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# USING DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE FOR TEACHING SOCIAL SCIENCES



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During the welcoming session at the start of every academic year, teachers in Vanier College's Psychology Department put on a skit to introduce incoming "psychology major" students, in a concise and entertaining manner, to the three different theoretical approaches currently prevailing in the discipline. In the skit, a teacher plays the role of a client who consults a psychotherapist (played by another teacher) for help with a marital problem. Seeking a solution to his problem, the "client" appears on stage three different times and receives treatment from three psychotherapists (played by another teacher) of different theoretical orientations: B.F. Skinner, Sigmund Freud, and "Dr. Phil", the famous American talk-show host (who respectively represent behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and cognitive psychology). Generally speaking, this skit is the first real exposure to psychological theories for the new cohort of students. Based on the feedback received afterwards, it seems to have made a powerful impression on them. Which explains why we keep putting on the same skit year after year!

One reason for the impressive success of this simple skit is quite clear: complex ideas can be effectively conveyed to even the most uninitiated in a concise and easily understood manner through dramatic techniques, because drama is engaging, entertaining, and thought-provoking.

## LEARNING THROUGH CREATIVE DRAMA

A few years ago, we published a paper in *Pédagogie collégiale* entitled "Teaching College Humanities and Social Sciences through Creative Drama", in which we advocated using dramatic techniques as pedagogical tools to encourage students to become actively involved in the learning process (Ho & Ho, 2002). It is our belief that in order for students to play a more active role in the learning process, they must be active participants in the classroom. They cannot remain seated, passively absorbing information from their teachers.

They need to be fully engaged in the learning process. This teaching method, which is conducive to the type of active participation we are suggesting here, does not require high-tech classroom technologies. As a matter of fact, instead of resorting to something digital, electronic or high-tech, we would recommend a return to the basics in the quest for active student participation in the class. This is why, in our opinion, we should be making greater use of drama techniques to teach psychology and other social science subjects.

The field of creative dramatics, i.e. using drama as a pedagogical tool, first appeared in the 1920s (Cornett, 1999). A group of progressive educators, including Winifred Ward, Brian Way, and Dorothy Heathcote, saw the value and potential of drama as a tool for promoting active learning in students. In the last decade or so, the use of creative drama techniques in education has gained even more widespread attention among educators from all over the world. Consequently, the rather specialized field of "Drama-in-Education", conveniently abbreviated as DiE, has now become firmly established. This development coincides with the gradual paradigm shift in education from a "teacher-centered" to a "student-centered" approach to learning. Not surprisingly, this heightened interest in creative dramatics has also been accompanied by the publication of several "manuals" or "handbooks" on using drama techniques as pedagogical tools (e.g. O'Neill & Lambert, 1993; Barlow & Skidmore, 1994; Neelands & Goode, 2008).

Thanks to the close affinity between drama and literature, teachers of the latter have been the first to capitalize on the use of creative dramatic techniques for enhancing students' in-depth understanding of literary works. Since drama is by nature an exercise in imitation, their rationale is that literature students can explore the personalities and emotions of the characters under study by playing their roles (Ho, 2010). We have, for instance, used creative drama techniques such as the "monologue" (Ho, 2000, 2010), the "hot-seat" (Ho, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), and "panel discussions" (Ho, 2007a, 2007b) for teaching Chinese literature at the University of Hong Kong. We find these techniques very useful not only for improving student participation but also for enhancing students' critical thinking and in-depth understanding of literary works (Ho, 2007a, 2007b, 2010).

While applying drama techniques to the teaching of literature is almost intuitive, using them to teach social sciences can



appear much less evident at first glance. Unlike literature, social sciences tend to rely on rational thinking and conceptual clarity rather than subjective interpretation. There is apparently little room for students of social sciences to show empathy or to inject personal emotions. However, as was pointed out in our last paper, social science students can definitely benefit from these pedagogical techniques as much as literature students (Ho & Ho, 2002). The use of drama as a learning and teaching medium has been found to be effective in developing students' generic skills, including creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. (Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2004). These skills are not only useful for the appreciation of literature but also for the pursuit of knowledge in general. Some psychologists, for instance, have demonstrated the usefulness of "panel discussion" techniques as a means of enhancing student-directed learning (Benz & Miller, 1996), critical thinking (Bucy, 2006), and understanding of complex emotional situations such as bereavement (Dodd, 1988).

#### ▶ AN ILLUSTRATION OF USING MONOLOGUES TO TEACH SOCIAL SCIENCES

In our 2002 paper, we highlighted the use of monologues in the teaching of literature and sociology (Ho & Ho, 2002). During a monologue, a character (played by the performer) would speak in front of a silent audience about (or during) a dramatic moment in the character's life. As pointed out by Starke and Tugwell (1998), people very seldom get to speak without interruption for even a short period of time unless they are giving a lecture. As a theatrical device, the monologue is therefore "designed to let the audience in on a character's deepest and most secret thoughts – things they'd never say to another person" (Starke & Tugwell, 1998, p.3). A good monologue requires the performer to "make imaginative leaps and substitutions" in order to "become the real character caught in the turmoil of struggle" (Earley & Keil, 1995, p. xii). To achieve this goal, the performer must be able to "view the character within the widest frame of reference" (Earley & Keil, 1995, p. xiii), i.e. the context in which that dramatic moment takes place in the character's life.

It is easy to see how a performer must have an in-depth understanding of the character being portrayed in order to give a good monologue. To achieve this level of understanding, the performer must first of all thoroughly research the character's background and the context in which the dramatic event occurs. This sort of task is traditionally performed by a social scientist – a psychologist, a sociologist, an anthropologist, etc. In addition, the performer must be able to have total empathy

for the character without judgment or prejudices. He must "use the character's needs, desires, articulateness, spirit and wilfulness as a means of expansion" (Earley & Keil, 1995, p. xiii). This type of task is traditionally performed by literature and art students. In other words, in order to present a monologue with substance, one must be able to amalgamate tasks traditionally performed by social science and literature students.

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With the monologue being one of the most popular tools in creative dramatics, many writers in DiE have compiled monologues for a wide range of real "characters", including kids (Roddy, 2000), teenage girls (Pomerance, 2002; Pomerance, 2005), teenage girls of colour (Jacob, 2002), and urban youth (Pannell, 2002). All these characters represent members of society who have not traditionally had a strong "voice" in society, possibly due to their age, gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. These monologues allow readers to gain insight not only into the sociological conditions of these voiceless segments of the population, but also into their psychology – their thoughts and feelings.

#### Sociology, an example...

The monologue technique was used as a pedagogical tool for some student assignments in a few sociology courses taught by one of us at Vanier College (Ho & Ho, 2002). For example, the evaluation for the "Challenges in Society" and "Sociology of the Family" courses consisted of having individual students randomly assigned a character on whose behalf they would perform a monologue that captured a dramatic moment in that character's life. Students were asked to relate to the context in which that event took place and to reveal the innermost thoughts of the character in question. In this way, an 18-year-old female student from Ville St. Laurent could be momentarily transformed into a 15-year-old high school "jock" who bullied the weakest and the most vulnerable kids. Or a 17-year-old male student from Châteauguay could suddenly become a 45-year-old wife/mother of two, struggling with her sexuality. Or a 17-year-old Jewish student from Côte St. Luc might be temporarily transformed into a Palestinian suicide bomber from the Gaza Strip.

These transformations force students to abandon their own familiar identity for a moment, compels them to think outside their usual frame of mind, and brings them face to face with serious intellectual and even emotional challenges.



## Psychology, an example...

As demonstrated by the skits put on by Vanier College's psychology teachers mentioned at the beginning of this paper, creative dramatics can also be a very useful tool for teaching psychology. Dodd (1988), as seen earlier, discussed the usefulness of the "panel discussion" technique for enhancing students' understanding of complex emotional issues such as bereavement. The monologue technique is another pedagogical tool that psychology teachers may find very useful. In courses such as "Developmental Psychology", "Adult Development", and "Child Development", for example<sup>1</sup>, each student could be asked to present a monologue of a person at different developmental stages covering the entire life span: from the prenatal stage through infancy and the toddler stage, to the playful years, the school years, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood, and even death. Optionally, the focus can be placed on the biosocial, cognitive, or psychosocial aspect of these developmental stages. Or one could focus on the different developmental stages of a specific theory, such as Freud's theory of psychosexual development, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, or Kohlberg's theory of moral development.

*Due to the very nature of the monologue, some students may find the experience extremely overwhelming [...] due to stage fright and is more a result of the intensity of emotions they experience during the presentation.*

"Psychological Disorders" is another psychology course where the monologue may serve as a useful teaching and learning tool. As both teachers and students of this course would readily acknowledge, clinical cases are probably the most fascinating aspect of "Psychological Disorders". They allow students to match real patients' behaviour to the symptoms of a particular psychopathology that they have studied, to make a diagnosis, to give a prognosis, and even to explore treatment options as a real clinician would. As a matter of fact, some teachers would opt for a "clinical casebook" in choosing the textbook for this kind of course rather than the standard "Abnormal Psychology" textbook – for the same reason that so many of us find novels, biographies, and dramas more interesting than other forms of writing. Teachers of "Psychological Disorders" can take this practice one step further and, in lieu of or in addition to a regular term paper, they could require students to delve into a particular clinical case, by asking them perform a monologue

in which they transform themselves into the patient in question and attempt to "experience" 15 minutes of a "significant" or even a "mundane" moment in that character's life, by talking, thinking and feeling from the perspective of the character being personified. The hypothetical patient in question could be suffering from any of the psychopathologies described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-IV-TR.

By the same token, the monologue technique can also be used in other similar courses, such as "Cult Psychology" and "Forensic Psychology". In the former case, a student could temporarily be "reincarnated" as a cult leader, such as Jim Jones of Jamestown or Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate, or a cult member who has chosen to defect from a cult or not to follow the leader's call for mass suicide following years of brainwashing. In "Forensic Psychology", students could temporarily transform themselves into an array of characters involved in crimes or criminal activities – for example, a gang member, a serial killer such as Jeffrey Dahmer or Charles Manson, a victim of a crime, a crime victim's family member, a criminal's family member, a law enforcement officer, a defence attorney, a jury member, etc.

A word of caution: Due to the very nature of the monologue, some students may find the experience extremely overwhelming. This is less due to stage fright and is more a result of the intensity of emotions they experience during the presentation. When it comes to psychopathology, criminology, victimology, or cultology, excessive empathy and emotional identification with the character in question can cause unforeseeable and considerable emotional stress in some rare cases. From our personal experience, some students occasionally identify so intensely with the story and the emotions of the character they are personifying that they might even shed real tears during their performance. Unfortunately, despite the proliferation of literature on DiE, little research has been done on the short-term or even long-term emotional impact of such drama techniques on the performer. Therefore teachers must use their own discretion to decide the suitability of this kind of assignment for each of their students.

Courses such as "Developmental Psychology" and "Psychological Disorders" are more individual – or "character" – focused; as a result, using the monologue as a teaching and learning tool appears to make a lot of sense intuitively. In courses that are less focused on individuals, but more focused on individuals' relationship with others (such as "Social Psychology", "Cultural Psychology", "Sexuality and Relationships", "Psychology of Relationships", and "Psychology of Health and Happiness"),

<sup>1</sup> Courses offered by the Department of Psychology at Vanier College.



the monologue may still be a very useful pedagogical tool. But instead of personifying a character with certain attributes, such as age, gender, psychopathological symptoms, the performer would represent a character being caught in a particular situation or web of relationships. For instance, a student could be asked to perform a monologue on someone committing a “fundamental attribution error” or being a victim of one, or someone in different stages of romantic relationships according to George Levinger’s ABCDE Model, or someone involved in a conflict such as an intercultural conflict, etc.

*Nor is psychology the only social science discipline that can benefit from creative dramatics. [...] sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, history, and economics can also make use of these pedagogical tools.*

Finally, with a little imagination, the monologue technique could even be used in some psychology courses where its applicability may not be immediately apparent. In “Sports Psychology” and “Psychology of Music”, for example, students could present the monologue of a player (famous or not) of a given sport or of a particular musical instrument prior to their respective game or concert. In “Psychology of Animals”, students could present an animal’s “monologue” to demonstrate its unique perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and social worlds compared to those of humans’, while at the same time trying to avoid falling into anthropomorphism.

Perhaps the most intriguing of all would be a course like “Psychology of Eating and Food.” Can the monologue technique be used as a pedagogical tool in this type of course? The answer is “yes”. One of the assignments in the “Psychology of Eating and Food” course that one of us taught at Vanier College was to have each student present a monologue of their experience of a simple meal, or even just a snack, either at home, at school, at work, or in a restaurant. In this monologue on a daily eating event, students are asked to deviate occasionally from the objective style of reporting and to remain phenomenologically true to the ebb, flow, and contents of their own “stream of consciousness”. In this case, the monologue would consist of two parallel parts: One being the objective description of the event, such as the steps involved in preparing the meal, or ordering the food and waiting to be served in a restaurant; and the other being the act of eating the food itself. This second part consists of the students’ “phenomenological reflection” of their “stream of consciousness”: a reflection based on the subject matter that they have learned in the course,

such as the biological and environmental factors that affect eating. In other words, in presenting this monologue, students would be alternating between two “voices”, with each one commenting on the other.

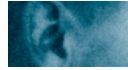
## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have illustrated how the drama technique known as the monologue can be used in the teaching of different psychology courses. It should, however, be emphasized that this particular technique is only one of many creative drama techniques. There is a whole repertoire of techniques available for teachers to choose from (e.g. O’Neill & Lambert, 1993; Barlow & Skidmore, 1994; Neelands & Goode, 2008). As a matter of fact, the monologue may not even be the best technique to use in some courses. It is a technique that can be combined with others to maximize student learning. For example, in order to encourage the active participation of the audience as well, the “hot-seat” technique can be used in conjunction with the monologue. “Hot-seat” is a technique in which the performer answers questions from the audience while still in the role of the character that has been portrayed. The performer can also ask the audience questions, hence giving rise to very interesting exchanges and debates.

Nor is psychology the only social science discipline that can benefit from creative dramatics. Other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, history, and economics can also make use of these pedagogical tools. When it comes to how to use these tools and which one to use, the possibilities are only limited by one’s imagination. ●

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