

HISTORY EDUCATION THROUGH DRAMA - A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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“... the urge to mimic, the need to act out some aspect of life ... has been with humanity from its earliest beginnings” (Pickering, 1978). People take on roles all the time. From the time children are very young, they act out roles in various games with caregivers, peers and on their own. The acting in games, according to Lowenfield (1984) “expresses a child’s relation to himself and his environment”. Even in adulthood, we play roles as we attempt to fit in to the environment in which we find ourselves.

Participating in drama activities is an extension of the roles we play in life and is generally viewed as enjoyable to children and many adults. This participation enables people to step into another person’s shoes, to feel the emotions experienced by the person, to create a clear mental picture of the event and to understand concepts, motives, actions and consequences (Oppenheim, 1982; Scrubber, 2001). Thus, participation in drama activities makes an excellent teaching and learning tool where learners become involved and therefore interested by stepping into a situation and assuming a character in order to fully understand, empathise with and judge the actions of a character from a position of being present and in role.

Despite the positive spin-offs from using drama, Goalen and Hendy (1992) point out that the use of participatory drama is often left to the Drama or English educator. However, there are History educators who have explored the very powerful and successful strategy of using participatory drama (Speer, 2005). Using ideas and information from primary and secondary sources, learners get under the skin of historical characters and make judgements from a position of understanding and empathy (Woodhouse and Wilson, 1988). The drama activity helps learners verbalise and explore ideas before putting these ideas down on paper. For learners, this method allows for greater engagement with concepts in a non-threatening way and this ensures increased confidence when issues are committed to paper (McMaster, 1998).

Somers (1994) further points out that drama can be liberating in that it uses communication forms other than writing and thus provides structured opportunities for engaging with language in terms of practice and development.

Scrubber (2001) identifies an important dilemma of History educators: how do they attract learners to their discipline and then hold their attention? To answer the question, it is important to ask: what do educators do in a History lesson? The 1987 National Assessment of Educational Progress (Wineburg, 2001) indicates that, in most American classrooms, learners listen to the educator, refer to their textbooks, write tests, memorise information and read stories. In short, they only learn dates and facts. They very rarely watch a film, work with other learners, use source material as the basis of their discussions or discuss why they are studying the section in History. Numerous studies (cited in Morris, 2001) indicate that a lack of connectedness to learners' concerns and involvement and a failure to relate information to learners' lives leave learners feeling detached from the mode and content of instruction.

In South Africa we saw the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1998. In 1999, a Review Committee, appointed by the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, was tasked with reviewing C2005. While changes to C2005 resulted in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) which eventually became the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), the recommendation asked for the principles of Outcomes Based Education, a corner-stone of C2005, to remain (Garson, 2000). In terms of FET History, the NCS document states:

We need to build the capacity of learners who study History to use the insights and skills of historians. In that process, they must be given the opportunity to analyse sources and evidence, study different interpretations and divergent opinions and voices, and build historical imagination. This is a central means of imparting the ability to think in a rigorous and critical manner about society.

While the skills learners should achieve are clearly articulated, the NCS document does not elaborate on how educators should proceed to build this capacity in learners (Jansen and Christie, 1999). We therefore propose participatory drama as a teaching strategy to build capacity in learners and to achieve the required skills. This form of drama is in

contrast to presentational drama where the focus is on understanding a character, learning lines and portraying a situation to an audience (Cassler, 1990).

In participatory drama, the audience is not a pre-requisite since the process, not the product is most important. It is during the process of creation that learning takes place (Heathcote, 1995). Landy (cited in Terry and Malan, 1990) points out that participatory drama are a non-performance, informal process of drama. According to Terry and Malan (1990), participatory drama, which aligns itself with learner-centred education, involves a group working co-operatively and involves the intellect, body and emotions. Participatory drama has a great deal to do with pedagogy because the richness of participatory drama lies in its potential to achieve understanding, a pedagogic objective (Bolton cited in Jackson, 1993). Bolton further points out that learners and educators involved in participatory drama are both participants and percipients, watching themselves even as they are experiencing.

In participatory drama, learners and educators are directly involved in creating roles and events. In a History classroom, this would mean that learners and educators would first engage in research, interrogate source materials and actively engage in discussions and questions. This context would serve as a framework for what they do. They would then assume roles, think creatively and critically, solve problems and respond (in character) to create historical scenarios, which may take a variety of forms. In other words, they step into another's shoes, empathising and experiencing. After this process, active de-briefing and reflection of the process take place. Again, this process may take a variety of forms (Pemberton and Clegg, 1968; Bordon, 1970; Klotz, 1992; Heathcote, 1995; Chilcoat, 1996). The teaching strategy of participatory drama offers a democratic form of learning, breaking down barriers between the educator and learners, where the educator is no longer the source of all knowledge but becomes a member of the community of learners, facilitating the process of exploration and reflection (Carklin, 1997).

The 1982 Bradley Commission on History education in the United States of America (cited in Wineburg, 2001) notes that, with respect to pedagogy, variety is essential and it encourages educators to select from a mix of teaching strategies. History must not be a vehicle for merely learning names and dates; it should be a way of changing how we think,

discern, judge and caution. Thus it teaches us a way to make choices, to judge opinions, to tell stories and “to become uneasy – when necessary – about the stories we tell” (Wineburg, 2001).

Above all, Holt (1990), stresses that educators need to caution learners against believing that History is a fixed story. In the light of the above, while stressing that academic history not be abandoned, Scrubber (2001) advocates the values of drama as a means of helping learners to see that historical characters were real people with goals, ambitions, conflicts and motivations.

To do this, Goalen’s (1996) History through drama project identifies the various objectives that may be developed. These objectives included the acquisition of historical knowledge, the development of historical skills and thinking, the development of an appreciation of history through enjoyment and engagement, the development of individual self-esteem and the promotion of equal opportunities. Similarly, Oppenheim (1982) cites Birt and Nichol (1975) who stress that drama in a History classroom is not just for entertainment but is valuable as a means of encouraging empathy for, and awareness of, motivations driving historical characters. Dawson’s research (1989) on tertiary level students, too, highlights the many benefits of using drama including the finding that drama provides an effective yet gentle way of acquiring information about complex patterns of events. He found that the students realised that it was no longer necessary to equate value with tedium and entertainment with irrelevance.

The use of participatory drama activities is seen by Goalen and Hendy (1992) as non-threatening as opposed to presentational drama, which could leave some learners over-exposed. In a study with undergraduate B.Ed History students, Goalen and Hendy (1992) note that students indicated that the teaching method involved in using drama to teach History was relevant and involved participants more actively. It was also found that teaching and learning through drama was integrative (Anderson and Brewer, 1946), person-centred (Paisey, 1975), liberatory (Freire, 1972), and progressive (Bennett, 1976).

Many History educators recognise the value of using drama as a teaching methodology. However, there is a strong sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence amongst them as they feel that they cannot implement the methodology successfully and see a need to introduce a

Drama educator into their classrooms (King, Tucker and Tucker, 1987; Dawson, 1989; Easdown, 1991; Goalen and Hendy, 1992). They also believe that drama will involve tedious, time-consuming preparations (McMaster, 1998). However, McMaster points out that the use of drama, as a teaching strategy, is highly effective because “an involved child is an interested child, an interested child will learn.” Kudlick (1999) further argues that the use of drama techniques forces educators to take a little of “the gravitas” out of History and she states that for the educator, the term will go faster “as you take up the challenges of improvising and responding to the drama of the moment”.

Byrne Hill (1994) cautions, however, that the use of drama requires the educator to be particularly alert and prepared to guide, redirect and even add to the situation that is unfolding in the classroom. If this is done, learners are able to interpret events using source material, they come closer to an historical understanding of a period, and relationships between learners and the teacher are significantly strengthened (Woodhouse and Wilson, 1988).

Thus it can be seen that drama can have a significant impact on how History is experienced in the classroom. If teachers are given the skills and are empowered to take drama into the classroom, then History will take its rightful place in the hearts and minds of learners, who cannot but be passionate about the subject which would then be more than merely a study of dates and facts.

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