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Theatre & Education *bonds of solidarity*

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The “Other” in Me

Triona Stokes, Ruth Forrest

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ΔΙΑΒΑΣΤΕ ΤΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΤΩ
Read the article below

Το άρθρο αυτό μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί δωρεάν για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Επιτρέπεται η αναδημοσίευση μετά από άδεια του εκδότη.

The “Other” in Me

Triona Stokes, Ruth Forrest

Abstract

Both presenters are primary school educators and lecture in a College of Education in Dublin, Ireland. Their academic interests are complementary in nature, in that Triona's area of interest lies in drama's inherent value, in addition to its educational use in the classroom. Within this realm, the development of empathy is constructed around the adoption of a character's set of circumstances, as the participant “walks in the character's shoes” by “stepping into the shoes of another” (O' Toole 1992: 51). Ruth, alternately, also works as a psychotherapist and hence has a significantly different view of what constitutes empathy. Her theoretical framework is hinged upon the understanding that empathy involves accompanying the character's footsteps on whatever journey is being undertaken. As every individual experiences a specific journey in a particular way, influenced by previous experiences and specific thought and behaviour patterns, her view, as a therapist, is that it is presumptuous to try to “walk in another's shoes”, as they can never fit. No individual experiences a journey in the same way as another even though the terrain may be seen to be consistent or comparable.

In order to reconcile these two understandings of what constitutes empathy, for the purposes of facilitating the workshop, both presenters agreed on the basic tenet that a participant brings to the role or character he or she adopts, his or her own viewpoints, experiences, memories and consequent interpretation of the role being adopted in the dramatic setting.

The Dramatic Context

The Greek-Cypriot hero quest of Spanos forms the basis for this workshop. As the villagers toil in the midday sun, the water from the river that is the life force of their village has mysteriously run dry. Under siege from forty dragons in the castle, the king sends a cry for help to the villagers below. How can they react to save the kingdom and their king?

Using a range of drama methodologies and visualisation techniques, participants negotiate the problems they face in role as the residents of Cephos in this exploration of story through drama.

Guided imagery is used at the beginning and end of the workshop to both facilitate ease of entry into the fictional journey and subsequently, reflection on the journey undertaken therein. Incorporating a range of primary curriculum objectives, the workshop explores themes of courage in adventure whilst developing empathy.



Workshop Format (180 minutes)

| Time- minutes | Activity | Facilitated by |
|---------------|--|-----------------|
| 5 | Theoretical introduction | Ruth |
| 10 | Guided imagery | Ruth |
| 10 | Map-Making of Cephos | Triona |
| 5 | Establishing fictional space using objects | Triona |
| 10 | Role-play and narration | Triona |
| 15 | Exploration of letter and objects from the King | Ruth |
| 10 | Gossip-circle regarding dragons | Triona |
| 15 | Meeting-in-role with spokesperson from the King | Triona |
| 10 | Reflection on leadership and follower tasks – active listening | Ruth |
| 10 | BREAK | All |
| 15 | Diary Entry of villagers on different parts of the journey | Ruth |
| 25 | Enacting Diary Entry | Ruth |
| 15 | Group Scenes to explore battle (narrated) | Triona |
| 10 | Reflection on Drama experience | Triona |
| 15 | Theoretical Framework Conclusion | Ruth and Triona |

The Workshop – a commentary

Note: The account below depicts how the workshop was actualised, in response to the perceived needs and decisions of the group.

The opening of the session entailed the presenters introducing themselves to the group of twenty two participants. There was a facilitator present for the duration of the workshop, who, after every few sentences, translated the words of the presenters into Greek. Most of those present had some English, however, the terminology associated with the theoretical component was deemed potentially challenging. The overall plan for the workshop was presented and explained by both Triona and Ruth.

Ruth went on to explore the *theoretical* focus of what empathy meant, according to both the dramatic and the therapeutic stance. This was so as to clarify the nature of the proposed workshop experience and its goals. Drawing on the work of Schechner (2002), the notion of the participant in role as “not me, not not me”, was presented. Consideration was given to Greene (1995: 3) advice that “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible”. In a communal fashion, through drama the poetic imagination enables us to enter into the “social fabric” of the “other” and extend our human experience. Such opportunities for social imagining constitute the essence of compassion (Neelands 2002).

The “Other” in me refers to the empathic synergy which occurs when one experiences what is termed in psychotherapeutic circles as “transference” in situations where there is such a close sense of identification with the person or experience being reflected (Mearns and Thorne 1988; Mearns 2003). Advanced empathy is one of the three core conditions espoused by Rogers (1961). In acknowledging the bonds of solidarity, and the conference theme, that same solidarity may be present when one experiences a genuine sense of advanced empathy with the “other”. Solidarity leads to the breaking down of boundaries – one of the worthy aims of any dramatic experience.

The storytelling was initiated through the use of *guided imagery*, to add a sensory quality to the experiential process. Participants added authentic detail from both their knowledge and experience of the location mentioned in the story. This led to the creation of a shared visual representation of the landscape using *map-making*. It was narrated that the kingdom had been besieged by dragons in the past and were ably defeated by the local hero, Spanos. Participants were invited to engage with the use of *space and objects* to establish the fictional landscape, as informed by the map.

A letter and some objects from the king arrived by messenger, which added a dramatic tension amongst the participants, in role as villagers, who held a meeting in-role to consider their options. The objects were examined in groups and their purpose decided and manner in which they would protect the villagers elicited.

Many participants were quick to place the responsibility for salvation with Spanos, some even doubting the veracity of the letter, indicating the significance of the problem. The added constraint was that Spanos was reported to be unavailable at his usual dwelling at his grandmother's house. This heightened the dramatic tension and prompted requests for a meeting in-role with the grandmother to elucidate further information and advice. Triona adopted the low-status role of Spanos' grandmother, who admitted she personally was helpless in this regard and encouraged them to take ownership of the problem themselves, by working as a group.

At this point, participants were asked to return to their original space to consider what they understood by "active listening" as this would be crucial to making solution-focused progress in a shared capacity. Body language, in particular, associated with active listening was explored.

Following the break, participants warmed up by engaging in a *gossip circle* to playfully engage with villagers' musings regarding the damage dragons had wreaked upon the kingdom in the past. The map was examined to plan a route to rescue the king and overcome the dragons. The plan was developed through problem-solving in a meeting in-role between the villagers messenger, adopted by the workshop's translator, Ioanna. This overcame the difficulty for the presenters of pacing and maintaining a role whilst facilitating its live translation.

The difficult terrain and obstacles en route to the castle were listed and participants divided into three groups to create a *diary entry* of the villagers' traversing a selection of these obstacles. The groups then enacted this diary entry. The *narration* of the king's rescue and the challenge to the forty dragons and their leader followed accompanied by the participants' enactment of it.

The workshop culminated in a consideration of the extent to which participants experienced a sense of empathy with the characters. They were asked to consider what they learned about themselves personally, and what implications might reflecting on the above, might hold for them professionally. One participant made a particularly emotional response regarding her sense of futility regarding her perceived ability to "save" the situation. She admitted a somatic response to the experience such had been her experience of empathy. The group were respectful of her outpouring of feeling and listened attentively and actively. Another



participant commented on the scope for exploration of the journey to the castle through movement and dance. This would have lessened the language demands on participants. Feedback was teased out with participants through further discussion immediately following the workshop, which helped to clarify the situated perspectives of the participants for the presenters. The perspectives were informed by both cultural differences and professional differences, in that some of the participants were viewing the experience primarily through a theatre lens, some from a more therapeutic stance and others still, from a primarily pedagogic stance as teachers.

Evaluation and Perceived Limitations of the Process

In order to facilitate the translation process, there were moments of dramatic suspension, during which the language of educational drama conventions had to be translated, and in some cases explained, in order to clarify the true nature of the process. While necessary, this broke the continuity and fluidity of the process which was potentially irksome for those delegates who had an adequate command of the English language. The ease with which our skilled translator negotiated both the Greek and English languages, as well as the language of drama, in which she was considerably experienced, was notable.

Only one group chose to work through the medium of English. Using the methodology of guided discovery, one particularly experienced drama practitioner showed leadership in the group in which she worked. This was achieved by guiding fellow participants in making artistic and narrative choices through the metaphorical

and physical crossing of the river in their diary entry. The result was a palpable sense of achievement translated into the physical performance by the group.

The initial decision whether or not to assist Spanos, reflected an inclination for some participants to adopt a passive stance. In many cases, this seemed to be due to the varying experience levels of individual participants with drama. During the break time, away from the intense focus of the fictional lens, participants appeared to forge their own “bonds of solidarity” through informal discussion about the process. This culminated in a more pro-active in the second half of the workshop, as the group worked collaboratively and in a unified manner, to arrive at a collective solution. There was a genuine sense of achievement at the end of the workshop, of having overcome the situational and contextual challenges borne out of language difficulties, professional competences and confidences in working through the art form.

Consistent with the theme of the conference, forging “bonds of solidarity”, there was sharing of good practice post-workshop, not only in the area of Drama in Education, as outlined above, but in the complementary areas of education such as Religious Education, in addition to observations regarding Dramatherapy and the use of English Literature as a stimulus for drama.

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Triona Stokes is a drama educator in Froebel College of Education, Dublin, where she lectures on the Bachelor of Education and the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (Primary). She has been working in Initial Teacher Education since 2004, as a lecturer in Drama in Education. A primary teacher, Triona also holds a qualification in educational dance. Dance in Education and Drama and Development Education are held amongst her additional research interests. Triona is currently undertaking doctoral studies on the Education Doctorate programme at Queen’s University, Belfast.

Dr. Ruth Forrest lectures on the Bachelor of Education and Post Graduate Diploma in Education in Froebel College of Education, in the area of ERB (Education about Religions and Beliefs) and Ethics and facilitates electives on Personal and Professional Development at the Froebel College. A former Primary school teacher and Principal, her work at Doctoral level focused on the formation spirituality of student-teachers.

