Drama in Education and Constructionism

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Abstract

This paper examines the similarities of two innovative pedagogies, Drama in Education (DIE) and Constructionism. It will be highlighted by theory and research that although they use very different means to achieve their goals, they both have a common objective, which is a more profound education where learning is achieved by 'making'. They both value the context in which learning is taking place and the artifacts with which learners engage in conversation. The description of a drama/theatre based learning experience will show how process drama and the creation of a theatre performance resemble with Papert's computer projects and 'constructions'.

Keywords:

Introduction

The question is about how scientists and educators intend to best educate young people for the future. Ackermann (2001) wonders "who are we to tell the children of others what they should learn and how?" And continues arguing that no one knows what is best for the others.

However, historically, many educational systems throughout history were designed to support authoritarian and male dominant social structures. It was the kind of education that was "appropriate for autocratic kingdoms, empires and feudal fiefdoms that were constantly at war" (Eisler, 2000). Teaching methods were used to prepare young people to obey those who had the power. The same philosophy, also, underlay the traditional industrial model, which prepared workers by providing segments of knowledge, so they could find their place in the system and its hierarchies without questioning either (McCammon, 2002). Such models that do not invest in conscious, independent citizens who have their own sense of control, are not compatible with the emerging educational needs in our multicultural societies and are not viable anymore.

Additionally, for years a false polarity has dominated the education of the Western world to a great extent. Since the 17th century, the positivist, scientific way of research and knowing has excluded feeling from the sphere of true, genuine knowledge and has focused on the cognitive, intellectual modes of perceiving the world. This prejudice about the superiority of cognition had a disastrous effect on education. The affective domain was rejected, an alternative way of approaching experience, the intuitive approach, was disregarded and students lost opportunities to have deep, profound, dynamic experiences of knowledge through another channel, that of 'cognitive feeling', felt intuition and felt understanding (Reid, 1976). This led to fractured meanings and to students' limited and partial intellectual explorations and, as a result, education was deprived of a whole world of values and quality.

The two approaches described above inevitably drove educators to design programmed curricula with a pre-determined 'body of knowledge' where students were recipients, treated as vessels to be filled. According to Paulo Freire (1972) this is 'the banking concept of education'. As a result, students are dependent on their teacher to learn pieces of knowledge, so knowledge remains the

property of the teacher (O' Sullivan, 2003). Students are supposed to live in democratic societies, but the final aim of the political systems which regulate education and invade local school communities is for students to serve the power games of the people who rule the world. It is as if dark forces undermine our schools, our homes and our lives. Teachers too, instead of educating students and helping them to become independent and revolutionary, "recycle the packages that others have generated" (Taylor, 1996) and serve the educational policies of their governments and of the dominators of the world, often unintentionally. Moreover, given the competitive world which emphasises excellence and personal achievements, most forms of education are individualistic and social aspects of education are neglected.

The necessity of a new educational philosophy

Another important issue is that in the above described model, students' differing needs and different learning styles were not usually taken into account. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences suggests that there are eight different forms of intelligence which are equally important: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and environmental (Gardner, 1999). Each of these intelligences means a preferred learning style for each student. According to Gardner (1983), we deprive students when we are interested only in linguistic and logical – mathematical intelligence, and as educators we deprive ourselves of the possibility of building a whole child.

As a result of the above situation, some pessimistic people assume that young people only want to hang out and have fun, but this is not true. Young people crave experience and productivity. They want to try new things, to take inspiration from different sources and create new combinations of materials, ideas and people (Fiske, 2000). Thus, today's schools are expected to engage the whole personality and good education has to be rooted in a real life context. This pedagogical idea is known as holistic education (Vappula, 2004).

The fundamental ideas of the philosophy of holistic education are briefly explained below. Firstly, students come to school carrying with them their previous life, their experiences, attitudes, skills, knowledge, culture, needs and the characteristics of their personality. All these are important parts of a student's personality and cannot just be ignored, but have to form the basis of a child's education (Heathcote as cited in Vappula, 2004). Secondly, we are aware that the truth has many faces and students must be educated in a way that will enable them to see as many of these facets as they can. This process is very important in our post-modern society which is characterised by cultural variety and diversity. Thirdly, learning is not only a matter of what we know, but also a matter of what we are, how we feel and how we behave. According to Heathcote (as cited in Vappula, 2004), school must bring together three elements: the mind of people, the manner of being and the matter of doing, as we must live in the world of both the scientific right hand knowing and the mythical left hand.

Finally, Vygotsky's theory (1962), known as social constructivism, came to support another fundamental and necessary element of post-modern educational systems, the theory of cooperative learning. According to him, learning occurs because of the communication of the person with his/her social environment. Vygotskians believe in cooperation as a context in which peers inform, explain and intervene in a scaffolding way to attain new knowledge (Mercer, 1995 as cited in Matsgouras, 2004). The members of each team, working together, exceed their personal limits and this is Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development. They take part in collective thought and actions, make the new knowledge familiar and individual and are gradually led to personal development and maturation.

In the light of the above theories education policy and curricula must be reformed in order to avoid separation of the brain hemispheres and the separation of people. The world must be seen as an inseparable whole, whose structural elements interrelate and interact in every possible way. At the same time, it must be seen as a field of multiplicities and in this way horizons will be broadened and new worlds will appear, ready to be questioned and explored (Greene, 1997). Maybe then, school would become a place of exploration, a place to share feelings and ideas, a community where educators, students and parents cooperate to ensure that each child will be respected and educated to live in more conscious, democratic and peaceful ways and to feel empowered to change the bad course of his/her life and the life of the world around him/her (Eisler, 2000).

Drama in education and constructionism: similarities

All the above theoretical foundation seems to underpin both Drama in Education and Papert's Constructionism. Both pedagogies imagine new environments for learning, put new pedagogical tools at the service of students and are interested in the dynamics of change. "They remind us that learning, especially today, is much less about acquiring information or submitting to other people's ideas or values, than it is about putting one's own words to the world, or finding one's own voice, and exchanging our ideas with others" (Ackermann, 2001).

Therefore, this paper is guided by theory and research that suggest that drama in education and constructionism as methodologies for learning share many common ideas. "The key terms of drama pedagogy (focus, framework, conventions, questioning technique, conciliation, dramatic forms of assessment, etc.) are the more peculiar representatives of the constructive character of drama" (Zalay, 2008). Such techniques help students to be open, discover their hidden features, structure their knowledge, build upon this knowledge and shape their 'own personal world'. Drama in education and the arts in general "can provide a rich and emotionally stimulating learning context in which students become personally engaged in their work through exploration, active involvement, and engagement of their particular activities" (Eisner, 2002). According to Heathcote (2008), the great DIE pioneer, in every society, there should be no greater priority than the need to reach young people and "create for them avenues for exploration". The ultimate aim for such a choice should be to empower young people to learn the 'old' knowledge and then to enable them to feel free to explore their own opinions in order to produce innovative designs, new applications of theory, 'new' knowledge and finally to make the transition to new beginnings.

Drama pedagogy can provide both teachers and students with the joy of creation. It is a conscious construction that considers alternatives and wishes to achieve concrete pedagogical objectives in the framework of a well-designed and continuously reflected structure. According to its intentions the participants can experience the experiential and situative learning process, that can develop or change their understanding of the world and as a result, practices of everyday life can be refracted and transformed. There is no brainwashing, no manipulation, no intimidation but playful and exploratory learning (Zalay, 2008).

Papert (1991), on the other hand, suggesting a 'catchy version' of the idea of constructionism thinks of it as a self –directed, active "learning by making" which means building knowledge structures in a context where the learner/student, in interaction with his/her world, is consciously engaged in hands-on explorations that construct a public entity. He is interested in how learners engage in a conversation with artifacts and "stresses the importance of tools, media and context in

human development" (Ackermann, 2001). Constructionism, like drama and theatre in education emphasises creativity, discovery learning, building understanding and synthesis. Problem solving is also a fundamental idea for both practices, as using the categories of analysis and design, is closely related to creative thinking and involves producing a new response to a new situation, which is a novel outcome (Antonenko and Thompson, 2011). What is most important is that design activities for both educational approaches demand learners to be engaged cognitively, affectively and kinesthetically. The difference is that for the same purposes constructionists use tools like LEGO/Logo or Scratch to help students learn important mathematical and scientific ideas, while drama and theatre in education use dramatic and theatrical tools like narration, improvisation or rehearsal either to teach students school subjects or to make them socially or aesthetically/artistically literate.

Play

In addition, DIE and constructionism share another common element which is their penchant for playful learning. Henry Caldwell Cook, another of DIE's pioneers, placed emphasis on 'play', 'doing', 'being active' and 'following one's heart' in order to free his students (Bolton, 1998). The desire to link education and 'play' was fundamental to the development of drama and theatre in education. Peter Slade (1954) was the one who undertook the great challenge and managed to give 'play' in education professional status and propose it as the basis of Child Drama (1954).

Papert and Harel in the introduction of their book *Constructionism* (1991) also argue about the playful facet of their methodology. What is of great importance at this point seems to be the fact that, Papert was inspired to 'construct' constructionism from a soap-sculpture art class. He writes: "I want to be a person who puts math and art together". What he mostly liked was that the art students were dreaming, gazing, imagining, talking to other people, waiting and thinking, trying and dropping ideas before constructing a work of art. He wanted to unite fantasy, imagination and science in his own work, too. That's why he writes that "those who like to play with images of structures emerging from their own chaos, lifting themselves by their own bootstraps, are likely predisposed to constructionism" (Harel and Papert, 1991).

Imagination

Imagination is important to Papert's work. Citing a project at Hennigan School in Boston as an example, he highlights the fact that children trying to make a snake out of LEGO/Logo were constructing the content of their work through the free expression of their imaginations (Harel and Papert, 1991). Vygotsky (1998) argues that "everything that requires artistic transformation of reality, everything that is connected with interpretation and construction of something new, requires the indispensable participation of imagination" and again "imagination is a transforming, creative activity directed from the concrete toward a new concrete".

In using the arts, drama in education releases the imaginative capacity, breaks down barriers, opens up situations and frees people and leads them to see beyond what is termed normal or common sense. Developing the formal and aesthetic structures of their devised drama they create their own dramatic meanings. Thus, drama provides people with opportunities to discover new possibilities, new beginnings and new avenues for action (Greene, 1995; Doyle, 1993; Wagner, 1999).

Constructions and situated knowledge

The arts have always been a means of casting new light on the familiar, in order to see the world differently. Artists generally hold a mirror to society, but they do not simply represent and reflect

reality. Instead, they restructure and reformulate conventional patterns, thereby uncovering the unrealised potential in society and establishing alternative visions (Doyle, 1993; Greene, 1997). Artists replace conformism with consciousness and reveal the inner needs of people.

Therefore, drama and theatre in education have their own potential as effective pedagogical tools. People develop through drama and students, by doing and creating drama, become part of a living-through experience, using their own resources to go beyond the predictable. This is a process of exploring the self, one's world, finding inner individual voices and also a process of emancipation (Doyle, 1993).

More specifically, taking into account that children learn better by making and doing (Neelands, 1984), drama and theatre create a safe framework for the students within which they can identify themselves with imagined roles, test reality, plan and reflect on several actions that resemble real life actions, handle situations, explore issues, events and relationships, imagine and create, become critical, make decisions, solve problems. In other words they can try out life itself. When using drama, logical and intuitive thinking are stimulated and knowledge is personalised while aesthetic pleasure is dominant. A dynamic unity of body, mind and emotion is used to achieve students' goals and this fact leads them to meaningful learning, to empowerment and to a sense of completion. Finally, given that drama and theatre are social forms of work, group and social skills are fostered in the participants.

A very special feature and a great attraction of both drama and theatre is that they are creative media that do not limit themselves in one form of expression or exploration. In this way, every student is encouraged to find his/her own style of learning, communication and interaction. In this sense, drama and theatre in education can play a vital role in promoting democracy, especially in post-modern multicultural and multilingual societies.

All of the above remind us of many ideas underpinning constructionism. Papert (1991) proclaims "vivent les differences" and argues that people prefer to think in their own way rather than in the 'best' way. According to him, his interest in differences and different intellectual and learning styles "set the stage for the evolution of constructionism". Papert's "bricolage" is almost the same as a devised theatre performance. Both are intellectual adventures of knowing and creating. In both cases students cannot stay with a pre-established plan. Both theories promote different ways of thinking and doing things and of constructing and giving form to their ideas. The result is always a personalised construction.

This view about individual people's ways of knowing and relating is also behind Papert's view of situated knowledge. Situated knowledge or learning is similar to living-through drama experiences. It means that certain knowledge cannot be detached from specific situations or context. In other words, cognition is grounded, experience- based and subjective (Ackermann, 2001).

Feminist approach

Finally, both DIE and constructionism value the feminist approach in education. According to feminist scholars "many women [and/or scientists] prefer working with more personal, less detached knowledge and do so very successfully. It this is true, they should prefer the more concrete forms of knowledge favored by constructionism to the propositional forms of knowledge [favored by traditional epistemology]" (Harel and Papert, 1991). Papert puts empathy at the service of intelligence and his 'child' "remains in touch with situations for the very sake of feeling at one with them" (Ackermann, 2001).

The arts and DIE, in particular, are considered to be an especially powerful setting for the emotional development of young people. Researchers have found that in art, the affective dimensions interact with cognitive dimensions and influence the quality of learning and life (AEP, 2004). Some neuroscientists and educators contend that learning cannot even occur without the presence of emotions and that emotional connections are necessary for memory, reasoning and deep understanding (LeDoux, 1996). In drama experiences, greater feelings and sensations unknown to the students are explored, "qualities and emotions that leapt the centuries" are touched, aesthetic satisfactions are felt and, in this way, the construction of personal meaning is facilitated (McCarty et al., 2004). Indeed, the discussion here is not about the direct pursuit of pleasure, in a utilitarian way, but rather about what Csikszentmihalyi (1997, as cited in McCarthy et al., 2004) calls emotional stimulation of creativity.

Concluding, DIE can unite the scientific and mythical levels of life, engage the whole human being, offer factual knowledge and also stimulate human interest and mystery (Vappula, 2004). Thus, a balance can be maintained between closeness and separation, openness and closure, mobility and stability, continuity and diversity, change and invariance (Ackermann, 2001). Through this lens DIE and constructionism complement each other and share similar goals.

A drama/theatre based learning experience

I will describe below a drama/theatre based learning experience, which was integrated into the school timetable, with 14 adolescents aged between16-18 years old, for one school year, in a Senior High School (Lyceum) in Palaio Faliro in Athens. The actual project and the research findings will provide evidence to support the idea that DIE is congruent with constructionism.

Methodology

This project was guided by the belief that the arts, especially dramatic arts, can play an exceptional role in the holistic development of young people and can offer them a high quality level of enjoyment and affect their quality of life.

The research was conducted in the light of changing methodologies and patterns of research in education and the humanities, which consider the two dominant approaches, quantitative and qualitative, complementary. The paradigm of critical educational research is also taken into account, in the sense that the purpose of this research "is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

Action research appeared to be the most suitable research methodology for the current project as drama and theatre in education is a newly introduced field in the Greek secondary school and the students are not only unused to this methodology, but also unused to the pedagogical philosophy that underlies it.

Three data collection methods were used: both structured and semi-structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, before and after the intervention, and participant, unstructured, overt, on-going observation. Moreover, materials produced throughout the project were used as data resources in the final analysis.

Research design

The arts' based experience involved a mixture of drama/theatre activities and games, process drama, theatre attendance, theatre rehearsals and theatre production. In the first phase, the students were engaged in two sessions of warm up drama/theatre games and exercises aimed at

creating a comfortable atmosphere to help them relax, begin developing communication skills and build trust within the group. Some of these games also focused on developing initial skills in drama and theatre.

In the second phase, the work focused on process drama and several drama activities. The methodology that was used for planning the drama was mainly based on the dramatic conventions and techniques of Jonothan Neelands (1984), Dorothy Heathcote (Wagner, 1999), and based on work done on the structural elements of dramatic art by John O'Toole (1992) and Cecily O'Neill (1995). The pre-text was that the students were citizens of the year 2208 and had to take a trip to the past, as they were not satisfied with their lives. They chose artists as their common imaginative role (Wagner, 1999) and journeyed into different periods of time in the past aiming to find what was missing from their lives. Within this context, the students were asked to work on many scenes and characters from two theatrical plays: Shakespeare's *Mid-Summer Night's Dream* (2000) and Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (2002), without having read the plays. The techniques of improvised drama and devised theatre were also used. Through the process the students developed a lot of improvisations and enactments based on their own ideas. Demands which were made on the students were physical, emotional, spiritual and mental. This phase also consisted of reflection on action either in the form of conversations out of role or writing or drawing.

The same research process was followed in the third phase of the work, which consisted of preparation for a theatre performance and its attendant rehearsals. The students worked on all aspects of the production: scenery, costumes, sets and props, make up, coiffure, sound, lighting and publicity. The rehearsal process was enriched with more drama activities to stimulate creativity and to hold their interest (Wooland, 1993), to present an alternative approach to putting on a play and, last but not least, to reinforce the educational and aesthetic character of the experience as the aim was not to produce a professional performance but for the students to have a quality arts' experience.

Research findings

The participants in this study were invited to participate in the arts, to decode works of art and to respond and react to them in their own way. All the students stated that this experience was something completely new for them and that they came out of it with many new understandings and insights of themselves, of the world and their perception of it and of the existing relationships. Constantina said the whole work was very much more than a simple performance: "…we discovered and expressed our best self…", and Olga said that it was even more than a journey and its destination. Christina continues her thought saying: "It was a deep experience. We did not stay on the surface, we understood things…And then we did the performance to express something, not to just do a performance".

It was observed by both the teacher/researcher and the critical friend that focused perception, internalisation, interpretation, building insight, discernment, understanding consequences, abstract and concrete thought, fluency, originality, problem solving, and the ability to make decisions were some of the skills that were developed during the process. Students were very perceptive, penetrating, discriminating, discerning and analytical when creating their own scenes or stories and when reflecting and commenting on them. They had created scenes and perceived the characters, before formally meeting them in the plays, in unique ways that young people have of perceiving the world. In this way, they were given the chance to search deep into their own personal resources, to find and use their personal knowledge and existing experience in the process, to develop their own ideas and to become active meaning makers and creators (Neelands, 1984). They had a deep experience by drawing into experiences where knowledge is

embedded rather than explicitly stated.

This process made them very excited, as they had discovered a way to give value to their previous personal experiences by transforming them into a significant arts product. This sense of ownership was unique for them. Other examples can be found at the moments when they started taking initiatives in every aspect of the drama and theatre work (their roles, music, costumes, make up, props and sets, scenery, publicity etc.), developing their own ideas, and expressing themselves with every means. They took several risks and finally created their own performance where almost everything that was presented was their choice. As a result, they considered it to be something that belonged to them and they carried through this work firstly for themselves and then for everyone else.

Expanding their imagination was another important result of the project. Christina noticed in her reports: "…using only our imagination we created an entire performance. Think what else we can do with it". The students experimenting to incarnate their characters tried at their own initiative, plenty of body stances, movements, gestures, facial expressions and tones of voice in order to provoke the laughter of their audience.

Moreover, the drama and theatre based experience under discussion offered plenty of opportunities to the participants to develop their inter-personal skills and to discover or construct aspects of their personal identity in order to make successful transitions to adulthood. All the students referred to the impact of the programme on the personal domain. Sophie was the student who stressed more than anyone else in her final questionnaire that the experience helped her acquire personal growth. She talked about building insights, personal development and expression in new ways. Building a sense of responsibility to the group and the project, setting and meeting goals, sharing a sense of common purpose and finally making friends were some of the results of the team work referred to by the participants and their parents. Improvisations where students came closer and co-acted, and discussions where they clarified their different aspects of reality assisted in the creation of a particular group's dynamics, where differences tended to be smoothed out by changing the balance of the group and its social health. Arts based experiences can also encourage students to search for alternative perspectives and to respect differing points of view, thereby teaching them to extend, to renew and to "hear more on normally unheard frequencies" (Greene, 1995).

All the students in the sample referred to the emotional stimulation and meaning which was provided to them by the arts experience they engaged with. They testified that they explored their own feelings and those of other people, either their co-participants' or their roles' feelings and that offered them personal insight. Some students noted that their relationship to the arts became more positive because they realised that the arts provoke a lot of emotions and free the person to explore and express them.

In conclusion, through the process of the drama and theatre based experience, the students developed an ability for creating art, acquired several technical/artistic skills in the arts and the art form, learnt to select, shape and organise material for performance, to compose imaginative works and to handle small details in artistic works that make the difference. As a result, they were empowered as art creators.

Conclusion

The above findings highlight the strengths of the programme because as Slade (1954) puts it, the aim of drama and theatre in education is "a happy and balanced individual". The participants in

this study did not get stuck on their acting skills and roles and on the production of the performance. They enjoyed themselves, achieved the fullness of their personality developed and cherished a remarkable experience in the realms of education.

These findings, also, are congruent with the relevant literature and research in constructionism (Ackermann, 2001; Harel and Papert, 1991; Antonenko and Thompson, 2011) and support the idea that the two educational practices share the same vision. An educational system which can offer deeper meaning to young people, opportunities to be engaged in situations and through this process achieve moments of inspired creation and personal construction of knowledge. Perhaps the co-operation of the two pedagogies is an important challenge facing educational research and reform today.

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