centred approach," noting that "[o]ur engagement in modes of play was crucial to the responses we elicited as this is often neglected post-diagnosis in favour of skills-based and behavioural approaches to 'therapy'" (p. 331). Shaughnessy then goes on to observe that, "As process-based performance, our work is situated in *a third space in between making and performance*, challenging the distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic in its form and content" [italics added] (p. 331).

Developing cross-cultural opportunities for understanding while not attempting to erase autistic traits can be considered "Inclusionary Othering" as described by Canales (2000) in her reconceptualization of Othering as positive or negative and avoid the fishbowl effect which many autistic researchers and writers have objected to (Milton, 2014; Michael, 2021). By regarding austim as a culture to be included in non-autistic society, therefore, the approach to social skills education can be modelled upon the many examples of multicultural curricula used in all levels of education, particularly in the arts where communication across cultures is often central to the pedagogical design and where drama educators have made many valuable contributions (Clarke et al., 1997; Nelson, 2021; O'Toole, 1992; Wilkinson, 2015).

Drama-in-education can provide the safe space for participants of various cultures to collaborate and learn to communicate with each other and to develop an understanding and respect for each others' cultures, and in the same way, drama classes can also provide that space for autistic and non-autistic participants to learn to appreciate each other's conversational styles, sense of humour, varied interests,

and social concerns. The participants of the Story Wheel project gave important feedback about the structure of the curriculum and the individual lesson plans, and their feedback combined with the observations discussed in previous chapters allow me to conclude with a number of suggestions for future work with the curriculum and for including autistic students in drama classes, especially those using story-drama or drama-in-education pedagogical structures.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the analysis of the video data and the contributions of the participants, the following points are important to keep in mind for successful inclusion of autistic students in a drama class or theatre production:

General Rapport

Presume competence, especially when working with adults. They will come to the drama workshop with a variety of life experiences and knowledges, and will have spent years observing social interactions and enjoying their own forms of socialization, both in person and online. The participants in The Story Wheel all had at least a high school education and were well-read and curious about the different social settings of the literary drama structures and their characters' motivations.

Accept all contributions to the discussion, even if it seems off-topic to you – remember that the first rule of improvisation is "Yes, and" (Spolin, 1999). Autistic individuals use analogies to build context and make meaning, and their "off-topic" comment may be their way of making sense of the current topic. By engaging with their comment, the facilitator can help them develop their understanding or learn that the contributed idea, while related to the topic in a tangential fashion, would lead the discussion in a direction that is not useful to the workshop or lesson plan at hand. The facilitator can then validate the contribution by acknowledging the tangential relationship to the topic and suggest

that it is a tangent for another day but would lead the workshop too far afield relative to the workshop structure for the day.

Be patient with hesitant and self-editing speakers, allow them to finish their thought. Often a research participant would start talking before they had completely thought out their idea, because they were eager to contribute and perhaps needed to speak the thought while it was fresh in mind. The result would be several false starts at completing the sentence as they edited their idea as they spoke or even simply repeating a few words several times until they were confident about what to say next. Allowing students the space and time to formulate their thoughts and articulate them to their satisfaction shows them that their contributions are valued and welcome.

Be aware of the sensory environment – temperature, acoustics, furniture. A classroom space with temperature control is ideal, as is comfortable but movable furniture. Find quiet places for the small groups to work so that the noise from other groups' talking is not disturbing, and if that is not possible in the workshop space, opt for whole group activities whenever possible. An intake form with information about sensory triggers and/or sensitivities would be beneficial to the facilitation team when designing the workshop experience, from choosing a location to creating lesson plans.

Provide a quiet corner for students to retreat to if they need a breather, with stim toys, weighted blankets and water. This can be a place where they can still watch the class to maintain a sense of engagement, or a place removed from the classroom space that offers a complete break from sensory overwhelm or emotional overload and allows the participant to self-regulate and regain their composure. If a student frequently seeks out the quiet space, it is a signal that the environment and/or interpersonal interactions need to be evaluated and addressed so that the drama classroom is inclusive for all participants.

Lesson Planning and Teaching

Allow time for world-building and character-building. The dramatic conventions approach to drama-in-education is an ideal pedagogy for autistic participants with its emphasis on context- and narrative-building activities. Keeping in mind that the autistic mind needs to create an understanding of context at the conscious level should guide the plans for the workshop facilitation, and spending time on creating the world of the story will give the participants more confidence to engage with the more metaphorical or improvisatory activities to follow.

Offer material for the story drama in a variety of modes to make it accessible to all – that is, a variety of literacy levels as well as aural and visual delivery modes – and be prepared to send out materials in advance if it will help the participants feel secure and confident with the story going into the workshop. Picture books and graphic novels are an ideal source of multi-modal storytelling, and video clips (with captioning) can also help with building context in a short amount of time. These are strategies that are well-documented in curriculum guides for elementary and middle school teachers (Clarke et al., 1997; Miller & Saxton, 2004; Neelands & Goode, 2000; Nelson, 2021) and can have a strong positive impact on autistic adult participants as well.

Allow time for an activity to develop, perhaps longer than you expect. As the participants work on building context for their own understanding, it may take some time for each participant to grasp the learning objective of the activity and to fully engage with it.

Balance small groups so that there is a strong actor or a peer with a strong imagination in each group to model improvisatory engagement and encourage others to participate. Having a more experienced peer facilitator can encourage shy participants to become more engaged as they have a model to follow without the power imbalance of a didactic teacher/student relationship.

Be sure that all participants are invited to contribute in every activity and discussion.

Even if they decline at first, the continued invitations will let them know that drama class is a safe space and that their autonomy is respected but their contributions will be valued.

Include topics and skill-building activities that address the common disabilities of the autistic population, rather than focusing on "normalizing" or "teaching" social behaviour, such as:

- Movement activities can be designed to assist with proprioception, or the sense of one's body moving through space, including mime and dance-based activities.
- Character building and improvisation activities can be designed to address difficulties with perceiving and identifying emotional states by explicitly naming and performing the emotional state within the fictional context, followed by discussions to generalize the concept.
- Text-based scene studies, open scenes, and improvisations can be used to work on recognizing and using Lakoff's three Rules of Rapport (Tannen, 2005) within a fictional context, experimenting with power relationships between the characters and discovering how that affects the choice of rapport mode.

While it is true that new trends are emerging in autism research as more authentically autistic researchers are entering the field and some research journals have publically shifted their focus to re-defining autism as a neurodivergent way of being or even a culture (Pellicano & Mandy, 2018), the majority of autism research literature that still informs many social skills interventions is rooted in the behaviourist theories of past decades. The findings of this project, especially when seen through the lens of context-blindness theory (Vermeulen, 2012), stand in stark contrast to social skills interventions based on the medical model of deficits, especially those that use drama as a pedagogical strategy. By following the above recommendations to ensure an inclusive drama classroom, autistic individuals can derive a great deal of enjoyment, satisfaction, and learning from drama participation, especially when

integrated with non-autistic individuals with the goal of learning to understand and respect each others' forms of communication.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study was limited in its scope and size due to the choice to focus on autistic adults over nineteen years of age and without co-occuring intellectual disabilities or other neurodisabilities. There were also limitations due to the nature of the project and pre-existing familiarity among the participants, which produced a particular selection of participants rather than a randomized sample. The drama framework attracted participants who had either had previous experience with drama participation or were interested in pursuing such an experience, so the prospect of participating in drama attracted a group of participants with a predilection for the subject matter and approach. Three of the participants knew each other from the local meet-up group, and two other participants were siblings, so their comfort level with social interaction was influenced by this familiarity.

This project was not funded by outside sources and therefore is not subject to any conflict of interest.

The next stage of this particular research project should be to offer the Story Wheel curriculum to various groups of participants to observe the impact of drama participation in this exploratory fictional framework on their conversations and rapport with each other. Future projects using The Story Wheel could include working with:

1. a heterogeneous group of adult participants, both non-autistic and autistic
2. autistic individuals in a variety of younger age groups
3. non-speaking autistic participants with a variety of speech/communication abilities, who may use assistive communication devices or whose speech abilities are inconsistent
4. twice-exceptional (gifted plus neurodisability) school-age students

5. a neurodiverse group of actors with various (dis)abilities
6. young autistic children and their parents or caregivers

In Conclusion

An ethnographic reading of the workshop transcripts brought to light the participants' deep interest in social justice and equity, their authentic behaviour motivated by unfettered impulses, their lightning-quick ability to make connections between one narrative and another in their memory, and their playful word-association style of conversation that is by definition social.

The final words of this dissertation belong to the participants, in their answers to the standardized questions of the post-project interviews (Appendix II). When asked, *Do you feel that these stories, in any way, help you understand things about social interaction that you didn't know before?*, Patrick's answer sums up the responses from the rest of the participants:

Some things, yeah. Different ideas and things they said got me thinking about what they would think and feel in certain situations. Especially since our group was so diverse in personality while all being autistic we got a wide range of opinions and viewpoints.

Gloria's poetic answer to another standard post-project interview question (Appendix II), *What do you wish people knew more or better about you in a social situation?*, was reiterated by the group as a whole, and her words provide the perfect summary for an ethnographic study of autistic adults, reminding us to centre the authentic voice of the research participants:

I want them to know that I love people, I want to make them happy.
I would especially want them to believe I'm one of them.
Not, like, see me as a strange special-needs person who confuses them,
but as a happy-go-lucky kind of girl who is just like everybody else.

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APPENDIX I

ORIENTATION INFORMATION FOR RECRUITMENT BROCHURE

THE STORY WHEEL: A 12-part DRAMA WORKSHOP

What We Will Do

In this Drama Workshop, we will experience a variety of heroes, villians, tragedies, and comedies to investigate social behaviour choices in many different situations.

Each class meeting will be based on one particular story, and the participants will be invited to explore the world of the story through drama activities – still portraits, soundscapes, character work, short scenes, and mime – and other art forms, such as drawing, crafting, writing, and movement.

The drama activities will invite participants to take on a role within the world of the story, such as a villager in Robin Hood's Nottingham or a scientist in Dr. Jekyll's Victorian London. Some activities will be completed "in role," and others will allow the participants to step "out of role" and consider the world they have been visiting.

The Structure of the Class Time

While the activities in each class will vary, the structure of the class period will be constant:

1. Check-in – circle discussion to share updates and news
2. Introduction to the story – led by the teacher
3. Entering into the story – taking on a role
4. Investigating the characters of the story -- in role
5. Developing ideas, opinions, perspectives -- in role
6. Reflection and discussion – out of role

Participant Information

Each class period will be 2 hours long, and will have a break for snacks and drinks, a trip to the washroom, and to get some quiet time if needed. Participants may take a break at any time if they are feeling overwhelmed or approaching sensory overload. Participants are welcome to bring favourite stim or comfort objects if they find that it helps them feel calm and able to focus.

APPENDIX II

THE STORY WHEEL RESEARCH PROJECT

INTAKE INTERVIEW AND POST-PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

PART ONE

PARTICIPANT INTAKE INFORMATION

The information gathered in this questionnaire will be used to build a profile of each participant. The profile information will be available to all research participants for these reasons: 1) to build a baseline for observational data analysis; 2) to gain an understanding of the participant's needs, preferences, and triggers; and 3) to collect the participant's contact information, emergency contacts and health-related considerations.

Participants will be offered the choice of responding via email, text messaging or in person, so that they can respond in the mode that is most comfortable for them.

A. CONTACT INFORMATION

NAME:

Preferred mode of contact: ____ phone ____text ____email ____online messaging service

Contact details (phone number, email address, etc.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

1. Name:

Phone:

Email:

2. Name:

Phone:

Email:

HEALTH INFORMATION

Do you have any health concerns or conditions (food allergies, medical conditions or learning disabilities) that we should know about?

The classes will include a snack break. Do you have any dietary restrictions or preferences we should know about?

B. PERSONAL PROFILE

Which pronouns would you prefer we use when addressing you or referring to you?

What do you really enjoy learning about? What are your special interests?

What is your highest level of education?

Do you have a job? Is it paid or volunteer? The drama classes will be on Sunday afternoons; will your work schedule allow you to participate in the project?

C. AUTISM CONDITION

Do you prefer being described as “autistic” or “a person with autism”?

Do you have a clinical diagnosis, or do you self-identify as autistic?

How old were you when you were diagnosed, or realized and self-identified as autistic?

1. Sensitivities:

Do you have trouble handling loud noise? Bright light?

Are any foods that you avoid because you can’t stand the texture?

Are there certain textures of clothing you can’t bear? How do you feel about tags on the back of your shirt, or wool sweaters, for example?

Do you have favourite sensations that you find calming or enjoyable, such as squishy balls or weighted blankets?

2. Overwhelm:

Would you like to give us any advice about helping you if you feel overwhelmed and are struggling to maintain calm in class?

Would it help to have a quiet place to retreat to?

Do you have any favorite stim toys or comfort objects that you would like to bring to class?

How often do you think you would need a break?

Is there anything that we can do to make you less likely to feel overwhelmed?

D. DRAMA AND STORYTELLING

What interested you about this project?

Do you have any previous experience with drama and/or theatre productions? Please describe.

What types of stories do you enjoy -- such as action-adventure, mystery, horror, comedy, sci-fi, fantasy?

Which characters do you connect with in a story, or a video game? What is it about those characters that draws you to them?

Do you connect with characters that you think are autistic? Can you name examples of characters that you think are autistic?

Do you have a favourite story, fairy tale, or book?

PART TWO

SOCIAL COMPETENCE & CONFIDENCE

1. What kind of social activities do you enjoy?

    a. Do you enjoy going to movies with other people?
    b. Do you enjoy parties?
    c. Do you enjoy playing sports or other kinds of games?

2. How do you prefer to socialize with people – online chat, text messaging, email, on the phone, in person, or a combination? Does it change depending how you are feeling emotionally?

3. Do you enjoy talking to people one on one, or do you prefer to be part of a group?

4. Do you like to be in situations where all you do is talk to people, or do you like to have an activity to do while you socialize?

5. Do you have difficulty interpreting any of the following kinds of social communication:

a. Facial expressions

b. Vocal inflections (high, low, loud, soft)

c. Tone of voice (the difference between one voice and another)

d. Gestures and body signals (e.g., folding arms together across the chest)

e. Figures of speech (e.g., "you're pulling my leg")

f. Sarcasm – using exaggeration or saying the opposite of what is meant (e.g., "Oh, sure, I don't mind this cold weather at all. I always love an excuse to wear 3 sweaters and a ski cap to bed.")

g. Metaphors to describe something or someone (e.g., "she was a force of nature

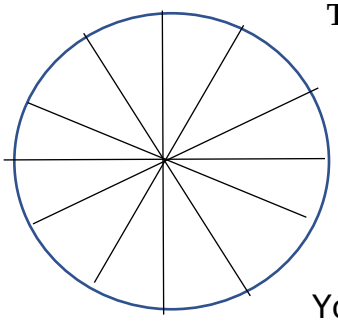
6. What do you wish you knew or understood better about peoples' general expectations for behaviour in social situations?

7. What do you wish other people knew or understood about *you* in social situations?

You will be asked to complete Part Two of this questionnaire again upon completion of the Story Wheel Drama Workshop.

APPENDIX III

THE STORY WHEEL PROJECT CONSENT FORM



The Story Wheel Project

Participant Information for Consent

You are invited to participate in a study entitled

THE STORY WHEEL PROJECT

that is being conducted by Nancy Curry.

Nancy Curry is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Victoria, and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone or email: [redacted] or c[redacted]@uvic.ca

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for an interdisciplinary degree in Applied Theatre and Curriculum and Instruction. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Monica Prendergast (Curriculum and Instruction) and Warwick Dobson (Applied Theatre). You may contact my supervisors at:

Dr. Prendergast: [redacted]@uvic.ca

Prof. Dobson: [redacted]@uvic.ca

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research project is to test a drama course designed to allow autistic adults to investigate social situations and behaviours by entering into the world of a fictional story in character. By taking on a role within the story, such as a villager in Sherwood Forest or a shopkeeper in Victorian London, you will have the opportunity to interact with classic stories of Western literature and look at social situations from many angles through a variety of drama activities. Following the drama, you will join the class in discussing the discoveries, observations, and conclusions that you have made. As the researcher, I am interested in the participants' response to the stories and their perception of the social situations illustrated by the dramas.

IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

Research of this type is important because, until very recently, autism research has been focused on children and on modifying their behaviour. Results from that research have relied upon reports from teachers, parents, and siblings rather than from the children themselves. This research project focuses on adults who identify

as autistic, who can speak for themselves, and whose viewpoints are central to the research results. This research project focuses on investigating the behaviours in human nature, rather than on modifying the behaviour of the autistic individual. By participating in this pilot project, you will be providing feedback and suggestions that will be used to refine and improve the drama course for future use by autism centres and autistic adult social groups.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have expressed an interest in drama, literature, role-playing video games, and/or social interaction opportunities, and have responded to the Call For Participants. You are over 19 years old, can communicate with verbal language, have no known cognitive disability, and identify as autistic.

WHAT IS INVOLVED

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include:

- Two (2) meetings with the researcher – one before the classes start and one after the classes conclude – for 1-1.5 hours each.
- Attending 12 class meetings, once a week for 2.5 hours each, located at the [redacted], [redacted] Street, Victoria
- Arriving at the class location 10 minutes before class starts
- Participating in drama activities in small and large groups
- Participating in activities that include art, writing, and crafting
- Participating in group discussions

Research methods during the project will include:

- Observation notes taken by the researcher and research assistants
- **Audio-video recordings** made by research assistants and the researcher on digital devices (iPads, iPhones, Android tablets, Android phones) with your permission (see below)
- **Photographs** taken of moments in the dramas, with your permission
- Collection and preservation of all materials created by the participants, such as lists, drawings, charts, and writings, with your permission

USE OF DATA

This research project is interested in two things – what you **do** in the class and what you **say** about it. "Data" means the various ways your participation will be recorded, as listed above, which tells us what you *do*.

The audio-video recordings, photographs, written notes and drawings/writings/crafts will be reviewed by the researcher to discover how you:

- interact with class members
- choose to participate in the class
- get frustrated
- have a good time
- show the 4 Cs of social interaction: communication, cooperation, collaboration, and compromise

and whether any of those change over the course of the drama workshop.

INCONVENIENCE

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including transportation to the class location and schedule conflicts with your other obligations.

You will also be asked to respect the privacy of other participants and refrain from discussing the details of the class activities with individuals outside of the research project.

RISKS

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research, and they include:

- Working with unfamiliar people and having to adjust and compromise with them.
- Becoming overwhelmed or frustrated to the point that it triggers a meltdown.
- Finding some activities difficult to perform.

To prevent and/or deal with these risks the following steps will be taken:

- You will be allowed to bring stim toys or comfort objects that will help you stay calm and focused.
- You will be allowed to bring a care worker, if that is part of your daily interaction with the world, but they will not be allowed to participate in the drama activities.

- A reduced-sensory space will be available to you, furnished with the calming stim objects that you prefer, based on your pre-project interview. You will be allowed to leave the class at any time if you need a quiet moment to let go

of frustration and find calm, accompanied by a research assistant if you wish.

- You will be encouraged to bring up any conflicts with other participants to the researcher, and conflicts will be worked out as they arise.

- A break will be scheduled into the class session so that every participant can have a snack, a drink, a quiet time, and a chance to visit the washroom.

- Alternatives will be offered if there are any activities that you find difficult or impossible, so that you always have a way to be involved in the activity. (such as choosing a designated writer or artist for the group)

- Contact information for at least one emergency contact will be obtained, and that person may be contacted if you are in distress.

BENEFITS

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:

- A greater understanding of social behaviour for you, the participant.

- A greater understanding of the way in which autistic adults interpret social interactions.

- The opportunity to contribute to the design of an educational and social experience for autistic adults and young people.

- The publication of the research results in academic journals that will reach many clinicians and educators in the fields of autism research and drama education.

COMPENSATION

All participants will receive reimbursement for travel expenses, such as bus tickets or HandiDart fees, a catered snack and beverage buffet at each class meeting, and a $50 Amazon gift card to thank them for their participation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. This does not affect your eligibility for compensation, and you will still receive the Amazon gift card.

If you do withdraw from the study, your data, such as audio-video recordings or photographs, will be used only for studying the other participants in a group activity that included you if you give permission.

To withdraw, you will notify the researcher and sign a form indicating your wish to withdraw from the project, the date of your last class, and your permission to use the audio-video recordings and photographs that include your image for studying the other participants in a group activity.

ONGOING CONSENT

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will provide you with a short description of the drama workshop plan for each class and ask for your signature to indicate consent at the beginning of each class meeting.

ANONYMITY

In terms of protecting your privacy, your name **will not** be used in the data analysis. You may choose your own alias, or the researcher will choose one for you, which will represent your data in the analysis.

Identifying information that **will** be used by the researcher are age, gender, drama/role-play game experience, and story preferences.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by storing the digital data in a secure data storage account at the University of Victoria. Only the researcher and any research assistants who are working on data analysis will have access to the secure data storage account. All other artefacts will be kept by the researcher in a locked storage unit, accessible only by the researcher.

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways:

- **PhD dissertation** – critical analysis of the data collected, looking for trends, concepts and reflections from the participants
- **Journal article** – a summary of the project and its results submitted to a professional periodical, maintaining the aliases of the participants.
- **Conference presentation** – a summary of the project and its process presented to professionals in autism research, drama research, and gifted education.
- **Three-Minute Thesis Competition** – an event held annual at UVic for its graduate students, which challenges us to explain our research in plain language within a three-minute time limit.

COMMERCIAL USE OF RESULTS

This research is the first step in a course development process that may eventually lead to a publication, however, this research project will **not** be directly used for a commercial product.

DISPOSAL OF DATA

Data from this study will be disposed of in 2 years after the conclusion of the study. It will be kept for this length of time to allow for the completion of the critical analysis.

CONTACTS

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include:

Warwick Dobson, dept. of Theatre [redacted]@uvic.ca

Monica Prendergast, dept. of Curriculum & Instruction [redacted]@uvic.ca

Sarah Macoun, dept. of Psychology [redacted]@uvic.ca

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria ([redacted] or ethics@uvic.ca).

THE STORY WHEEL -- CONSENT FORM

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant (Print) *Signature* *Date*

Consent to visual recording of images (please initial to indicate consent)

- Videos may be taken of me for: Analysis _____Dissemination*_____

- Photos may be taken of me for: Analysis _____Dissemination* _____

*Note: even if no names are used, you may be recognizable if visual images are shown in a conference presentation or journal article.

Consent to respect the privacy of other participants by not discussing class activities outside of the workshop setting. **_____**

Consent to allow research team to contact emergency contacts in the event that I am in distress and/or unable to continue with class _____