DARING TO BE DIFFERENT
Drama as a tool for empowering the teachers of tomorrow

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How can drama in education (DiE) contribute to a student teacher’s professional development? This question is particularly relevant in a context where teaching and learning with drama-based pedagogies are rare and therefore novel. This essay focuses on the journey of two student teachers exploring teaching and learning through DiE in Switzerland, where the field of inquiry is still quite new. Indeed, drama in education is not yet integrated in teacher training in Switzerland (Göksel, 2021), nor is drama a school subject in its own right. Therefore, most Swiss teachers will not typically have experienced teaching and learning with drama during their studies, and they will hence often not feel comfortable teaching with drama.

Training to be a teacher can be arduous as it includes much scrutiny in the form of graded papers, group projects, exams, and assessed practical teaching experience (practicum). Indeed, as Britzman notes, the student teacher, being part student and part teacher, has “the dual struggle of educating others while being educated” (2003, 36). For student teachers at the University of Teacher Education Zug (PH Zug), in Zug, Switzerland, a practicum involves teaching in a primary-school classroom, either on a weekly basis or for several weeks at a time, observed by the actual classroom teacher as well as by university mentors. In this essay I will explore the path of two student teachers at PH Zug who chose to enrich their experience by teaching and learning with drama, an approach that was novel in their context.

Karin and Tanja volunteered to participate in a semester-long DiE training led by a drama specialist. They then developed original, 90-minute drama-based lessons for a range of primary-school subjects, including history, English, and ethics. These lessons were observed and filmed. In addition, the student teachers’ creative processes and their self-reported professional growth were documented and analysed via narrative interviews. This work elaborates on qualitative observations which indicate that the student teachers gained confidence in their teaching skills and felt empowered to teach creatively due to their experiences working with drama. Their stories emerge as part of my doctoral research, which uses narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008) to examine the potential of applying drama in teacher education across the curriculum in the Swiss educational context.

I first introduced drama as a tool for teaching and learning at PH Zug in 2015. My aim was for student teachers to experience being participants in drama work prior to engaging in their own facilitation. I started by “smuggling” drama into the university, firstly by offering...
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a series of extracurricular workshops, facilitated by a range of practitioners from universities around the world, and secondly by integrating drama games and exercises into my own teaching of student teachers. In 2017, the smuggling was sanctioned when I was asked to design and teach several drama lessons for PH Zug’s English methodology courses.

Over the course of six years at PH Zug, in many conversations with student teachers, a recurring theme emerged – the student teachers felt that teaching with drama was daring. A main reason for this was the novelty of the approach in the Swiss context: Despite DiE’s relatively long history in the Anglo-Saxon context, it is not generally known in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (Göksel 2019). In addition, some student teachers were concerned that other teachers might not understand or appreciate their use of DiE, as drama work can be quite noisy and chaotic at times. Also, in Switzerland, drama is usually associated with putting on a play, which is considered a fun activity but is not necessarily linked to subject-specific learning.

Thus, my student teachers were worried about the potentially negative effects of such “fun” learning on classroom management. For example, Daniel, a student teacher who adapted one of my lessons for his practicum with a grade three class, reported:

Since it was so much fun, it was difficult to calm the kids down and give them instructions. Although there was a good vibe and the kids really liked it, I wouldn’t do it every lesson, otherwise the kids’ behaviour would get out of hand.

Such reflections are understandable coming from a novice teacher, and indeed were not isolated to Daniel’s case but were echoed by other student teachers I observed at PH Zug. Furthermore, there is no venue at the university for the student teachers to voice or seek advice for such worries, as PH Zug, like many other Swiss universities, lacks a drama programme or even a regular drama course. It is therefore befitting to call it daring to use drama-based pedagogies in Swiss classrooms. This is also what led me to design a case study in 2016 to explore the potential of implementing drama in teacher education in the Swiss context. This essay is one of the outcomes of this study, which is further detailed below.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the concerns mentioned above, a group of student teachers volunteered to join a semester-long, biweekly drama training in spring 2017. These twilight trainings, which took place after hours on PH Zug premises, were facilitated by Marcel Felder, an experienced Swiss drama and theatre pedagogue. I took on the role of participant-observer, documenting the training and joining in when an extra person was needed. The training introduced the group to basic drama conventions (Neelands and Goode 2015), improvisation (Johnstone 2016), and process drama (O’Neill 1995). It began by immersing the participants in a series of drama experiences, before encouraging them to reflect on how to facilitate drama in various subjects in the primary classroom. Four of the participants additionally agreed to participate further in my doctoral research project: They each developed an original 90-minute drama lesson for a range of primary-school subjects, which they taught as part of a practicum in various local schools in the spring and fall of 2017. I filmed the drama sessions and followed up with informal interviews immediately after each lesson. I also conducted individual narrative interviews (Riessman 2008) with all four student teachers, shortly prior to their graduation in June 2018.

I will herein examine the journey of two of these student teachers, Karin and Tanja, as it was shared with me during our interviews. Over the course of three semesters, these two student teachers developed and taught several 90-minute drama lessons together, including two historical process dramas, a philosophy lesson, and an English language lesson. These
lessons were an important part of their bachelor’s thesis, which they wrote together, under my supervision. Although the drama training took place in German, my interviews with Tanja and Karin were in English, as Karin is a native English speaker (bilingual) and Tanja volunteered to conduct her interviews in English.

Returning to the question of how drama in education can contribute to a student teacher’s professional development: In the cases of Tanja and Karin, both felt strongly that their two-year journey with drama at PH Zug had afforded them new perspectives on teaching and learning, as well as empowering them as beginning teachers. For example, they felt that stepping into role helped them gain empathy and that improvising taught them to be ready for the unexpected in the classroom. Tanja felt that “I was able to change from being this person to being that person, so I can also be really spontaneous in class.” Her statement is in line with DeZutter’s assessment that “teachers need to be willing and effective improvisers” (2011, 47). In fact, in her 2011 book chapter, DeZutter calls for a shift in teacher education, in which the profession is redefined as an improvisational one. Based on Tanja and Karin’s experiences, as well as on my observations of their teaching, I can only echo this sentiment.

In her final interview in June 2018, Tanja reflects that she learned about empathy and about trying out new perspectives: “I think drama helps you to be someone else for a certain time. It doesn’t matter who you normally are – at that very moment, you can be someone else and you can act that way.” Tanja’s narrative remains optimistic throughout her interview. She describes herself as a shy student who learned to be “crazy.” She states that being open to new ideas was at the core of her experience at PH Zug – which she particularly attributes to her work with drama, and which she feels was transformational for her. In her words, it allowed her to experiment with various classroom scenarios, and it reduced her anxiety about being a novice teacher.

Tanja’s story is about developing a love of teaching and learning, and, in particular, about developing an affinity for teaching and learning with drama. She sees the benefit of drama for her own professional growth, as well as potential benefits for her future students, whom she wishes to motivate, inspire, and give agency to.

In her final interview, Karin described her encounter with drama in education as giving her the “courage to do something differently.” Karin at first depicts herself as a passive participant in her own story – “I always thought I had to do everything that other people do” – but her story shifts as she discovers her own agency: “knowing I can do it differently […] that’s really powerful and real for me”. Karin expressed that she had felt a strong need to conform in elementary and high school. Her encounter with drama at PH Zug, especially with process drama and in particular with the convention of teacher-in-role, gave her a new sense of freedom. In her interview, Karin constructs a narrative in which she learns to trust herself. She allows herself to be creative when planning lessons and she sees opportunities to include drama in other assignments at the university. However, the earlier pressure to
conform appears to have lingered, for Karin’s narrative shifts from its rosy optimism as she shares an anecdote about working with a challenging practicum mentor. She introduces the teacher as someone whose opinion she “didn’t trust” and explains that the teacher did not approve of drama as a method. Karin states point blank that she would not use drama in the presence of such a teacher, and thus she only worked with drama in that particular classroom when the mentor was not present.

Karin allows herself to be vulnerable and admits that the biggest hurdle in daring to do drama was to overcome “resistance from myself” as she heard herself saying “you can’t do this now” and “you have to teach like everybody else.” In Karin’s narrative, there is strong emphasis on the importance of teachers and mentors being supportive of new ideas. She states that “the relationship [between mentor and mentee] has to be good and you have to respect and trust that person and know that they have an open mind.” On another occasion, with a different mentor, one she admired, Karin felt the opposite – not only did she feel free to use drama, but she was even somewhat disappointed when the mentor was unable to attend a drama lesson to see her in action. Despite these moments of insecurity and vulnerability, over the course of three semesters, Karin’s narrative shifts to one of empowerment. Describing one of her lessons, Karin states that “it was a success because there was laughing, there was learning, and there was feeling free. […] Every sense is activated, every person is thinking, and is there.” Karin may have been describing her students, but in my reading of her narrative, her words reflect her own experience and attitude towards teaching and in particular towards teaching and learning through drama.

In their own voices, both student teachers reflected on how brave and daring they felt applying drama in their own teaching, especially in a context where they were being observed and assessed. Not only did they incorporate drama successfully in their own teaching, they also invited peers to team-teach drama sessions with them in various practicum settings throughout their training. They told me that working with drama, both in their initial training and in their own practice, had made them more open-minded, empathetic, and spontaneous. Although the findings herein are part of a single case study, they leave me optimistic about the possibilities that drama in education affords us in teacher training and in the classroom.

Notes

1 Interest in DiE is growing in Switzerland: The University of Teacher Education Zurich offered its first course introducing drama in education to its student teachers in early 2021. The course was designed and facilitated by Marcel Felder and me.
2 In this essay, I focus on the situation in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.
3 All the students’ names have been anonymised.
4 Having limited time and resources for introducing drama in education, I focused on drama as a tool for subject-specific teaching and learning, as well as for developing social and emotional learning. The aesthetic dimension of drama work was less of a focus.
5 I originally referred to this process as “sneaking” drama into the curriculum, but after a conversation with Filippo Fonio (Université Grenoble-les-Alpes), I have adopted his term of “smuggling” drama.
6 PH Zug has established exchange programmes with partner institutes in 19 other countries. Details can be found on the website: international.phzg.ch
7 The student quotations have been cleaned up to make them easier to read.
8 I use this term courtesy of Prof. Em. Robyn Ewing.
9 Tanja did not initially participate in the drama-training at PH Zug, as she was on exchange in Austria in spring 2017. There she was trained by two Austrian drama specialists, who, in turn, had trained Marcel Felder. Tanja and Karin developed lessons together via Skype during Tanja’s stay in Austria.
Indeed, several of my colleagues at PH Zug approached me independently to tell me how impressed they were with both Karin’s and Tanja’s implementation of drama in teaching in various subjects.

References


