

Theatre in Education – A Tool for Developing Competences and Intercultural Communication

Lia Codrina CONȚIU, PhD

University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Tîrgu-Mureș
liacodrina@gmail.com

Abstract: *Theatre in education, as an interdisciplinary learning method, can be integrated and applied in various fields, such as pedagogy, language study, social sciences, history, and even science. When we talk about theatre in education or applied theatre, we do not focus on the artistic dimension, the aesthetics of the performance, but more on its instrumental dimension, on its ability to develop skills, both learning and intercultural communication and relationships. Our study aims to analyze the different types of educational theatre and its applicability and to provide examples of good practice in this field.*

Key words: *education; theatre in education; competences; learning methods; intercultural communication.*

‘If play is the actual manner of a Child’s way of life,
then play may be the correct approach to all forms of Education’
(Peter Slade, *Child Drama*, 1954)

Introduction

My interest in Theatre or Drama in Education sprung up with the project *Be Aware of your consumers rights* – Youth in Action Programme, 21-30 September 2013, Istanbul. I was involved in this project as the leader of the Romanian team formed by six students and during the ten days, we were involved in different activities performed in various places, either indoor or outdoor: drawing, music, storytelling, drama, fieldwork and debates. The most interesting one was the preparation of a short play performed by students and leaders from Turkey, Romania, Italy and Lithuania. We divided in four mixed teams and we had to select a topic related to consumer rights, write the script, find the proper mise en scene, select the stage clothes, rehears and perform in English, in front of teachers and pupils from a school located in Istanbul. It was difficult as we had to use a language which was not our



mother tongue, we came from different cultures and we were not actors. But this entire endeavour developed our intercultural communication, understanding of the topic and we enjoyed every minute of our work. This was the moment when I realised that drama can help people in ways that maybe they are not aware of. You do not have to be an actor/actress to use drama in different activities, especially if you deal with people from different cultures, with different backgrounds and age. One of the Romanian students said that the short plays were a captivating and positive way of transmitting the message to the audience and they got it correctly and, at the same time, drama helped students in understanding better their rights as consumers and developed their cultural communication.



Figure 1 – Scenes from the short performances of the teams (screenshots)
Source: *Be Aware of your Consumers Right* [Youtube]

Different Genres of Applied Drama

There are various concepts and approaches when it comes to Applied Drama based on different cultural contexts, ideologies, philosophies and ways in which humans are learning. Jouni Piekari makes a classification of these forms in the handbook *DRAMA - a Way to Social Inclusion. Practical process descriptions for drama workers*, an outcome within The DramaWay project.

Drama in Education (DIE) refers to “the use of drama as a tool of education” (Jouni Piekari, 2005, p. 14), being preferred mostly in British and Australian contexts. It is a way of learning through experience and the pupils can explore different topics and subjects with the help of drama conventions. As this method is used in a context where the



focus is on learning, we cannot expect to find brilliant performances but more a process of creating meanings through simulations in a safe environment. That is why this method is also called process drama or pedagogical drama.

Theatre in education (TIE) method “refers to the use of pre-written and rehearsed theatre performance as a tool of learning” (Piekkari, 2005, 14). This way of using drama is based on the collaboration with professional theatre companies and the plays can complement the subjects in the school curricula and they are interactive. Before or after the performances there can be workshops or exercises for pupils led by the professional actors or by teachers in order to develop the pupils’ learning processes. These exercises are intended either to prepare the pupils for the topic of the performance or to further develop it and help the learners to discover different meanings related to the process of learning.

Forum Theatre was developed by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, and it is a part of his theatre method called “Theatre of the Oppressed” (Boal, 2006, passim). It is used to solve social problems that are relevant to the audience such as racism, violence, sexual prejudice, bullying, and substance abuse or can be applied in media education and interactive discussion forums either in classrooms, on stage or on TV. The actors do not give the solution to the problem, but the audience is invited on the stage to find out possible solutions for the problems discussed through acting (Heritage, 1994, 31).

Invisible Theatre was invented by the same director, Augusto Boal, and it is a form of theatre that makes people believe that they are part of a real situation and not the audience of a play. The performances have a script and they are performed in different places taken from real life such as a mall, a restaurant, in the metro or market place. The goal of this form of theatre is to make people be involved in the performance which is perceived as a real situation of oppression (Giesler, 2017, 351; Boal, 2006, 6, 40).

Legislative Theatre is developed within the theatre system “Theatre of the Oppressed” and it is used as a tool aiming “to denounce the irregularities, protest against the indifference of the public authorities, and, together with the audience, to look for possible solutions for the questions presented” (Heritage, 1994, 26). This method can facilitate the participation of disadvantaged people in politics through internet discussions, thematic festivals and political rallies.

Theatre-for-Awareness / Theatre-for-Development method was used in developing countries as “a tool for participatory development programmes and awareness-raising campaigns” (Piekkari, 2005, 16). There are performances that deal with different problems of the people living in a less developed country and there could be discussions after the play. The topics of the performances are picked up based on field research amongst the local people who classify the most important issues of the region. The focus of this theatre form is to bring a social change in the community through the contribution of the people living in it. It is also called popular theatre and community theatre.

Devised Theatre “refers to all processes of theatre-making where there is no prewritten play text or where a play text is used only as a starting point for a completely new



piece of theatre” (Piekkari, 2005, 17). The topic chosen by the group can be cultivated through music, improvisations, videos, movement or other visual techniques.

“*From Fact to Fiction*” is a form of devised theatre that has as a starting point real facts taken from TV, Internet, newspaper articles, and interviews.

Play Back Theatre was developed by Jonathan Fox in the United States (1975) and it is an improvisational form of theatre in which audience tell stories of their lives and the actors act them on the stage using music, mime and spoken scenes. There is a musician, an emcee, a team of actors and “tellers” from the audience. This form of theatre is used in many settings such as schools, hospitals, private organisations, prisons, day care institutions, colleges and universities. Play Back Theatre deals with the audience’s experiences, so it can be used for a large category of people with a therapeutic, educational, social and artistic purpose (Playback.org).

Sociodrama is based on the work of the founder of psychodrama and sociometry, J.L. Moreno, and it is “an experiential group-as-a-whole procedure for social exploration and inter-group transformation” (Kellerman, 1998, 181). It uses role-playing and the goal is to examine, comprehend and learn about various problems that can be found every day in people’s lives in their social interactions.

Celebratory Drama emphasises “aspects of carnival, the use and creation of myth, creativity, visual theatre and street theatre style of expression” (Piekkari, 2005, 17). This form of theatre can have a positive effect on groups of people that are less involved in the community as it sets free the creativity that lies in human beings. John Fox and Sue Gill with the *Welfare State International* are well known for their projects on celebratory drama (Welfare State International).

Hospital Clownery was invented by Patch Adams, a professional doctor, social innovator and a clown, as a laughter therapy. The philosophy behind the hospital clownery is that laughter can help in the healing process. That is why this form of drama can be used especially in hospitals for ill children but it can be taken to places where war ripped out the joy and laughter (Saidalieva, 2018).

Site-specific theatre refers to any kind of theatre production that is performed in a different place than that of a standard theatre. It can be in the building of an old factory, in a hotel, a courtyard, or even in an unconventional theatre space, such as a forest. These performances are more interactive and the border between the spectators and the actors is somehow blurred and sometimes the audience becomes part of the event (Field, 2008).

Drama, myths and ritual forms of performance is a form of theatre that uses local myths and traditional forms of arts such as songs and dances with the help of allegories in order to build or re-build the local identity and strengthen the cultural heritage of a community (Piekkari, 2005, 18).

Street theatre is the oldest form of secular theatre. It is performed in public places or on streets and uses many visual aids and sometimes carnivalesque elements in order to draw the attention of people to these events.



Live-Action Role Play (LARP) is a cultural movement in which the players, especially young people, embody their characters and the game takes place in a physical setting. “LARP is a series of highly interactive and imaginary dramatic events, where each participant takes part in an improvised drama by following their own pre-determined roles” (Piekkari, 2005, 19). The world of the game can be imaginary; it can illustrate myths or prehistoric events, even science-fiction.

All these approaches to applied drama have many things in common; the same techniques are used in various contexts and sometimes are called in a different way, but all these genres of drama focus on the process of creation which is, in many cases, more important than the product itself. “Applied drama and theatre are primarily concerned with finding tools for, or with targeting, learning and empowerment, personal development, discussing themes, effecting social change, and making decisions” (Schonmann, 2005, 34). When we talk about applied theatre, we do not focus on the artistic dimension, the aesthetics of the performance, but more on its instrumental dimension, on its ability to develop skills, both learning and intercultural communication and relationships.

Drama, Competences and Intercultural Communication

European Commission points out that “moving to a competence-oriented approach in education, training and learning represents a paradigm shift. It impacts not only on the structure of curricula, but also changes the organisation of learning” (EAC, 2018, 5). This turn to a competence-oriented education implies the use of cross-curricular approaches, interactive learning and teaching styles, and a combination of formal with non-formal and informal learning. The so-called “soft skills” or “transversal skills” (critical thinking, teamwork, intercultural skills, problem-solving, etc.) started to be more important nowadays than the knowledge acquired within the formal education system. “They can respond to the growing needs of individuals to deal with uncertainty and change, remain resilient, develop personally and build successful interpersonal relations” (EAC, 2018, 39).

Besides all these changes in the educational approach, we live in a world of cultural diversity and intercultural openness and understanding starts with the understanding of “one’s own cultural identity within local and national contexts” (EAC, 2018, 42), where we can encounter different languages, traditions and social relations. This makes our cultural communication and positioning even more difficult especially for young people which are trying to live in a society in full development. As there are so many changes at the world level: climate change, instability, war, migration, the composition of the European populations is changing. This brings a shift from traditional values and bonds to new ones, and we deal with new issues of tolerance and respect for others (European Commission, 2017, 55). The Eurydice report on citizenship education (2017) underlines the importance of a variety of teaching and learning approaches in citizenship education, from active, interactive, critical, collaborative and participative learning to whole school approaches and learning through extra-curricular activities (EAC, 2018, 57).



And in this respect, drama or theatre in education can help in fostering the skills and competences that are needed in the intercultural communication and social relations. If some of the genres of drama presented previously are more difficult to use as they require theatrical skills, some of them are quite easy. *Storytelling* is one of them. It can be considered as a technique per se or can be used as a tool in many genres of drama. Storytelling uses spoken language and physical movement in order to convey the message to the audience. The idea behind storytelling is that the spectators can use their imagination to complete and co-create the story. The emotional part is very important, as storytelling is based on personal experience, in this way we can pass on accumulated wisdom, opinions, and values. Stories encapsulate the past, the present and the future and they are a natural way of expressing ourselves as human beings. Storytelling is interactive, personal and co-creative and it is developed through the interaction between the teller and the listener. The stories can have different functions: they can teach, inspire other people, empower, connect people with different cultures and backgrounds, and even heal the souls of both the teller and the listener.

Children use stories to create other worlds or to imagine the future or even to express themselves. More than any other form of communication, the telling of stories is an integral and essential part of the human experience. Storytelling can enhance also intercultural understanding and communication with children. It can help them not only to explore their own cultural roots but also to develop an understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures. It can promote a positive attitude towards people from different countries, nations and religions. Storytelling is part of the African heritage as they expressed themselves and narrated their history through stories. There is a storytelling festival since 2009 organized by The Department of Information Science of University of South Africa (UNISA). Originally it was presented only in Pretoria but in 2011 the Festival was taken also to different regions: in 2011 in Polokwane, Limpopo Province; in 2012 in Phokeng, North West Province in cooperation with Royal Bafokeng and in 2013 in Bloemfontein, Free State in cooperation with the UNISA Regional Office. After the storytelling sessions focus group discussions are held with the children and storytellers on issues related to intercultural communication and understanding. In 2014 the Festival took place in KwaZulu-Natal, and more specifically to the area near Mtubatuba. The theme of the Festival was the environment and climate change (Conțiu, 2014). The goal of the annual storytelling festival is to create awareness and to emphasise the importance of storytelling amongst the children, their teachers and the communities where the Festival is hosted. And in 2016 the storytelling festival was taken even in prison (Barberton Prison) in front of the juvenile prisoners who enjoyed their time listening to the stories. Besides these actions, there are other storytelling festivals organized in South Africa, as the one within South African Book Fair, in 2018, in Newtown, Johannesburg (South African Book Fair, 2018).

In a pedagogical project for the inmates of the penitentiary of Dozza Bologna, Italy, in 2015, called “Not only mimosa”, the trainers aimed at intervening in the area of well-being, health and life quality of women in prison. The project’s goal was to help women find a typically female relational and emotional dimension in a total institution primarily designed for men. They techniques used were training for emotion management and



assertive behaviour, the Mail art technique and a Movie lab. In the training the female inmates used role-playing, expression of emotions through creative “postcards” sent to the artists and storytelling for the movie. The stories could be theirs or they can read the stories written by other inmates or even create imaginary narration in order to film a documentary which can give a different image on the issue of detention and develop a culture of gender differences in prisons ([EPALE], 206)

Within the EU project Rem – Rights, Duties, Solidarity, Erasmus+ Programme, 2018, (<http://www.erasmusrem.eu/index.php/en/>), the teachers from the Metropolitan Centre for Adult Education of Bologna used the techniques developed by Augusto Boal and other methods to help the migrants understand that beyond the colour of their skin, language, culture, and tradition every human is the same and dream to a better life. The trainees had to write a text – *ten things that are different between you and me*, then they had two theatre exercises – *the mirror* – in couples, each of them had to imitate his/her partner as in the mirror, and *Tableaux vivants* - each group represented a concept such as exclusion, violence solidarity. Then a video was filmed with no actors but the migrants, some images taken from the video being illustrated below, in Figure 2.



Figure 2 - Orizzonti - Idee per una comunità (SUBS) (Screenshots)¹
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UP_fmObNLU

¹ This video is the result of a project of the Metropolitan Center for Adult Education of Bologna within the Erasmus+ Project REM-Rights, Duties, Solidarity.



Drama in education can be used in many contexts: educational, social or therapeutic, with positive effects on the participants. This fact is proved by the EU-supported project DICE (“Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education” <http://www.dramanetwork.eu>). In addition to other educational aims, this two-year project (2008-2010) was a cross-cultural research study carried out by partners from twelve countries investigating the effects of educational theatre and drama on five of the eight Lisbon Key Competences (Communication in the mother tongue; Learning to learn; Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, Civic competence; Entrepreneurship and Cultural expression).

The findings of the research demonstrated that the students who regularly participated in educational theatre and drama activities, compared with peers who had not been participating in any educational theatre and drama programmes: are assessed more highly by their teachers in all aspects / feel more confident in reading and understanding tasks / feel more confident in communication / are more likely to feel that they are creative / like going to school more / enjoy school activities more / are better at problem solving / are better at coping with stress / are significantly more tolerant towards both minorities and foreigners / are more active citizens / show more interest in voting at any level / show more interest in participating in public issues / are more empathic: they have concern for others / are more able to change their perspective / are more innovative and entrepreneurial / show more dedication towards their future and have more plans / are much more willing to participate in any genre of arts and culture, and not just performing arts, but also writing, making music, films, handicrafts, and attending all sorts of arts and cultural activities, / spend more time in school, more time reading, doing housework, playing, talking, and spend more time with family members and taking care of younger brothers and sisters. In contrast, they spend less time watching TV or playing computer games / do more for their families, are more likely to have a part-time job and spend more time being creative either alone or in a group. They more frequently go to the theatre, exhibitions and museums, and the cinema, and go hiking and biking more often / are more likely to be a central character in the class / have a better sense of humour / feel better at home (DICE, 2010, 24-25).

In spite of all these positive results, in many European countries the theatre in education is low funded or it is not even included in the school curricula. And as Roger Wooster pointed out (Wooster, 2016), the society is changing so quickly that tomorrow’s jobs will be different from today’s jobs, so it is even more difficult to prepare young people for their future career within the formal education system. Theatre in education can offer the young generation a tool through which they can imagine possible forms of the future, can conceptualise problems and envisage solutions. The youth’s imagination and capacity of visualisation will be cultivated as they start thinking about hypothetical situations and find alternative situations or outcomes. Another role of the play is that it puts you in someone else’s shoes, so you develop a degree of empathy and an understanding of the way the other people are thinking in a certain situation. The theatrical situation is a real one, but the young people are placed in a safe zone offered by the actors or teachers. They are not



really acting, but they “can explore, investigate and test out ideas and opinions without threat” (Wooster, 2016, 20). As they are not penalized for their acts, they can explore even historical situations and find out the reasons of their outcomes. They can question themselves, look for answers, and understand the reasons behind the historical or personal actions. So, they engage personally and emotionally but they are protected in their “acting” by a theatrical construct. “This is not the educational theatre that instructs and insists but rather it facilitates thought, presents dichotomy and frees young people to undertake critical analysis [...]” (Wooster, 2016, 14).

What can we do in order to help the young generation develop their competences, cultural communication and the ‘skills of democracy’ as theatre in education is low funded and there is no interest to include drama in the general school curricula? And the challenge is even much bigger as the digital experience monopolizes the young people. There can be made small steps, especially in the field of teachers’ training, as, in order to implement drama in the classroom, they have to know how to do it properly. That is why different projects between TIE actors/teachers and teachers from schools and universities can help in developing theatre in education. We have to become aware that if we want the young generation to be empowered, involved in the community, develop their critical thinking and intercultural communication and above all build their own and better future, we have to use drama in education and this means to be involved “politically”. As Freire said:

Neutral education cannot, in fact, exist. It is fundamental for us to know that, when we work on the content of the educational curriculum when we discuss methods and processes, when we plan, when we draw up educational policies, we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice.

Freire, 1972, 174

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