Leveling the playing field in the classroom through embodied teaching and theatre
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ABSTRACT:
Drama allows students to have an embodied experience with learning. Through simple drama techniques abstract concepts can be made concrete, allowing students to see, touch, discuss, move, and understand through the three thinking styles: Verbal, Object-Visual, and Spatial-Visual. This levels the playing field in terms of inclusion and in terms of Universal Design for Learning. Exploring concepts through theatre easily leads to other educational explorations both traditional and arts-based. In addition, theatre offers students the ability to make choices and develop their critical thinking skills in ways that no other educational tools currently provide.

Keywords: Educational Theatre, Drama in the Classroom, Embodied Teaching, Spectrogram, Locogram, Sculpting, Thinking Styles, Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Critical Thinking, Universal Design for Learning, UDL.

Introduction

I don't teach by lecturing. I don't find that to be very effective. I teach through setting up experiences for students and then having them reflect on them through writing and discussion. Since we are at the beginning of a day full of experiences looking at the Common Core and Inclusive Education, I think we need to warm-up to the themes of the day and each other. People work together better if they are able get to know each other. I will share a warm-up that I use the first day of a new class.

First, we will create a series of spectrograms. A spectrogram is a long imaginary line or continuum with a high value – like 10 – on one end and a low value – like 0 – on the other end. After I ask a question, you get up and stand on a point on the line that you feel expresses your opinion or experience. For instance, if I placed 10 on the left side of the room and 0 on the right side and I asked, "How awake are you this morning?" you would stand at the 10 if you were totally alert and awake, at the 0 if you were sleep, or anywhere in between. Sometimes to figure out where you belong, you need to talk to the people around you…and that's OK. So let's do several spectrograms together:

- How awake do you feel right now? From Totally Awake to Asleep.
- How far did you come to get here this morning? From Far away to Very Close.
- How much breakfast did you have this morning? From Nothing to I Ate Too Much.
- How experienced/comfortable are you teaching theatre or using theatre as a teaching tool in your classroom? From "I've never done it and it sounds difficult" to "I do it all the time and I love it!"

- How experienced/comfortable are you working with students with disabilities? "Very uncomfortable" to "I love working with them."
- How much do you know about Universal Design for Learning? From "Never heard of it" to "Yes, I use it every day."

Beyond just being warm-ups and get-to-know-each-other mixers, spectrograms can be used in classrooms for:
- Preparing students to have a discussion about a serious subject by helping them think through their opinions or level of knowledge before they start,
- Assessing how much students feel they know about a subject before you start teaching,
- Assessing the interest level students have in a particular topic: Do they want to learn more?
- Allowing students to evaluate how much they think they understood a lesson (in essence, evaluating your teaching),
- Allowing students to evaluate how prepared they think they are for a test,
- Helping students who are "on the fence" make a choice,
- Dividing students to debate a topic (and maybe challenging them take the opinion opposite to their own to defend),
- Allowing students to see the diversity of opinion in the classroom and, quite literally, where everyone stands on an issue.

Now, we are going to find out a little bit more about each other, but we are going to divide into groups or locograms ("loco" meaning location, not crazy). You get to decide where your group is by finding all the other people who belong in it.

- Find who likes the same kinds of breakfast foods as you do.
- Find people who have the same type of job as you.
- Find people who had the same major in college as you.

Locograms can be used to:
- Divide students into random groups.
- Allow students to choose among several topics to research.
- Find hidden commonalities in order to build friendships and decrease class conflict.

Drama is Embodied Teaching

Drama comes from an ancient Greek work meaning "to do" or "to take an action." Even though we didn't create any characters, and we didn't perform a scene while we were doing these spectrograms and locograms, we did a very simple form of drama in which anyone can participate. You were each able to take a stand (literally) in relation to everyone else here and begin a dialogue.

On one hand this is very basic…and on the other hand, it is very advanced and daring. Sometimes teachers ask students to talk about their ideas, but we rarely ask them to *show* how

they feel or *demonstrate* their ideas. That requires more courage and often more specificity on the parts of students and teachers alike.

Anyone who teaches theatre knows that to act out a character – whether from a script or in an improvisation – an actor must be able to consider options and make choices in order to embody the character. That's basic. But to do it in an interesting manner that captures the attention of an audience and gets them to think deeply about the human condition – that's advanced.

Spectrograms and locograms are the types of beginning dramatic activities that everyone can do, even if they are shy, and even if they are non-verbal. If students are mobile and can understand the question, they can move to the group or the place on the spectrum that matches how they think or feel. These activities allow everyone to think independently and make their own choices, but relate to the rest of the group at the same time. Even if a student is in a group by himself or on a part of the spectrogram alone, he is still in relation to the rest of the group. Anyone who ends up "alone" can be validated for being an independent thinker and a risk taker!

Providing Students with Opportunities to Make Choices

In a lot of educational situations today, students don't get to make many choices. The curriculum is decided for them and then presented in a manner that fits the style of the teacher or the needs of the school system. Students have no say in the development of tests. Paper and pencil tests do not necessarily evaluate what they have learned in a manner that works with their best style of expression. This system develops students who are passive and looking for "the correct answer."

The arts – on the other hand – offer participants the ability to develop beginning to advanced skills in critical thinking and problem solving. Those skills are open to all participants – regardless of ability or disability. Arts instruction – particularly theatre instruction – empowers students, encourages them to think for themselves, use their imagination, take responsibility, and engage fully in their education. The teacher's or director's responsibility becomes creating a safe space in which confidence and ideas can grow *and* to provide an educational structure through which the students can make choices and problem-solve using those choices.

Because choice has been taken out of much of our education system, I feel that it is crucial for teachers interested in developing critical thinking in their students to create as many opportunities in their classrooms for their students to make choices. It is the only way we will keep our students from becoming passive learners who do not know how to think for them selves.

I direct the Barrier-Free Theatre, a group of adults with and without disabilities in Manhattan, Kansas, the community where I live. Every year we create an original play based on their ideas and improvisations. I don't come in and say, "This year we are going to create a play about _____." I ask them, "What do you want to create a play about?" This year they voted to work on a play that takes place in a mad scientist's laboratory. Then I ask, "Who do you want to be in the play?" We have ended up with scientists, spies, re-animated skeletons, industrial cleaning ladies, and zombies. Everyone has chosen what kind of character he or she

wants to be. Some people even chose their character names. In the play the Smart family, a group of scientists who are all related, have created an anti-aging formula and a mind-reading cap. There is another group of culinary scientists that want to corner the world candy market. I could not have thought this up on my own! But I was able to guide my actors through the process of making choices and improvising various scenarios.

This group of actors ranges from individuals who are typically-developed community members or graduate students at Kansas State University to adults with high-functioning autism and intellectual disabilities to adults who are lower-functioning in terms of physical and intellectual abilities. But everybody loves drama, and everyone works together to the best of their abilities to use their imaginations, cooperate with each other, develop their expressiveness and performing skills, and learn lines, dances, and songs.

Barrier Free Theatre rehearsals are one of the few places in their lives where their opinions are sought after, where they are allowed to experiment with "what if…" situations, where their ideas are encouraged and accepted. They've learned how to brainstorm and think for themselves. They know they have the right to have an opinion and voice it. At first newcomers to the group are afraid to share, but after awhile they gain confidence and begin to stretch their imaginations. Some even begin to develop their abstract thinking abilities.

I know for a fact that even very low functioning individuals can think creatively and abstractly if provided with the right environment and the right scaffolding. Many years ago I worked as a drama therapist at a group home in Alexandria, Virginia. The residents were delightful adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who had limited educational and life experiences. They worked in a sheltered workshop where they did simple and repetitive tasks – like sealing envelopes and putting on address labels. One day I decided to play the acting game where you take an everyday object and, based on its shape, pretend that it is something else by using it as that imagined object. I wasn't sure if it would work – if it would be too abstract for them. I brought in a paper towel roll and – lo and behold -- almost everyone was able to make the connection from the shape of the roll to an object they imagined the roll could be.

The next week I brought in a Frisbee – and again, they were able to imagine other things it could be "turned into." The most amazing leap of imagination happened when one woman held the Frisbee flat and started turning it in a circle with her left hand while pointing down at it with her index finger. At first the rest of us didn't get it – and then I *saw* what she was doing! She had turned the Frisbee into a record on a turntable. It was brilliant!

After that moment I have never under-estimated another human being in terms of his or her ability to be creative! Everyone is inherently creative, and everyone has an imagination. It has nothing to do with your IQ. All of your students can grow their abilities to use their imaginations, if you – as the teacher -- start with the concrete and move slowly to the abstract.

Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning

There are many actions – accommodations and adaptations – that can be made to include students with disabilities in classrooms and theatre productions. The first and most important

action is to be welcoming – to see all our students as wonders to be discovered rather than problems to fix. I think probably theatre teachers do this better than many other educators because theatre attracts the kids who are "the outcasts."

There are many smaller actions that help individuals with specific needs to succeed. That is the approach I have always taken: starting with the individual and figuring out what works best for him or her. However, there is a new approach to inclusion that I want to share with you called Universal Design for Learning: UDL for short (http://www.udlcenter.org/). UDL grew out of Universal Design – the design of products and environments to be usable by *all* people to the greatest extent possible *without the need* for adaptation or specialized design. Universal Design enables people to age in place. For instance, instead of doorknobs, lever handles are used to open doors. Doors are built extra wide so that wheelchairs can fit through them. Floor surfaces are made out of non-slip materials. Thresholds are flush with the floor, so wheelchairs have an even surface to roll across. With Universal Design most of the time you don't need to worry about stopping to make an accommodation, because the accommodations are already there.

Universal Design for Learning is an approach to curriculum development and delivery that gives all individuals an equal opportunity to learn. This usually means that multiple, flexible methods of instruction and assessment are offered to everyone so that their best way of taking in information and sharing their understanding of it (i.e., assessment of learning) is included.

The three guiding principles of UDL are:
- Provide multiple ways to engage students' interests and motivation.
- Represent information in multiple formats and media.
- Provide multiple pathways for students' actions and expressions.

Multiple pathways to engage students' interests and motivation. The first principle – provide multiple ways to engage students' interests and motivation – requires the creation an exciting learning environment. For instance, some people get excited working in groups; others prefer to work alone. A variety of options need to be provided. Some people learn better when they can move and manipulate objects; others learn better through computer screens or reading books. Multiple ways of engagement provide the added benefit of variety in the activities and rhythm of a classroom day, keeping everyone focused better.

Environments in which positive emotions are generated are more engaging and make learning easier. In a recent article entitled *Happiness Matters: Towards a Pedagogy of Happiness and Well-being*, authors Scoffham and Barnes say, "Happiness is a positive force which enriches our sense of meaning, enhances our capabilities, and enlarges the scope of our thinking" (2011). Happy students are motivated to work harder and longer because learning is interesting and fun for them.

Represent information in multiple formats and media. Principle two -- represent information in multiple formats and media – means delivering instruction through spoken words, video, live demonstration, video, text, pictures, diagrams, and models.

Recently neuroscientists have discovered that there are 3 major thinking systems or pathways in the brain. The first is **Verbal. Verbalizers** prefer to process information through words written and spoken. They like to listen, discuss, and read. This system is processed primarily in the frontal lobes, particularly in the left hemisphere where the word centers of the brain are located (Blazhenkova, Becker, & Kozhevnikov, 2011; Thomas & McKay, 2010).

The second is called **Object-Visual. Object-Visualizers** or **Imagers** prefer pictures and images. They excel at creating vivid, concrete, detailed images that they visualize mentally when they think. They also express themselves well through visual art. This kind of processing is linked to the temporal lobe and ventrical system (Blazhenkova & Kozhevnikov, 2010; Thomas & McKay, 2010).

The last is **Spatial-Visual. Spatial-Visualizers** prefer learning through spatial relationships and schematic images, like diagrams and graphs. They tend to be drawn to the natural sciences and engineering. This kind of thinking process is linked to the parietal lobe and the dorsal system of the brain (Blazhenkova, Becker, & Kozhevnikov, 2011; Thomas & McKay, 2010).

Each pathway functions independently, and everyone is able to use all three, unless there is a lesion or disconnect created through brain damage; however, individuals tend to favor one system over the other two. That preferred system is stronger than the others, and therefore easier to use. With continued preference, this thinking system continues to develop in strength and ultimately becomes the primary system (Blazhenkova, Becker, & Kozhevnikov, 2011; Thomas & McKay, 2010).

The three thinking systems relate tangentially to Sensory Learning Channel Preferences, which was a popular learning construct in the 1980's. This model identified learners with auditory preferences who did well learning through listening to lectures, learners with visual preferences who learned best through pictures and reading, and learners with haptic/kinesthetic preferences who learned best through using their bodies. The model postulated that if teachers allowed students to use all their major sensory channels, everyone's preferred channel would be included in the instruction process, and everyone would be able to learn (Markova, 1991, 1996).

The Sensory Learning Channel Preference system was soundly de-bunked by cognitive psychologists in the 1990's because there was no physical evidence that those senses connected to actual neurological systems in the brain (Willingham, 2010). However, neurologists have since been able to observe the three thinking systems at work and to identify them through paper and pencil tests. These embodied thinking systems originate from physical pathways in the brain and require the use of the body in space as well as in imagination in order to facilitate learning information.

Added to these thinking systems is the discovery of Grid and Place cells. These cells, located in the hippocampus, calculate our location and navigation/movement. We are constantly calculating and recalculating our location and our relationship to everything around us. Our brains make mental maps and overlay these maps with memories – information, emotions, smells, and experiences are all tied together. These are the memories that are strong enough and potent enough to make it into long-term memory.

Thomas and McKay believe that "learning outcomes improve when instructional material is matched to students' cognitive styles" (2010, p.197). Instruction needs to include pictorial information, schematic diagrams, lectures *and* instructional text to reach all students.

Provide multiple pathways for students' actions and expressions. The final tenant of Universal Design for Learning is to provide multiple pathways for students' actions and expressions – in other words, for their output and demonstration of learning. This means students need opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned through whatever method works best for them: writing an essay, a story or a poem, drawing a picture, building a model or a statue, making a video, or acting out a scene. There are endless ways to demonstrate you have learned. Making assessments creative and fun relates back to principle one: engaging interests and motivation.

The great news for us is that theatre techniques *are* universal designs for learning. Theatre is a flexible medium, and theatre people are flexible individuals. Flexibility with enthusiasm can be contagious, and we can convert the rest of the teaching staff in our schools to play along with us.

Using theatre techniques as learning tools involves the whole student in embodied learning. Interacting through words in drama will enable Verbalizers to remember better, students involved in an enactment will create visual pictures that Object-Visualizers will remember, and being in space, moving in space, and creating in space will support the thinking preferences of Spatial-Visualizers.

Theatre involves students in working *together,* which extends what is learned from facts to relationships and interconnection skills for living and working more effectively with others. John Donne says, "No Man Is An Island." We know that theatre is all about working as a team. Even the solo performer of a one woman show does not produce her show without the support of the director, stage manager, lighting designer, sound designer, costume designer, set designer, stage hands, and front of house staff. Information learned theatrically allows all the participants to use the information individually AND in conjunction with other people.

Theatre techniques can take us from the surface of the learning process to its depths. For instance, a dramatic sculpture can introduce a new subject or a new concept, engaging students' interests and then that dramatic sculpture can be explored to create characters, improvise scenes, and perhaps even write a whole play.

To demonstrate how Universal Design for Learning, delivered through theatre, works to include everyone, we are going to start by creating a concrete image – building a human sculpture that represents the form of government known as Monarchy.

At this point, I got members of the audience involved in a twenty-minute enactment. Volunteers created a tableau of the queen, lords and ladies of the court, the jester, the royal baker, the flour salesman, the miller who ground the flour, the farmer who grew the flour, and a number of beggars in the street around the castle. I asked the audience to tell me objectively what they saw

by describing the physical relationships depicted. This is an Image Theatre technique created by Augusto Boal to explore power dynamics (1992).

Then I asked the actors to tell the audience how it felt from inside the statue. We discussed what medieval society might be like from the information we discovered through the structure we had created, and we talked about what we learned from exploring in this manner.

After exploring a concept through a human sculpture, a teacher can move on to a more traditional lecture or stay with theatre techniques and take this exploration of monarchy deeper. Each character could improvise a monologue about his/her role and relationship to the other characters. Scenes could be played out between the different characters. Drawings of the characters could be made. Students could write a story or a play singly or jointly about the situation.

In *Why Our Kids Need Drama* by Peter Smagorinsky (2014) writes about the necessity of thinking of education, not in terms of the individual student, but in terms of how education affects whole human communities. It is not enough to have success on an individual level; students must feel as if they belong to a group. He says that drama specifically creates a "positive social updraft," moving attention from individuals to groups, allowing people to become fully involved in a cultural activity that brings them a feeling of belonging and affiliation. In drama

> …attention shifts to how the whole of the social setting provides conditions and activities through which young people can feel included, cared for, valued, and appreciated – not just for who they are, but for how they contribute to a large complex project. This activity's social value radiates out to the broader community as friends, family, and those looking for an evening of entertainment and enlightenment attend performances and thus themselves develop stronger relationships within the school institution.

I encourage all of you to think globally and locally in your efforts to include everyone in your classrooms. Globally by using Universal Design for Learning to level the playing field for *everyone* in your classrooms and locally by finding specific ways to make accommodations whenever UDL misses someone who needs just a little extra to succeed with everyone else in the room. And remember: Theatre *is* Universal Design for Learning.

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