

## TRANSCENDING TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES THROUGH DRAMA: INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

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### ABSTRACT

We conducted a self-study of drama integration with an emphasis on teaching perspective taking in a new interdisciplinary course. Our work employs a theoretical model of coming to understand the self through others or in Vygotskian (1981) terms, from interpersonal to intrapersonal knowledge. One of our main aims was to determine how disciplines could be interwoven to enhance students' personal development, as well as our own. We envisioned drama integration as more than a list of activities that could include teaching the ethic of care and empathy. Teaching and learning would be in a circle wider than self - in a collaborative network with a synthesis of our diverse experiences to provoke our students to pull down or even shatter their fences. Outcomes included: students' utilization of drama in their career goals, finding our humanness, and knowledge of self and others. As professors, we uncovered our commonalities while renewing our individual passions. We discovered that drama could serve as an international language to communicate the need and value of human diversity while bridging many disciplines and careers.

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

We are two professors from two different worlds. Roland is a drama professor, a playwright, and a director of plays. I am an education professor, a self-study researcher, and a director of teacher education - a different kind of artist than Roland. Yet, we were drawn to a collaborative endeavour to study the relative place, meaning, and integration of drama with other disciplines. We developed and taught an interdisciplinary course, *Drama Beyond the Theatre* and share our self-study of this endeavor. In Odysseus-like fashion, we eagerly accepted the unpredictable nature of our work and set out on a wondrous adventure filled with an aura of mythical mystique. Embarking on this transcendental journey however, meant that we, like our students,

were crossing our known discipline boundaries with no markers or certainties. We acknowledged that the process could be, as our students tell us, "embarrassing and enlightening!" During the summer, we implemented our drama work with refugees, orphans, and caregivers in Bosnia and Croatia to model how professors, like students, need to be willing to solve unfamiliar problems and give action to their theories. We tested drama exercises for promoting peace, often in a nonverbal fashion, and returned to teach our course again with new pedagogical insights.

There is much research to support the connections between the arts, academic achievement, success for all students, and the work place, especially the ability to reason, think creatively, and solve problems (Caine & Caine, 1994; Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1996). In urban and "high-poverty" settings the arts have a significant impact on student improvement in reading and mathematics (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). While there have been national initiatives for placing the arts as part of a core curricula in schools (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994) these initiatives have had little impact at the university level. College-level students typically complete their art requirement in a non-integrated fashion. This is particularly problematic for preservice teachers who may receive little experience or modelling of arts integration in their own schooling.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Our main course objectives were for students to experience drama as a conduit for perspective taking and conflict resolution, its interdisciplinary connections in the liberal arts, and its applicability towards their career goals. We explored the means to empathize and understand better what it is like to walk in someone else's moccasins, in someone else's world, on someone else's path - a real learn by

doing course. Using Bruner's (1966) theory, we offered experiences in enactive representation where students used their bodies; iconic when we asked them to create images in their minds; and symbolic when they used language to symbolize their experiences (see Wagner, 1998).

Students from all disciplines and majors were invited to practice the tools of drama: adapting acting techniques, exercises, improvisations, and theatre games and develop a project applicable to their career goal. The University encouraged faculty to engage in efforts that foster the whole development of the person through the integration of knowledge with cross-disciplinary study of the concrete problems which confront mankind. In our interpretation, this course would prompt students to experience the abstract principles of the life and dignity of the human person in our one human family. Using a self-study approach, we assessed our efforts towards this purpose.

### **CONCEPTUAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Our work employs a theoretical model of coming to understand the self through others or in Vygotskian (1981) terms, from interpersonal to intrapersonal knowledge. Learning is socially constructed with cooperative activities to cultivate a sense of community and respect that we hope students promote in their own career settings. We believe drama moves our students, some more than others, towards higher development through the collaborative nature of drama, within and across the overlapping zones of their proximal development.

### **ASPECTS AND METHODS OF SELF-STUDY**

We wanted to know if this course mattered to anyone.

- What was the impact of our work on students' learning?
- Did class experiences provoke students to change their angle of repose?

We also wanted to find out more about ourselves as educators by examining our own practice through collaborative inquiry - framing and reframing our thinking about teaching through individual and joint exploration and reflection. We raised our own questions of

inquiry, collected, analyzed, and presented our data to improve our teaching.

### **GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What are our students' perceptions of using drama exercises to learn about themselves and others, i.e., to promote perspective taking? If so, how, and in what ways?
- What are our perceptions of this interdisciplinary work? Is it valuable to students' and professors' lives, careers, and professional development?
- How might drama be used as a tool for student's knowledge of self, i.e., for their self-study?
- *Is integrating drama with other disciplines feasible and worthwhile for students and professors? What are the challenges? The benefits? How does our institution reward or inhibit our interdisciplinary work?*

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Students represented a variety of disciplines including: Anthropology, Biomedical Engineering, Education Studies, Latin, Nursing, Psychology, and Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education. In the spring 1999 cohort there were 14 students: 11 undergraduates (10 female, 1 male) and 3 graduates (all female) enrolled in our course. Enrolment was limited to 16 students to provide an intense and supportive environment. In the spring 2000 cohort, there were 11 students, 10 undergraduates, and 1 graduate (all female).

### **DATA SOURCES**

As reflective practitioners, we were the principal instruments for mediating data in our qualitative research (See Taylor, 1996). We cooperatively planned, team taught, and then reflected upon each class session. Through daily communication (e-mail, phone, fax, and face-to-face dialogue), we studied our efforts throughout the semester. In a logbook, I wrote our artistic sketches and reflections and the things that seemed to inspire us. I recorded our notes, students' reactions to class activities, and their post-enactment reflections in an effort to make sense of the 13 weekly class experiences. Students' projects and assignments were collected and copied. We solicited student feedback frequently. Samples of students' final projects were videotaped.

University course evaluations were also completed at the end of the semester. We also each documented our drama work in the Balkans and discussed what we learned there.

### *DATA ANALYSIS*

There were no preconceived hypotheses and no simplistic cause-effect view of the human experiences that occurred in this artful work. The logbooks and diaries recorded the evolving and shifting relationships that grew out of the drama experiences between us, between ourselves and our students, and among students. Multiple data sources were used to inform this self-study. First, primary data sources were examined, which included: professional logs, students' assignments with self-evaluations, written final project presentations, and course evaluations. Next, secondary data sources were analyzed: field notes and all electronic correspondence. The multi-data source was read and re-read with marginal remarks and memoing of repeated themes. The constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with theory initially generated from the data and with grounded theories elaborated and modified with incoming data was employed. Categories were constructed, in this case, conceptual elements of students' and professors' thoughts. Properties, or conceptual aspects of each category, that emerged from the data were noted.

### **OUTCOMES**

This study focused on two questions:

1. What are our students' perceptions of using drama exercises to learn about themselves and others, i.e., to promote perspective taking? If so, how, and in what ways?
2. What are our perceptions of this interdisciplinary work? Is it valuable to students' and professors' lives, careers, and professional development?

### *STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS*

#### *Career Connections*

Students noted the course was most worthwhile in terms of its utility towards their career goals. Preservice teachers designed curriculum units incorporating improvisation to explore teaching about disabilities, conflict resolution, and character. A female, engineering graduate student devised a skit

debunking stereotypes of female scientists. A psychology major designed a project to use drama in therapy to facilitate the healing of sexually abused children. An Educational Psychology doctoral candidate, who also works as a school practicum liaison, asked preservice teachers to role-play the perspective of a parent in a parent-teacher conference. A preservice teacher remarked, "Now I realize how important it was for us to do this perspective taking during our education method studies."

#### *Finding our Humanness*

When students observed and then improvised a "street person," conducted and read in character an oral family history, or shared a favorite story about values, we began to know each other and recognized that we have more commonalities than differences. Students spoke of the similarities they found between themselves and "street people" such as, "getting through the day; survival; trying to hold on to our human dignity; tuning out the world around you if the world around you, tunes you out." In improvisation exercises, they spoke of their sadness, empathy, ill judgement, awkwardness, and loneliness. In post-enactment reflection, they expressed gratefulness for their own fortunes and a deeper understanding of human frailties.

#### *Knowledge of Self and Others*

After improvisations students commented how they came to know new things about themselves, e.g., "I learned that I try to avoid conflict" and "I think I have more positive feelings towards the homeless than the soup kitchen women." Through oral history interviews, students reflected on how they came to know a side of their families they never knew before. Many commented how they could now see themselves in their mothers and sisters. In an interview of an elder, a student gasps, "Adults really were little kids too." A student became very interested in her father's escape from a war-torn country, "He doesn't see his story as interesting and only as a negative story that makes him look bad, even though he is the hero in it." A student who describes her own birth delivery through her mother's eyes explains, "I was able to feel what my mom's emotions were in a way I don't think I had ever experienced." One student brought

us closer to her mother's struggle and indicated, "Thinking back on the interview with my mother, I know that being a teenage mother was a difficult, difficult thing for my mother. It makes me proud every time I think of her story."

### *PROFESSORS' PERCEPTIONS*

#### *Frames for Teaching*

Integrating a Vygotskian approach that I designed for teacher preparation (Samaras, 1998) and using a Stanislavski (1989) technique that Roland implements as a play director, we uncovered similarities in our work, despite the vernacular of our disciplines, e.g., scaffolding and side coaching, respectively. We had both worked with oral histories, dance exercises, puppetry, and children's creative drama, but had a limited view of how they could be integrated outside our own work. Working in concert, Roland and I were able to draw associations between our fields of study as we brought them to bear on problem solving. We discovered that we both taught about perspective taking. I taught preservice teachers to view teaching situations from the perspective of student, parent, society, and teacher within our teacher education reflective framework. He taught drama majors the Stanislavski application of "the magic if," or to put oneself on the plane of make believe of someone else's situation. Roland came closer to the realities of schools by coaching preservice teachers' curriculum projects while I observed students feeling, not just talking about others' perspectives.

#### *Professional and Personal Growth*

The openness of our self-study led to a high level of both professional and personal growth that could not be afforded without the nature of interdisciplinary work. A student writes in her course evaluation, "They worked wonderfully together. They are the yin and the yang of teaching." Roland uses bold, but indirect, teaching strokes to shake students up and shatter the fences that have kept them from sorting things out for themselves. I offered a safe class structure and guidance, although I also became more of a risk-taker within Roland's drama world and in my work in the Balkans. Roland writes that I afforded him new insights into his own field by my, "keen ability to make creative connections." We

found we were very similar in many ways and embraced each other's strengths making us "the team." During the process of this course, I often looked a back and read my journal log. I began to understand my attraction to this collaborative venture that was elucidated through my self-study. Below is an excerpt from my log:

*9 February 1999, Samaras Logbook*

I am a student again who is new to the power of drama but not the arts. I insisted Roland check the topics I had typed for our syllabus. He explained that he knew from our many planning sessions that I already had certain things in mind, and that he would support that teaching of content through the mechanics of the theatre. I was beginning to understand this scaffold he was erecting for me. I had been dancing around the arts, notions of feminism and the connections of the cognitive through the emotive. I looked back on why I was here, now. It suddenly all made sense. I also enrolled in a modern dance class I hadn't taken for about 15 years. I lay on the floor with my arms stretched out to each side and melted into the floor as the teacher asked us to find our center and to feel the imprint of our spine in the imaginary sand. I was home and free again.

### **SO WHAT? - LESSONS LEARNED**

#### *Lesson One*

Creating and learning are life-long processes that can be modelled through one's own teaching and self-study practices. With our students, I too have discovered how to use and assess drama techniques to promote perspective taking and conflict resolution across many disciplines and professions.

#### *Lesson Two*

Learning does not have to occur in isolation and is enhanced through collaboration for professors and students alike. Interdisciplinary work can take professors beyond the comfortable boundaries and familiarity of their work while inspiring and renewing a passion for their own discipline. Sharing our pedagogical and content knowledge enriched our knowledge and practice in this truly team-teaching experience.

### Lesson Three

I believe it is a myth that professors need to stay singularly focused with a specific research agenda. Interdisciplinary teaching is my agenda. I feel privileged to team-teach with a Drama professor and playwright, in offering one of the University's first interdisciplinary courses. Predetermined destinations do not lead us to new roads. I have always grown the most when I walked to the edge and into an unknown path that called out to me.

### Lesson Four

Through this self-study, we found that drama can provide a safe, but very real, haven for exploring a multiplicity of views. Drama exercises catapulted us into worlds we never knew and suddenly and for a brief and frozen moment, we came to know things about others and ourselves that were hidden or not obvious. We discovered that drama could serve as an international language to communicate the need and value of human diversity while bridging many disciplines and careers.

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