

Title
Learning group improvisation in a site interaction context
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Keywords (Max 4)
Group improvisation, site interaction, masks, intercultural training
OVERVIEW
A site interactive, experimental teaching that outlined the impact of Commedia dell'Arte on European theatre over the centuries, and through practical engagement provided a critical theoretical overview of common pragmatic principles of the art of the performer.
Overview, Aims and Context (the rationale including underpinning pedagogy) (summarise the activity in 2 or 3 sentences, max 50 words)
I proposed an approach to teaching theatre that is experiential, trans-cultural and interactive, aiming at connecting theory, history and practice. All educational outputs of the module had relevance beyond the specific field of The Italian Commedia dell'Arte. They were intended to develop the students' performance skills and trans-cultural knowledge about the art of the performer over the centuries and the ability to work in communities and open spaces.
Description (a brief description of the activity; and how you have used innovative pedagogies and approaches in the curriculum design; max 200 words)
Seminar/practical workshops allowed students to engage in structured experiential learning through the practice of formalized forms of training and the preparation of short group performances based on traditional Commedia dell'Arte masks and <i>lazzi</i> . This was the structure: first academic semester 2016-17; Week 1: Performance demonstration by the lead researcher; Weeks 2-6: Work on acting and interaction techniques; Weeks 7-11: Group performance preparation; Week 12: Public parade and performance. A variety of practical pedagogical applications shaped the learning environment and allowed multiple evaluation of how this affects teaching methods and learner engagement.

Besides theoretical and historical introduction, intercultural physical training included Japanese Suzuki workshop, Wu-shu Chinese martial arts workshop, Aikido techniques, French mime, Italian masks postures creation, Asian facial masks and make-up, music/voice group improvisation, etc. The lead investigator set up specific strategies for evaluating impact, engagement and learning gain from student perspectives.

This was facilitated by having a postgraduate student on the project team to collect data, to record interaction and to evaluate impact. This project team also acted as production team, providing creative (e.g. costume, set and make-up design), technical and dissemination/marketing support to the actors/performers group.

Design (methodological approach (qualitative and quantitative evaluation); and)

This was an experiential, student centred, practice-as-research pedagogical experimentation, verified through qualitative evaluation.

All students were required to work independently and in groups and to undertake research related to creative tasks.

They were required to engage in creative problem-solving and seek to develop a disciplined and professional working ethos.

Process and results were monitored and filmed. Students were regularly interviewed and the progression of their skills checked and verified throughout the whole project development.

The final public performance functioned as a test of the effectiveness of the methodologies adopted and applied over the months.

RESULTS

Findings and Conclusions: (provide information on results/findings, evidence and conclusions)

Students acquired intercultural actor training skills, the ability to structure improvisations and to design adaptable indoor/outdoor/community context performances as well as to perform in a space located outside the studios or classrooms. Finally, they performed a successful parade across the Magee campus and a show in the foyer of the Student Union in block MG.

EVALUATION

Reflective Commentary (this should draw from your experience and identify what worked well and what were the key challenges;)

Overall, the teaching explored ways of enhancing learning to engage students more collaboratively. The experience was successful and the participation was constant. The work with intercultural forms of actor training, make up and traditional Italian masks engaged the students and brought them to work collaboratively to achieve success in their final public performance. Since we could not afford buying professional costumes, it was challenging for the students to design and make their own costumes. However this activity was integrated with their research and it worked quite well.

Documenting during teaching and learning sessions (especially videoing) was at time challenging,

however the team managed to capture some essential aspects of the project and produced some hours of footage. Editing the materials would be a further challenge, yet unexplored due to lack of time and specific funding.

Student Engagement (to be completed by the student partner): Impact on learning experience and sense of belonging;

The structure of the course enabled the students to gain direct engagement with the material (masks) and the techniques of Commedia dell'arte. I assisted this process from the very first classes where an introduction was given to the students under the form of performance by Giuliano Campo. This encouraged the students to cultivate a *handling* approach towards the taught subject and be more courageous in dealing with theatrical equipment. The experience arrived at its culmination with the creation of theatrical pieces from groups of them where the progress in terms of acting and using this particular technique were evident. The students' sense of belonging was cultivated and increased through the process of learning. The interaction between them as group members enabled them to build the necessary trust level in order to be effective in the delivery of the task.

Learning Environment and Engagement: your views on the appropriateness and effectiveness of physical spaces for engagement and virtual spaces to enhance learning.

Studio spaces at Foley arts building are adequate for this kind of physical-based pedagogy, and Magee Campus open-spaces gave the opportunity to the students to experience and experiment their technical achievements in front of an audience. The studios worked well for all the first part of the pedagogical project, based on physical training. For the second and final part of the project, the Campus open space areas (including the foyer of the 'Bunker' utilised as a performance space) and various opportunities to meet there casual audience provided the necessary responses to the student and to the researchers.

Impact (please provide evidence of the impact on learning and/or teaching)

The impact was immediately apparent and the students have been interviewed, questioned and filmed in different moments of the learning process. They expressed appreciation of the innovative pedagogical approach and they promptly already made use of the skills learned also in other occasions (in other modules and performances, in particular in some shows produced through the Directing module in the second semester).

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Transferability (consider how this activity might be used by colleagues in other schools/faculties and if it could be developed for a further Faculty interdisciplinary learning project)

The physical training and the work on voice are particularly organised in order to experience and achieve a basic understanding of the traditional work on oneself through the performing arts, in the domain of research through practice. Although the topic is itself extremely specialising (the work included the acquisition of skills directed towards the creative establishment of an

individual and group actor training) the approach is transferable to other contexts and the structure/conception of the work may be applied to a variety of environments (for example through community engagement activities). Therefore, it may be part of Faculty interdisciplinary learning projects.

Dissemination (internal and external) (School and Faculty briefings, workshops, resources developed)

Dissemination was initially produced through the public performance in the selected space (e.g. parade outdoor across campus and indoor at the foyer of the 'Bunker'/Student Union). In the future the performance, or small fragments of it, may be shown as part of the activities of the Drama Society (SPAM), or of University-related activities such as Open Days and other promotional events or, depending on funding, in other public spaces and theatres (external dissemination). This is also part of my current activity as workshop leader and I may present materials related to this specific experience in a number of venues and contexts, such as at the Doctoral school of the University of Rio the Janeiro that I will be visiting soon.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

References (using Harvard style, list literature and other resources that influenced your work)

BARBA, E & N. SAVARESE, (1991). *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, trans. R. Fowler, London: Routledge.

CRUCIANI, F & FALLETTI, C. (1985) *Teatro nel Novecento. Registi pedagoghi e comunità teatrali del XX secolo*, Firenze: Sansoni

GIROUX, H. A., SHANNON, P. (1997). *Education and Cultural Studies. Toward a Performative Practice*. New York and London: Routledge.

NICHOLSON, H. (2005). *Applied drama*. New York: Routledge.

PINKERT, U., *The concept of theatre in theatre pedagogy*. In: Shifra Shonman (Ed.), (2010) *Key Concepts in Theatre /Drama Education*. Rotterdam, 119 – 124.

Acknowledgements (support staff or departments that supported you detailing specific areas of assistance and contact details)

Drama department, Foyle Arts Building, Magee Campus, Block MQ

Attachments List and attach relevant documents/images in support of project activities

I enclose here a selection of students' reports, reflective essays and portfolios containing independent research and materials produced by the students (including images and photos). Over 200 hours footage is also available on request. The footage includes evidence of activities and students' skills developments over the whole 12 weeks of the pedagogical project, as well as interviews at specific phases of the work. It also includes video of the final parade across the

Magee campus and public performance at the foyer of the Student Union-‘Bunker’ restaurant.

List of Attachments

(PDF Files in Folder ‘Commedia dell’arte 2016/17):

Portfolios 1, 2, 3

Description of role (sample)

Self reflective essays, (sample)

Evaluation of Learning Process (sample)