

FORUM THEATRE AS A MEANS OF “MINDING THE BODY” IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Anne Hewson
St. Thomas University
Fredericton, New Brunswick

Abstract

This paper describes an arts-based Action Research project in which Forum Theatre (FT) was used to explore classroom management issues with pre-service teachers. Both participants and author were engaged in inquiry: the pre-service teachers tested different management strategies, immediately experiencing the consequences of their actions; the author noted qualities of body language and emotion to which she could draw attention in future FT workshops, thus highlighting the importance of what one senses and feels when responding to difficult classroom situations.

Introduction

Forum Theatre is an interactive type of role play developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal, as part of a repertoire of exercises known as the Theatre of the Oppressed. It has been used extensively in community, political and educational settings throughout the world as a means of identifying and eradicating oppressions in everyday life. Having been introduced to Forum Theatre during my doctoral studies in drama education, I decided to use it to explore real-life classroom management issues with pre-service teachers in an introductory Education course. Could Forum Theatre work move participants away from preoccupations about controlling students' behaviour, a major concern of most pre-service teachers during their practice teaching? Could I begin to practice a critical pedagogy using this dramatic medium?

Sherry Shapiro (1999) suggests that a “critical understanding of one's life and world” arises from a “dialectic of mind and body” (p. 41). Forum Theatre provides us with an opportunity to attend to our senses and to what our bodies feel in very specific circumstances; the aesthetic sparseness of each scene eliminates much of the irrelevant detail or “noise” that one might encounter in a regular setting, thus highlighting significant qualities for consideration. Awareness and intelligence come together in an embodied reflection (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch; 1993, p. 27). The freedom participants have to freeze the action at any instant makes it possible to consciously examine the meaning of body language, gesture and emotion.

Methodology

I chose a combination of arts-based inquiry and critical-emancipatory educational action research (McKernan, 1996) to investigate the following questions:

- 1) How might I sensitize pre-service teachers to the consequences and implications – the backtalk (Schön, 1987) – of their actions in a classroom setting, without imposing my own values and ideas?
- 2) What is the potential of this medium for transforming educational practices?

I invited a teacher with 15 years of classroom experience to observe me teach the Forum Theatre classes, and taped our after-class conversations. With the permission of the pre-service teachers, I videotaped classes as a record of what was said and done. Transcripts of discussions and reflective writing pieces from participants provided additional data. Writing journal entries after each class led me to further questions and associations. The Education class consisted of 60 people divided more or less evenly between elementary and secondary streams. The population was primarily Caucasian middle class, like myself, with a small minority of Acadian francophones. Names and information that might lead to identification of individuals were changed for the protection of participants in the project.

In our FT classes, I gave small groups time to share difficult classroom situations they had witnessed or experienced, telling them that for ethical purposes they were not to identify the school, the teacher or the students. They then had to present a scenario of a typical problem any teacher might face. The scene had to end like a “cliffhanger,” with no resolution. Each group decided on a title and wrote it on a file card, which I collected. I then recorded the titles on the blackboard, creating a “programme” for performance. First, the scenes were played through without interruption. Next, the audience determined which scenario they first wanted to explore. During the ensuing playthroughs, individuals stopped the action to tell the actors to try something different, a tactic called simultaneous dramaturgy (Boal, 1979). Or, if they were feeling brave, they took the role of teacher and attempted a response themselves.

The purpose of arts-based educational research is “the enhancement of perspectives” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96). Narrative and other artistic forms are used to create virtual realities into which we may project ourselves, empathizing with characters and vicariously experiencing their predicaments. There is a sense in which both I and the participants were conducting an arts-based inquiry: the students were using theatre to explore their responses to problematic classroom situations; I was strengthening my understanding of the medium in order to better use it for pedagogical purposes. They returned again and again to the action to refine or revise their responses; I revisited the transcripts and videos to identify points where, as facilitator, I might deepen the experience for the participants.

The problem of student resistance seems to be a common one for teachers; every cycle of this project has included at least one scenario on this theme. For this paper I have analysed the transcript and videotape of one session in which individuals generated four different responses to the dilemma: humour, intimidation, punishment and dialogue. I use narrative to describe the problem and the interventions in order to give readers a feel for the Forum Theatre work. Each description is followed by an analysis in regular font, highlighting qualities of action to which I would like to draw participants’ attention in the next cycle.

A Forum Theatre Scenario: “Resistance”

In a grade eight classroom, a substitute teacher is attempting to settle students down before class begins. “Okay class, why don’t you get your books out?” she says, as she turns to write the date on the board. Very quietly, scattered individuals start to hum. The teacher chooses to ignore them for a while, which encourages a few more to join in. Eventually, she politely and pleasantly asks them to stop the humming. They oblige – until she turns back to the board. This time when she turns to face them, her expression is stern and her request is now a demand. The students respond by humming even louder. Now visibly upset, the teacher patrols the aisles between desks, hoping to catch members of this cabal. Students, however, simply stop humming as she approaches, and there are no other signs she can use to identify the offenders. The action has reached a stalemate.

Humour

Elayne, an enthusiastic young woman, stops the action. She comes up to take over the role of teacher, facing the board as her predecessor had done to write something there. When the humming begins this time, Elayne turns and smiles at her ‘class’ as she starts humming herself. There are a few chuckles from the spectators; the actor-students, on the other hand, are a tougher audience, and they don’t give an inch, although they do not get louder as they had in the previous playthrough.

Humour is a strategy that is used by teachers to promote positive relationships with students. Novak and Purkey (2001) claims that humour can “depersonalize” a situation, such that a personal attack may be deflected and no blame may be assigned to any individual or individuals. Using Goleman’s aspects of social intelligence (2006) to analyze Elayne’s actions, she demonstrated a certain self-control not to be “infected” by the negative emotion underlying the students’ humming; she required a confident self-presentation to expressively modulate the underlying emotional tone of her own humming; furthermore, her humming is an act of synchrony, a physical alignment to what others are doing that orchestrates interactions between people and facilitates the transmission, or entrainment, of moods.

Elayne was attempting to lighten the mood. However, her inability to sway the 'students' suggested that we look beyond personality for a workable solution to student resistance. Personal influence may interfere more than help when it is used to prevent individuals from expressing legitimate feelings or from dealing with a pressing issue.

Intimidation

Rick, a tall man with a powerful voice, calls for a freeze. "What I would do," he says, "is give them an option, you know what I mean?" He brings a chair right up to set in the middle of our 'students' before the action even starts. When he turns to the board, the humming predictably starts. With an unsettling calm, he strolls, hands in pockets, to the empty chair. Then he sits down, crosses his legs and his arms, and eyeballs the students around him, looking very displeased. He spots Della, who is still humming, and immediately moves his chair next to hers. Intimidated, Della stops humming, and the others join the silent wave one by one.

It would not have been appropriate to initiate a discussion about intimidation in the context of Rick's intervention, making him feel as if he had done something wrong when in fact intimidation is a form of discipline we are all capable of enacting, having probably experienced it ourselves in a variety of settings.

On reflection, I could in future classes initiate a discussion about how bodies – female and male – can be used in non-verbal intimidation or coercion, perhaps by first presenting a scenario in which a teacher uses a seemingly benign strategy called "proximity interference" (Levin, Nolan, Kerr & Elliott, 2005). Arends (2007) explains that "[m]oving close to an offender" is a management tactic that teachers use to get students back on task without interrupting the flow of their teaching (p. 189). It can, however, be interpreted as a technology of surveillance, as evidenced in the use of the term "offender." How much more pleasant if a student were to look expectantly at the teacher, invite him or be invited into a conversation about the curricular content being explored, and not be cowed by the physical presence of the teacher! This is not suggesting that teachers can never use such a strategy. As Jennifer Gore (1993) states, "One reason for which no practice is inherently liberating or oppressive is precisely because of the recontextualizing that is always possible" (p. 122). If we wish to build a learning community, we may wish to base our decision to use a strategy is based on what Goleman (2006) calls relationship management rather than the enforcement of compliance.

Punishment

When Leanne reaches the front of the class, she is immediately in character, and that character means business. "Right, guys, today we are going to learn about Chemistry," she says, as she picks up the white board marker. The humming immediately escalates in response to her tone, and one student defiantly throws a book to the floor. Leanne turns to face the students with indignation. "Right, who threw the stuff? Anyone want to admit it? No?" She turns once more to the board, and the humming starts afresh.

"Right," she says as she swings around yet again, "everyone knows the class rules?" Another book hits the floor in response. Leanne continues with steeliness, "Yeah, we know all about Saturday detention. The Saturday detention list is going up right now. Anybody want to join me this Saturday? Okay, Mary, you're behaving badly, and Peter, you too."

Peter is not going gently to detention. "No, I wasn't humming. It was them. I didn't hum at all!!!"

"I saw you humming. You're coming to detention on Saturday."

Peter reasons just like an adolescent: "How could you see somebody hum?" Some people in the audience chuckle at his believable teenage disdain.

I call a freeze. "Okay, Leanne, how are you feeling in this moment right now?"

She may be feeling very vulnerable because she answers by telling us instead what she tried to do: "I

think I'm just trying to draw their attention to the rules that were already set out in the class. I am assuming that these kids have been fooling with me before. So I'm just upping the ante."

Kohn (1996) suggests that because of our own experiences in punitive environments, we may feel our only choices are to punish or do nothing. It is, however, a "false dichotomy" which prevents us from perceiving other possibilities for action (p. 31). Elsewhere I have analyzed how punishment may damage students' dignity:

When we are concerned about losing control of a class, we may sometimes act defensively to protect our own face while ignoring the need for safeguarding that of our students. Publicly stating potential consequences or assigning punishments may help establish or re-establish one's sense of control, but in certain contexts they are defensive moves which attempt to shame a student into complying (Hewson, forthcoming).

Any of our actions may, in fact, inadvertently generate shame, anger or fear. I could have asked Leanne how her strategy had worked for her, rather than asking her how she felt. I might also have asked the student-actors how they felt in reaction to the threat of detention, since their roles were distanced from who they were as adults.

Dialogue

"Matt, you wanted to come up and try something?"

I ask for everyone to give their attention to Matt, who starts the scene anew. Predictably, people start humming, tapping pencils, dropping books. Matt quietly turns from the board, observes everyone with a look of curiosity on his face, then he takes a chair and pulls it to the front of the class and sits facing his students, one leg crossed onto the other leg's knee, his expression open and his body relaxed. "Okay grade eight, it looks like we have to have a conversation here. Is there something the matter? You guys seem to want attention. I'm not pointing to anyone in particular, but I can sense there's an issue here. Now we all know how to behave in a school, and that this is not how it's done. So – what's the problem? Let's address it."

Peter the 'student' gets a little defensive. "There's no problem," he says.

Matt accepts the offer as it stands. "There's no problem. Okay, that's a start. Anyone else?"

Cathy takes a risk and proclaims loudly, "I'm bored."

"You're bored? Well, let's work with that, if we can. Who else is bored in this class?" All the others raise their hands, some right away, others, a little more uncertainly, wondering perhaps if this 'dude' can be trusted. "You know this is science class, so let's see what we can do. I'm limited here too, but I'll do the best I can to help you guys stay interested. Because we can't have this behavior. Any suggestions?"

Jane suggests that they go outside.

"Go outside? We can work with that. Maybe once every couple of weeks we can have a lesson outdoors. I'll take that into consideration when I plan. So, if I do this for you, will you cooperate with me? Is that a fair deal?" Heads are nodding. Matt is weaving a spell. "All right, so for the next couple of weeks why don't you think about this and come to see me with your questions and comments and suggestions? Excellent! Let's get back to work." As he stands and moves his chair to one side, everyone, including his "students" on stage, breaks into applause.

The ability to sense the emotions of others is what Goleman (2006) calls primal empathy, deriving from our automatic and implicit reading of non-verbal cues. Matt read the mood and determined that "there's an issue here." At this point he physically attuned himself to them, sitting down with a receptive body language, expressive of his genuine interest in what they had to say. He sensitively accepted Peter's

resistance and denial that there was a problem, saying with no trace of sarcasm, "Okay that's a start." Matt's lack of defensiveness may have spurred Cathy to risk giving him the truth: "We're bored." Matt mirrored her response, communicating his acceptance of her feeling: "You're bored? Okay, we can work with that. Who else is bored in this class?" As the rest of the class raised their hands, Matt had his confirmation that there was indeed an issue needing resolution.

The discussion of what was to be done was perhaps superficial, since in a real classroom it might take much more negotiation to assuage the cynicism and apathy of some students; furthermore, there was no elicitation of what students loved or hated about science class, no dialogue to discover where their interests might lie. However, Matt's intervention made such an impact on his peers that everyone spontaneously applauded, including his fellow actors. Positive responses spilled over into the journal entries written about this work:

There's definitely something to be said for a teacher who can take ideas from students without feeling threatened.

It doesn't mean your class is out of control if conflicts arise; a class becomes out of control when conflicts are resolved poorly (and that's often).

I learned that I'm going to try sitting down and ask the students what's wrong. Address the underlying problem not just the behaviour.

I learned to watch the energy of a class, and to avoid power struggles by dealing with the cause, not the symptoms.

(All journal entries dated October 20th, 2005).

Conclusion

Our options for action come from a repertoire of what psychologists call "dispositional representations" (Myers, 2002, Damasio, 1994), images of cause-effect that allow one to recognize patterns of action and determine how the present situation is similar or different from situations we have experienced in the past. When strong positive or negative feelings occur in conjunction with an event or object, they become associated in our memories to that image (Damasio, 1994 & 2005). Negative affects, or somatic markers, help the individual to automatically eliminate certain alternatives for action. Positive somatic markers push other alternatives forward for quick, implicit consideration. If we are to move beyond strategies of persuasion, intimidation, and punishment, then we need to construct significant experiences with a strong positive affect to "mark" other classroom management alternatives for future consideration. Anecdotal evidence collected indicates the FT work gave participants strategies to use in difficult situations during their practicum. As this work progresses, my critical pedagogy relies less on explicit discussion of abstract social concepts and more on the cultivation of attention to what is happening in class, and to how the students and I feel about it. We are beginning to mine our experiences for the underlying assumptions and values. In the next cycle I will conduct follow-up interviews after the field experience to determine whether this project is making its "mark."

References

- Arends, R. I. (2007). *Learning to teach*. 7th ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Barone, T. & Eisner, E. (2006). Arts-based educational research. In Green, J., Camilli, G. & Elmore, P. (Eds.). *Handbook of complementary methods in education research*, pp. 95-110. Washington D.C.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed* (Charles A. McBride, Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, Trans.). New York: Routledge.

- Damasio, A. (1994). *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Inc.
- Goleman, D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Gore, J. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth*. New York: Routledge.
- Hewson, A. (Forthcoming). Emotions as data in the act of joking Forum Theatre. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. To be retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/>.
- Kohn, A. (1996). *Beyond discipline: From compliance to community*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Levin, J., Nolan, J. F., Kerr, J., & Elliott, A. (2004). *Principles of classroom management: A professional decision-making model*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada Inc.
- McKernan, J. (1996). *Curriculum action research: A handbook of methods and resources for the reflective practitioner (2nd ed.)*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Myers, D. (2002). *Intuition: Its powers and perils*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Novak, J.M., & Purkey, W.W. (2001). *Invitational Education*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design of teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Shapiro, S. B. (1999). *Pedagogy and the politics of the body: A critical praxis*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1995). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Biographical Note:

Dr. Anne Hewson is an assistant professor at St. Thomas University in Fredericton New Brunswick, where she teaches in the Education Department. Her background includes Drama Education, Music Education and Second Language Education. She is interested in arts-based inquiry, teacher research and critical pedagogy. She can be reached through the Faculty of Education, St. Thomas University, 51 Dineen Drive, Fredericton, New Brunswick, E3B 5G3.