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Developing Drama Teachers' Body Awareness and Holistic Interactions Using Theatre Based Methods

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Abstract

The challenges of pedagogical interaction in drama are related to the teacher-student interaction. The aim of our research is to develop theatre based training programmes designed to take advantage of teachers' holistic, especially nonverbal communication interaction skills; presence and the use of bodies and space in educational settings. Our research questions are: 1) what theatre based tools can be used to teach body awareness? And 2) is it possible to use those practiced body messages consciously in teaching-studying-learning situations? The aim of this paper is to present the background and some aspects of the theory based practical training program we have developed to teach holistic interaction to professional teachers and teacher students in Helsinki University's teacher education "Challenge of the Empty space -research project". We also present the preliminary results of the effectiveness of the training programme. Preliminary data collection was carried out between 2014 and 2016. Two groups of teacher students (N=36) and one group of qualified teachers (N=16) took the basic studies of drama education course (25 ECTS credits). Holistic interaction skills were especially studied in the theatre education course (7 ECTS credits). After the course the participants reflected on their learning by answering a questionnaire. All the respondents felt that they have learnt something new about teacher-student interaction and about the importance interactions during teaching. They mentioned that they had been paying close attention to their own supplementary communication. All the qualified teachers (N=16) described concrete situations where they have used "new holistic interaction" skills consciously. The results of the preliminary study reinforced our view. They give indications that teachers' body awareness in teaching situations can be developed with these methods. The results will help us to develop the theatre based training programme further.

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Keywords: Holistic interaction; body awareness; drama; theatre based methods.



1. Background

Teaching drama is a current issue in Finland, because of the new National Curriculum (2016). The new curriculum underlines future skills; interaction, collaboration, creativity and students' active role in learning (The Finnish National Board of Education 2014). In Finland drama is mainly connected with teaching literature and interaction skills in the Finnish language, but in the new National Curriculum drama has also been put forward as a teaching method for many other subjects. Drama is associated with creative, child-centered education and inquiry-based learning that use elements of the theatre art form (fictional roles, time and place) for educational purposes for students of all ages. Learning through drama is focused on transformation of the participants' knowledge and attitudes regarding a phenomenon, towards a new and more complex understanding and new knowledge (Toivanen, Salomaa & Halkilahti, 2016). In the previous studies of the research project "Challenge of the empty space", at Helsinki University's teacher education department, we identified and explained the teaching factors, which were identified by teachers to create challenges in teaching drama (Toivanen, Antikainen & Ruismäki 2012; Toivanen, Mikkola & Ruismäki 2012; Toivanen & Pyykkö 2012). The main reasons teachers put forward for the failure of drama lessons were associated with teacher's actions, e.g., being too strict in their planning, a lack of pedagogical courage to improvise, failures in classroom management and a lack of presence in educational situations. We concluded that challenges to pedagogical interaction in drama teaching seem to be related to teachers' presence and nonverbal communication in an educational situation.

Teacher-student pedagogical interactions are professionalized relationships, which have the content dimension of the relationship dimension. When we hear a message, what the words mean is the content. What the person means and the subtext behind the words is the relationship. Even though in professional communications the teacher is the expert and has a professional relation with the student, emotions still form an important part of the interaction (Frymier & Houser 2000). Pedagogical studies have shown sensitive and responsive teacher-student interactions to be one key factor in providing students with experiences that extend their learning, support their creativity, social development and create positive school experiences. (Lobman 2007; Morrison & Connor 2002; Pianta 2006, Pianta & al.2008) Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008, 2-5) grouped classroom interaction into three main domains; emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support. Our training programme concentrates on the emotional support domain that includes positive classroom climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives and avoiding a negative climate. Pianta et al name these factors to be central to effective classroom practices. To be able to be more interactive, to take into account students' perspectives and to be able to respond to their needs, teachers should be more aware of his or her students' interest, motivation, points of view and emotions. In an interaction event both sides want to know if the other can hear what they have to say or if their ideas are accepted. So both, the teacher and the learners, observe each other to see how their expressions and actions are received. If the interaction in the teaching-studying-learning situation is mutual, the learners will feel comfortable asking for help and sharing their ideas. (Lehtonen, Kaasinen, Karjalainen-Väkevä, & Toivanen, 2016). A strict adherence to the lesson plan can lead to a lack of presence and spontaneity in

creating pedagogical interaction with pupils leading teachers not to interact responsively to the pupil's proposals but ignoring, interpreting, or dominating the activity (Sawyer 2004, 2006, 2012; Toivanen, Mikkola, & Ruismäki, 2012).

We came to the conclusion that teachers should become more aware of the interactional part of teaching when she or he is building interaction and positive leadership in teaching. The problem is that when a teacher concentrates on teaching drama, his or her own bodily state may be the furthest thing from his or her awareness (cf. Zarilli, 2004). The lack of drama teaching experience makes it even more difficult. The non-verbal part of interaction, body expressions during the teaching situation, plays an important role in creating positive leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2008, 7). Bass and Riggio (2008, 3–15) divide leadership into four categories; passive, laissez-faire, transactional and transformational leadership. Leaders may use all four approaches, but usually they use one more than the others. The best leaders are more frequently transformational and less adequate leaders are passive or concentrate more on corrective actions. Passive leadership is least effective and satisfying. Laissez-faire leadership is the avoidance or absence of leadership. Authority remains unused. It is an inactive and ineffective way to lead a group. Transformational leader's help their followers grow and show their commitment by responding to individual need's by empowering them and aligning their goals to individuals and groups. According to Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2014, 10–11) when the verbal and non-verbal messages are complementary, rather than conflicting, our messages are usually decoded more accurately. Nonverbal behavioural actions, like verbal behaviour, are encoded with varying degrees of control and awareness. Sometimes we have time to plan our non-verbal messages and responses - sometimes they are automatic (Lakin 2006). In actor training the actor student learns to understand and master the processes of his or her bodily experiences through psycho-physical training. The actors will be able to transform fictional experiences into new forms and then express them via their bodies so that audience can read and understand their intentions. (Evans 2009, 3.) The purpose of this article and the theatre based teacher training programme is to highlight some theoretical and practical connections between theatre based methods and teaching in the field of body awareness. The goal of our research project is to develop a theatre based training programme to teach body awareness and holistic interaction skills to teachers and teacher students. In our training programme we mainly concentrate on body movement and position, not on the communicator's physical characteristics such as height, weight, hair etc. which are relatively unchanged during the period of interaction. According to Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2014, 10–19) body movement and positioning includes the following major areas; gestures, postures, touching behaviour, facial expressions, eye behaviours and vocal behaviour. Body movements include movement of the limbs, hands, legs, head and feet. Facial expressions include smiles, eye behaviour (direction and length etc.). Postures determine the degree of attention or enrolment (forward leaning direction), relative status to interactive partner and postures associated with emotions. The vocal behaviour training concentrates more on how something is said (etc. pitch, duration, loudness), than what is said. While creating the programme we were aware of the challenges such as biological and cultural force overlap between nonverbal communications in many ways and also recognized that non-verbal cues rarely have a single denotative meaning. Nonverbal signals are more spontaneous and therefore harder to control or fake. You cannot fake nonverbal messages and be

convincing (Lakin 2006). Our purpose is not to train teachers to “act” in front of a class. Our intention is to make them understand the importance of nonverbal communication (body awareness) and maybe use these skills in some educational situations (e.g. create positive authority, take control, to get their students' attention, to calm their students, to inspire their students).

2. Problem Statement and Research Questions

The aim of this paper is to present some aspects of a practical, theory based training programme, which we have developed to teach holistic interaction to professional teachers and teacher students.

Our research questions are:

- 1) What theatre based tools are used to teach body awareness?
- 2) Is it possible to use those practiced body messages in teaching-studying-learning situations consciously?

3. Comparing body awareness between actors and teachers

In our previous article (Toivanen & Kaasinen, 2013) we compared the work of actors and teachers. We noticed that voice, gestures, facial expressions, body posture and the use of space may together be understood as a holistic interaction (in teacher's work) and as psychophysical actions (in actor's work). We do not claim that teaching is acting even if all teaching is performance related. Teachers take on the professional role of a teacher which is not necessarily the same as their more private personas. With professional “role playing”, created by controlling one's voice and other gestures, a teacher can make himself or herself more confident and extrovert. (Dickinson & Neelands, 2006, 48.) Teaching is a balancing act between structure (goals, content knowledge, emotional support, classroom management) and ‘improvisation’ (the ability to react to students' group actions and needs). In teaching the balance shifts toward a greater degree of structure and a lower degree of improvisation.

In acting ‘psycho-physical’ awareness means that the actor should have an idea why he or she is acting in a certain way on the stage. The aim of psycho-physical exercises is to establish a connection between the actor's inner intentions and his or her physical actions. (Stanislavski 2008, 512.) In our opinion a teacher also should be aware of his or her inner intentions and also be able to express them through physical actions while teaching. Cohen (2002, 61–63) named four principles associated with a basic method for the acting approach (goal, other, tactics, and expectations) which we connect to the drama teaching situation (Toivanen & Kaasinen, 2013). In order to achieve “the internal creative mode” a teacher needs to know and understand “the internal elements” of drama (creativity, the goals and consistency of teaching, circle of attention, the teaching event in which the teacher must be active participant, creating the fictive worlds of drama, lesson structure, contact and communication, a here-and-now way of working, presence and status, ethics and discipline) (Toivanen & Kaasinen, 2013). In order to achieve “the external creative mode” a teacher needs to practice the holistic interaction skills. It is also important to specify what should be taught and how these things can be taught and learned.

4. Adult experiential learning and embodied learning

The theatre based training programme is designed to help teachers 1) to become more aware of their communicative body and 2) to become more aware about the body messages their body sends. To learn a new bodily skill, you have to do physical actions, work bodily, and also understand the meaning and the use of that skill (Rouhiainen 2011, 83; see also Merlay-Ponty 1962/1995.) For this reason, we are dealing with both experiential and embodied learning. As we mentioned earlier, teachers' bodily states remain outside their consciousness when they concentrate on teaching. Teachers do not explain to themselves, why they raise their hands when they want to get their students' attention. The justification and the base of that movement has become tacit knowledge. That is because those gestures and body postures which teachers use in teaching are part of their professional actions. These kinds of movements and this kind of knowledge are located in the hard core area of their personal experiential knowing.

The personal experiential knowing contains our conceptions and hypotheses from which we operate in our every-day-life. Although this personal experiential knowing is very true for all of us, it is still quite holistic, insufficient, inaccurate and tacit. Adult experiential learning is a re-construction process, which modifies the personal knowing holistically. Through the second-order-experience a learner can receive a "crack" into his or her personal knowing. Through this new experience familiar becomes problematic; the "crack" violates the usual way of thinking of the learner and starts a re-construction process which corrects insufficiencies in the teacher's personal experiential knowing (Malinen, 2000, 134–135; Malinen, 2002, 65). Our aim is to produce the 'crack' situations through drama and theatre exercises so that the teachers would become more aware about their body and body messages.

In this context, we use the term "body awareness" to describe the situation when the teacher becomes aware of the embodied part of an interaction; that he or she has the body which is sending messages. The concept "body" we understand as the division into "living body" and "lived body" (Thompson 2007, 235–237). Our living as a human being occurs through our bodies and in our bodies (e.g. organ functions, the sensations, experiences, physical acts). Bodily knowing also involves knowing in and through our bodies (See e.g. Parviainen 2006; Rouhiainen 2007; Thompson 2007). There are different points of view of what bodily knowledge is, but we can find a large body of research data supporting the belief that embodiment is the basis for consciousness, cognition, and learning (see, e.g., Damasio 2010; Johnson 2008; Thompson 2007). Anttila (2015) says that shifting focus between the personal and the shared (inner and outer) body experiences and body expressions is difficult at first but it becomes easier with active practice. In her opinion, this kind of pedagogical practice becomes possible only, when teachers really want to be fully present for their learners, and are interested in their lived experiences, their creative expressions, and shared meanings (Anttila 2015, 376). Our intention is not to teach some specific movements or gestures to use in certain kinds of interactions in teaching situations. We are trying to build a connection between teachers' inner intentions and outer actions and increase their abilities to discern what kinds of reactions and actions their own body messages create in students.

5. The theatre based training programme

We have discussed the elements that a teacher should know (through Stanislavsky's theory), as well as the principles a teacher should be aware of (through Cohen's theory), when he or she prepares to teach drama. Next we use Lecoq's (2000) perception of physical theatre as a basis, when we consider how to teach body awareness and holistic interaction skills. Lecoq's teaching can be, in the light of the content and objectives, summarized into three areas: 1) improvisation and its rules, 2) movement technique and its analysis and 3) creativity and playfulness. He taught, for example, masks, mime, characterization and clowning. (Lecoq 2000, 14–16, 18–19.) We have used those same areas of physical theatre.

In our body awareness training programme we try to increase teachers' body awareness and their willingness and readiness for holistic interaction. In addition, we try to develop their emotional supporting skills, behavioural management skills and instructional supporting skills which are presented in more detail in Table 1.

Table 1. Content of the theatre based training programme.

Emotional supporting skills	Behavioural management skills	Instructional supporting skills
- Positive learning atmosphere - Sensitivity - Regards for students perspective	- Classroom organization - Positive leadership	- Educational dialogue - Feedback - Flexibility - Creativity
Theatre based practices: - Improvisation - Mask theatre - Clowning	Theatre based practices: - Drama techniques - Improvisation (status expression) - Masks and miming	Theatre based practices: - Simulation - Improvisation (listening, yes-and-principle) - Actors work (goals, obstacles, tactics and expectations)

6. Research methods and findings

Preliminary data collection was carried out between 2014 and 2016. Two groups of teacher students (N=36) and one group of qualified teachers (N=16) took part in the basic studies of drama education (25 ECTS credits). The groups had seven male students and 45 female students. The students were enrolled in Helsinki University's Department of Teacher Education and the qualified teachers in Helsinki Open University. Both courses amounted one academic scale from autumn to next spring. Their started Holistic interaction skills were studied especially in the course of theatre education (7 ECTS credits, in all 48–63 hours of group lessons). The data were collected using a questionnaire. All students and teachers (N=54) answered the questionnaires after the course. The answers were analyzed using theory-based content analysis. In theory-based content analysis the classification is based on an earlier frame of reference, so in such cases a pre-decided theme directs the analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 113).

The questionnaire consisted of two themes 1) the students' and teachers self-assessed learning outcomes during the course (Did you learn something about you own corporeality and interaction?

Reflect the issue from a personal and professional point of view.) 2) The perceived pedagogical benefit of the courses (Qualified teachers also answered the question: Are you able to describe a professional situation in which you have used those holistic interaction skills?). Although the study groups consisted of student and qualified class teachers, subject teachers, kindergarten teachers and speeds professional, there were no discernible difference between the teacher groups' answers to questionnaire, but there were some differences between the students and qualified teachers when the answer were divided into theme groups by the researchers (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comments related to holistic interactions.

Theme	Students	Qualified teachers
Named body awareness	36	16
Used body messages in teaching	10	16
Performance anxiety reduction	12	2
Increased self-confidence	26	0
Increased self-knowledge	31	16
Infringement on personal borders	23	16

All the respondents reported that they had acquired wide-ranging knowledge of body awareness and how use these skills. They felt that they have learnt something new about teacher–student interaction and about the importance of the interaction during the teaching situation. They mentioned that they have been paying close attention to their own supplementary communication as persons and professionally. Here are some examples of the answers:

“Improvisation exercises challenged me to face my limits. I had to let discretion and foresight go. The ‘Yes’ - response is central to improvisation. In real life, it often also opens up new opportunities. So I can honestly say that I have learned about life itself from this course!” (Female, qualified subject teacher)

“Now I pay much more attention to my own interaction and I also observe other people’s activities in interaction situations”. (Female, qualified kindergarten teacher)

“Due to the drama course, I have improved my teacher’s sensitivity, embodied expression and interaction skills.” (Male, class teacher student)

All the qualified teachers (N=16) answered the second question and reported concrete situations where they have used “new holistic interaction” skills consciously. This data set indicates that the learnt skills transfer to real life situations, this was most promising result of the study.

“I became more aware of my body expression after mask exercises. It is a big advantage to be aware of your own embodied communication and to understand how much it affects teaching and classroom activities. After the mask and clown practice sessions I have consciously tested what kind of impact my embodied communication has on class activities. I have already noticed that the way I walk or the way I step in to the classroom in the morning has an effect on pupils’ reactions towards me and my teaching.” (Female, qualified class teacher)

“Training these nonverbal skills has given me the ability to win the status struggles with the students (to get their attention). This is, of course, been a joy to me: I’ve noticed how strongly studied mask practices have had

*an impact on my bodily expression and using them has impacted to the behaviour of students.”
(Female, subject teacher)*

“Mask theatre work encouraged me to move much more freely in front of the group. I began to consciously practice new ways to be in front of the class e.g. how different ways of standing can transmit a certain kind of message. I began to adapt these skills to my performance. I've tried them in practice and I have noticed the difference. The awareness of my body messages and awareness of different alternatives to use them has had great importance for my development as a teacher. I certainly understand that there still is very much room for improvement.” (Female, class teacher student)

Increased self-confidence was a category that appeared only in the student's responses (26 answers). The answers were related with group experience (courage to express themselves in front of a group) and a belief to be able to become a better teacher. On the other hand, a large majority of both groups felt (N=47) that they had learnt something new about personal expression and interaction skills. They feel that they had broadened their personal limits by doing something they would never have believed they would be able to do (N=39).

“I am happy that I have found increased self-confidence. I'm more relaxed in interaction situations. I have a new kind of courage. I have nothing to fear if I sometimes fail to do something.” (Female, class teacher student).

There were also mentions of decreased performance anxiety (N=14) which were joined with possibilities to perform in safe groups. The answers to this preliminary study will help us develop the theatre based training programme further.

7. Conclusions

Although the importance of the development of teachers' interaction skills has been strongly emphasised in research and debates on teacher education, there has been little systematic research into how these skills can be nurtured. We are aware of Thomas Gordon's "Teacher Effectiveness Training – system (2003) and development and research projects based on using improvisation in teacher education (see Sawyer 2011, Lobman & Lundquist 2007). In the present study, we examined student-teachers' learning experiences in courses focusing on the development of the nonverbal side of holistic interaction skills. Even though the courses were practical, they were based on theory. One of characteristics of the courses was a deep integration between theoretical, practical and self-regulative knowledge. Our findings showed that students in both courses, teacher students and qualified teachers, gave the highest attention to learning of interaction skills. The findings of our study indicate that it is possible to combine teachers' holistic interaction skills with theatre based methods if the teaching is strongly underpinned by a theoretical background. There are certain limitations that need to be taken into account when contemplating these preliminary results. To begin with, it is difficult to distinguish, what is the effect of the theatre course for developing experienced holistic interaction skills in relation to the whole drama course. How much does the whole drama course effect the results of the questionnaire? There was no pre- or after testing of the interactions skills. The results of this study were based on students' experience and self-evaluation instead of objective testing. Further

development work and studies are needed to confirm and elaborate the findings. The most encouraging finding in this study was that in the group of professional teachers the learnt skills transferred well to real life situations in school. It would be interesting to follow, whether the changes teachers reported in their answers are permanent. Even though courses were carried out in a Finnish teacher education context, we believe that the final model will be applicable to teacher education in other countries.

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