



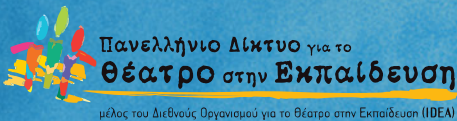
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The “Most Significant Change” Technique: Research on the Evaluation of Theatre in Education (TiE) Programmes

Marios Koukounaras-Liagkis, Iro Potamoussi

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present and suggest the Most Significant Change as an effective evaluation methodology of Theatre in Education (TiE) programmes. It is given that TiE, as other forms of performative and participatory educational projects, is hard to be assessed and evaluated. It becomes harder due to the lack of adequate research in the field and thus the lack of initiatives, data and experience. This paper presents the “Most Significant Change” (Davies & Dart, 2005) evaluation method as adjusted by the researchers, which was implemented after the TiE programme “Ston Kosmo tou” (In his world) funded by the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation. This is the first presentation and analysis of a wider study that took place during the school year 2017-2018, where 38 schools, 2185 students and 58 teachers were researched after the application of the programme. This paper argues that narratives and stories may well serve as an internal process of evaluation of TiE and other educational participatory programmes. It attempts to suggest specific steps of using a well-known evaluation tool and launch a new approach on the evaluation and assessment of such educational interventions.

Key words: *Most Significant Change (MSC), evaluation, Theatre in Education (TiE), Theatre in Education programmes*

1. Introduction

This paper examines the introduction of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique in the context of a Theatre in Education (TiE) programme¹. A major issue of social intervention using TiE as a pedagogical method (Jackson, 1993) is the evaluation of the results of the interventions in formal and non-formal education. The nature of TiE - which is philosophically based on pragmatism and the constructivist approach of learning (Dewey, 1929; Vygotsky, 1978; VonGlaserfeld, 1995) and the pedagogical principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) - raises factors that make it more difficult to assess its effectiveness. All the more so when the proposed evaluation methods are based on the principles of Gnosticism, the closed view of right and wrong, and the existence of a correct answer or choice in the context of education. In Gavin Bolton's words, “it is reflection on the experience that leads to change in understanding” (Jackson, 1993, p. 42).

2. The Most Significant Change technique

The MSC was invented in the 1990s (Davies, 1998). It is a qualitative method of monitoring and evaluation, which is based on the collection of stories/narratives of significant changes from the field, from the participants in a project. It is a participatory approach. The stakeholders firstly decide the sorts of change to be monitored and, secondly, they analyse the collected narratives (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 8).

An innovation in evaluation methods is noted in the field, mainly because of the inappropriateness of many traditional means of evaluation (Vanclay, 2015, p. 551). Also, since the effectiveness has been a questionable issue, story-based approaches to evaluation came to the fore after the 1990s (Mayne, 2004, pp. 49-50). Performance Story Reporting (PSR) (Dart & Mayne, 2005; Roughley & Dart, 2009) and Collaborative Outcomes Reporting (COR) (Dart, 2008) are similar techniques related to the MSC.

The components of the technique are the Dynamic Values inquiry and the stories of the participants. The first concerns the value of individual outcomes of the participants, which are revealed explicitly by the latter. The MSC has no predefined indicators that are countable and measurable; this means that it identifies unexpected changes. Also, the MSC can be used to monitor and evaluate bottom-up initiatives giving the whole picture of the project as well as the actual changes (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 12). Basically, the MSC process has 10 steps: 1. How to start and raise interest, 2. Defining the domains of change, 3. Defining the reporting period, 4. Collecting Significant Change stories, 5. Selecting the most significant of the stories, 6. Feeding back the results of the selection process, 7. Verification of stories, 8. Quantification, 9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring, 10. Revising the system (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 10).

In step two the stakeholders have to identify broad domains related to the purpose of the intervention and changes that are not precisely defined by them. Then the stories can be collected by a simple question, just by asking 'During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place for participants in the programme?'. After that, the participants respond with a story-narrative, justifying at the same time why they consider that change to be the most significant one. That process refers to educational organisations and companies that follow a systematic and hierarchical procedure. So, from bottom to top the staff distributes the stories within each of the domains. After that, the stories are sent to the next level where further screening takes place. All stakeholders at that level assess the stories based on common criteria and report the reasons why the specific stories were picked at each domain; subsequently, funders are asked to assess the stories. The assessment at that level is based on which of the stories fully cover the outcomes; the project managers take all the material and, finally, based on the stories that show the most significant change, they return to the participants in order to verify the change. Moreover, the quantification consists of the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative information. The aim of that level is to quantify the extent to which the most significant changes have been identified. The process contains monitoring which concerns the process and the system itself. The last step of the MSC is to reflect on the process and the results of the use of that MSC and make revisions if needed (Davies & Dart, 2005, pp. 10-11).

This function may be especially pertinent to evaluation, assessment and monitoring of Theatre-in-Education programmes, which function as educational and social interventions in formal and non-formal education. Such a TiE programme was used for the present research.

3. Research and methodology

The research hypothesis is whether the MSC technique is an effective evaluation technique for Theatre in Education programmes for secondary education and, in general, for educational programmes implemented outside the school timetable.

The specific research was conducted by Marios Koukounaras Liagkis, Assistant Professor at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and Iro Potamoussi, PhD candidate at the University of the Aegean. The researchers' experimental pedagogy group 'Ideatro' took part in the specific Most Significant Change process. The group consists of 35 members in total, including the two coordinators. The TiE Project was implemented by a group of 5 – including the two researchers/coordinators of the group – and the wider group of 35 members participated in the MSC process.

The TiE programme addressed students who are 13-16 years old (Year 7-Year 9). It was completed in three phases. In phases one and three the TiE group visited the students (a total of two visits per application of the TiE); in the second phase, suggested material was given to the responsible teacher in order to work with the group between phases one and three. The project was entitled "Ston kosmo tou" - In his World/Oblivious. The main theme that was in the project core was the formation of identity during adolescence and the role of others - peers and family - during this process. Through the use of a specific story of a boy in his early teens, students explored critical questions of self-image, confidence and belonging, and through the safety of fiction they were asked to put themselves in the characters' shoes and actively make difficult decisions, discuss and evaluate the impact of these decisions on the characters and potentially on themselves. More specifically, the expected learning outcomes were for students to be able:

- to address the complexity of teenage life and explore questions about identity as a stage of self-consciousness in everyday life;
- to understand that, in the process of identity search, the decisions the teenager takes and the choices he/she makes, have their consequences;
- to analyse the impact of the family, school and peer environment on the phenomenon of bullying and the dynamics of the relationships between the people involved in the relevant incidents as well as the ones that witness them;

- to explore the attitudes that one can have towards bullying and, in particular, the taking of responsibility and action;
- to feel intimate with diversity and the “other”; with the others’ special characteristics, from small difficulty in social contact to more serious difficulties in behaviour (spectrum of autism);
- to critically examine their personal attitudes and reactions to diversity in their everyday lives;
- to develop critical and social skills by cultivating and practicing imagination, creativity and expression (Koukounaras Liagkis & Potamoussi, 2015, p. 58).

The project, funded by the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, ran for three years in the wider region of Attica, where we researched and applied the MSC Methodology in the final year 2017-2018 at 38 schools and 2185 students. We are currently in the process of analysing all the research data. The present paper focuses on the presentation of the MSC as a research tool for TiE programmes and other educational participatory programmes.

4. The adaptation of the MSC

Our study has some features that are important and have been taken into account in our analysis. The MSC was applied: a) to under-age secondary school children, b) once, at the end of the educational/TiE programme, c) during the morning schedule, in cooperation with one or two teachers of the school, and d) it did not include feeding on the results of the selection process. The purpose of the study implementation is to evaluate the expected learning outcomes of the programme, as they were outlined above, and the evaluation of the learning dynamics of the programme in general.

4.1 The steps of the adjusted MSC process

Based on the above, there was an adjustment of the steps of the technique as it was originally presented, and each step included the following:

4.1.1. Defining the domains of change

The first aim was to evaluate the expected learning outcomes of the programme. The domains of change (table 1) were determined by the two researchers based on the expected learning outcomes of the programme. These were wide enough, so that they could include different types of stories and so that no stories would be excluded. A prerequisite was that stories concern changes in the students themselves and in their lives. This meant that stories about changes that concerned the plot and the story of the programme were excluded from the study.

Table 1. Domains of change of the TiE according to the expected learning outcomes

<i>Domains of Change</i>
1 Issues concerning adolescence / identity
2 Issues concerning bullying
3 Issues concerning diversity
4 Issues concerning education

4.1.2. Defining the reporting period

Since the TiE programme developed in three phases, as mentioned above, it had to be decided when the changes would be monitored. Among the three options: a) monitoring at the end of each phase; b) monitoring at the end of phases a and c; and c) monitoring at the end of phase c, the third was selected due to lack of time at the end of the other phases and because we considered that at the end of the programme the students would have an overall view of the activity and could appreciate the changes in their lives. That is why stories were written in two stages in phase c:

Stage one – the story of the programme resumed through still images and then students were asked to consider their participation in the TiE programme so far and to note down the personal changes that had been stimulated by the specific programme, combining them with events, faces, incidents, situations, thoughts and feelings that illustrate and explain them. Students were given a sheet of paper with guidelines and helping tips about the track of thought that they should follow before writing their chosen changes.

The guidelines included tips such as that the changes can be minor or major, positive or negative, changes related to the school environment (the way of teaching and learning), or regarding personal relationships (friends, family, classmates or other), etc. In this first stage, the changes were written down and then the programme continued.

Stage two – at the end of the programme, the changes written in stage one were used as possible sources for selecting the MSC. Students were asked, at this second stage, to think of the programme as a whole from the beginning to the end and choose the Most Significant Change that happened to them. They used a second sheet of paper with new guidelines and helping tips which encouraged them to think and choose their MSC. The change should be related to an issue of the programme and its aims, a teaching methodology of the programme, the relationship of the students with their teacher and with each other, their friends, family or other people in their lives, or their everyday life, beliefs and ideas. After choosing their MSC, students were asked to narrate it in writing, with details about specific events, people, feelings, results and a full justification on why they chose the particular MSC.

The purpose was that the evaluation would be related to the whole educational intervention, to get the students to write their narratives in as much detail as possible, as it is difficult to present events with characterisations, feelings, details of place and time, without generalisations, at this age. In the first stage we gave about 10 minutes, while in the second one we gave 20 minutes.

4.1.3. Collecting Significant Change stories

The stories were collected by all 5 members of the TiE application group, who were also available and helped with any inquiry before the beginning of the writing, i.e. when the students were reading the introductory questions and were thinking about the change that took place in them.

4.1.4. Selecting the most significant stories

The stories were then analysed and filtered at three levels:

- a. All of the stories of each school were given to the 35 members of the wider group 'Ideatro' and, after they read them, two independent evaluators assessed which stories referred to changes that concern the narrator and the people around them, and they distinguished them from those that referred to changes from or about the theatrical part of the programme or the plot line.
- b. All the stories that were rejected were given to a 7-member team of evaluators, in which both researchers participated, who re-evaluated the stories according to the same criteria, showing that continuous reviews by more members of the group are constantly needed, and that, by discussing and analysing the school case data, they lead to firmer conclusions. The stories that were finally evaluated derived from this level.
- c. The 7-member team individually read all stories, which were divided into 4 categories (Table 1). Then, discussion and negotiation took place and the final distribution was made. Subsequently, the stories from each category were read out loud by one person and every story was evaluated by each member with grades 1 to 5 based on the following criteria: 1) Is the story the most important to the narrator? 2) Does it have a personal criterion and personal exposure of thoughts and feelings? 3) Is it thoroughly analysed and justified by the person who narrates it? 4) Does it include details on events, faces, feelings, results? The most significant changes, which are analysed below, emerged in each category with the collection of points.

4.1.5. Quantification

The most significant changes were studied by the two researchers based on a) the framework of each school and b) the comparisons between the schools, highlighting what Jessica Dart and Rick Davies emphasise about the stories: "it is possible to include quantitative information as well as qualitative information. It is also possible to quantify the extent to which the most significant changes identified in one location have taken place in other locations within a specific period" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 11).

4.1.6. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring

By doing a content analysis of all the stories of each school, the two researchers managed to spot the issues that the TiE programme also deals with. The goal was to study the participants' point of view and their understanding of the issues, and at the same time to present the themes and tendencies in the wider framework of the stories.

4.1.7. Revising the system

Based on the analysis and the feedback, we moved on to the evaluation and revision of the programme.

4.2 The most significant changes

The change is the point of these stories; this is why, during the process, the 7-member group of evaluators agreed that references to minor changes which may have occurred in adolescents' lives during a TiE programme are more likely to have occurred. Therefore, the tendency for students to give the "correct" answer, which is usually sought in a traditional educational system such as the Greek one, is eliminated as much as possible in this way. For example, in one story it is clear that the change which is noted is not spectacular and, thus, probably true, because it says: I was at his side and sometimes I just did not participate (bullying).

4.3 Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring of the stories

The use of the MSC technique in programmes outside the school curriculum brings to the surface a lot of information about the student communities and their context. This information, as it is not a long-term social intervention during which changes are verified and the stories turn back to the participants, is useful in assessing the production of the results and the revision of the system (the programme). Our study has attempted to triangulate data at this stage to increase the accuracy of our results. Additionally, feedback sheets of school teachers and research diary entries were also studied.

5. Concerns

As expected after each attempt of implementing something new, several thoughts and concerns arose about what could have been done differently if we had started all over again. One of the issues that came up was the question of whether the participants realised and had the required time to understand and fully conceive the notion of change and, as a result, their own personal significant change. After the analysis, the secondary analysis and the meta-monitoring of the process, we had a reflection session where it occurred to us that if the participants had been asked to think, perceive and write down their changes after the first phase, and if, when we came back for the second phase, we had asked them to think of further changes and then choose their most significant change, this would have given the students time to have ownership and a better understanding of what was asked from them. Thus, maybe they would have had a clearer view of the change that occurred in them. In addition, the MSC technique is suggested to be combined with other techniques in the case of an educational programme application and especially when assessing expected learning outcomes (triangulation). Teachers are a useful resource as they know the students, so it is a good idea that they give more interviews and participate as observers.

6. Discussion

According to the inventors Jessica Dart and Rick Davies (2003, p. 140), MSC is a research tool for significant programme outcomes, providing summative evaluation in order to facilitate programme improvement. This means that, although the technique helps to assess the processes and the outcomes of a programme, it is not a "stand-alone technique".

In conclusion, it can be argued that MSC can be effectively used as a research method of assessment and evaluation of participatory educational programmes. It is a reliable method that can measure the impact of a social intervention or educational programme in the school context. The specific methodology supported and served the expected learning outcomes, which concerned a programme based solely on the principles of experiential learning and on students who are called upon to think and reflect on what is happening around them and, above all, in themselves. It is not a lesson with academic and cognitive goals. This is precisely why this technique is effective, reliable and applicable; because it was a useful tool for the research team to draw on the educational success of implementation of a programme that aims at young people's awareness and motivation.

Notes

- 1 Drama/Theatre Education has always dealt with issues of terminology; Theatre in Education programmes have not been the exception. It is of utmost importance to set a common ground in the understanding of terms before proceeding. In this paper, 'TiE' signifies the use of theatre with integrated active participation of the audience within a set educational framework; it is designed for and applied in an educational environment; its issues are closely related to the curriculum and/or the educational needs of a specific age group, aiming to challenge its audience both intellectually and emotionally. It is addressed at small audiences - not more than 40 participants at a time - and it is most often portable regarding props, lights and setting (Jackson, 2011; Jackson, 1993; O'Toole, 1977). The definition - rather, the clarification - is used in order to avoid misunderstandings - bearing in mind, however, that by using definitions we might run the risk of making notions sound more absolute than they are (Kolb, 2015), than we consider them to be or than we intend to make them sound.

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