The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education

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Looking back and forward

Publication details


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Published online on: 24 May 2022

How to cite :

Cletus Moyo. 24 May 2022, Looking back and forward from: The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education Routledge

Accessed on: 14 Dec 2023


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LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

Reflecting on my facilitation as a drama in education teacher and facilitator at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe

Cletus Moyo

Introduction

In 2011 I started teaching drama in education (DIE) at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe. I argue that facilitation is a critical element of DIE. In this chapter, I reflect on my experiences as a DIE teacher and facilitator. As DIE teachers and facilitators, there is a need to look back and reflect on our approaches, strategies and experiences so as to be able to use such reflection to look forward and work on improving our practice. This not only concretises the practice of DIE but also facilitates a deeper understanding of DIE and its theorisation.

Whilst Zimbabwe has a rich theatre history (both outside and inside the school system), for the school system the major turning point came in 2015 when the government ministry responsible for primary and secondary education introduced a new curriculum. This new development introduced visual and performing arts as part of the curriculum for both primary and secondary education. Previously the performing arts were considered as extracurricular activities, and participating in them was largely voluntary. Because of the extracurricular tag that was attached to drama, many pupils did not value it much. Some sections of society (at times sections within the school) developed negative attitudes towards drama and voiced their criticism and disdain openly. During my secondary school days, those who were part of the school drama group were often labelled as crazy or fanatics. As a result, pupils who had enjoyed drama at kindergarten and primary school would shy away from drama when they got to secondary school and high school levels. At these stages, the enthusiasm for drama would wither, and by the time they got to tertiary level drama it would be a distant memory. The students would have “forgotten” their drama skills and capabilities. It was only the few who would do drama courses who would get to experience again the beauty and playfulness of drama. The students to whom I first taught drama at university had gone through this kind of a system.

Despite these challenges, drama and dramatising have now become very common in Zimbabwean primary and high schools. Plays have been used to raise awareness and educate pupils on issues such as HIV and AIDS, cholera, teenage pregnancy, children’s rights and youth behavioural issues (Ogunleye 2004; Moyo and Dube 2019). Going through the school system therefore exposes young people to theatre both from the performance
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and the audience sides. There are many drama competitions and performances organised in Zimbabwean schools where pupils participate. While involving students in DIE at university level may seem out of the norm for those who occupied the peripheral zone of theatrical activities at primary and high school, to others it is not a completely strange phenomenon.

DIE is a phenomenon that has long been present in the Zimbabwean education system, particularly in early childhood and at the primary and secondary levels. Some teachers have even deployed it in the delivery of their lessons. The extracurricular activity tag, however, relegated DIE to the margins in some schools. The new curriculum in 2015 ushered in changes to the status quo.

Methodology and theoretical framework

In this research I use Lupane State University as a case study. According to John W. Creswell:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources.

(Creswell 2013: 97)

For data I relied on my observations during my classes, my students’ feedback, my lecture notes and lesson evaluations. Data for this research were not primarily gathered for this chapter but rather turned into research data in retrospect when the need and opportunity for this chapter arose.

Theoretically, I deploy Donald A. Schon’s (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner. Schon encourages reflection in action pertaining to the work we do so that we can think of the best ways of handling the situation. He is of the view that we should experiment with the situation as part of understanding it and learning how to handle it. This is important for a DIE facilitator. Schon argues that “when someone reflects in action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case” (1983: 68). When this is applied to DIE facilitation, innovation is encouraged.

The research is also framed within the action research paradigm. Action research is reflective and allows for one to make an inquiry into one’s practice and take action to correct or improve it. Action research involves a cycle of carrying out an investigation – planning for action, taking action or implementing new ideas and evaluating the outcomes (Given 2008: 4). According to Eileen Ferrance (2000: 1), “Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research”. In this research it is my own teaching and facilitation of DIE that I reflect on. Ferrance goes further to identify the following ingredients as some of the key elements in action research:

- Teachers and principals work best on problems they have identified themselves.
- Teachers and principals become more effective when encouraged to examine and access their own work and then consider ways of working differently (Ferrance 2000: 1, quoting from Watts 1985: 118).

The above assumptions were of significance to my work.
The teaching and facilitation journey – a practitioner’s reflections

In this qualitative approach to research I am immersed in the journey together with the participants (O’Connor 2003). Like any lecturer would be, when I first had an opportunity to teach DIE at Lupane State University in 2011 I was very excited. I imagined how excited my students will be when I introduce the subject to them – together we will improvise drama scenarios and reflect on them. The class will be lively. So I thought, but I was wrong. When the day came for me to introduce the lesson, students were not as enthusiastic as I had imagined. Rather they were somewhat puzzled. As I later learned from the students, they had not expected something “playful” like drama. As first-year university students they had become conditioned to a particular routine. Since the drama course was a second-year course, they found it out of place. They were not prepared for it. No one had told them about it. When they saw a drama course as part of their degree programme, they had assumed that it would be an analysis course only with no dramatising involved. Like me, they were also wrong.

Standing right there in class in front of the students I had to change tact. Instead of going right away into the practical dramatisation lessons, I focused on more explanations of what the course entails and deferred the practical dramatising lessons to the following week. This is in line with action research which is “flexible…uniquely suited to researching and supporting change. It integrates social research with exploratory action to promote development” (Given 2008: 4). In this environment, I started my DIE facilitation.

My first focus was to create an environment where students would feel free to participate in the lessons. Second, my task was to get students out of their routine. Without being disrespectful, the impression I got during the first lesson was that the students were stuck in a routine. I turned to games. I encouraged students to volunteer in leading games and exercises at the beginning of the lessons. This resulted in mixed feelings. While there were those students who were willing to “try it out”, there were also those who not only shied away from this but also demotivated those who wanted to try by trivialising their efforts through laughing and negative comments. This was a situation to be handled. Respectfully, I offered guidance during the lessons. As time went on students became more settled in the lessons and started enjoying dramatisations. However, there were still more hurdles to deal with.

The issue of space was another challenge. As the teacher and facilitator of the DIE lessons, I noticed that the physical space we were allocated – the lecture room – was limiting. Whilst the lecture rooms were big enough for students to sit in and participate in theoretical discussions, the space proved too small for practical dramatisations. When we started improvisations, playing games and doing role-play exercises, I observed that students could not move freely around the space without bumping into furniture or against each other. Bumping against furniture created disruptive noise. At that time the university was using rented premises until it moved to its campus that was under construction. Therefore, there were very limited options when it came to teaching spaces. As a facilitator my duty was to create not only a conducive social environment but also a conducive physical environment. Having reflected on this challenge posed by space, I decided to take my students to the tennis court outside, where there was plenty of space.

The idea of moving to the tennis court was refreshing to the students, who seemed eager to break with the monotony of the lecture room. From my perspective as a facilitator, the open space offered by the tennis court served two functions. First, it assisted in getting the students out of routine, which had proved to be a hindrance. Secondly, it resolved the issue of a cramped space. Everyone was happy to be at the tennis court. The outside space also created a casual atmosphere that enhanced students’ relaxation and an atmosphere of playfulness that is essential for improvisations and creativity. However, a few challenges began to surface. One of these is that
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An outside space can have many distractions. For example, people playing soccer in the nearby grounds could attract the students’ attention. When I noticed such occurrences with my students I would draw their attention back by facilitating a concentration game. This means that a facilitator has to remain alert so that such distractions can be addressed. Another obvious challenge is the weather. While it may be fine on some occasions, on others it can be too hot, windy or rainy.

Navigating the Terrain

Facilitation is like shooting at a moving object. There are many factors that come into play in terms of facilitating DIE or process drama. An approach that works for one group may not work with another, and an approach that works in one context may not produce guaranteed results in another. A facilitator has to be willing to navigate the terrain. This requires adaptability, creativity and flexibility. Teaching DIE to different classes each year has given me an opportunity to act and reflect on my actions as a facilitator. As Schon succinctly summarises it:

Because each practitioner treats his case as unique, he cannot deal with it in applying standard theories and techniques. In the half hour or so that he spends with the student, he must construct an understanding of the situation as he finds it. And because he finds the situation problematic, he must reframe it.

(Schon 1983: 129)

The facilitator of DIE education has to remain alert, creative, reflective and adaptive. They should be eager to keep on moving, navigating the terrain.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a glimpse of my DIE facilitation experiences at Lupane State University. Whilst the chapter centres more on the first years of my lecturing career, I have continued to teach DIE at the same institution up to the present. I have also continued to seek better ways of facilitating during my lessons. I continue to reflect on my work in order to improve. I also remain alive to the fact that different contexts need a facilitator who is willing to experiment in order to find out what works best under the circumstances.

References