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HUMANIZING THE CURRICULUM
Exploring the use of drama pedagogy in faculty development

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In Fall 2017, the James Madison University (JMU) theater education program was redesigned to include engagement and professional development components in addition to more traditional programming. With a focus on social justice education and drama pedagogy, the program serves pre-service licensure students and provides in-service teacher training and faculty development across the campus and within the local community. An embodied and arts-based teaching and learning modality helps educators explore professional issues within education, unpack influences that shape teacher identity, and consider diverse perspectives different to their own. Highlighting work at JMU, specifically through its Center for Faculty Innovation (CFI), this chapter considers what drama pedagogy affords university faculty as they develop their craft, reflect on their own practice, and consider what teaching can look and feel like within higher education.

Faculty development centers on college campuses

Many United States universities have a faculty development center on campus. While these operate under various names and structures, they “increasingly serve as hubs of pedagogical innovation” and bring together faculty from across a university (Lieberman, 2018). Faculty development, which focuses on improving an individual instructor’s teaching skills (Diamond, 2002), is housed within a university center, often called “Center for Teaching and Learning” or “Center for Faculty Development” (Lieberman, 2018). These centers signal a university’s commitment to educational development. The broad and inclusive term of “educational development” reflects the “profession dedicated to helping colleges and universities function effectively as teaching and learning communities” (Felten et al., 2007, p. 93). A center’s efforts widely support instructional faculty as they design and redesign courses, implement new teaching techniques, discuss teaching and learning on a college campus, and consider the role of effective teaching as the landscape or medium changes (Lieberman, 2018). Faculty development can act as a “lever of change in higher education... Because such changes are ongoing, faculty development programs should never remain static. They must adjust creatively and responsively to meet changing student, faculty, institutional, and societal needs” (Pchenitchnaia & Cole, 2009, pp. 288–289).
Drama pedagogy within faculty development

As a teaching associate with the CFI, I design and deliver various workshops for faculty related to topics in higher education that connect specifically to teaching and learning. Embedded into faculty development experiences, drama offers the opportunity for participants to learn about pedagogy through a structured experience. Using a range of techniques from across the field of drama, participants immediately connect, reflect, and understand more about themselves as they analyze a concept or topic through the use of their voices, bodies, and imaginations. In my experience, this type of active and embodied participation is not typically found within faculty development workshops on college campuses.

For university faculty, drama facilitates knowledge production through moments of inquiry, questioning, and discovery. Authentic engagement, through drama pedagogy, asks participants to engage as themselves rather than pretend to be a student. This format requires the facilitator to develop a nuanced experience that allows participants to both play and reflect on the content being explored. As part of the process, I facilitate a metacognitive reflection moment for the participants to unpack the experience as educators and consider the use of the strategy within their teaching context, noting that in-service educators “need to [both] understand how it feels to make meaning through dialogic, embodied methods (activity processing) and understand how to adapt it and apply it in their own context (strategy processing)” (Dossett, 2014, p. 62). It is essential for faculty developers to help participants “delineate between these two types of reflection and understand their importance” (Dossett, 2014, p. 62).

Drama exists within a liminal space—a moment that cannot be replicated and exists only from the unique makeup of the ensemble and their individual and collective contributions. Creative and body-based learning helps make a connection between self, situation, and context. Therefore, faculty development workshops in the CFI include a reflection on the specific context of the university. Considering that JMU exists as a historically and predominately White institution, drama demonstrates to participants how critical pedagogy can be enacted through an embodied and arts-based practice. Furthermore, the clear and effective facilitation of such strategies illustrates how drama could be infused into university teaching. However, the ephemeral nature of the work limits its replication for faculty who were not present or participatory during the workshop.

Drama pedagogy as a relational practice

When used with fidelity, drama establishes teaching and learning as a relational practice. This positioning allows educators to “attend to different features of teaching” (McNamee, 2007, p. 319). Attention is drawn toward the process of teaching, relationships at play, and multiple ways in which facilitated learning can take place (McNamee, 2007). Specifically connected to the liminal space of drama, relational teaching “center[s] on the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each participant brings to the current learning context” (p. 319).

Faculty development can utilize drama pedagogy to reframe and reimagine what teaching practice can look like in postsecondary institutions. Focusing on examining and changing conceptions of teaching and learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996), drama pedagogy embedded into faculty development workshops specifically supports pedagogical conceptual change (Dawson, 2018; Lee et al., 2013). Though not as widely known on the JMU campus before 2017,
drama is now a welcomed pedagogy at JMU’s faculty development center. Noting the attention toward innovation through the center’s name – the Center for Faculty Innovation – fellow faculty developers and university instructors across campus enrolled in the drama-focused professional development workshops offered. However, these workshops seem to mainly attract university faculty already interested in social justice, pedagogy, and andragogy.

**Drama pedagogy and relational teacher education**

The dialogic techniques that drama presents to the field of education are relatively unknown to American university educators. The progressive pedagogies upon which drama education is founded are often not an aspect of faculty development. Prentki and Stinson (2016) state, “the leading educational philosophers of the twentieth century—Dewey, Vygotsky, Freire—have long since offered founding principles for a different, humane curriculum but those charged with designing and implementing school curricula, remain largely impervious to their implications for progressive education” (p. 4). Therefore, drama pedagogy is not usually a method taught at faculty development workshops in educational development centers.

However, drama supports numerous aspects of educator development. Noting the playful pedagogy of drama, using these strategies within any university course enhances student engagement. Working to model pedagogy in practice, the reframing of the student-teacher relationship through drama signals toward culturally responsive teaching practice. The examination of the self, the learning community, and a character, scenario, or world beyond the classroom, real or imagined, helps educators see the value of holistic education. And, finally, drama is a flexible multimodal form of instruction that is adaptable to meet the needs and abilities of diverse groups of students and thus demonstrates inclusive teaching practice.

For these reasons, if embedded within faculty development workshops, drama supports relational teacher education. It is defined by Kitchen (2005) as a “reciprocal approach to enabling teacher growth that is respectful of the personal practical knowledge of pre-service teachers and builds from the realization that we know in relationship to others” (p. 195). Relational teacher education is “based on respect for adult learners and on a genuine belief that each prospective teacher must construct her or his own meaning as a curriculum maker” (p. 201). Like Kitchen, I believe that by analyzing and understanding the self, our stories, and our relationships, in-service teachers, like pre-service educators, can individually and collectively author their own meaning, understand the relationship between pedagogy and practice, and become agents of change inside the system of higher education.

Working with in-service educators through university faculty development workshops, I offer drama as a valuable and essential pedagogical tool. Highlighting three critical aspects of drama pedagogy, I illustrate how arts-based and embodied faculty development works to humanize the curriculum by engaging in relational teacher education.

**Building community through play**

Pushing back the tables, we form a circle together. This rearrangement of space and the positioning of the facilitator within the circle alongside the participants works to alter the traditional classroom environment right away. Through drama strategies borrowed from Augusto Boal, Michael Rohd, Viola Spolin, and many others, we play together with a focus on co-constructing rules of the game and kinesthetic problem-solving. This work invites play into the room. As a modality for adult learning, it offers rich moments of unknowing to reflect upon. The community building (through play) serves as an essential component...
before the collective construction and inhabiting of characters, worlds, and scenarios. The use of theater games gives educators a tangible way to reframe power dynamics and to introduce body-based learning as a form of knowledge production in the classroom.

Leaning into and learning through story

Drawing upon the numerous strategies that support engagement in and around story, we enter into a fictional world. The story is framed around a teaching/learning scenario, one that is similar to a dramatic dilemma that faculty would face in or at the university. Through a series of scaffolded drama strategies, participants move fluidly between roles to reflect within and on the event. I use this to model how to move from object- and text-based dialogue into dramatic engagement; beginning with a strategy like “headlines” or “artifact” hooks participants into the inquiry; then, diving into the dramatic dilemma, “role-on-the-wall” or “conscious alley” techniques facilitate examinations of the complexity of a single moment. Finally, participants physically embody characters that surround the event and express diverse opinions through strategies such as “paired improvisation” and “town hall meetings”. This truncated version of process drama offers an embodied experience for educators to remember while providing a bank of strategies to draw upon when planning their own lessons.

Artistry and expression as meaning making

Utilizing gesture, sound, physical staging, and spoken word, we reflect on our experiences together using devising processes that invite individual contributions into collaborative creations. With an “I Am” poem, we consider how intersectional identities are at play within contexts we work in. Likewise, we map geographies to consider how conceptions of home influence and shape teaching practice. And using the metaphor of a recipe, to explore various facets of teacher identity. The process of writing, collaborating, and performing helps participants figuratively and metaphorically play with abstract ideas and consider how larger concepts are constructed. Expressing their ideas through the aesthetic devices of poetry and movement provides the opportunity to observe, read, and appreciate the (artistic) work of others.

Theory to Practice: Sample Lesson Plan for “Mapping Geographies of Home”

Source of the Strategy: Drama for Schools, Jan Cohen-Cruz, and Omi Osun Olum
Time: 60 minutes
Space: large open rectangular space
Materials: soft instrumental music; “North”, South”, East”, and “West” signs

In this experiential activity, participants explore what shapes their understanding of home. The embodied nature of the activity, including gesture work, disrupts the prevalence of disembodied cognition prevalent in higher education. It invites participants to get into their bodies and hearts and work collaboratively to create a choreography of home.

- Our playing space will become a map. Let’s orient ourselves north, south, east, and west. Lay out signs or tape them to the walls. The center of the map is _______ (location of the workshop).
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• If the center of the map is where we are right now, find the place on the map where you currently live.
  • Share and discuss.

• If the center of the map is where we are right now, find the place on the map where you were born.
  • Share and discuss.

• If the center of the map is where we are right now, find a place on the map you would call home. It could be a place that you spend/spent a lot of time, or a place that you feel is “home” though you haven’t been there or aren’t there often.
  • Share and discuss.

• Develop a gesture that would offer an abstract or concrete representation of the physical place you call home.
  • Play music.
  • Practice and refine your own gesture.
  • Pairs teach gestures to each other and practice, develop a cohesive movement sequence.
  • Each pair finds another pair (making groups of four), teach gestures to each other, develop a cohesive movement sequence.
  • Refine and revise thinking about the aesthetics of theater (pace, composition, expression, etc.).

  • Share with the whole group. Each group shares their piece once. Then, the group shares it again. In this second round, the audience names what they see (action, emotion, idea, etc.) when the facilitator prompts by saying, “Home is…”
  • Turn off music.

  • Create a circle and discuss:
    • What did you notice about yourself as you moved around the map or created and shared gestures?
    • How did our map shift as we moved between the three prompts?
    • What is home? What shapes our understanding of home?
    • Encourage faculty not to reflect on how they would use or adapt the strategy. Guide faculty back to reflection on the experience itself.

Meta-reflection

This activity offers participants an opportunity to unpack the Geographies of Home. It invites them to elaborate on stories of how they came to be and how identities have shaped their work as educators.

• Working as a whole group (in a circle) or utilizing think-pair-share, participants discuss some of the following questions:
  • What is your relationship to where you are born, where you have traveled, and what you call home, and how does this impact your teaching?
  • How does your geography of home live in, play out in, and connect to your work as an educator?
  • How might the notion of home impact or influence your/our students (individually or collectively)?
  • How can you connect the ideas of home, migration, and/or story to your field of study or a course you teach?
Conclusion

University instructors often seek ways of improving their teaching practice. Drama provides the opportunity to build a community of learners in the classroom, engage students in sustained dialogue through multiple modalities, and establish a connection between the academic content and the personal lived experiences of the students. In this way, Drama in Education (DiE) illustrates how the utilization of diverse pedagogies in the college classroom develops more effective teaching practice.

The use of drama within faculty development provides an opportunity for participants to learn through and about the pedagogy simultaneously, marrying theory with practice in real-time. With the goal of “humaniz[ing] the curriculum while affirming the interconnectedness of all forms of knowing” (Fowler, 1994, p. 4), drama allows in-service educators to reflect on their world views, name their prior experiences, and understand the contexts that they are situated within. Furthermore, the modeling of such strategies by faculty developers and the subsequent use of the methods by university instructors within their college courses can shift the classroom culture and climate and influence change across the university.

The cyclical nature of education requires interventions that support both immediate and lasting change. If the study of teaching is about understanding our relationships with others and society, drama provides a critical launching point for inquiry and investigation. While no method can reform education single-handedly, drama can be used as a critical approach to humanize the curriculum. In a place where faculty development begins but does not end, drama is an essential method for teaching and learning centers to support and serve university instructors as they work to innovate their individual pedagogy and practice.

Notes

1 James Madison University (JMU) is a liberal arts university in Harrisonburg, Virginia (USA), with roughly 20,000 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate students. The university has about 1,000 full-time and 400 part-time instructional faculty. Joshua was a faculty member at JMU from 2017–2021. https://www.jmu.edu/about/fact-and-figures.shtml

2 “Pre-service education” broadly serves university students enrolled within a licensure program at any level and in any subject area. In contrast to pre-service education, “in-service education” is a form of professional development for educators already working in the education system. In this article, I use the term “in-service educators” to refer to those teaching at a university.

References


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