

The use of drama as a RIT strategy

Paul Skinner and Dr Elizabeth Hoult

Department of Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education and Faculty of Education

Background

This project used drama to challenge restricted notions of research and practice in teacher education. We were concerned that classroom and behaviour management are perhaps the most problematic aspects of learning to be a teacher. We adopted Augusto Boal's ideas about forum theatre in order to open up the teaching/research nexus and to escape the supposed theory/practice binary. We wanted to explore how a play could provide a safe space for teaching professionals to talk honestly about the difficulties of managing behaviour in secondary schools. We both had a long-standing concern that literary texts represent important ways of knowing about the world and that such ways of knowing tend to be marginalized in many forms of education research, where social scientific texts and methodologies tend to dominate. Similarly we wanted to bring the valuable insights from the long-standing tradition of drama in education into a higher education context.

The project sought to demonstrate that an examination of the relationship between teacher and student is key to understanding the challenges and complexities of transformational learning. This contrasts with the limitations of the conventional, mechanistic exploration of pedagogic strategies, common amongst teacher educators. Dramatic fictions have the capacity to engagingly present these relationships in stark relief. Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* and David Mamet's *Oleanna* are clear examples of the way the teaching and learning scene can be illuminated and read openly when it is viewed as drama. They present contrasting manifestations of successful and unsuccessful teaching. These plays have had tangible and active responses from their audiences, highlighting the extent to which the figure of the higher education teacher in these plays is embedded in the public imagination. The outcomes of each play are dependent on the capacity for change in both the teacher and the learner as the pedagogic journey progresses. We were convinced that this literary genre introduces a helpful alternative to the conventional range of social scientific models currently promoted as the dominant academic discourse on teaching and learning. The project funding allowed us to write our own play - *NoManzLand* - which was inspired by these texts.

Approach/methodology

Paul Skinner had previously studied the art of playwriting as part of the prestigious Masters course at the University of Birmingham, under the leadership of David Edgar. Elizabeth Hoult used drama texts prominently as part of her doctoral research into resilience in adult learners in higher education. They therefore combined a theoretical commitment to the use of drama as a method of both research and teaching. They began by writing the play together. What emerged was a depiction of a 60 minute English lesson which descends into a 'lesson from hell'. Postgraduate English, Drama and Media students then auditioned for the roles and the script was developed in workshops led by Paul over the Easter holidays. The students worked very hard and developed their characters' personas into a final script which was captured by Paul. Boal's principles were used throughout to develop the creative response to the issue of concern. All through the process Paul worked with the students to develop their understanding of behaviour and classroom management in response to the action. The play was rehearsed and dress rehearsed and eventually performed to a professional, student and community audience in June 2008. Filming the play provided experience for an MA Media Studies student.

Outcomes

When the play was performed it was very well received – the students in the show were very convincing and all the student teachers recognised the problems that were being faced. As a drama it was a very condensed and exaggerated way of showing the behaviour issues that might be experienced over perhaps a term, but it was an interactive way of engaging student teachers with some of the behaviour issues they will encounter.

We were amazed at the way that the drama had a powerful effect on the members of the audience as well as the actors - the discussions that took place at the end of the performance were marked by a level of frankness that we had not seen before. The comments from the audience were highly favourable, including "the best piece of professional development I have ever attended."

The project was very successful as a model of RIT. It had a discernible impact on the students who took part and the audience. It developed our thinking about the possibilities for using dramatic, literary and creative texts as part of a professional learning course.

Now working as teachers, the students are still talking about the experience. The evaluations, which we have captured digitally as part of the post-performance discussion, demonstrate very significant engagement with the project and that the students considered it very important in their development as beginning teachers.

We now have a product – the final script of *NoManzLand* – which has been performed once again already and will be performed again in 2010. It is simultaneously a pedagogical tool and a record of a piece of research. We are intending to develop the methodology in a new setting.

Enhancing RIT

Learning was enhanced by the deep consideration of the issues involved in classroom and behaviour management. The simulacrum of the classroom provided a very safe space in which to explore the student teachers' thoughts and feelings about managing behaviour. Students helped each other to think of solutions. The original research text (the play script itself) was intrinsically linked to the students' learning needs because it was developed directly in response to them. Secondary research is emerging from the project, including a paper presented to the *Teacher: icon, identity and image* conference at the University of Glasgow, 2008.

Advice for others

The project gave us the confidence to take risks and to develop something that we felt passionate about. Our advice is to use the opportunities afforded by RIT to work in more radical and innovative ways than are sometimes possible within the restraints of the mainstream teaching funds.

Reflections and any future plans

We are developing ways of disseminating the work on this project more widely. We would like to turn the play into a DVD so that it could be more widely available and we would like to work on more research publications about the methodology.

The play has been used with a second year of PGCE students and will be used again in 2010. We are hoping to apply our methodology to a new problem in another community setting. The work illustrated the issues around observation – what it means to the student and to the class when a PGCE tutor is present – and there are many issues that could be explored through further research.

Contact for further information:

paul.skinner@canterbury.ac.uk



It's 2.10 pm on a dank Thursday afternoon in November and the bell has long since gone ... Meet Mr Leeson's GCSE English class. He is their new student teacher, and they are about to teach him a lesson he will never forget ...

NoManzLand, the Research Informed Teaching drama project from PGCE English designed to support and develop engagement in behaviour management issues, was first performed on June 25th 2008, to the following unsolicited reviews:



Pure genius. I've been thinking about it non-stop and I wanted to thank you. The script and the delivery were absolutely spot on.

Louise Cameron, English teacher

Fantastic stuff ... excellent script and high energy performance ... It was so like being in a classroom and yet great as drama also ... No text book, however well written, can equal the immediacy of the experience, both for the actor and the audience ...

Andrew Humphries
Modular PGCE English Course Leader

Last night was GREAT!!! Superb acting. I was knocked out by how natural the acting was – superb play too!! Wonderful work.

Dr Andrew Lambirth
Principal Lecturer in Primary English

Incredibly realistic portrayals of Year 10 pupils ... it has to be the most powerful piece of learning I've been part of within the PGCE.

Simon Houlton
Director of 11-19 Initial Teacher Education

... it really was very, very good - well written, funny, excellently performed and also quite provocative

Dr Ian Marsh
Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy

I was really moved ... made me realise yet again how vulnerable students are ... a safe space for people to say stuff ... I would love to sit with a group of professional [teacher] mentors and watch that ... a screen version would be great ...

Chris Carpenter
Senior Lecturer in PGCE Secondary PE

... clearly needs a much wider audience as it says rather more to lay folk like me than any statistics or league tables could ever achieve!

John Telfer
former Chief Student Resident Manager

... thrilling. It worked very well as a drama, but also as a very significant contribution to teacher education both for actors and audience, for staff as well as students ...

Professor Tony Booth
Professor of Inclusive and International Education