“LADIES! LORDS! Let us please start
the meeting! I think you and I can all
agree that we are sick of this blood-
shed that has been going on. I had
threatened death if this should happen
again.” The speaker is a theatre teach-
er, but she’s not in a theatre class. She
is addressing her ninth grade English
class in role, using process drama.

Maybe you’ve fretted that your Eng-
lish classes (or classes in history or
math or virtually any other subject) are
not as active or engaging as your the-
atre classes. You’ve heard of process
drama but you’re not sure how to plan
it. What if your non-theatre students
don’t get it? Will they even know how
to participate in a drama activity?

The intention of this article is to
walk you past some of those concerns
by describing, minute by minute, what
goes on in an English class process
drama investigation of the confl
ict in
Romeo and Juliet.

Process drama defined
Process drama is a broad term for
various strategies that teachers use
to engage students in dramatic situ-
ations outside of theatre—to get
them to participate in a process,
not to produce a performance. The
teacher-in-role strategy requires the
teacher to play a part and interact
with the students (who may also
be in role or acting as themselves)
in an imagined scenario. In role,
the teacher questions, summarizes,
challenges, and engages the stu-
dents in a dramatic context that
promotes thinking, problem-solv-
ing, and language use. The teacher-
in-role keeps the drama moving,
encourages student involvement,
and maintains order.

In their book Planning Process
Drama: Enriching Teaching and
Learning, Pamela Bowell and Brian
S. Heap offer five key principles.

- Identify the targeted theme/learning area.
- Create a dramatic context—the specific fictional circumstance to explore the theme.
- Decide on roles for the teacher and the students.
- Determine the drama’s frame—a collective concern, an impetus for participating in the dramatic circumstance.
- Choose strategies—ways of making process drama happen.

Here’s how Sarah approached her planning.

Theme/learning area. Sarah
teaches in a large sub-
urban public high school.
Her Curriculum Guide Com-
mon Task for the ninth grade unit
on Romeo and Juliet reads, “Perform
a scene from the play, adapting the
setting or style to enhance a theme
or idea.” Sarah felt that an imagined
improvised scene would satisfy this
goal.

“Seventy-four percent of our
school’s students qualify for free or
reduced lunch, and many come from
tough home situations, so engage-
ment and motivation are crucial to
their success,” she wrote later. “My
previous approach to this assign-
ment—facilitating a discussion and as-
signing an essay—resulted in only the
same high-flyers thinking critically.
Whenever I incorporated process dra-
ma to engage students in prewriting
activities, I noticed increased invest-
ment, especially among the ‘diffi-
cult students,’ so I felt optimistic about a
Romeo and Juliet process drama.”

Context. To engage students in ad-
dressing the issue of blame in Romeo
and Juliet, Sarah imagined a meeting
of the citizens of Verona that occurs
after the play ends.

Roles. Sarah played Prince Esca-
lus, the ruler of Verona—an actual

BY ROSALIND FLYNN
AND SARAH FORMAN

34 TEACHING THEATRE
Framing the narrative

A teacher-in-role strategy with ‘Romeo and Juliet’

character in the play. She cast her students as Verona’s lords and ladies. Her role as the prince conferred status, her right to be an arbiter, and ways to compel student involvement. Casting students as members of the educated, wealthy class would prompt them to elevate their language and critical thinking, assume roles quite different from themselves, and participate safely.

Frame. Any successful drama needs conflict, so Sarah had to determine how to create tension. Thus, the meeting called by Prince Escalus is not just a pleasant gathering. Its purpose is to voice and challenge ideas, assign blame for the recent deaths, and explore how the feud began.


Stills from the video “The Teacher-in-Role Drama Strategy with High School Students” using Romeo and Juliet in a task aligned with the Common Core.
Preparing students
Students need some frontloading activities to provide them with background information and help them commit to their roles. Sarah created a form called “Citizens of Verona Meeting—Who’s to Blame?” which explains the dramatic context (p. 37).

Sarah begins the class session by previewing the upcoming activity: “So we will be in a meeting that Prince Escalus has called of the citizens of Verona,” she tells her students. “Together in role, we will debate and decide who is to blame for this terrible tragedy.” Then she gives the students time to prepare by reading, discussing, and completing the form. In groups, the students share ideas and refer back to the text for information and evidence. Sarah circulates among them.

To further build belief, the students create names and titles for the characters they will play and print them on paper.

Warm-ups
Sarah leads a warm-up focused on helping students fully embody their characters. “Show me how you think lords and ladies of Verona would stand if they were in a meeting with a prince.” She asks the students to freeze in their poses, complimenting the ones who are committing to the warm-up. Her positive and sometimes humorous affirmations encourage the hesitant students. This groundwork is crucial with teenagers who need to feel safe to take on a role.

Sarah explains that in the drama, citizens will stand up to speak and adjust their voices to address the prince. “What do you think lords and ladies would do or say?” she asks. Students discuss using objects to tap their desks, clearing their throats, and addressing Sarah differently. “So ladies and gentlemen, you will no longer address me as Miss Forman. You will address me as either Your Grace, Your Highness, or Your Majesty.” Sarah has the students practice, in unison, saying, “Ahem, Your Majesty!” accompanied by whatever gesture each chooses to incorporate. They rehearse calling one another “My Lord” or “My Lady” and using a genteel handclap to indicate that they agree with points made. Sarah approves a request to use a British accent, even though the setting is Verona, Italy.

Sarah asks students individually to say “The cow jumped over the moon,” first as a normal high school student would and then as a lord or lady would. These warm-ups, rather than being time-eaters, contribute to the students’ buy-in and participation. Some students engage more enthusiastically than others, but no one is bored or detached. There’s a growing sense that maybe today’s class will be fun.

Sarah explains that they will begin the drama by mingling and introducing themselves. She asks, “How do you think you would greet each other?” A student suggests curtseying and bowing. Sarah agrees and adds, “Remember—the handshake was not really a thing at this time.”

The students make their nameplates, creating character titles like Lady Mimi and Lord Manchester, and then Sarah makes it explicit that this activity is considered a Common Task that relates directly to the curriculum. “I do expect everyone to please speak at least once.”

Conducting the drama
Sarah gets into role. Role in this case does not mean a perfectly prepared characterization. Instead, think of it as adopting the attitude of someone who will be the dramatic catalyst for engaging students in examining issues. She turns her back to the students and dons a hat. She turns around, clearly signaling the start of the drama in a slightly British accent. “Greetings, greetings, ladies and lords of Verona. Please, please, please come and greet each other. We have some time now before we start the meeting.” (For clarity, dialogue that Sarah delivers in role will be rendered in italic type.)

The warm-ups have done their job: the students participate. Some commit more strongly than others, of course, and many forget and shake hands instead of bowing or curtseying. Sarah, as Prince Escalus, joins in the mingling, modeling how to respond in role.

The meeting begins at about the eleven-minute mark on the video. Prince Escalus pounds the lectern. “Ladies! Lords! Let us please start the meeting!” They take their seats. “I think you and I can all agree that we are sick of this bloodshed that has been going on.”

Sarah/Prince Escalus explains the purpose of the meeting, incorporating words like “indeed” and “kinsman” into her elevated dialogue. She reminds them that the stakes are high. “I had threatened death if this should happen again.”

Her commitment to her role is apparent—not overdone, but it communicates that she is taking this drama seriously. “We need to have justice served and we need to have this feuding stopped.”

While waiting for a student to willingly enter the dramatic context, she continues speaking and rephrasing, giving students time to commit. “So, does anyone want to offer up who they think should ultimately be to blame and punished so that this feud is gone forever?”

Lord Manchester stands to accuse Benvolio, quoting him, “How about we go and check out… examine other beauties.” (A direct reference to the text!) Prince Escalus responds and affirms Manchester’s contribution.

The Prince does not have to ask a follow-up question because Lord Watermelon joins in the debate. “The illiterate servant who came to Benvolio—would he not be to blame for this?”

To get this lord to elaborate, the Prince asks, “Can you tell us why—why should this illiterate servant be to blame?” (Whenever possible, rather than provide missing information, the teacher-in-role solicits it from the students-in-role.)

“Because Benvolio got the information from the illiterate servant, did he not?” To keep the drama moving and give students time to think, Sarah summarizes the two accusations.
Citizens of Verona meeting—who’s to blame?

Prince Escalus has called a meeting of the city's citizens. He is fed up with the Montague/Capulet feud and wants to put a final end to it all. He needs to find the root of the problem. However, punishing all involved will only cause more bloodshed, and punishing only one individual involved will not solve any problems. He wants to find who is to blame and punish them justly for their cause of Tybalt's, Mercutio's, and now Romeo's and Juliet's deaths. He is also trying to get to another root of this problem: how did this feud even begin in the first place?

Together, in role as citizens of Verona, we will debate and decide who is to blame for this terrible tragedy.

**Directions:** Before you begin, with your group, write down at least one detailed reason why each character could be blamed for the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio. This needs to be supported with two to three quotes from the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Reasons for Blame?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sampson, Gregory, and Abraham</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romeo</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercutio</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Benvolio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lady Montague</td>
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<td>Lady Capulet</td>
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<td>Paris</td>
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<td>Friar Laurence</td>
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<td>Nurse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate Servant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Prince</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Lady Snow rises and speaks softly, “I believe that Lord Capulet was more to blame because…”

The Prince interrupts her. “I’m sorry. I don’t think Lord Noodles over here can hear you. He’s pretty hard of hearing, right?”

Lord Noodles promptly cooperates by yelling, “What? I can’t hear you!”

Lady Snow begins again, projecting her voice more strongly and blaming Lord Capulet for giving the invitation to the servant in the first place. Then Lord Jeebus (who is female) places the blame on Paris, who caused problems by wanting to marry Juliet.

One of the goals of the teacher-in-role is to look for ways to involve less active students. Sarah notices a student nodding his head and asks him if he agrees that Paris is to blame. The student thinks that he will be able to get by with a simple “No,” but she presses him to justify his thinking. He stands and accuses Romeo.

She probes further and elicits greater language use and participation.

Lady Melanie stands next to disagree about Romeo because people don’t choose to fall in love. She blames Tybalt, who was always looking for a fight. “He loves all violence, and he hates all Montagues.”

Student participation now becomes more rapid. Lady Mimi “half-agrees” with Lady Melanie, but she blames Lord Capulet. He allowed Romeo and Benvolio to stay at the party, which angered Tybalt and led to the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. He is also forcing a marriage upon Juliet, who chooses death over marriage to Paris.

Madame Dumbledore’s assertion that Benvolio is to blame elicits a gasp from the opposite side of the room. “Despite his peaceful tendencies, I believe that he is to blame because he convinced Romeo to go to the party.”

The teacher-in-role listens intently, summarizes remarks, and then interrupts herself to allow Lord London to contribute. “The Nurse could have stopped all this confusion with the forbidden love between Romeo and Juliet. She could have stopped them from being married.”

Lady Melanie disagrees because the Nurse was just following the orders of the girl she serves. She also refutes the idea that Benvolio introduced Romeo to Juliet, because he disappeared and the couple met on their own.

Lord Jeebus rises to challenge an accusation that Lady Melanie denies making, giving the prince the opportunity to intervene. “Ladies and lords, let’s be civil here. We do need to come to a good conclusion.”

Lord Jeebus then places the blame on Romeo and Juliet, and teacher-in-role helps by summarizing. “Because they are trying to escape these lives that they’ve been put into and they’re unhappy about.”

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Participation has been strong for the first eleven minutes, but Sarah wants to encourage more involvement, so she delays the response of a student who has already contributed and follows up on a comment about Romeo and Juliet’s attraction. “Does anybody else agree about this love between Romeo and Juliet? How many of you think and agree with Lord Jeebus that it seems to be only an illusion or a means of escape for both of them?”

This prompts a brief discussion of whether the love was puppy love. “How many of you lords and ladies loved your husbands or wives when you married? How many of you married by choice?” The Prince’s question prompts some laughter, but Sarah stays in role and rephrases the question. “How many of you lords and ladies were in an arranged marriage?” Several students raise their hands.

Madame Dumbledore interrupts with a grand pronouncement. “I have a new conclusion about who’s to blame. It’s not just one person.” This remark prompts gasps from the gathered citizens. “It’s two gruesome people…. Both families—Capulet and Montague—are to blame, because if it wasn’t for their history and their issues, none of this would have happened—none of Tybalt’s bloodthirstiness for another family…. Romeo and Juliet would have been married normally. They wouldn’t have to keep it secret.”

The drama is going well, but Sarah, in role, wants to involve more students. “Ladies and lords who have not been able to speak today, do you have something to add to what these two women contend?”

Lady Barrow speaks up for the first time and declares that they need to discover what initial strife caused the feud between the two families. “Once we can figure that out, then we can look at who’s to blame.”

The Prince goes with Lady Barrow’s recommendation (and with this smooth segue into a stated lesson goal) and follows her lead. “Lady Barrow has a great point. Let’s try to figure out what started this feud in...
the first place…. Do any of you remember?” Her question is not one that is answered within the play. It is contained in the larger drama the students are engaged in, an invitation to imagine and make inferences. The improvisational nature of this dramatic encounter is apparent. The teacher has invited the students to enter the fictional world, but once the invitation has been accepted, as process drama expert Cecily O’Neill says, they can respond, ask or answer questions, and oppose or transform the circumstances. The teacher’s challenge is to improvise with the students-in-role even when the drama does not proceed as envisioned.

Lady Kaylonday stands and speaks for the first time. “Back when I was a young girl in Verona, I used to hear that Lord Capulet may have seen Lady Montague a few times.” Her voice is dramatic, she accompanies her revelation by stroking her chin, and what she says evokes gasps and groans from those assembled.

“Are you implying that Lady Montague may have not been faithful? Ooh, scandalous! Interesting.” The teacher-in-role extends the inquiry. “Did you all hear any more rumors around Verona about why this feud has been happening?”

Lord Manchester offers an explanation that involves confusion over the theft of a fishing rod six generations ago. This is a bit far-fetched, but the teacher-in-role stays in character, accepts the idea, and then redirects attention to a new speaker. By this point—twenty minutes into the drama—many students are eager to offer their ideas.
Lord Jeebus encourages Madame Dumbledore to offer her perspective: “The two families are related to Macbeth and Hamlet.” This elicits appreciative laughter, but Sarah stays in character. “Oh, I’ve heard of these rumors before.”

“Macbeth—Montague,” Dumbledore says, emphasizing the M’s of both surnames. “Hamlet—Capulet!” she continues. Her observation earns a chorus of approval and applause.

The Prince warns about putting stock into conspiracy theories, but—remaining in role—endorsesthe end, too. “That is some sound evidence there!” The teacher can address any nonsensical or downright incorrect information after the drama.

Other ideas are tossed around—about affairs, wayward girls, and arranged marriages at the root of the feud. Then Lady Mimi’s perspective casts the motives of the Prince into doubt. She wonders if the Prince banished Romeo to keep him safe while everyone else endured punishment.

Sarah picks up on the accusation. “Are you implying treason?”

The meeting has run close to twenty-seven minutes. Aware that the bell is about to ring, Sarah signals the end of the drama. “Well, lords and ladies, I will call you again so we can reconvene once I have thought all your suggestions through.” She bows. “I thank you very much for your advice.”

Using her natural tone of voice, she says, “All right. The Prince has just left the building,” and she turns her back and removes the hat.

Reflecting on the process drama

As is evident in the video and narrative of this session, process drama can head in unexpected directions. Students can play their roles minimally—responding more like the high school students they are than the characters of lords and ladies, and the contributions can become trivial. With repeated participation in process drama sessions, students get more comfortable with this unorthodox approach to learning, yielding higher-quality results.

Despite any deficits in the students’ commitments to their roles, what cannot be denied is their engagement in the lesson. Everyone in the classroom paid attention and at least thirteen of the twenty-four students made strong contributions to the discussion, often making direct references to the text to justify their claims. Energy in the room was high throughout the forty-minute class.

Two students interviewed after the process drama session endorsed this strategy in their high school English class:

“I love the use of drama in class because it really engages us students and you get into character. It’s really, really fun.”

“I would tell someone to use drama with students because they might find it entertaining—maybe travel to another world in their minds and use their imaginations in different ways, and it’s pretty entertaining when you do different things, pretend to be different people, and just escape from everyday life.”

Sarah, too, was definitely pleased: “I was so happy with the kids—they kept it going! The students also really got into the characters, which was great.”

Post-drama writing

The writing that Sarah’s students produced convinced her to keep process drama in her teaching repertoire, especially as a pre-reading strategy for challenging texts. As compared to essays from previous years—produced after only a discussion and the worksheet—the essays from this group of students showed greater critical thinking and more relevant and interesting textual analysis. And they were longer. Not only that, but most of the students actually submitted the written assignment. For Sarah, this was dramatic. “In a school where homework submission is generally around fifty percent, that’s a huge victory!” She’s already working on some new roles.