

Using drama based teaching methods to promote student participation in the teaching of business studies.

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Aim of the project

In my department, most of the teaching approaches are lecturer centred. This is the banking approach to teaching (Freire, 2008) which has been criticized for limiting students' agency as active creators of knowledge. I taught this way for many years. The aim of the project was to trial and evaluate student-centred teaching approaches. I decided to seek inspiration from the arts and embraced drama-based pedagogies. Thus I introduced learning activities that were drama-based. The goal of my project was to rearrange the way information was presented in lectures and give students space to participate, and facilitate opportunities for students to create their own understandings - tied to their life worlds- of the curricular materials.

Processes / Methods

Prior to the project, I was picking up and experimenting with new pedagogical techniques. During this time, Prof Bozalek exposed me to Participatory Learning Action (PLA) techniques such as the River of Life¹. These experiences paved the way for me to explore drama based pedagogies.

I went about it by learning about drama-based pedagogies at conferences from experienced colleagues and reading on the topic. I discovered that arts and drama-based pedagogies were used in education in various disciplines for transformative learning (Eisner, 2005; Greene, 1995), social justice (Kraehe & Brown, 2011) and to encourage innovation and creativity. With regards to drama, Sinclair & Donelan, (2012) declare that:

"Learning in drama is active, social, and experiential; it involves critical inquiry and creative problem solving. Also, drama engages the whole person – the intellect, emotions, the imagination, and the body – and it develops socially useful skills and knowledge" (Sinclair & Donelan, 2012, p. 69).

O'Toole (1992) suggests that understanding gained through drama 'is neither just propositional comprehension nor sensuous apprehension; it is a fusion of both' (1992, p.98). Drawing on these insights, I incorporated drama techniques in the supply chain management (SCM) course that I taught in 2018. I rearranged my teaching activities. Instead of me presenting the prescribed readings during class using PowerPoint slides or even asking students to present via PowerPoint (which I have done with other postgraduate classes), I requested that groups of randomly selected students present the prescribed

¹ 'The river of life' is a visual narrative method that helps people tell stories of the past, present and future. Definition retrieved from http://www.kstoolkit.org/river_of_life (accessed 01/06//2018).

material using drama-based activities. In the first lecture, I modelled a frozen scene², where I asked a few students to use body postures to model various actors in the supply chain. I vividly remember how the class was buzzing with excitement. There were 65 honours level students in the SCM course. Many of them were working during the day. Although they were tired from a day at work, because of the practical arts based activities, they were energetic and attentive, especially if I compare their engagement to how similar students usually responded when I used the traditional PowerPoint-lecture format. Discussions in class followed students' queries rather than being driven by the sequence outlined in the course outline. I would argue that learning was student-centred through student queries as they constructed their understanding of the prescribed reading materials. I would argue that learning was student-centred through student queries as they constructed their understanding of the prescribed reading materials. I would further argue that it could also be considered rhizomatic (Strom, 2015) since students would sometimes perform a particular performance (on one topic) and connect it to a previous topic or a topic to come. Instead of a top down approach to learning (teacher and authority driven) we have a relational approach that is open to growth in multiple directions. Thus even I as the lecturer was learning from my students and alongside them.

In 2019, I taught the same module and used the same formula of having students engage in drama based activities. I had a smaller cohort of students. As with the first cohort I found that students struggled to let go of the logocentric nature³ of conventional learning and teaching. Most performances would include written text that would accompany bodily performance. Nevertheless, students found the pedagogical approach refreshing.

Outcomes

My reflections. Students' performances were assessed using a rubric in which students were assessed on both their performance and the 'content' of their presentations. These assessments formed part of the student's summative assessments and formed part of their continuous assessment marks (CAM). These performances thus not only served as pedagogic exercises, but also as assessment tasks as well. After each performance I would give students feedback on their performance and on the 'content'. Because they were students who had work experience their presentations reflected experiences from their work experiences. Thus the drama approach made it possible for students to bring together the subject content with their personalised insights of the world of work in a fun and educational performance. Most of the student performances were frozen scenes and skits drawn from their work and life experiences.

² "A drama technique somewhat like charades, a tableau vivant is interactive and involves cooperative learning and creative and critical thinking. ...Tableaux vivants are frozen moments in time, acted out by groups." Tortello (2004, p.206). A frozen scene is similar to a tableaux vivant.

³ In brief, this means that speech and words are privileged over action and reality. In other words, telling about something or an object conveys its true reality.

Data was also collected in student evaluations of various aspects of the module. Where permission was granted, the performances were videotaped using my personal smartphone. These recordings were later analysed. Initial analysis of my notes, videos and memories reveal that the drama-based activities contributed to unsettling students' conventional ideas of how business ideas and concepts can be taught and learnt. Thus a student commented: *"For me the written and art-based combination was truly insightful. Something different, made me realise there is always different ways to look at one thing."* Students appreciated being challenged and being able to use their other intelligences (Gardner, 1983). They could draw on more than just their cognitive intelligence. A student said: *"Thank you for allowing the entire class the opportunity to tap into their artistic side."* It allowed for student engagement and for students to 'own' the learning experience:

This was my favourite and most productive module of the semester because of the interesting methods of teaching and interacting with the work in class. It honestly required the most effort to be put in but I feel that it has helped me in understanding the content of SCM in everyday life. I enjoyed putting in the extra effort.

For example, in one drama scene, students performed a hospital encounter with one student lying down as the patient. The student laying on the table could viscerally grasp what it meant to be a patient that depends on the right instruments being supplied to the hospital via the supply chain. Another insight from this example is that the students in the class gathered around the patient to try and interpret the frozen scene. In the process of guessing and interpreting the performance, students would make jokes and lots of laughter would ensue. Ahmed (2004) suggests that bodies open up in joy to new possibilities. Paulo Freire (2003) spoke of the importance of emotions for learning. Freire (2003) asked us to pay attention to play, humour, joy, and indignation as necessary dimensions of learning. My personal reflection is that I have never had so much interaction and laughter in teaching a course. Many students expressed similar sentiments. One of them said to me in class that the university "took it to another level" in terms of engagement and interaction.

The significance of this study is that it demonstrated a successful encounter with an alternative pedagogy in a curriculum space that is characterised by 'chalk and talk' teaching. Students found drama pedagogical approach stimulating and their engagement in class was more than what it had ever been when I compare it to when I taught using traditional banking pedagogy. Students generally reported that they enjoyed the intervention. This confirms Pearce (2006), Brennan and Pearce (2009) and Butcher, Pearce and Ross's (2017) findings that drama based learning encourages 'active learning' amongst students enrolled in business related courses. Pearce (2006) found that marketing undergraduate students found drama based techniques meaningful. They also found it more enjoyable, more engaging and more motivating than conventional teaching. My research confirms these insights.

Drama based pedagogies can be the foundation for thinking about decolonial alternatives (Athimoolam, 2018) within the current neoliberal trend in business education. I would further argue that the use of drama based pedagogies can make a generative contribution to the teaching of business subjects where learning is more than just cognitive or the ability to regurgitate pre-given content. I would further argue that drama based pedagogies encourage a relational approach to teaching and learning that opens up multiple pathways for learning. Thus even I as the lecturer was learning from my students and alongside them.

From my perspective as a lecturer the intervention decentred my role as the centre of attention and the controller of student learning. The classroom engagements promoted student-centred learning through active multimodal and multi-sensorial engagement. It allowed for students' bodies and experiences to creatively be part of the curricula materials. It also encouraged students to do (some of) their pre-readings before class and enhanced the relationships between students. Thus I conclude that drama based approaches promote student-centred learning in a fun and joyous way and is a step towards constructing a student-centred learning experience.

However, there were some limitations. One limitation was that students found that the preparation time required for the performances was onerous. They also complained that it was difficult to find a time where the whole group could meet together. Another student commented that he could not do all the readings required per evening but could only do the part of the readings required for his group's performance.

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