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Abstract

This article focuses on the work of Paulo Freire and the social theory encapsulated within 'Pedagogy of The Oppressed' (1996) as applied to a professional educational context; A Year 11 GCSE drama class in preparation for their final assessment piece which was being moderated by an AQA assessor. Drama is a subject which allows for the key concepts of Freire's theory to be explored due its creative nature. There is an explanation of how this theory has been applied in a professional context whilst drawing on the work of Boal (1992) and Nicholson (2006).

1. Introduction

1.1 Drama, Creativity, and Critical Pedagogy

This paper was written in response to working with a group of GCSE drama students within a secondary school in the North West of Lancashire as they prepared for their final practical assessment. They had devised a thematic piece incorporating selected poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789 [1990]), which was filmed and then viewed to help this reflection. This choice came about through a previous session about situations of vulnerability that the students had found themselves in. They felt that this would be a good basis on which to devise their final piece as it would be something that they could relate to.

Boal (1982) forms the argument that within traditional theatre, there is a lack of emotional participation in the audience as they do not have the chance to express their feelings and beliefs, whereas within *Theatre of the Oppressed*, there is the need for a unity between the audience and the actors, which allows for a more liberating experience, as the audience are allowed to participate; they are given a voice and are encouraged to change the performance. As Boal (1982: p.30) explains 'the Theatre of the Oppressed is theatre in this most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human beings are Actors (they act!) and Spectators (they observe!)'.

Boal based his theatre on the work of Freire (1987; 1996) in a move towards a critical form of pedagogy generated through performance. Boal (1992) sees theatre as a way of implementing social change amongst groups of people, as it is a form of knowledge which can be used as a means of transforming society. Through drama, theatre groups or indeed individuals, can build and create a future, rather than just accepting domination. In a similar way to Freire's need for dialogue, Boal attempts to break down the divisions between the passive audience (the spectator) and the performers (the actor); this generates the term 'spect-actor.' Boal (1992: p.26) explains:

> [In] its most archaic sense, theatre is the capacity possessed by human beings – and not by animals – to observe themselves in action. Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow. This is why humans are able to identify (themselves and others) and not merely to recognise.

1.2 Emancipatory Theatre

Here I refer to Nicholson (2006), a practitioner whose work I have come to understand and relate to my own practice over the past few years and who is keen to advocate the work of Freire and Boal. Nicholson (2006, p.141) states that, '…the immediate impact of a project of applied theatre may be measurable'. This suggests that there could be emancipatory benefits for the group as they prepare for their moderation. Without our realising, the devised performance has spontaneously become a piece of applied theatre. The term *emancipatory* is not used here to mean that the students are from war torn countries fighting for everyday survival, but rather that they are facing challenges in their lives that are affecting them.

Previous research from Nicholson (2006) suggests that there is a connection between applied drama and self-confidence, and I was keen to relate this to the liberatory aspect fostered amongst the student group. One of the most common aims and expected outcomes for those who engage with drama as a process is to increase confidence. Participants do frequently believe that their confidence was indeed boosted as a result of engagement in that process, which has enabled them to explore aspects of the self through the mask of the other.

Following Freire's beliefs, at the start of the creation of this piece of theatre I had felt the need to intervene to an extent, yet at the same time I wanted the students to take ownership of the piece and exert their own choices as much as possible. Ranciere (1999) describes this process as 'subjectification.' This subjectification is produced through a collection of actions by a group of people allowing for an experience to be created and identity formed as part of the reconfiguration of their field of experience. I believe that a form of subjectification was being experienced within the drama space through the students' actions and words. They were drawing on their own personal experiences in order to create a piece of theatre.

The nature of drama as a subject produces the need for the vocalisation of thoughts which are turned into performance but, to an extent, within the school environment there can be a hidden agenda. In this case, it was my need to prepare the students for a standard in order for them to meet the requirements of the exam specification and ultimately pass their GCSE.

Freire (1996) describes the students as becoming 'containers' in which I, as their teacher, was ready to fill the students with the contents of my own narrative. I was aware that this narration could become 'detached from reality,' which I did not want to happen and yet I knew that the students had targets to meet. However, through taking a step back and allowing the students to present their problems through drama, I became their student as I started to learn what they wanted their audience to feel and understand. As Freire (1996) advises, within the drama space the teacher must be united with, not against the oppressed.

Through my participation in drama activities relating to devised performance, such as 'hot seating' and 'thought alleys', the division between teacher and student became blurred and I was able to understand the group's situation through the initiated dialogues that were beginning to occur. Within the drama space there were, 'acts of cognition, not transferals of information' occurring along with a form of 'authentic liberation,' (Freire, 1996, p.60). This was evident in the way that I observed the group working together. For example, I was aware that a particular student, who had previously appeared to be reluctant to join-in and contribute to his group, was now taking more responsibility and was giving direction to the piece successfully. This particular piece was about relationships with parents and he had started to draw on his own experience of parental relationships in order to create a believable dialogue.

2. Creating an Understanding of the Other

Initially, the students decided that they would set their piece in a classroom and through performances of duologues and monologues, hoped that this would highlight different situations that young people may be affected by; for example, eating disorders and family problems. The fact that the students decided to set their piece in a classroom made me begin to wonder if they visualised it as their metaphorical oppressor. This view was strengthened further when they decided that they wanted to record a teacher giving instructions so that they could use it in their performance. It was interesting to note that they did not ask me to do it but, instead, asked another teacher to provide their voice. As a piece of theatre, this created a good effect but also from an emancipatory exploration, it made me question the methods of teaching being employed. I wondered if it was a subconscious decision and if they did actually view teachers as being oppressive, rather than working with them. When Freire (1996) refers to the oppressed, he was describing disenfranchised people situated within spaces of civil unrest, whereas I am referring to a group of young people living in a stable society. I am aware that the context is different but, when describing and talking about the students' problems, it became evident to me that they too felt oppressed about the different situations that they were finding themselves in. I could have chosen a different term to reflect the students' position; however, I felt that the word oppressed was transferable to this particular situation albeit on a different level to Freire's description.

The students also selected poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789 [1990]) to match their particular problem. For example, one group, who were looking at sibling rivalry, chose the poem *My Pretty Rose Tree*, as they felt that this stanza reflected the feelings of jealousy between the siblings:

'Then I went to my pretty rose tree,
To tend her by day and by night;
But my rose turned away with jealousy,
And her thorns were my only delight.'
(Blake, 1789 [1990], p.41)

The student, who recited this stanza, did so after an argument with her sister to highlight the fact that she was jealous of her sister's good looks and intelligence. I felt that through the tone of her voice, the student's feelings were conveyed effectively. Another student chose to use the following stanza from 'The Sick Rose', to help convey his feelings for his first love:

'Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.'
(Blake, 1789 [1990], p.63)

Again, I observed his body language, (he appeared to look sad as he looked down and drooped his shoulders), and vocal delivery, (this was modulated with a downwards inflection.) These particular examples may not be interpreted in the way that Blake wanted us to understand them but they resonated with the students and therefore were deemed as an appropriate choice to be used in the performance.

Although the group had originally scripted their dialogues, throughout rehearsal there seemed to be a move away from this sense of formality and the groups started to improvise their spoken words. I observed spontaneous scenes being created after discussions on their chosen topic. I believe that this was the students' way of vocalising their feelings and as Freire (1998, p.15) puts it, 'each individual wins back the right to say his or her own word, to name the world'. I also noticed that two students had changed the theme that they wanted to act out. Again, I viewed this as a move towards applied theatre, even becoming reminiscent of Theatre of the Oppressed. For example, I observed that whilst they had been discussing a particular topic, other related themes had branched out from these dialogues and the students had decided to base their scenes around those instead, as it was something that they all could relate to. The students had been given a choice between following the prescribed scripts, or using improvisation, between being spectators or actors, and between speaking out or being silent.

3. Theatre for Change

Boal (1992, p.31), when describing the powerful nature of theatre, echoes Freire when he explains 'theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society'. This would suggest that theatre can help groups of people help build a future, rather than just waiting for change. In reflection on my own practice, I observed that, through the use of drama, the students were becoming aware of their own situations so were able to talk about how they could externalise their feelings. Boal's description is reminiscent of Freire's

need for dialogue as a means of transforming the individual, within which dialogue must engage critical thinking as a means of generating critical thought as, '...without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.' (Friere, 1998, p.74). Regarding theatre, this would suggest that the spontaneity of improvisation would allow the participants (students) to explore their problem rather than simply remember and reproduce written words.

Boal's work is also rooted in liberation theory. Shor and Freire (1987) discuss liberatory and transformational education within schools and explain how important it is to understand the students that you are working with; they talk of researching the words of the students in order to understand their thoughts and to come to understand what they what they want and how they want to live. This is seen as a privileged place to be in in order to access their consciousness. A level of accessibility should therefore be created within the space of applied drama. Shor and Freire (1987), in their commitment to the dialogical, explain that if we are to begin to try and understand what is happening with our students' development, there is the utmost need for us, as teachers, to interact in a way that promotes the individual's own way of communication, rather than teaching by rote. If we, as teachers, cannot interact with our students and speak to them in authentic language, then frustration is created because we are unable to start to assess their themes and levels of development. Once we can teach and learn in a transformational way, then learning may become reflexive. Shor and Freire (1987, p.10) explain:

> '...the dominant ideology 'lives' inside us and also controls society outside. Therefore if this domination was definitive, there could be no possibility of social transformation. However transformation is possible because consciousness 'is not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection but is *reflexive and reflective* of reality.'

It could therefore be possible to claim that the drama teacher and participants are capable of creating this transformative and reflexive learning, especially if they are creating work that the students genuinely have an interest in and if they want their voices to be heard. The drama space becomes reminiscent of this, in the way that we often pretend to be other people and try to understand other people's thoughts and processes.

I believe that a piece of applied drama was happening within the process of creating a piece of theatre for the drama moderation. The group was identifying problems within their own situations and was using drama methods to bring them to life on the stage. This is reflective of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, as the drama that the students were creating was crossing from fiction into reality and becoming integrated into their lives thereby fostering a sense of empathy.

Performance of this nature could also be seen in everyday situations and Nicholson (2006) pushes this concept further by explaining how we are affected by soap operas in a similar way; she describes how people react to characters in soap-operas as if they were actual people and this can sometimes cause confusion.

4. Perceiving the Reality of Oppression: Final Reflections

Although this particular performance was not an attempt to resolve the groups' problems, it was acting as a vehicle for them to identify and vocalise, through dialogue and performance, their thoughts and feelings. Due to ethical constrictions I am, quite rightly, unable to disclose too much information on any particular individual, but I am able to reveal the fact that at times there were some spontaneous breakthroughs within the group, when they had felt particularly emotional about the scene that they were working on. For example, one student had chosen a song to play during her performance that she felt reflected her feelings. When she began to speak her words and the song was played for the first time, she became overwhelmed and the whole group suddenly became aware of how she was feeling about her situation and reacted by consoling her and helping her through the scene. She had gone from standing on her own, speaking her inner monologue to breaking down barriers within the group. As Freire (1998, p.30) illustrates, 'conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided'. The group was as Freire (1998, p31) puts it, '…perceiving the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform'.

The transformation within the group was even more apparent when it came to the actual day of the moderation performance as tensions were running high and there had been external issues with a few students in the group. This, in fact, resulted in a better visual performance and also allowed the students to draw further on their emotions. For example, the students were able to draw on the feelings that they were experiencing about being assessed and to apply them to their individual performance.

After the actual moderation performance, the assessor commented on how creative the group was and that they had given a natural and believable performance (which incidentally was a marking level on the syllabus). Nicholson (2006) describes how empathy can influence the emotional condition of an audience. I believe that this is what happened during the moderation. I personally felt emotionally moved by the performance as I was aware of how far the students had come in their way of telling their truths. Nicholson's beliefs would suggest that drama can be used as a way of understanding each other and creating social change. Nicholson (2006), also states that through creative media such as drama, lasting social change is possible. I knew that a form of change had occurred within the group because they were displaying natural reactions through their performance to the problems that they were facing. Therefore, they were convincing, because the students' words that were being spoken were being understood as truth. To reiterate Freire (1998, p.77) 'we must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world'.

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