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DRAMA WORKSHOPS AS SINGLE EVENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION – WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

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Introduction and purpose
For over four decades I have been teaching drama in higher education (HE) in Sweden. Most of the time I have been working in teacher education. It has been a positive challenge and often highly rewarding but at times also rather frustrating. The dilemma is related to a combination of growing scientific support for classroom drama and theatre (DICE, 2010; Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013), positive feedback from teacher students who appreciate drama and ask for more, and the experience of only being able to present a fragment of drama in a fairly superficial way due to severely limited time. To tackle the problem, I usually try to improve my teaching. However, I have gradually come to realise the powerful impact of context, and how external conditions affect the teaching situation as well as the students’ understanding.

In Sweden, drama is not a school subject in compulsory school. In our National Curriculum (K-9), drama is briefly mentioned in the introduction as a form of aesthetic expression, along with dance, music, sloyd, and visual arts. This general statement is fairly weak, and drama then only appears as a tiny part of the subject Swedish (Österlind, Östern & Thorkeldóttir, 2016). The limited space for drama in the school curriculum has implications for HE, where drama mainly exists in teacher education (TE). Our task as drama teachers in TE is to introduce drama for learning (DfL) to teacher students, in order to extend their teaching repertoire. Even in primary and pre-school teacher education, drama is minor, dependent on local conditions and priorities, and often scheduled as scattered, single events. These conditions are highly unsatisfying from a professional perspective, and unfortunately not unique to Sweden (Österlind, Östern & Thorkeldóttir, 2016). But if this is the harsh reality, a pertinent question asks: What is possible to achieve in a single drama workshop?

To be able to demonstrate the concept of drama for learning, there must be another topic or other learning content. For several years, I have chosen to work on sustainability. It is a topic that can be described as a “burning issue of genuine concern” (Boal, 2008). While on sabbatical at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, I had the opportunity to design a drama workshop on sustainability. It was given for the first time in 2014, at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Since then, the workshop has been conducted several times at Stockholm University, Sweden, but also...
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at Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece, and at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki, organised by Open University of Jyväskylä, Finland. On some of these occasions the participants filled in questionnaires about sustainability and how they experienced the drama workshop. Outcomes of the workshop in Helsinki have already been presented (Österlind, 2018; Lehtonen, Österlind & Viirret, 2020), just as the outcomes of a workshop in Athens (Österlind, 2020). Results from Stockholm have not been published elsewhere, but a preliminary overall comparison was presented at IDIERI in 2018.2 The tentative results indicated significant variations in how the theme of sustainability and the concept of drama for learning were understood by the students. This led to a comparative analysis of data provided by university students in Athens, Helsinki, and Stockholm in order to gain a deeper understanding of the possibilities and limitations of drama workshops as single events in HE.

The purpose is to explore the potential of drama for learning as single events in HE and how varying contexts and conditions affect the students’ experiences. Here, the theme of sustainability serves as an example of content mainly based in other disciplines. The research questions are:

1. What does it take to learn about a topic or theme through drama?
2. What does it take to grasp the concept of drama for learning?
3. What conditions and circumstances affect the students’ understanding?

Research on drama in higher education

Research on drama in HE can be hard to identify due to lack of consensus regarding terminology. The concept of role-play is far more common than educational or applied drama in studies of HE, but it is a broad concept, and what characterises role-play may vary significantly (Österlind, 2018, 2020). This plasticity can sometimes already be seen in the titles. For instance, Sloman and Thompson (2010) write about “large-group drama” for teaching science in HE. The study is based on a carefully designed one-day event, including 85 undergraduate students who were given different tasks as participants in certain interest groups. In my view, this event may just as well have been presented as a large-scale role-play, which, of course, can be one of many possibilities included in applied drama work.

Educational drama is the key concept in two related studies, one qualitative (Pearce & Jackson, 2006) and one quantitative (Brennan & Pearce, 2008). These studies refer to a marketing course in which experiential three-hour drama workshops were included on a weekly basis for one semester. In this case, the workshops are clearly rooted in drama theory and practice; for instance, the authors refer to drama conventions and discuss the distinction between role-playing and role-taking. Another concept is “drama-based role-play”, used in a study related to work-based learning, where role-play and simulation are central (Kettula & Berghäll, 2013). The study refers to a course in forest products marketing, where role-playing was a recurrent activity throughout the course. The roles were decided by the students, and they were allowed to use their imagination if facts were not available, two aspects that, according to Kettula and Berghäll (2013), represented a deviation from more traditional role-play and the reason for talking about drama-based role-play. Those studies include the word drama in the title and refer to more than a single drama workshop. The latter is also valid for a study by Davis and Tarrant (2014), referring to applied theatre in the title, where the purpose is to cultivate connections between students and the environment through a combination of science, fiction, “experiential drama”, and applied theatre.
These examples of studies of applied drama in HE are promising as the research is based on recurrent drama work, not on single events. They also reveal a need to discuss the distinctions between knowledge-based, fairly cognitive role-plays, simulations, and applied drama. Role-playing is definitely part of drama (cf. Heyward, 2010), but role-play is not always defined as drama work. A more specific framework, addressing multiple purposes for varying situations, different kinds of role-playing, various forms of preparation, and so on, would increase clarity and make a contribution to the field. The current study is based on single drama workshops as occasional events. Such conditions seem to be more common in research on role-playing conducted in other disciplines.

Research based on single workshop events frequently uses the concept of role-play. There are a few studies of role-play in HE related to sustainability, conducted in various disciplines like biology, economy, engineering, and geography. The role-play is often designed as an encounter between stakeholders with different interests, creating a “structured controversy” (Wareham, Elefshiniotis & Elms, 2006, p. 651) as a learning experience. The preparation phase runs from a couple of months (Paschall & Wüstenhagen, 2012) to a couple of days (Buchs & Blanchard, 2011) or down to less than half an hour (Wareham et al., 2006). The actual role-playing may be a two-day event (Paschall & Wüstenhagen, 2012) or may last less than an hour (Cutler & Hay, 2000). The more extensive forms are usually taking place towards the end of a course, while minor events are used as an introduction to a field. Usually, the role-play ends by a reflective discussion or “debriefing” (Blanchard & Buchs, 2015), emphasised as vital for learning.

The outcome may be evaluated qualitatively and/or quantitatively (e.g., Schnurr, De Santo & Green, 2014) and is often very positive. To give one example, Buchs and Blanchard (2011) reported that among 179 students, 80% said that the role-play supported the development of critical thinking, and 91% claimed it was significant for changing their behaviour. Their conclusion is that the role-play helped the students to understand sustainability “in a less normative format” (p. 709). Gordon and Thomas (2016) also report affirmative results, or as one student put it, “the learning sticks” (p. 14). This is in line with two studies preceding this one, where students after a single drama workshop gave strong, thoughtful, and vivid responses in relation to sustainability (Österlind, 2018, 2020). In a follow-up enquiry one year later, some students claimed that participation in drama workshops had affected their decision-making in daily life and had motivated them to act as positive role-models (Lehtonen et al., 2020).

Difficulties are also described. For example, role-playing can be time-consuming, and students can be anxious before they understand that it is not about formal acting (Gordon & Thomas, 2016). Davis and Tarrant (2014) put forward the tension between scientific facts and research-based knowledge about sustainability and the fictive, affective, and embodied drama work. Below, the research design and procedures for data collection will be presented, including a brief outline of the actual drama workshop, before turning to the results.

**Method**

This study is an example of a small-scale, tentative investigation based on interplay between practice and research, which has evolved over time. The design is not the result of careful, long-term planning or meticulous considerations. Instead it has grown organically, driven by a desire to better understand and develop my own teaching practice and to examine practice from a student perspective. Thus, it may be categorised as practice-based,
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Educational research, with an evaluative/developmental character (cf. Stokes & Wall, 2014). This means that the workshop events were not arranged for the purpose of research; instead the research was adjusted and adapted to already existing practice. The selection of participants shows some similarities with what is known as snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

The evolving research design can also be described as minor, linked single-case studies (cf. Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009) or a series of educational interventions (Riley-Tillman, Burns & Kilgus, 2020), and the results are only valid for the participating groups. As the first results were published and the analysis of the other samples continued, an interesting variation appeared in the students’ responses. This emerging pattern led to a shift in research focus from the initial interest in drama education for sustainability in HE (Österlind, 2018, 2020) to current issues related to the impact of context and conditions on drama for learning in HE.

The Drama Workshop Intervention

The workshop From the Global to the Individual – Explorative Drama Workshop on Sustainability, which takes two to three hours, is designed for university students without previous drama experience. It is based on improvisation and social interaction and does not require any preparation on behalf of the students. The first part concerns individual and collective reflection on sustainability issues. A whole-class brainstorm about major challenges to the planet is followed by a guided relaxation and individual, silent introspection: “What do you feel in front of these problems? Imagine an object that symbolises your feeling…” This also includes sharing thoughts in pairs and small groups, leading to bodily still images, thinking aloud about the human causes of the global challenges. The first part ends with a joint mingle (whole-group reflection) concerning what needs to be done and by whom.

The second part is built around a role-play event, an environmental conference. The participants are asked to choose a perspective they want to explore and represent (e.g. activists, corporate leaders, politicians, researchers). Within these interest groups, they prepare themselves briefly. The teacher is in role as hostess, “replacing the chair of the conference with short notice”. At the conference, all teams present their views and motives and then, based on a graphic representation of emission scenarios fed in by the teacher in role, discuss varying issues in mixed groups. On their fictive travel back home, each team (students in their group roles) is asked to reflect off the record on their experiences of the conference, while the other students listen (eavesdropping). After some whole-class reflections, out of role, the workshop ends by a guided relaxation and introspection, where the participants are asked to return to their fictive object and think for themselves about something, big or small, that they personally are able to do to counteract these global challenges, and whether they are ready to actually do it.

Data collection

The workshop was given at several universities, to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. At five such occasions, the students filled in questionnaires afterwards. Among them were two groups of teacher students and three groups of drama students.

In total, 123 students from universities in Athens, Helsinki, and Stockholm filled in a questionnaire directly after participating in the drama workshop. This approach enabled
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a high response rate while the experience was still current in the mind of participants; although, there is a risk that experiences like reluctance, scepticism, or more critical reflection may need a bit more time and distance to be articulated. Also, when it is the workshop leader who hands out and collects the questionnaires, the respondents may be influenced to be more kind and polite than if this were done by someone else. From a research perspective, it is a weakness if data are only collected in immediate connection to a drama event (Österlind, 2013). In some of the actual settings, however, this was the only reasonable way of collecting the data. For instance, in Athens, the students would graduate and leave campus within a week, making it much more complicated to receive their answers later on. And in Helsinki, the students took part in another two drama workshops the following day, so postponing the questionnaire would have caused ambiguity about which workshop their answers referred to.

Content analysis of students’ responses

The workshop was designed to (a) address sustainability issues, (b) introduce drama for learning, and (c) encourage students to reflect on applying drama in their own teaching for sustainability or in other areas. The questionnaire included three open-ended questions concerning (1) how the students experienced the workshop, (2) whether they learned anything (e.g., about environment/sustainability, about drama, about themselves or others), and (3) reflections on possibilities and difficulties of using drama in their own (future) teaching. The students in Athens and Helsinki answered in English, not in their first language, while the students in Stockholm responded in Swedish. Initially, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using a process of standard coding (cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The process is similar to meaning coding and meaning condensation (Kvale, 2007), aiming at identifying explicit themes in the data. Consequently, I did not focus on the language as such, nor did I make any attempt to interpret the written responses by reading between the lines. The content analysis revealed three areas of interest, connected to the purpose of the workshop. One of these was the presence or absence of comments related to sustainability. Another aspect was related to comments about drama for learning. A third aspect concerned comments including both sustainability and drama and teaching. The content analysis was carried out separately for each group of students. The process was done step by step, in a similar but not in exactly the same way. Results of the content analysis are just briefly presented here.

Comparative analysis of five groups of students

Based on the content analysis, students’ responses related to drama work were compared regarding the extent and quality of reflections connected to sustainability and drama for learning. In addition, a straightforward quantitative comparison was conducted regarding frequency of explicit connections to sustainability in the students’ written responses. In one case, I also included my own observations during the workshop. Finally, some contextual characteristics for each group of students were taken into account, to allow a comparative analysis between the groups related to certain dimensions in the emerging response pattern. This overall comparison between five different groups of university students, based on a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and contextual information, is the main focus here. An overview of the data material is provided in Figure 31.1, below.
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Results

This section is structured in three parts. First, contextual information and responses from two groups of teacher students are presented and compared. Then, contextual characteristics and results from three groups of drama students are described and compared. Finally, a comparison between all five groups is presented in order to address the research questions.

Teacher students

As part of teacher education, the formal purpose of the workshop was to introduce drama for learning. The two groups of teacher students presented below differ in terms of academic studies and level of teacher training. One group consists of Primary teacher students in their third semester, and the other of Upper Secondary teacher students in Economy, ready to graduate. Their responses to the open questions differ significantly.

Group 1: Students in Teacher Education for Primary School, third semester. During the workshop I note that the 19 students appear to be very enthusiastic, seemingly uplifted by the intense energy generated by the interactive drama work. Data show that nearly all students (18 of 19) strongly appreciate the drama workshop, although their written responses are rather brief, 45 words in average, and often quite general. Of the 19 students, 7 explicitly refer to the topic of sustainability, often in terms of the environment: “How different groups look at environmental problems”; “Everyone can contribute in some way, even if it is small”; “Beginning to think more about the environment, and what I can do, big or small. Where can I start?” Their answers mainly fall into three areas. One area describes personal experiences of participating in the workshop; “fun to try something new”, “very inspiring”. Another area encompasses general statements about teaching and learning, sometimes related to drama; “Active teaching = good”; “Role-playing is very good for learning”. A third area includes comments on possibilities and difficulties related to using drama in their own teaching: “contributes to variation”; “believe it would be appreciated by pupils”. Some critical reflections are also put forward: “can probably increase pupils’ interest and motivation. Hard to keep it serious though, turns easily into play”. “What to do after the drama activities?”; “Believe I need to learn more to create a good learning experience”. Only one student makes a connection between sustainability, a workshop activity, and future teaching: “Learned how one can think about environmental problems and sustainability. How I can teach my pupils through brainstorming.”

Table 31.1 Overview of data material in chronological order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location and date</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helsinki March 2017</td>
<td>Postgraduate in-service teachers w. drama experience, Open University course in Drama Ed. for Sustainability</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athens May 2017</td>
<td>Undergraduate Teacher students in Economy, Upper Secondary School, ready to graduate</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm I May 2017</td>
<td>Undergraduate Teacher students, Primary School, third semester</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm II Nov 2017</td>
<td>Undergraduate Drama students, Bachelor in Applied Drama, first semester</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm III Nov 2017</td>
<td>Post-graduate Drama teachers, One-year Master in Drama and Applied Theatre</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group 2: Students in Teacher Education for Upper Secondary School, final semester. Out of 58 students taking part in the workshop, 56 responded to the questionnaire (Österlind, 2020). Of these, 40, or nearly three-quarters, explicitly refer to sustainability or the environment: “It reminded me how much the environment needs us”; “How I can change my life and do it more environmentally friendly”; “We have to take action immediately”. Some students appreciate the interaction: “Now I know what my mates think”; “I realise other people too care about the environment”; “A chance to communicate about pollution and climate change and environment, thanks to the role-plays”. Most of the students felt positive towards the drama experience: “Playing role was fascinating”; “We did something ‘out of the box’”; “There was action”; although there is also some critique: “It was a bit tiring in the end”; “If we were prepared for it, it would be fun”. All students reflect on the possibility of applying drama in their future teaching: “It would be very challenging but yes I would love to try this on my own”; “The difficulties in a classroom full of noisy children will be plenty. But I believe, in some occasions it is totally worth it”. Other comments emphasise difficulties: “I wouldn’t feel comfortable to do this in my own teaching”; “Drama will help in teaching, but we [are not] educated. So we don’t know how to use drama in teaching”. The students’ approaches to apply drama for learning in their own teaching vary from optimistic, “It’s creative and innovative. Students would be really motivated”, to realistic, “I think it will be difficult at first, but we can give it a try”, and pessimistic, “Under the circumstances of the analytical [study] program and strict headmaster it would be difficult”. Two students make a connection between sustainability, drama, and their own teaching: “I learned many techniques I could use in environmental education. I have tried it once with a very good effect; I believe drama can increase compassion for the earth to people that have not thought of it” (see Österlind, 2020, pp. 58–59).

Comparison between two groups of teacher students

As mentioned, the questionnaire included three open questions, and the response rate among the 75 teacher students is very high. Both groups are clearly positive towards the workshop. The most obvious difference between the groups is that comments by the Primary teacher students (Group 1) are very brief compared to the considerably more elaborate responses provided by the Economy teacher students (Group 2), which is remarkable as the latter were asked to respond in English, not in their first language.

The first question for the analysis concerned the extent to which participating in the drama workshop created a learning experience related to the content of sustainability. An indication of this would be if the students refer to sustainability in their responses. Among the 19 Primary teacher students, only 7 or less than half, explicitly refer to sustainability or the environment. Among the Upper Secondary teacher students ready to graduate, 40 of the 56, almost three-quarters, refer to the theme of the workshop. Apparently, one factor affecting the teacher students’ comments on the topic is the level of teacher training (see Figure 31.2, below).

A second question for the analysis, related to the main purpose of the workshop for the teacher students, concerned how the students reflect on drama for learning. The evidence shows substantial differences between the two groups. The less experienced teacher students made brief general reflections about drama, teaching, and learning. In contrast, each one of the more experienced teacher students made thoughtful comments about the possibilities and difficulties of applying drama in their own future teaching. The result, based on the written responses, is that teacher students close to graduation were able to pay attention to
both sustainability and drama for learning in more depth and to a larger extent than the less experienced teacher students, even though both groups appreciated the workshop.

**Drama students**

Three groups of drama students are presented below, including undergraduate and postgraduate students in varying forms of university studies. One group consists of Applied Drama students in their first semester, one group includes in-service teachers taking an Open University (OU) course, Drama Education for Sustainable Futures, and one group concerns senior students taking a one-year master’s in Drama and Applied Theatre.

**Group 3: Undergraduate Students in Drama and Applied Theatre, first semester.** For the 15 undergraduate drama students, the workshop is part of a course on drama for learning and process drama. Their responses are rich, 100 words on average, and particularly elaborate in relation to drama for learning. Their answers concerning sustainability are also quite elaborate, which is not as self-evident. Nearly all drama students in their first semester, 13 of 15, put forward reflections and insights related to sustainability. Some comments are more general: “An important topic, for once sustainable development became interesting”; “I got a sense of how widespread the problem is and how a lot of stakeholders are involved”. Others put forward a need to learn more: “I became interested to find out more about environmental problems”; “It generates a lot of thoughts. First one has to become aware, and then one can make a choice”. Many responses connected to sustainability took a more personal tone: “I maybe felt some hope in relation to the topic”; “I was engaged and emotionally touched”; “I realised a personal problem, to rapidly ignore some environmental issues to avoid having to make a decent choice”. Reflections on the drama work focus on the drama genre and workshop design: “It is a great way of teaching, the possibilities are endless”; “I liked the part of looking inwards, at the end”; “As a teacher, I would have more facts interwoven”. Some difficulties are also put forward: “Schools are very focused on the results. This is a longer process”. There are also reflections on a meta-level: “A rewarding work form, suitable to work on complex issues like environmental problems. Difficult questions create fear as there is no simple solution. This cannot be solved alone, only by cooperation and community”.

**Group 4: Postgraduate In-Service Teachers in Open University Course.** In this group, 15 experienced teachers taking an OU course on Drama in Education for a Sustainable Future, gave detailed responses to our questions (see Österlind, 2018; Lehtonen et al., 2020). Many
of them make personal reflections related to sustainability: “This is a topic that has been on my mind for long – action makes my thoughts more clear”; “I do a lot of things but there are also things I’m closing my eyes of”; “I learned that this topic worries me more than I admit”. These students spontaneously put forward the importance of contextual aspects: “Everyone should have some knowledge [in advance] about the topic/subject”; “This would work as an opening for further education”. They show a great interest in the drama work and provide educational reflections on the workshop: “I liked the rhythm of the workshop”; “Taking roles in environmental meeting was very impressive practice (heavy subject became lighter)”. They also comment on how to use drama to teach for sustainability: “I think drama is a good way to explore this topic”; “How to teach the complexity of decision making in this field”; “I think this group would have been able to do even deeper drama, the structure could have been even more emotionally engaging”. Some of them also reflect on how to adapt the actual workshop design to their own students: “They are 8–9 years old so it is a bit ‘too much’ for them. I have to adjust the material, but the concept of environmental issues taught through drama is great”; “I could easily imagine doing this with a youth group”; “I think for people younger than 15 this would need some modification”.

Group 5: Postgraduate Drama Teachers in Master in Education. For the 18 students in this group, taking a one-year master in Drama and Applied Theatre, the drama workshop served as an interactive component in their mainly theoretical studies. They give rather elaborate answers (in average 68 words), although some answers (5 of 54) are brief, only single words, or in one case hard to read. Their responses cover personal insights, educational reflections, and comments about politics and society: “A very good workshop, engaging, playful, non-judgmental action that can lead to increased awareness and a willingness to take a stance and search for more knowledge”. Of these 18 students, 14 reflect on the theme of environment and sustainability, many of them even before being asked, in response to the first, completely open question. As only four students do not refer to the topic, more than three-quarters of the master’s students refer to sustainability: “To emotionally anchor knowledge about environmental problems and the importance of sustainability by experience in action”. Some comments are from a personal perspective: “Catch sight of one’s own agency”; “I was surprised by some of my choices”; “It was interesting to try a perspective that is far from my own”. Others reflect on the problem: “How hard it is to get people listening to each other, despite good intentions”; “Changed focus from resignation to solutions”; “To focus on things that needs to be done, must be done. It does not help to be afraid, we have no choice – we must find a solution”. There are also some critical reflections on teaching: “Definitely good for a class to do this play. Might need to be a bit more distinct”; “There are strong conflicts in the environmental debate. Very quick role preparation creates clichés”; “It takes time to be able to do more than scratch the surface”.

Comparison of three groups of drama students

The response rate among the 48 drama students was also very high. All undergraduate drama students (Group 3) reflected on the design of the drama workshop, which could be expected. Nearly all of them also offered explicit, personal reflections on sustainability. The in-service teachers (Group 4) all provided qualified comments on drama for learning and reflected on sustainability. This was somehow anticipated, as they had chosen an OU course with exactly this profile. They also had teaching experience and some previous drama competence. Thus,
they were able to deliver thoughtful responses, combining personal and educational reflections related to drama and sustainability. As expected, master’s students in Drama and Applied Theatre (Group 5) gave qualified responses regarding the workshop design. They also reflected on the topic to a high degree, even though they had not actively chosen to learn about sustainability. All groups of drama students provided initial comments on the drama workshop and reflected personally and professionally on sustainability. Among the in-service teachers (Group 4), an integrated educational perspective, connecting drama to teaching for sustainability, was more prominent.

**Considerations of research design**

It is not always ideal to collect data immediately after an event. In this case it is possible that the questionnaires failed to reflect the less experienced teacher students’ learning from the workshop. These students’ brief, general responses do not mean they did not learn anything. They may have learned other things than what they were asked about, or they maybe needed some distance and time for reflection to be able to give more detailed answers. It is also possible that interviews would generate more information from this particular group. In any case, this serves as a reminder that the results are only valid for the participating groups.

**Concluding discussion**

For **teacher students**, the results show that a single drama workshop may offer a meaningful learning experience, although what the students learn may vary significantly. For the least experienced group, the Primary teacher students in their third semester, the impact of the actual topic and, to some degree, also of drama for learning seem limited. The students appeared to be carried away by the embodied, interactive learning experience. My interpretation, based on what I saw, is that they were thrilled by the energy in the room and the contact they made with each other, an important part of a good learning environment which seemingly had not been cultivated during their initial semesters of teacher education. Most of them did not give any response connected to sustainability, and their reflections on drama for learning were quite general, although they clearly appreciated the workshop. The Economy teacher students who were about to graduate were also very positive towards the workshop. They were able to, in some depth, both relate to the topic and reflect critically on applying drama in their own future teaching (cf. Österlind, 2020). If the purpose is to create a positive learning environment, a single workshop may have greater impact on less experienced students. If the purpose is to introduce the concept of drama for learning, a single workshop appears to be more successful when given to more experienced teacher students.

For **drama students**, the undergraduates in their first semester were used to participating in drama work and most likely motivated to learn more about drama. Nearly all of them commented on sustainability as well as on drama for learning, despite being fresh at university. This probably reflects that being familiar with drama work allowed them to focus on the content as well as the design of the workshop. All postgraduate, in-service teachers refer to both drama for learning and sustainability. Their initiated and engaged response could, to some degree, be expected, as these students already had an interest in drama education for sustainability. Still, it shows what is possible to achieve. The master’s students in Drama
and Applied Theatre are the most qualified students in terms of drama competence and academic studies. A large majority of them reflected both personally and educationally on sustainability, in line with results from the undergraduate drama students. My interpretation is that previous drama experience made it easier for all drama students to identify and focus on the topic – even if it was not their own choice – without being “carried away” by the drama work itself.

To summarise, there is a pattern in how the students reflect on the drama work and drama for learning, where the least experienced teacher students’ brief and general comments clearly differ from the more elaborate responses provided by all other groups of students. A similar pattern is visible in relation to reflections on sustainability. The proportion of students in each group who explicitly refer to sustainability in their responses is illustrated in Figure 31.3, above.

- **Drama experience facilitates learning about other topics through drama.** When drama is applied to teach and learn about a certain topic, it is likely to lead to better outcomes if the students have some previous experience of drama work. Alternatively, when it comes to teacher students, more extensive teacher training seems to increase reflection on the topic.

- **Teaching experience facilitates understanding of the concept of drama for learning.** In this case, more experienced teacher students were significantly more able to reflect on drama for learning after a single workshop than the less experienced teacher students. Limited teaching experience (and lack of drama experience) made it difficult for these students to relate to sustainability issues and reflect on drama for learning at a meta-level. This outcome may have implications in terms of when it is most appropriate to insert drama in teacher education and for what purpose.

It is worth remembering that the formal purpose of the drama workshops varied between the groups. The main purpose for the teacher students was to get a basic understanding of drama for learning through a personal experience of drama work, and for the undergraduate drama students to deepen their understanding of drama for learning and process drama. The postgraduate OU students were supposed to learn about drama in education for sustainability, while for the master’s students the workshop served to add a creative component to theoretical studies. There was only one group for which sustainability was a formal subject.
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But in four of the five groups, a large majority of the participants explicitly referred to the topic in their comments. Only comments from the least experienced teacher students were very brief on both drama for learning and sustainability.

From my perspective, the ideal learning outcome would be students able to make connections between drama, sustainability, and their own (future) teaching. This was, with few exceptions, only achieved by students who were already familiar with drama.

One outcome of this comparative study is the potentially huge impact of drama in teacher education, even when drama is offered as a single event. Evidence based on the two groups of teacher students clearly indicate that drama work may generate significant, positive effects after only one workshop. Another outcome is related to the impact of timing, that is, when single drama workshops are scheduled during teacher training. Here, drama seems to boost student interaction and create a supportive learning environment, which appear to be most important for the less experienced teacher students. If this is the aim, drama should be given time and space already in the first semester of TE. If the purpose is linked to the future profession in terms of expanding the students’ teaching repertoire, the results indicate that – if drama is limited to single events – drama workshops should take place towards the end of teacher training. According to the outcome, drama may contribute in various ways during different phases of teacher education, and it seems reasonable to assume that recurrent drama work would generate even better results. If the substantial evidence for the positive impacts of classroom drama and theatre as presented by the OECD (Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013) and the EU (DICE, 2010) was taken into account, drama for learning would definitely be emphasised and integrated in teacher education as a whole.

Final comments

An interesting observation related to former research is that drama in HE can be thriving in other areas than teacher education. The example of educational drama in marketing, offering three-hour drama workshops on a weekly basis during one semester (Brennan & Pearce, 2008), clearly exceeds drama in teacher education as I know it. This confirms what O’Toole noted already 20 years ago: “We are nobody’s core business. Certainly not in education” (O’Toole, 2002, p. 115). Another, more positive observation is that drama research in HE is usually not conducted in relation to single events. This is encouraging, as drama work deserves more than one occasion to be more fully realised and investigated.

In drama, just as in any other subject, it is almost predictable that when students have some pre-understanding it opens the door for a richer and more nuanced learning experience. But I was struck by the indisputable evidence that what the teacher teaches is not by definition what the students learn. This was especially true regarding the least experienced but highly enthusiastic teacher students who, as far as we know, had no former drama experience and only limited teacher training. It may also be the case that as university teachers in drama we are coming closer to a situation where our ambitions are simply incompatible with the given conditions in the academy. My passion for drama and visions of what is possible to achieve may sometimes create dissatisfaction or even disappointment, leading to a blurred view of what the students actually gain. Consequently, it is important to adjust one’s ambitions and aims to the current conditions, while continuously working to expand the frames, and remember the impact of timing.
Notes

1 Since the National Curriculum of 1980, statements about drama have been reduced, becoming more vague and peripheral in the curriculum of 1994 and even more so in the latest curriculum from 2011 (for an overview of drama in the Nordic countries, including Sweden, see Österlind, Østern & Thorkelsdóttir, 2016).

2 The 9th International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI), 2–9 July 2018 in Auckland, New Zealand.

3 In these cases, students’ quotes have been translated into English by the author.

4 For a closer description of the content analysis regarding two of these groups, see Österlind (2018, 2020).

5 Please note that the data material does not allow any definite conclusions about what the students actually learned. To be able to answer that question in a reliable way, a different research design would be necessary.

References


Drama workshops as single events


