



# BIG DRAMAS second edition

## Wheeler-Dealer

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

<b>Suitable</b>	Year 7
<b>Difficulty</b>	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
<b>Genre</b>	Social issues drama
<b>Themes</b>	Physical and intellectual disability, new schools, bereavement, bullying and hostility, friendship, self-sufficiency and resilience
<b>Literary and dramatic techniques</b>	Apostrophe and aside, parody and stereotype, rap/performed poetry, singing and dancing, performed magic, verbal comedy (e.g. puns and Freudian slips)
<b>Cast</b>	7 nominally female although there's no reason this couldn't be read or acted by males

## Why choose this play?

Not only a fun play with moments of rap, magic, singing and dancing, *Wheeler-Dealer* deals honestly with the experience of acquired disability and the hostility, awkwardness and anger that goes with it. The main character, Mandy, is now wheelchair-bound after a car crash which killed her father. On hearing Mandy's inner and outer voices, audiences will be struck by her spiky resilience and her willingness to call others on their own barely concealed confusion. Led by a fun and multi-talented character who proves that honesty is strength, this is a hopeful and wryly comic play about the things we don't say and how they reveal themselves anyway.

## Practical considerations

This play involves disability, bereavement and bullying, so could prove sensitive to some students.

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.





# Teaching *Wheeler-Dealer* by Sue Murray

## ***Learning objectives***

Students will:

- understand that inner discomfort at an unusual situation can be a kind of narrative conflict explored by literary texts
- identify how characters use language to disguise or negotiate this discomfort and that doing so can cause misunderstandings
- consider that inner conflict is communicated through multiple languages or modes which modify the whole message which they transmit. Such language modes include verbal and non-verbal language and transmit both conscious and unconscious thinking
- analyse how a playwright works ideas about equal opportunity into a literary text and uses characters' language to shape the audience's opinion
- learn and apply terms such as equal opportunity, positive discrimination, inclusion, discrimination, prejudice and preference
- compose a monologue using character traits and verbal styles established by an author.

## Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

<b>Year 7 content descriptions</b>	Literature: Responding to literature	ACELT1621	Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts.
	Literacy: Interacting with others	ACELY1804	Use interaction skills when discussing and presenting ideas and information, selecting body language, voice qualities and other elements (for example music and sound) to add interest and meaning.
<b>General capabilities</b>	Personal and social capability		Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships.
	Ethical understanding		Students develop ethical understanding as they identify and investigate the nature of ethical concepts, values and character traits, and understand how reasoning can assist ethical judgment. Ethical understanding involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.





## 1. Approaching the text

Read the play around the class but try to do the rap parts fluently! The character of Mandy is spiky and fun and loses its zing if the rap isn't snapped out with attitude. Ask students to consider how the sight of a wheelchair affects the audience—are they more interested than usual? Do they feel obligated to listen? What's their first question when they see the wheelchair? What does that tell them about themselves and what the play might be about?

Reference popular culture where students may see a wheelchair user in a performance space, such as *The Voice*, and ask them what their reactions are.

## 2. Introducing ideas

**i) When confronted with situations that are even a little out of the ordinary, we can experience confusion or conflict within ourselves, which in turn affects our choice of words.**

Ask students what powers stories. You're looking for the answer that conflict is at the heart of narrative—something has to happen for events to change and for the plot to go forward. Confirm that they understand that conflict doesn't need to be as dramatic as two people having a fight; it can just mean someone feeling uncomfortable in a situation that they don't know quite how to handle. (This is what we sometimes mean when we say we're 'conflicted'.) Discomfort or inner conflict causes almost every character to say the opposite of what they actually mean at the beginning of the play.

### *Understanding activity*

List ways in which characters experience this kind of conflict in the first part of the play (up to Prue throwing the cards in the air). You could set it out as a table like this (a blank editable version is available to download):

Character	is uncomfortable because	They say
Mandy		
Mrs Blake		
Mrs Appleby		
Prue		
Sue		
Lou		
Fiona		

**ii) Sometimes our language—verbal language and body language—can reveal what we're really thinking.**

Whenever we communicate, we use multiple languages to get our *whole* meaning across. It's particularly important to detect this in texts so that we can identify sophisticated elements like irony. We've seen that the play opens with the characters feeling conflicted or uncomfortable when confronted with Mandy's disability. Their verbal language communicates one thing, but their *whole* meaning is communicated by other means, such as body language, non-verbal elements like tone or silence, even performative gestures like Mandy's card trick.

Sometimes these languages convey things we don't mean them to—such as Mrs Appleby's patronising behaviour when she pats Mandy like a puppy, implying that she's not fully human. When this happens we can talk about unconscious or subconscious meaning. (You may need to explain the difference between conscious and unconscious meaning.)



### *Understanding activity*

Students should add another column to their table entitled ‘But what they’re thinking is probably ...’, or write further sentences in their responses about what characters say when they’re uncomfortable. Ask them to consider what the characters are really, or unconsciously, thinking when they say the line which students have selected.

### **iii) Sometimes there’s a gap between what we’re thinking as private individuals and the views we’re expected to hold as members of a wider society.**

Sometimes the gap between what we say and what we’re thinking happens because we’re not sure what an acceptable or ‘appropriate’ reaction is. This is particularly true when we find ourselves in situations involving a sensitivity such as race, ethnicity, religion, disability or gender.

Hold an open discussion about how students have found themselves in difficulties because they didn’t know what to say in a situation like this. Assure them that no judgments are being made—if the characters in the play have felt it, at least one of them has!

### *Understanding activity*

Discuss how our society’s attitude to equality comes with its own language: ask students what they think the following terms mean and where they are evident in the play.

- Equal opportunity
- Positive discrimination
- Inclusion
- Discrimination
- Prejudice
- Preference

Explain that an official level playing field, where the first three concepts listed above are enforced, is often imposed to make sure that an unofficial hierarchy where the ‘fittest’ wins (you can explain the concept of social Darwinism if you think students are conceptually able) doesn’t rule. This is important because if institutions (like schools) didn’t implement some measures to make sure that everyone had an equal chance, there would quickly be a separation into the very powerful, able and ‘acceptable’ people and an oppressed underclass.

## 3. The learning activity

Students should understand that there are different languages used to convey conscious and unconscious thinking. They should be aware that the composer focuses on characters’ reactions to foreground their discomfort at dealing with Mandy’s disability. They should consider that the discomfort comes from a conflict between what they think and what they know they’re expected to think and say.

Mandy’s apostrophes to the audience make clear what her thoughts are and we can compare these to her (comically opposite) spoken words. Students should select a moment in the play where one of the other characters has a chance to reveal their thoughts to the audience and create a monologue of their own which shows the difference between what they’re thinking and what the play text has them saying. They should consider carefully how Murray has created the voice of that character—our inner monologues are often very different to our spoken voice, so Fiona, for example, might be highly verbal inside her own head.

The monologues should explain the following:

- how does the character really feel and why—what exactly about this moment in the play causes them to think this?
- what social or cultural forces pressure them to act as they do if they feel differently?
- what are they afraid of?
- what do they think may happen if they just said what they thought?





## 4. Rounding up


When students have completed and performed their monologues, draw their attention to the idea that the final movement of this play—students may know it as the resolution, denouement or anticlimax—is really one of *revelation*. Everyone lays out what they actually mean, think or feel. The transparency between words and actions allows everyone to move forward because they understand each other more clearly.

### Assessment ideas

- i) Defend the indefensible: ask students to choose a truly terrible character (such as Prue, Sue or Lou) from a text that they know well, and present a monologue which not only demonstrates their negative qualities, but makes the audience understand and even sympathise with them. They could compose a heart-warming backstory, reveal hidden depths through the character's self-disclosure, or present the material in such an engaging way that the audience can't help but empathise with them. Along with their monologue, students should write a short explanation of why they chose certain techniques to make their character more likeable and what they have learned about persuading an audience.
- ii) Give students a stimulus image which draws on a particular stereotype, and the quotation "He/she saw the way everyone looked at him. If only they knew." Ask them to write the character's story, showing an understanding of the stereotypes applied to the person because of their appearance and how the character's use of language shows those to be inaccurate.
- iii) Ask students to choose a billboard advertisement—it should have both text and image—and give a three minute presentation showing how the combination of words and images manipulates the viewer. They should also prepare a more 'honest' advertisement for the same product—they could produce a written reflection about the difficulty of 'honest advertising'.

### Using the play with other resources

It is possible to combine this play with other Macmillan resources if you have them in your collection. The exercises in the following workbooks provide useful warm-up activities with which to differentiate the concepts in this lesson. Students could attempt one or two of the exercises at home as a preparatory exercise for this lesson.

	<p><b>English Workbook 1</b> <b>(3rd edn)</b></p>	<p>Unit 1: Personal and social identity, pp9–10, 18–19          Unit 2: What's your opinion?, pp45, 49          Unit 3: Reading: 'medicine for the soul', pp63–5, 75, 79          Unit 4: Imaginative and informative texts, pp105–8, 117</p>
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### Further reading

- *Owning It: Stories about Teens with Disabilities* by Donald R Gallo gives a number of stories about teenagers who face various challenges because of mental or physical disabilities. It was positively received (a review can be found [here](#)) and makes a good source book for exercises about how stereotypes and simplifications are received from the people labelled with them.

## Linked texts

*Wheeler-Dealer* could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others)

- *Skellig*, David Almond
- *Secrets in the Fire*, Henning Mankel
- *The Colour of Sunshine*, David Metzenthen
- *Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life*, Anna Fienberg
- *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, JK Rowling
- *Holes*, Louis Sachar
- *Nips XI*, Ruth Starke
- *The Power of Poetry*, J Eshuys and V Guest
- *Chariots of Fire*, directed by Hugh Hudson
- *Shrek*, directed by Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson and Scott Marshall
- *Heroes*, Allan Baillie
- *Tough Stuff*, Kirsty Murray, illustrated by Harry Harrison





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