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# Narrative, drama and the compound stimulus\*

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## Abstract

This article is divided into six sections. It highlights the centrality of story to human existence, the key to drama's effectiveness as a change agent, and then explores the implications for young people and for the drama they create. Section three describes the theory that underpins the use of a "compound stimulus", a way of drawing participants into the fictional world and the exploration of specific stories. It also outlines the ways in which the compound stimulus should be used and provides case studies of its use. Finally, section six reflects on applications of the compound stimulus.

**Keywords:** *story, narrative, drama, compound stimulus, workshop*

## 1. The centrality of storying

Storying – the creation of narratives – is an indispensable aspect of human existence. As Barbara Hardy (1977) comments, it is "a fundamental act of mind transferred from life to art" (p. 12). Story permeates our whole existence for, without its organising frameworks, we would exist only in the moment of experience. Storying allows us to engage in three fundamental processes to:

- Organise momentary experience into a series of memories;
- Predict a future;
- Experience, vicariously through the stories of others, aspects of the world we ourselves do not experience.

The first gives rise to notions of who we are: identity rooted in memory. The second allows us to have hope, expectation and to organise our actions. The third forms the basis of much of our learning and is the source of most formal education.

### *Personal story*

The most fundamental psychological need humans have is that of knowing "who we are". Our personal identity is painstakingly built throughout our lives, and embedded in it are our notions of self-worth. David Novitz (1997) maintains that we construct our personal story much like an artist makes a work

of art, selecting and ordering experiences into a personal memory bank that becomes our signifier of identity. Much of what happens to us in life is deemed by our memory to be insignificant, and left on the cutting room floor as the "film" of who we are is continuously edited by us.

### *Meta-stories*

We move in a world that contains stories other than our own; in fact they constantly surround us. Some we elect to experience, such as the novel, film or TV programme, whilst others are as invisible as the air we breathe: national identity stories, the unspoken narrative of our family, social behaviour patterns that we absorb from life. Some of these are benign and consensual; others are created by sections of society with an aim in mind: for example, to demonise another nation, to support a political stance, to sell us something.

### *Intertextuality*

We are unavoidably affected by some of the stories we encounter. Certain of them, especially those that reinforce our own, personal story, attain the state of intertextuality, the active interrelationship of our personal story with another narrative. From this process comes the possible modification of the individual's personal story.

## 2. Young people and stories

The telling of stories is a major means by which adults represent the world to children, passing on the seminal stories that encourage knowledge, understanding, appropriate action and the tenets of moral behaviour. Where major commercial interests control the making and broadcasting of story, an unhealthy dominance of the narrative diet may result, true diversity may become stifled and consumers be encouraged to adopt global values and behaviour alien to their culture. Whilst the intertextuality of personal story and commercial narrative can be stimulating, it is also important to encourage children and adults to become producers of their own stories, and not just receivers of those of others. Given a free choice, I believe individuals choose to experience stories that have the most relevance for them, that have the greatest chance of productive interaction with "who they are".

### *Drama and story*

Participants in Drama in Education are encouraged to enter a fictional world. This world has similarities to that enjoyed by the child at free play. The difference is that the object of the play is chosen, usually consciously, by the leader and/or participants. The medium through which the object is modelled, the dramatic language, is deliberately acquired over time through the learning of skills. There is no doubt that drama leaders intend not only to make effective drama, but also to change attitudes, although they are often reluctant to admit it and see no reliable way of judging that attitude change has taken place (Somers, 1999). My research shows attitude change to be possible (Somers, 1996). Even though they are cautious in claiming positive change in attitude, teachers' implicit aim is to develop more humane, sensitive people and they become troubled if it is suggested that their students remain unchanged by drama experience, or even become more negative as a result of it (Somers, 1999).

### *Devices to get participants into the fictional world*

There is a huge variety of techniques to get participants into the fictional world of drama. Often, the stimulus used becomes less important as the drama ideas that the participants originate gain strength. The compound stimulus described in the first case study can be seen as a booster rocket that gets the main craft (the participants' dramatic story, its characters and the world they inhabit) into flight, before falling away. The energy and interest generated by the compound stimulus are crucial to ensuring participant involvement. It provides an initial strong

stimulation to the users' story-making powers and, once the latter are established, can serve as a continuing reference in the drama-making process.

## 3. The theory of the compound stimulus

All inanimate objects designed for personal use are redolent of their owners. A tool can suggest labour and the labourer; an item of clothing the wearer and their behaviour; a letter a motive for writing and a relationship. Individual artefacts have limited story-generating potential. The picture of a baby is, well, a picture of a baby and it is difficult to generate any stories other than simplistic ones based on the concept of "baby". Add the sound of a metronome to the image and a new impetus for story making is generated. The story often is not rooted in "image of baby" or the "ticking", but is held in the creative force field of their interaction.

Documents can be subtler and more complex in the story they suggest – the two letters shown in Figure 1, for example. Here, the formality of a solicitor's letter is set against the informality of a personal note. The users conjure visions of a relationship that has gone wrong, an intimacy that is now exposed to legal wrangling. The story hovers between the documents, is to be found in the territory which exists between them.

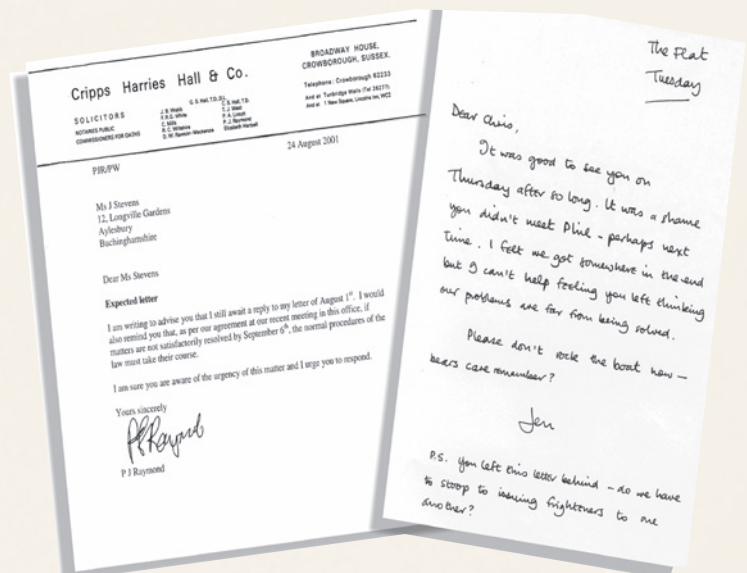


Figure 1

The compound stimulus is so named by me because it is *compound*, i.e. made up of more than one element, and a *stimulus* to story-making. It is composed of a number of artefacts – objects, photographs, letters and other documents, for example, enclosed

in an appropriate container. The compound stimulus and the story that flows from it is given significance by the careful juxtaposition of its contents (the relationship between them) and how the detail of the objects suggest human motivation and action – a crushed photograph or torn-up letter, for example.

Herein lies the secret of the creation of a compound stimulus. The elements of the story that each artefact represents must, when juxtaposed, create a web of relationships that are neither so quickly understood that the story becomes immediately obvious, nor so remote from one another that no obvious narrative possibilities, based in the felt story tensions, emerge. The differing relationships of the tensions between artefacts in a compound stimulus can be represented by the quality of distance. I have tried to represent this principle in three diagrams. In Figure 2, the relationships of the artefacts are too close, giving rise to too obvious a connection. In

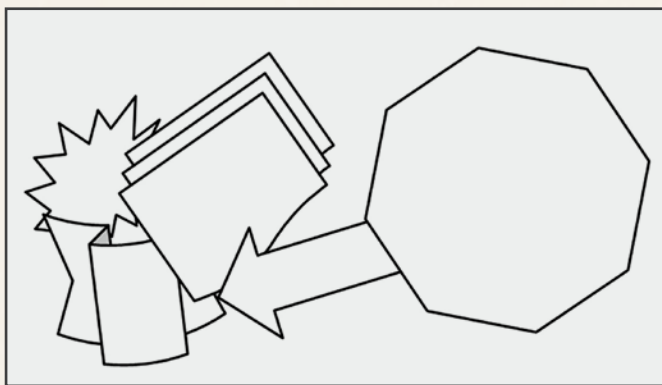


Figure 2

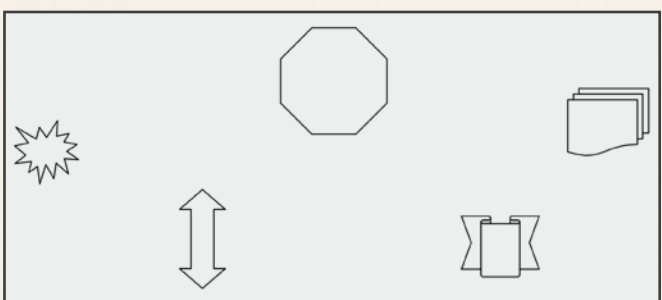


Figure 3

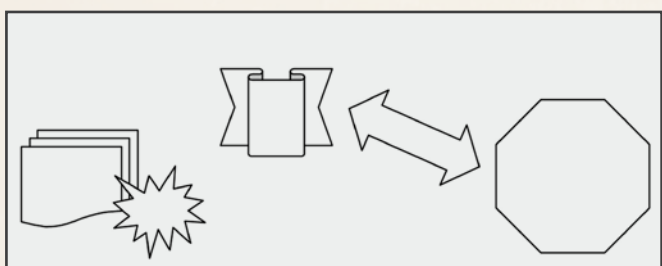


Figure 4

Figure 3, the relationships are too remote, making it too difficult to arrive at a story that adequately connects the artefacts. Here, there are no felt tensions that can be productively explored in the drama. In Figure 4, the relationship is just right, leading to productive exploration through improvisation.

This state is achieved by giving enough information for there to be plausible links between the artefacts, the nature of which can only be defined by participant hypothesis. Examples are: placing names within letters that are echoed in initials on other artefacts; correspondence of dates; a photograph that could be of a person mentioned in an official form; a keepsake that may have been cherished as a result of a relationship hinted at in a diary entry. The juxtaposing of the artefacts represented in Figure 4 provoke a series of narrative tensions that will suggest to the users story possibilities that can be followed up in the drama.

#### 4. The processes of use

When confronted by a compound stimulus, the users must invest imaginatively in its use in order to generate story. The first act of the leader is to show the container to the participants and to explain where it was found – under a bed, left on a bus, thrown on the street, for example. As with all drama work, a spirit of playfulness is required, a willingness to enter into the spirit of the “game”. As such, the leader needs to conduct early exercises with the participants in order that they “learn the rules of the game”. The rules here are of speculation and hypothesising. And game it must be, for the users need to know that this story and this stimulus have been created for their use and are not “real”. There are two basic questions that I always pose to participants: “who are the people involved in this story?” and “what is happening to them?” There is only so much to be gained by discussion and speculation in this, the imaginative/association phase, where a plausible story in which the artefacts are embedded emerges.

If the compound stimulus is being used in an Interactive Theatre programme, the performance may now follow. If the work is taking place in a workshop or lesson, participants then need to move to the exploration stage, where drama improvisation is used to explore the lives of the people who are suggested within the story. This is the use of the drama space as social laboratory. The guiding question here is “What situation would you like to create within the drama that will allow you to find out more about these people?” It is essential that a dramatic tension exists within the improvisation if it is to have dramatic energy, and one of the skills participants develop in this stage is identifying situations that

contain such tension. Participants work best in small groups, using drama as a research device to find out more. It is in this phase that the people from the story come alive, for drama allows us to create the detail of human circumstance. Further improvisations are set up progressively to discover more. Such investigation clarifies on the one hand (the basic story achieves coherence), but complicates on another (further dilemmas and questions emerge that demand investigation).

The third phase is one of selecting and shaping. Here the group sifts the information it has discovered from the research phase to select that which has coherence and value in relation to the story and its characters. The manner of finding things out in the research phase may not be the way of recording in the shaping phase. The participants may, for example, have discovered something about a relationship through naturalistic improvisation, but choose to shape it in a stylised form. What is shaped can be seen as the insight, the wisdom the group has acquired through the research. It is in the selecting and shaping that the group comes to understand the significance of the story it has made and inhabited.

The fourth phase that follows naturally is that of communication. Here, what has been selected and shaped into a statement in the dramatic medium is communicated to others – most usually other main group members. If done within the group, the communication is offered as the outcome of a research process to fellow researchers. Many of the accoutrements of performance are therefore not present. What we get is the basic story, ordered and shaped to give coherence. This phase can use human resources skilfully however – the use of narration, song and live instrumental music to join together the sections of the dramatised story, for example. It is essential that the material communicated have dramatic form and power. Almost always, applause is inappropriate as we are not “performing” but sharing the outcomes of a communal research process – sharing our insights and findings with fellow researchers. With a sophisticated story, sufficient time and the willingness of the group, however, the communication phase can be developed to establish a more formal performance.

I mention the term “research” frequently. This is because I think the whole process is a research one:

- *Phase one, **imagination/association***, is where the speculation, hypothesising takes place;



Figure 5

- *Phase two, **exploration***, is where the fieldwork is conducted. In a dynamic relationship between hypothesising and empirical work, the speculation experienced in phase one is modified by what is discovered;
- *Phase three, **selecting and shaping***, is where the data are analysed and ordered and meaning is made;
- *Phase four, **communication***, is where the research outcomes are shared with the wider research community (in an education setting, the rest of the class).

The choice of artefacts that go into a compound stimulus dictates the kinds of stories that emerge. It is possible, therefore, to organise the stimulus to take participants into a particular aspect of life. The quality of the artefacts and their presentation should be of the highest possible standard and seem authentic. Users should take care to get the detail right. If originals cannot be used, authentic copies must be made. The artefacts should be placed in an appropriate container that gives the collection coherence. The stimulus also needs to be introduced with an appropriate story that positions the container and its contents in a suitable human context. In Figure 5, prior to an Interactive Theatre performance in Taiwan, for example, a facilitator invites audience members to look inside a school

bag. Note the prepared surface for displaying the contents. The actors stand at the side of the performance area.

The aim of the exercise is to intrigue the participants, to develop a sense of empathy for and identification with the people and dilemmas that are represented in the compound stimulus. It is also most important that the leader should respect the compound stimulus and appear as ignorant of the meaning of its content as the participants. If she appears not to find it interesting, or knows their meaning, the users may feel it devalued at the outset. The leader's appropriate handling of the artefacts and the ways in which the contents of the container are revealed are crucial for its effectiveness. If, for example, the group seems to be delving into private possessions, due respect for what is revealed will be appropriate. As noted above, it helps if the contents are displayed in some way so that the users become aware of inter-artefact relationships.

The contents are progressively revealed and as many users as possible get a chance to take something from the container and to describe it to the rest of the group. The significance of each artefact is considered and its potential links with other objects are explored. Some of this happens through open discussion in the group, but much more occurs within the thoughts of individuals. The exposure of the



Figure 6

compound stimulus is often followed by participant need to examine certain aspects of the contents in more detail. It is normal to keep the contents together in the place of display so that users can refer back to them during the exploration stage.

## 5. Examples of compound stimuli

I have tried here to present, with the use of photographs, the nature of two compound stimuli. No picture can fully compensate for touching or reading the actual artefacts, of course, but I hope the reader will discover the secrets of the essential decisions about choosing the ingredients of the stimulus. Depending on the size of the group being worked with, the ideal group format is a single circle if the group does not exceed twenty in number, or a semicircle of several rows if there are more. It is possible to duplicate the compound stimulus for ease of examination (see example two below), but this can undermine its sense of uniqueness.

### Example one

The first description is of a memories box that I have used for many years in several different countries. It never fails to intrigue. The container is a cigar box tied with red ribbon. I introduce the box with the story that I visited an auction room to buy a chest of drawers. This I did, selecting the chest from other furniture that seemed to come from the same house – suggesting a house clearance after the owner has died. The chest of drawers appeared empty, except for old newspaper in the bottom of each drawer. On getting it into my house, however, I discovered the cigar box. At this point, I untie the ribbon, open the box and invite participants, in turn, to take one artefact out and describe it. It is then placed on a white cloth in the centre of the circle.

As can be seen from the photographs, the box contains material from around 1920:

A dried flower;

Seed heads from a plant called, in English, “honesty”;

A feather;

A posed photograph of a group of people in formal dress;

A photograph of a man;

A birthday card with the hand-written message:

*Just to wish you many happy returns of the day. Read carefully the verse on the other side. And accept a small token of friendship from me.*  
Yours sincerely,  
Florence.

Figure 7

A hand-written letter that reads:

*Dear Florence,*

*Great news! You know that I had told you that I had written a letter to my Uncle Richard in Vermont – well, I heard from him this morning, and he tells me that if I come prepared to work hard, there may be an opening for me. Florence, this could be the chance I have been looking for. I know that after what I have been through could never stay in Bleadon, but one day when I have made my fortune, perhaps I will return.*

*I have managed to get a berth on the liner ‘Oriole’ which sails this Friday, and as there are some affairs to be attended to in London, I leave for there this afternoon. Mother is informing everybody that my birthday celebrations are cancelled. I regret this robs us of another opportunity to meet again but I know that after our discussion at the garden party on Saturday you will be pleased for me.*

*Thank you for helping me to see things so clearly. I will write to you from America when I am settled in.*

*Your affectionate friend*

*Peter*

Figure 8

Stories of different kinds emerge from this compound stimulus. A description of one may help the reader understand how the stimulus works to facilitate story making. A group recently created this story:

*A woman, Florence Astell, from Bleadon, a small Cambridgeshire village, met a man, Peter Connaught several times whilst they were growing up. At a garden party, held in the garden of the Rectory, they met again and, after Florence had helped Peter come to terms with his arguments with his father which led to his being sacked from the family firm, he invites her to his birthday party. She is attracted to him and she thinks it is mutual, although nothing explicit is said. He picks a flower from the priest’s garden and places in her dress front, and at some point, she tickles his neck with a feather found in the garden. In anticipation of his birthday party, she writes a birthday card for him, but gets his letter before she has the chance to send it. She did not see him again before he left for London. Whilst alive, she kept the objects in the box as memories of a relationship that never developed.*

Groups use improvisation to explore situations from the story: what happened to them both on their walk in the garden; how Florence responded when she learned that Peter’s birthday party had been cancelled; what happened when Peter returned to Bleadon some time later and met Florence, for example. Each piece of useful information garnered from the improvisations is used to clarify and strengthen the participants’ story.

It is possible to use this compound stimulus to explore over, say, four hours, the relationships of these people set in the social context of the 1920s. It is also possible to extend the work over greater time to create more sophisticated outcomes including the creation of full-scale performance.

### *Example two*

This compound stimulus was used as part of a Theatre in Education (TIE)<sup>1</sup> programme delivered to students of thirteen years of age in schools in the county of Devon, England. The compound stimulus was used to involve the student participants in generating a story prior to a visit from the Theatre in Education Team one week later. Because we worked during the course of a day with two hundred and seventy students, in three groups of ninety (each containing three classes of thirty students), it was decided to duplicate the stimulus for ease of use. Accordingly, each class of thirty received six compound stimuli so that discussion could take place in groups of five. As fifty-four compound stimuli were needed, for ease of duplication, we restricted its content to documents and a photograph.

The pack contained:

- A confidential school record-card of Lucy White, aged 14. It recorded a series of statements by teachers, including comments about Lucy's successful early adjustment to her new school on transfer from Primary to this Secondary school. As Lucy gets older, it notes that a girl called Sarah Richards increasingly puts her under pressure, and jeopardises her relationship with her special friend, Rachel.
- A postcard from Rachel to Lucy whilst the former was on holiday.
- A page from a rough book where a student is trying to do some French work, but is interrupted by the scribbling of others on her work.
- A document folded and taped together with "keep out" boldly marked on its outside. On opening, the document reveals a photograph of a group of students labelled "our French class on a trip to Caen" that has been annotated to show the owner's feelings towards other members of the class.
- A Devon and Cornwall Police report by a "Detective Constable Denise Walters" who was called to the Accident and Emergency Department of the local hospital at 2.28am to see a young girl, Rachel Hurst, who had been brought to the Department unconscious with a blood/alcohol level three times the adult legal limit. It also gives some of the context in which this incident occurred, and what lines of enquiry the policeman is contemplating.

A "special report form", for Sarah Richards that she is required to take to each class she attends and which is signed by the teacher following the entry of a comment on Sarah's behaviour.

Five pages of Lucy's diary revealing inner thoughts on relationships, pressures, fears and hopes.

An ambulance call-out record sheet from the local hospital giving brief details of the circumstances of a call from someone requesting an ambulance at a given address, and the record of the despatch of paramedics and an ambulance.

A set of four photo-booth photographs of two girls. A receipt for the purchase of a considerable amount of alcohol.

An invitation for a "sleepover and video party".

All of the documents were contained in a plastic bag advertising a shop that sells alcohol.

Teachers in the schools were briefed by a TIE team member on how to use the compound stimulus. Having organised the class into six groups of five, the teacher told the students that a group would be coming into school next week to deal with issues of alcohol use. They would be working on a story that involved the contents of the bag and that, prior to the TIE group's arrival, their job was to find out as much as they could about the people in the story and what was happening to them. Teachers subsequently reported a high level of interest and involvement in the contents of the bag and the emerging story (see Cousins & Somers, 2001).

During the following week, the TIE team visited the schools. It presented a performance element of around 25 minutes showing a story utilising the contents of the bag. The students were now able to meet Sarah Richards and see her affect on Lucy and Rachel; they saw the circumstances in which Lucy and Rachel took the booth photographs; they witnessed how the party was changed from an innocent sleep-over and video party to one where hard drink was obtained and consumed – particularly by Rachel, whose drink was spiked by her long-term friend Lucy, who was under the malign influence of Sarah Richards.

During the time following the performance element, the students were asked to decide who was responsible in any way for Rachel being in hospital intensive care (she had choked on her own vomit and was unconscious). To aid the discussion, large cards bearing the names and photographs of characters in the story were given to the three classes present at each of the programme's three deliveries. As a focus for their discussion and decision-making, they were invited to place the cards in the order in which they thought characters had some responsibility for Rachel being in hospital. These characters include



Lucy's parents, for example, who had left the house whilst the party took place. During their discussions (each class of thirty was in a separate room) they could invite any character to be hot-seated, a process by which they can ask the character any question they wish to clarify motive and story.

Finally, all three classes were brought back to the performance space and their cards were prominently displayed in three columns (one for each class) in the order in which they felt the characters had responsibility for Rachel's hospitalisation. A discussion then ensued about why they had put the characters in the chosen order. Teachers followed up the activity in the following week during their twenty-minute morning tutor periods.

One week later, and to achieve "closure" of the programme and its story, a letter was sent to each class from Rachel's mother. This informed them that Rachel was now out of intensive care and would soon be home. It thanked the students for their help in unravelling the events that led to her being in hospital. In addition to the briefing given to teachers who would use the compound stimulus with the students, teachers were also given notes outlining the nature of the programme and possible follow-up activities that could flow from it. As the delivery of the TIE programme usually formed part of the school's health education programme, schools sometimes used additional material of their own choosing.<sup>2</sup>

## 6. Applications of the compound stimulus

The function of the compound stimulus is to engage the users in making stories. It therefore has usefulness wherever story-making is required. This could be in a mother-tongue lesson, where talking and writing were the main activities and not drama. Thus the moral dilemma suggested by the stimulus might be explored through discussion, and the story furthered by the writing of additional letters, or the written reflections, in role, of a character from within the story, for example. It works best, however, when drama techniques are used to bring the story alive.

As stated earlier, human behaviour depends on the nature and interaction of individuals. How a father responds on hearing that his son is experimenting with drugs flows from his attitude to drugs, whether he loves his son, his attitude to possible social stigmatisation, for instance. Any discussion about the detailed response of individuals to particular circumstances brings the response "it depends what the people are like". Drama allows us to invent this kind of detail, to create authentic contexts for the exploration of issues of concern.

Used in this way, it can be of assistance in many parts of the curriculum. In History, it allows us to bring alive people involved in past events. The compound stimulus can be used as an introduction to a new topic or can be used to explore the human aspects of a situation well understood in a factual sense by the users. Its main role is to look at the implications of events for the humans involved, to create empathy. Thus, for example, the users might fully understand the dates and facts of Azorean migration to Brazil, but not "feel" what it was like to make such a journey, in privation, to an unknown shore, or the tension of the first meeting between an Azorean immigrant and indigenous inhabitants. Students might know the facts of Jenner's smallpox vaccine discovery, but not understand the feelings of a woman who is saved by his knowledge, or the suspicion his ideas generated amongst his colleagues.

In Geography, a compound stimulus that records the final years of life on a farm, the land of which is to be sold for industrial development, could help focus attention on the competing interests and rights to land ownership and use. In a foreign language lesson, elements of a compound stimulus could require translation from the target language before sense can be made of its meaning and improvisations undertaken.

The two examples given describe the use of the compound stimulus in contrasting contexts. Example one can be used within drama sessions for drama-making that could, if required, grow into performance. Alternatively, it could be adapted to focus on a particular historical situation or to deal with issues of relationships, families or migration. Example two shows how the compound stimulus can be used by a TIE team to raise social issues. It can be adapted to deal with issues such as bullying, drug taking or petty crime.

In all of this work, there must be a respect for the story being created. Fledgling ideas are easily crushed by incautious statements by the leader or fellow students. The knowledge that emerges in the exploration stage is often tentative and must be treated as such. The improvisations undertaken must be seen as a way of generating hypotheses, rather than the rehearsal of certain knowledge. Only if the practical drama work takes the participants beyond the understanding acquired from discussion will the exercise truly work. The leader of the group must decide how she wishes the participants to use the story-making impetus that a compound stimulus generates. As I show above, it can form part of a wide variety of broadly educational contexts.

## Conclusion

I do not claim the idea of the “compound stimulus” as innovation. I accept that many “story boxes” or “drama packs” have been used in the past and are described in publications. What I have tried to do here, however, is to unravel the basis on which these stimuli work, to expose the underlying theory in ways that will aid their creation and use. In order to extend my knowledge of practice and theory, I would be interested to hear from people who have used such approaches in their drama work and how their experience reinforces or challenges what I have stated here.

**John Somers** was an Honorary Fellow at the Department of Drama, Exeter University, England. He was founding editor of the journal *Research in Drama Education* and director of the international conference *Researching Drama and Theatre in Education*. He founded the Exeter MA Applied Drama. He was artistic director of the Exstream Theatre Company, which specialises in interactive theatre in non-theatre sites. He wrote and directed major original community plays. His play *On the Edge* won prestigious awards for its contribution to better understanding of mental health issues. He worked extensively internationally, in Finland, Estonia, Turkey, Poland and China. He won the American Alliance of Theatre and Education Special Recognition Award in 2003. His books include *Drama in the Curriculum* (1995), *Drama and Theatre in Education: Current Research* (1996) and *Drama as Social Intervention* (2006). A writer of many published articles, his research interests focused on Applied Drama and the role of narrative theory in drama.

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## Notes

1. Theatre in Education involves the use of theatre in educational contexts. It always involves a performance element that is embedded in an inter-active programme of other activities that involve the students in exploring character motivations and in being able to influence the story through their often moral, engagement with the story and its characters. For a fuller explanation, see Jackson (1993).
2. For a full evaluation of this programme, see Cousins and Somers (2001).

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