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In Quest for Drama in Open Education: Incentives, Challenges and Traps

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ΔΙΑΒΑΣΤΕ ΤΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΤΩ

Το άρθρο μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Κάθε αναφορά στο άρθρο ή σε μέρος του άρθρου μπορεί να γίνει με παραπομπή στην παρούσα έκδοση.

In Quest for Drama in Open Education: Incentives, Challenges and Traps

Ana Marjanović-Shane, Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić, Aleksandra Jelić, Jelena Stojilković

Abstract

The workshop explored *hybrid forms of praxis* – practices that join different spheres of human interest and activity, with divergent purposes, ideologies, expectations, meanings, etc. It was particularly intended for drama teachers, theatre artists, educational and theatre researchers and other experts involved in the field of drama/theatre and performing arts in education.

The workshop explored several tensions: a) between its aesthetic/artistic purposes and its diverse educational purposes; b) between the artistic and the educational expertise; c) between authoritarian vs. authorial regimes; d) the struggle for the legitimacy of the creative and reflective transcendence in education; and e) tensions between creative vs. critical authorship.

Our secondary intention was to present a unique blend of approaches to the performing arts in education, in Belgrade, Serbia, that continues a long tradition of searching for, developing and offering diverse cultural forms of open education for children, youth and to diverse social groups at risk.

Key words: *hybrid forms of praxis, polyphony, drama for healing, drama for freeing*

1. Introduction

Our workshop was conceptualised as an exploration of *hybrid forms of praxis* – practices that join different spheres of human interest and activity, which have divergent purposes, ideologies, expectations about relationships, evaluations, meanings, etc. This hybridity, thus, expands the spaces for action, impact and values of such practices (Batelaan, 1999; Beljanski-Ristić, 1999; Cooper, 2010; Ristić & Ilić, 2016). It was particularly intended for drama teachers, theatre artists, educational and theatre researchers and other experts involved in the field of drama/theatre and performing arts in education.

However, hybridity also brings tensions within a praxis, tensions that stem from the inherent differences in the origin of each component practice. Thus, our aim was to explore several key tensions arising from this hybridity in the interaction between drama/performing arts, on one hand, and education, on the other (O'Toole, Stinson, & Moore, 2009). Specifically, our intention was to explore the following tensions: a) between the two key purposes of drama in education: its aesthetic/artistic purposes vs. its diverse educational purposes; b) between two different kinds of expertise: the artistic (directors, actors, writers, etc.) vs. the educational (teachers); c) between authoritarian vs. authorial regimes in relationships among participants; d) the struggle for the legitimacy of the creative and reflective transcendence in education and society; and e) tensions between creative vs. critical authorship in drama in education (Marjanovic-Shane, 2016; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019).

Our secondary intention has been to present a unique blend of approaches to the performing arts in education and beyond the theatre stage, in Belgrade, Serbia, a blend that continues a legacy of a long tradition of searching for, developing and offering diverse cultural forms of open education (Marjanović, 1987a, 1987b; Marjanovic-Shane, 2017) for children, youth and to diverse social groups at risk (Beljanski-Ristić, 1983; Beljanski-Ristić, 1992; Beljanski-Ristić, Vukanović, & Krel, 2015; Boal, 2008).

2. Description

The workshop structure was shaped by a dynamic process characterised by a “polyphonic approach” in the communication between the real and the fictive planes – i.e. “chronotopes” of play and play-crafting (Bakhtin, 1994; Marjanovic-Shane, 2011; Vygotsky, 1971). We used selected dramatic structures, videos and dialogic forms to start creative interactions and critical reflections – aiming to generate provocations for opening new interactional spaces where all participants may re-examine and re-define their own individual and shared opinions, standpoints, values and desires regarding the status of performing arts in education.

We lead the participants through several stages in the realisation of the workshop:

1. Opening and warm-up.
2. Two provocatively divergent approaches to drama/theatre in education led by two very different drama pedagogues, Jelena Stojiljković and Aleksandra Jelić, who will be presented below:
 - a. Jelena Stojiljković, a professor of literature in a pharmaceutical vocational high-school in Belgrade, whose approach could be generally characterised as having the purpose to improve the work of an existing educational institution by integrating the arts (literature and drama) into the professional subject-matter of the pharmaceutical curriculum, in order to kindle passion, curiosity and ontological engagement in her students; and
 - b. Aleksandra Jelić, a professional theatre director, the founder and the principal leader of the Apsart Centre for Theatre Research, in Belgrade, which “aims at developing practices of applied theatre and promoting an idea of theatre as means of personal and societal action... to include the citizens into creative processes”¹. Her approach aims at social change for (re)establishing human freedoms and basic rights to define their own development and interests, rights that are currently suppressed by educational and other societal institutions.
3. Dialogic platform - an overall critical reflective dialogue about purposes, incentives, challenges, tensions and traps of the hybrid praxis – led by Ana Marjanovic-Shane and Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić, whose long collaboration as two different professionals (a drama in education practitioner and a researcher and theoretician) from the very start incorporated divergent, polyphonic ways of joint meaning-making about authorial ways to promote and support personal and social development.

2.1. Opening and warm-up

Our workshop started with the participants walking into an open space containing four tables arranged with materials that presented or symbolically signified each one of the four workshop authors’ core work. For instance, one of the tables contained some pictures from the authors’ previous work with her high-school students, and some herbs and fruits. Another table featured a few books and two eggs in an egg carton. The items on the tables were deliberately meant to provoke questions and to start conversations. During this part of the workshop, a slide-show rotated four short slides presenting each one of us through several key points.

All tables also displayed index cards containing provocative statements about drama/theatre in education, chosen from the manifest of IDEA², i.e. from different drama in education theoreticians, researchers and practitioners with the same provocative question at the end, “Utopia or necessity?”. For instance, “Drama/Theatre are integrated as methodology into the teaching of other subjects. Utopia or Necessity?”; “Drama/Theatre is an independent art subject and is taught as a compulsory part of all educational programmes. Utopia or necessity?” etc. Each table had a copy of the same 24 cards. The cards led us into the first workshop activity, designed to provoke conversations about the tensions we defined above. When most of the participants had had a chance to see each table, we asked them to look through the cards (at a nearest table), and place them on one of two piles, one called “Utopia” and the other “Necessity” (In English and in Greek). When all cards were placed, we collected them from the tables in two paper bags also labeled “Utopia” and “Necessity”. We asked the participants to sit in a circle and each to draw a card from one of the two bags according to their choice. When each participant had a card, we went around the circle, each person reading the card they drew, and providing a short personal comment about the statement on the card. This activity combined talking about the important tensions of drama in education and getting to know each other in a meaningful way related to the purpose of our being together in this workshop. In its very dynamics, this activity made the participants experience the hybridity of the drama in education and some of the tensions between them. For instance, it happened that the same statement ended up both in the “utopia” bag and in the “necessity” bag – reflecting two different ways, potentially opposite and somewhat unclear, that it is possible to evaluate its meaning. Such controversies about the statements invited the participants into deepening their initial thoughts about drama in education, its purposes, hopes and problems, and immediately entering a critical dialogue about some of the tensions that we anticipated

and also some others that the participants themselves had in mind. We think that some of the themes, started in this conversation, became an inspiration for some creative activities later in the workshop.

2.2. Two provocative approaches to Drama/Theatre in education

In order to engage our participants in exploring particular tensions of the hybrid activities, we designed two case studies by two authors: Jelena Stojiljković and Aleksandra Jelić. Jelena is a high-school teacher who discovered the magic of the dramatic method to integrate the required high-school literature with the professional courses in a vocational school – enabling her students to discover and forge their own meanings and values in their personal and professional development. She founded “Theatre Pharmacopeia,” a classroom theatre that she leads in her school. Her aim is to use drama/theatre to improve the current education practiced in the established educational institution.

Aleksandra Jelić is a theatre director who ventured into the sphere of education and found herself pulled into the vortex of the educational struggle of the socially excluded and vulnerable and at-risk groups fighting for their basic human rights to live through being creative authors. Her aim is to humanise the society and promote personal creativity and humanity through play and art – and to break and disrupt any social institution that imprisons and stifles humanity expressed in the basic rights of every person to play, explore, learn and change... “This is why we play in prisons, in schools, on the streets, in the parks, in hospitals, daycares – everywhere where there is life... We don’t play FOR the audience, but WITH the audience.”³

2.2.1. The dose makes the poison (*Sola dosis facit venenum*)⁴ – The Healing Olympus

Jelena Stojiljkovic started her workshop with a personal statement about herself being “in the middle of the war between what the drama experts and the educational authorities say about how to use drama” and about her strong convictions that art and the beauty of drama/theatre can improve teaching professionalism.⁵ Then she invited the participants to a drama activity as she would design it for her students, future pharmacists and physiotherapists. Inspired by the fact that the Conference is in Athens, Jelena decided to combine two areas of her expertise: mandatory curriculum in literature, her literary knowledge about Greek Mythology and the knowledge of pharmacognosy, a study of healing plants and medicines based on natural ingredients.

Aphrodite		Goddess of love, pleasure, passion, procreation, fertility, beauty and desire. Daughter of Zeus and the Oceanid Dione, or perhaps born from the sea foam after Uranus’ semen dripped into the sea after being castrated by his youngest son, Cronus, who then threw his father’s genitals into the sea. Married to Hephaestus, although she had many adulterous affairs, most notably with Ares. Symbols include the dove, bird, apple, bee, swan, myrtle and rose.
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She asked the participants to each draw a small card from her hand, that contained a name of an Olympic God, a photo of his or her Greek statue and a short description of that god – who (s)he is, what spheres of life (s)he rules and in what kind of relationship (s)he is with other gods, her/his symbols and her/his powers. Going two times around the circle (that conveniently had exactly the same number of participants as was the number of Gods) the participants got acquainted with the gods and each took a role of her/his god to say something about her/himself from the role.

Next, Jelena introduced a dramatic structure called “The meeting on the top”. The imaginary premise she introduced was that Gods have gathered to once more intervene in the lives of ordinary humans in the spheres of art, theatre, literature and education, in order to heal the problems they perceive as plaguing the lives of people today. As Gods, they have been invited to invent healing drops for the individual and social illnesses they perceive in today’s world. She reminded them that in Greece, and especially on their beloved Olympus, grow many healing plants and potentially also represent a source of other healing materials. She took a small sprig of rosemary she just picked that morning on our way to the workshops and gave an example of rosemary’s healing powers (such as possessing antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds, improving digestion, enhancing memory and concentration, and others). She then invited each “God” to say what ailment (s)he perceives as the most disturbing and what kind of healing “measure” could help fight it. And she reminded them that “the dose (measure) makes a poison”; that the same substance is either a medicine or a poison, depending on the dose.

This gave the participants an opportunity to talk about many aspects of education, environment, economy, politics, etc., troubling them, and to talk about different remedies they think would help. It became an interesting and potentially important occasion to express one's worries about the world, and to reflect on the possibilities for healing. When all the "Gods" expressed their concerns about the plagues of the humankind today and gave their suggestion for healing, Jelena concluded her workshop by having them stand in a circle and stretch one hand into the centre. She included the character of Paeon, the healer of the Gods, to lead them in their first step to create a healing potion for the ailing humanity. When they joined hands in the centre of the circle, they exclaimed: "For our first step! ... Let our play begin!"

2.2.2. Critical examinations of life through dramatic forms

Aleksandra Jelić organised her workshop as a series of ontological provocations which can be examined and answered through particular dramatic activities. Rather than starting with a personal statement about her mission and her approach to dramatic activities, she finished with it, as her own provocative and disruptive answer to the questions raised for everyone in her segment of activities. Her workshop consisted of three parts: 1. Let's map...; 2. Let me tell you...; and 3. Aleksandra's story about developing her approach as the applied theatre to promote an idea of drama/theatre as a means of personal growth and societal action.

In the "Let's map..." segment, the participants had to answer a series of questions regarding their drama experience or their perception of certain drama practices in their contexts, using particular dramatic formations. For instance, creating a physical line to put themselves on a continuum depicting their answers to questions regarding a degree of some quality of drama in education and/or a degree of their personal acceptance/rejection of certain statements; working in smaller groups on answering some questions through movement, sound, mime: creating frozen statues, tableaux or "machines" in which each person becomes a movable part depicting some joint idea.

The questions for the participants were meant to explore their opinions about diverse aspects of drama/theatre in education in general, in their particular countries of origin, and in their personal practice. The following questions were explored through the following dramatic forms:

- a. Creating a physical line of continuum according to the number of years each participant has been involved with drama/theatre in education;
- b. Grouping themselves by the countries they come from;
- c. Creating a sound machine – movement, sound, word or sentence within small groups to answer what kinds of drama/theatre practices exist in their country;
- d. Grouping themselves in two groups (Yes and No) to answer whether drama in schools exists in their country;
- e. Creating a continuum between $+\infty$ to $-\infty$ to express their opinion about the value of the impact of drama in schools, and then providing one sentence explanations;
- f. Grouping themselves in three groups according to how they would answer the following question: What is drama/theatre in schools more important for:
 - LEFT: personal development/communication skills/conflict resolution/empathy; or
 - RIGHT: as a tool for mastering school subjects (math/history/language, etc.); or
 - MIDDLE: practice art, develop art skills;
- g. After the participants formed these three groups, they had 10 seconds to agree about three main reasons for their opinion and present their answers by creating a statue depicting their reasons;
- h. In a large circle, depicting each one's biggest fear in their drama/theatre practice, through striking a pose that would best represent that fear;
- i. In a large circle, depicting each one's biggest joy in their drama/theatre practice, through striking a pose that would best represent that joy.

The "Let me tell you..." segment drew the participants deeper into exploring their personal failures and achievements in their drama/theatre practice in education. Aleksandra organised a two-segment activity to create

Picture 1. The BITA Approach: Moving Towards Community



Picture 2. Let me tell you...



trusting pairs who could privately tell each other stories of their failures and achievements. In the first segment, the participants formed pairs in which one person held and lead the other, who wore a blinder scarf over their eyes, through many obstacles (randomly placed inverted chairs or piles of chairs throughout the classroom), telling him/her about the nature of the obstacles and ways to avoid them as they went through. In the second segment, the leader who walked a blinded person was asked to tell two stories to her/his blinded companion: one about her/his greatest failure and the other about her/his greatest achievement in their drama/theatre in education practice. These experiences were shared privately, among the pairs, and were not performed for the rest of the group.

After this segment, participants were asked in two groups to make small performances out of told stories, and to perform them.

Finally, Aleksandra summoned the participants into sitting in a circle again for the final segment of her workshop in which she told her own story, who she is, how and why she started using applied theatre in prisons in Serbia, and what it meant for her working with other

groups of people – to promote their own “jailbreak” out of the imprisoning conditions and institutions of their everyday life. As a final point of her speech about a great need to use theatre as a means for unschooling, she said, “Don’t force theatre and drama to go to school! They would need years and years of healing and repair, as does everyone who becomes a participant in these hybrid processes. They will be victims of irreparable damage, much greater damages than those done to us in our schools without drama!”

2.3. Dialogic platform and analysis

In the last part of the workshop, we engaged participants in a transgenerational dialogue with us, Ana Marjanovic-Shane and Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić, one a theoretician and the other a practitioner, yet both of us explorers and organisers of creative drama/theatre and critical dialogue practices, and authors of specific visions of dramatic and conceptual arts in transforming education into an open, inclusive and polyphonic praxis. The two approaches to drama in education that were presented, the dramatic structures and dialogic forms, stem from Ljubica’s and Ana’s long mutual collaboration in developing our own authorial approaches to drama and dialogue in education. Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić and Ana Marjanović-Shane introduced a notion of polyphony, internal diversity and tensions between authoritarian and authorial approaches in Drama/Theatre in education.

Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić, a founder and a director of “BITEF Polyphony”⁶, an accompanying programme to BITEF – Belgrade International Festival of Experimental Theatres – used her expertise as a director to create the design of our whole workshop. From its very beginning in the year 2000, its founders, participants and audience have been constantly discovering and developing new meanings and manifestations of the polyphonic concepts: the heteroglossia, the multivoicedness, counterpoint, the diversity and constant variability, the harmonies and the live acting of the “strange loops”, cyclical organisation and feedback loops, through the structures of continuously being and newly becoming out of itself (Hofstadter, 1980). Bitef Polyphony values each voice as a part of socially responsible acting and an answer to ubiquitous challenges of the world in which we live (Boal, 2008; Freire, 1986; Freire & Freire, 1994). In our workshop Ljubica tried to give a taste of this multivoicedness to all the participants: both all the workshop leaders and its participants. She attempted to connect the experiences and praxes of the contemporary theatrical forms, exploratory approaches, personal stories, social engagement, activism and politics...

Polyphonic approach to the praxis of education has been the main focus of Ana Marjanovic-Shane’s studies in dialogic pedagogy and drama in education. Understanding the need to view education as art, rather than technology (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2018), Ana introduced her analysis of the many tensions and contrasts between creative authorship promoted by drama/theatre approaches in education, on one hand, and the ontological critical dialogue in education, on the other. Through her studies of the role of the “spoilsport” in education, Ana uncovered many traps of the use of drama. While both drama in education

and critical dialogues promote students' authorship, the two approaches also differ in their orientation. In general, drama/theatre in education is based on the basic theatrical premise of the "suspension of disbelief" in the construction of an imaginary world, i.e. "imaginary chronotope" (Marjanovic-Shane, 2011). It is a praxis of displacements of the real and potentially dangerous ethical, emotional and relational conflicts into this imaginary chronotope, where the participants are freed of ethical responsibility, i.e. they can "play" as characters, impersonations of others. This enables them to take a step back and reflect on their own lives. On the other hand, critical ontological dialogue in general and in education is based on "deconstruction", i.e. "suspension of belief" about the actual "reality chronotope," where many diverse opinions and solutions may be expressed without relinquishing the personal responsibility for one's positions and responsible ethical acting toward others. In other words, critical dialogue enables reflection about the real where "there is no alibi in being" (Bakhtin, 1993).

Another potential trap of drama in education lies in its focus on the construction and sustenance of the imaginary chronotope. This praxis depends on agreement, consent and collaboration – values that promote and support authoritarian relationships, and through that can strengthen oppression of the mandatory aspect of education by making non-participation, disagreement and dissent not only illegitimate, but also ethically unacceptable. Thus, paradoxically, while drama in education strives to overcome the alienation and deadness of contemporary education through immersing the students into lively and arousing activities, it can also promote passive acceptance, consent and erasure of personal authorship and ownership of education.

Without a balancing focus on critical ontological dialogue in education, especially in promoting personal rights to dissent, disagreement, non-cooperation and non-participation, drama in education may create an educational regime where the real education based on the equal rights to have a unique voice, a unique point of view, is harder and riskier to achieve.

3. Conclusion

In our workshop we tried to emulate Bitef Polyphony in miniature – using multiple performing arts' concepts/techniques developed and applied by experts, explorers, artists and teachers. We used dramatic exercises developed by Stanislavsky (2003) and Chekhov (1985), Boal (1979, 2006), Bolton and Heathcote (1995), McCaslin (2006), and others. We tried to provoke the participants to think of diverse aspects of drama in education and its inherent tensions, by involving them into two very different approaches to applied drama/theatre: Jelena's "healing" approach in which drama in education is a tool to improve learning both in literature and in diverse professional subjects like pharmacognosy, chemistry, etc., and Aleksandra's "freeing" approach, where dramatic exercises are used for one's self-examination and freeing from the societal and institutional forms of oppression. Both provocative workshops involved the participants in exploring the hidden tensions we saw in a hybrid praxis of using drama not merely as an art, but as a means to achieve goals of other spheres of life: education and development of personal and social values, freedom and equal rights.

Thus, we tried to inspire our participants, educational practitioners of drama/theatre in education, to believe in the meaning, the value, the importance and the power of drama/theatre and other performing arts when creating visions of hope for a better world, especially in these troubled and turbulent times, despite their many challenges and traps.

Notes

- 1 From the ApsArt website: <http://www.apsart.org/o-nama/>
- 2 IDEA – International Drama/Theatre and Education Association
- 3 From the ApsArt website: <http://www.apsart.org/o-nama/>
- 4 A saying ascribed to Paracelsus.
- 5 "I could say that my school is unique in the fact that all our faculty took a continuing professional improvement seminar 'From a Drama Play to the School Forum Theatre: Drama improves the basic educational competences', conceptualised by Ljubica Beljanski-Ristić. I was one of the leaders of this workshop." – from Jelena's personal statement.
- 6 BITEF Polyphony - <https://festival.bitef.rs/Side-program/785/Bitef-POLYPHONY.shtml>

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