The Effects of an Authentic Collaborative Project on University Directing Students' Learning Experiences

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Abstract

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Keywords

authentic learning, collaborative learning, meaningful learning experiences, collaborative project, acting and directing students, theatre education, phenomenology

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Acknowledgements

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This phenomenological study reports an authentic collaborative project between students of acting and directing (AD) and students of Teaching English as Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in University Sains Malaysia (USM). The project, which is integrated and infused with features of authentic learning and creative drama education, aims to provide the AD students with new learning experiences that are authentic in nature and that focuses on their abilities to direct a full theatre performance. Using qualitative data collection methods (i.e., online reflections and open-ended items), the study identified and determined six meaningful learning experiences that the 29 AD students gained: (i) constructing, sharing, and utilizing knowledge; (ii) understanding roles as directors; (iii) identifying and solving problems; (iv) creating and building teamwork; (v) developing creativity in directing; and (vi) practising professionalism in directing. The paper also provides some guidelines for other practitioners and researchers to undertake similar projects in future and in other settings.

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In drama education, meaningful and authentic learning (AL) experiences could facilitate students' understanding of given tasks and "assess their efforts against the criteria for an acceptable performance" (Morris, 2001, p. 41). Such experiences may develop students' abilities in creating performances that are complete, rich, and utilizes every available resource. This is because, as postulated by Ogden et al. (2009), the drama students would be "engaged in real-world situation" that connects their practice with a "tangible end-product for a specific audience," as well as learn to negotiate challenges "while maintaining a high commitment to the production" (p. 381). Hence, planning, structuring and organizing meaningful experiences for drama students are crucial for developing creative, resourceful and skillful performers.

Directing students should also undergo similar experiences so that they too are able to build and develop their skills. This is because an AL experience may guide students, as future directors, to establish, practice, and advance related skills and develop their own unique working system. This is especially important when they evaluate others' performances (and their own) that would allow them to note improvements and areas of concern, especially during rehearsals (Roberts, 2007). Combining AL experience with arts-based learning will lead to new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, as well as ways of authentically engaging directing students. This combination of AL and arts-based learning would facilitate individual and collective learning that encompasses both personal and professional growth that can have positive effects on students' future endeavors, especially in transferring knowledge they have learned (Ogden et al., 2009).

The most critical issue that directing students face is applying their theoretical knowledge in an environment that is framed by real AL and practical learning purposes (Kelley, 2009). In attending to this particular issue, Kelley (2009) suggests that practice and theory, in the process of learning, should be combined in a student production, as it would provide the opportunity for the students to learn and to understand. This opportunity is a form of "authentic context" in which "realistic problems preserving the real-life setting" are posed to the students so that they know how the knowledge gained in classrooms could be used in the physical realms of reality (Herrington & Herrington, 2007, p. 70). Also, it leads to concrete understanding of how a director would behave in a real theatre production, as well as experiencing the different perspectives of directing and director's roles that one should know and practice. However, literature demonstrates that such opportunities are not afforded to students as they are merely switching roles with others/peers in a restricted environment (see Movassaghi & Growe, 2019; Naraine et al., 2018) as educators favor the use of textbooks and passive methods of teaching over practical, active and engaging forms of learning (Serrano, 2018).

In the teaching of basic directing in many settings, students do have opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge but only in short scenes using the same group of people who are usually their peers (i.e., course mates; see Wales, 2009). In these situations, they would only be able to direct a few scenes as well as address only some fundamental aspects of theatre direction such as the conceptualization of the performance and training the performers. Ideally, directing students should be able to direct and experience a full-length performance, which includes the very first decision—that is, selecting the appropriate script—through the final stage—that is, staging the performance. Unfortunately, there is a scarce number of studies on directing students' experiences of directing a full performance independently in an authentic environment.

In this study, we provide directing students the opportunity to focus on and direct a full-length performance with the aim of facilitating them to apply the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired into authentic direction of a theatre performance. We give them the opportunity to work with novice performers and co-create scripts with novice writers, as well as other areas of theatre performance and production. Basically, they have to think, plan, conceptualize, discuss, implement, assess, and make decisions all by themselves, mimicking an actual theatre performance and production from start to finish. It is hoped that through this AL experience, they will experience the problems and challenges in directing a play and, more importantly, be able to think, reflect, and develop various effective strategies in surmounting those problems and challenges. In other words, the student directors "become their own teachers" as they exhibit desirable attributes that include "self-monitoring, self-assessment, and self-teaching" (Chen et al., 2015, p. 11). This is to mold the directing students as future experts who are able to visualize their vision of a play by guiding real performers through an authentic creative process by engaging them in various problem-solving situations. Such vision and mission resonate with Omasta and Snyder-Young's (2014) suggestion of the importance of exploring new research realms in educational drama and exploring the unknown using "a wide range of methodologies" and undertaking them with a purpose—to "clearly distinguish between research for its own sake and research in service of advocacy" (p. 19).

Therefore, we utilize the phenomenological research approach to determine the effects of an AL experience from the perspectives of those who experienced it i.e., directing students. Our goal is to describe the meaning of learners' experiences, especially what were their experiences and how they experienced them (Neubauer et al., 2019). The outcome of the study can offer fresh insights into pedagogical awareness and nuances for future researchers and practitioners. Empirically, this study would be able to suggest how directing classes

could be planned and conducted, and what possible challenges one should be aware of when planning such an AL experience.

Theoretical Perspective: AL and Creative Drama Education

Two theoretical perspectives, AL and creative drama education, that underpin the collaborative project, are discussed in terms of their features and characteristics and how they are integrated and interwoven into the various facets of the project. In tandem, the two form the fundamental theoretical platform and structure in terms of planning, implementing, and assessing the project, and eventually achieving the stipulated learning outcomes for the directing students.

In an AL environment, students are engaged in genuine learning problems/tasks that will enrich their learning abilities as it allows the students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner (Pitchford, Owen, & Stevens, 2020). This will help the directing students apply the theory that they have learned into a practical setting and thus, master difficult skills. In order to facilitate AL, Reeves et al. (2002) suggest 10 design characteristics, which are integrated into the various aspects of the current project.

First is to provide real-world relevance by designing activities that match real-world tasks as much as possible and not merely focusing on "decontextualized or classroom-based tasks" (Herrington et al., 2002, p. 3). Second is the need to create authentic activities that are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations, which require students to define the tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major activity. AL activities embrace uncertainties, perplexities, and conflicting perspectives, and drive students to develop problem solving skills used by experts (Koplin & Hui, 2011). Therefore, in this project, the acting and directing (AD) students are required to work within the structure of activities that were ill-defined and open for multiple interpretation, leading to the final performance at the end of the semester with the aim that students will be able to develop and internalize relevant work skills.

Third is the provision of opportunities for students to examine the tasks and problems from theoretical and practical perspectives using a variety of resources, which should encourage students to make connections to wider work and/or life issues and to their experiences (Ornellas, Falkner, & Stålbrandt, 2019). Hence, the AD students were given freedom to direct and train a group of actors (students of Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, or simply known as TESOL) by scaffolding and coaching to support the TESOL students (Herrington & Herrington, 2006).

Collaborative learning is the fourth characteristic, which is the "social interactions that are targeted towards deeper knowing" whilst acquiring important knowledge and skills (Chai & Tan, 2010, p. 52-69), as well as enhancing communication though peer collaboration (Ahmad et al., 2019). In this study, the AD and TESOL students collaborated and interacted for one semester to stage a theatre performance, in which they experienced the process of evaluating their ideas and knowledge based on evidence and resolving their conflicting views (Ornellas, Falkner, & Stålbrandt, 2019). Fifth, students are required to reflect on their learning, both individually and as a team or community. It is a "deliberate thinking about action" with a view to improve (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 52) as the students will engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations, as well as enhancing their awareness of professional development and knowledge (Kabilan, 2007). In this particular project, AD students reflect to showcase and share their experiences in completing their authentic task where they have to think, decide, and act without explicit instructions by making "connections among theory, coursework, and diverse real-world

scenarios" which then deepen "their understanding of the theories and ideas they engage with" (Endersby & Maheux-Pelletier, 2020, p. 59).

AL activities need to be integrated and applied across different subject areas and beyond "domain-specific outcomes" (Reeves et al., 2002, p. 564) that contribute to the development of flexible and dynamic students who adapt to the real-world setting. Adapting activities that are based on real-life settings nurture students' communication skills and positive professional behaviour (Herrington, Parker, & Boase-Jelinek, 2014), as well as problem solving and decision-making skills (Ornellas, et al., 2019). Also, AL activities are structured in a manner of cultivating diverse disciplines and domains for students and, therefore, these activities should allow "a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions" (Reeves et al., 2002 p. 564) because students would be dealing with the complexity and uncertainty of the real world (Ornellas, et al., 2019). In order to facilitate AL, rigid instructions should not be given to learners, especially those directly related to the tasks, activities and the format of learning outputs. The current study encourages students to experiment with new ideas and interpret the given tasks according to their own understanding and creativity. The same approach is adopted for the method and nature of directing the final performance.

The complexity of activities, in which students need to investigate and complete tasks over a sustained period of time, requires students' commitment and their investment of intellectual resources and thus, reflect the nature of tasks in the real-world domain (Reeves et al., 2002). To heighten the authenticity and complexity of tasks, authentic activities should create polished products and experiences through critical reflection (Endersby & Maheux-Pelletier, 2020) and not activities that are additions or sub preparation for something else. The current study also reflects both authentic characteristics in the tasks, in which directing students are responsible for the management and artistic process of the entire theatre performance (from script analysis to the staging of final performance), and not only directing per se. The related and connecting tasks include designing the production, publicizing and marketing the play, managing ticket sales, as well as training actors, which all lead to a polished final full-length theater performance.

Authentic activities should be accompanied by authentic assessments and be "seamlessly integrated with the major task" (Reeves et al., 2002 p. 564). The assessment component of the current study emphasizes elements of the performance and process of the theater production. In addition, Kearney and Schuck (2006) suggest informal observations for instructors to understand students' collaboration, reflections, and behaviours throughout AL. Similarly, the current study employs the use of reflective writing to understand students' experiences and learning, as well as a form of an authentic and pragmatic assessment (Endersby & Maheux-Pelletier, 2020).

As creativity is one of the important elements in a meaningful learning environment for theater directing, it was suggested that AL methods can be used to enhance students' creativity and critical thinking skills (Yeen-Ju et al., 2013) in forming theatre concepts and direction. Toivanen et al. (2016) proposed a creative pedagogical environment framework for drama education with different elements including learning climate, collaboration, and the need to focus on students' perspectives. The element of learning climate is about the relationships between teachers and learners (Lehtonen et al., 2016), while collaboration is the meaningful collaborative experience between AD and TESOL students while directing, choosing a play, forming directing concepts, designing the performance, and developing the performers. Finally, focusing on students' perspectives means that the AD students show a "positive recognition of learner responsibility in learning and a general readiness for autonomous learning" (Chan, 2001, p. 293).

Self-of-the-Researchers

This study is an outcome of a long-standing collaboration between the first and third authors i.e., Nur Hilyati Ramli (NHR) and Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (MKK). NHR is a lecturer at the Theatre Department of The School of the Arts (SOTA), USM, where she teaches acting and directing courses. She has been helping MKK with his undergraduate TESOL students from School of Educational Studies (SES) since 2015. In the beginning it was a simple and straight forward collaboration, where NHR teaches and trains the TESOL students the fundamental elements and skills of acting, which MKK strongly believes would be useful for the TESOL students in their career as a future teacher in Malaysian schools. The collaboration grew in its complexity, scale, participation, and stature, as both NHR and MKK kept on fashioning and generating new ideas, new challenges and new collaborative practices and engagement between them to enrich the TESOL learners with meaningful authentic learning.

In 2018/2019 academic session, NHR's AD students were wholly and directly involved in the training of the TESOL students' acting and help direct the TESOL students' live performance, as the AD students' course requirement needed them to direct a performance. All these were part of their course work and that both TESOL and AD students needed to accomplish. In the 2019/2020 academic session, we invited another lecturer from SOTA into the collaboration –Safia Najwa Suhaimi (SNS), who was teaching Graphic and Design (GD) students. The GD students are assigned with the task of supporting both the AD and TESOL students in terms designing stage sets, props and adverts and, publicizing the live performances, among others. The introduction of GD students, we believe, made the authentic collaborative learning project more meaningful and relevant to the real world.

From a small collaborative classroom project between three different courses, it slowly morphed into a huge collaborative research project. This current paper is the first outcome of the project. All three of us have invested an enormous amount of time and energy into this very dynamic but complex collaboration. It has also brought the three of us closer, personally, and more importantly, professionally, whereby we have integrated and implemented new ideas that we all contributed for the effective learning of our students, regardless which courses they are enrolled in.

Method

This is a phenomenological study that attempts to establish a valid and well substantiated conclusion about meaningful learning experiences gained by AD students in a collaborative AL environment. Since the study involved a complex and dynamic collaboration between students from different programmes with different learning outcomes, we examined the AD students' lived experiences as an interpretive process situated in an individual's lifeworld of AL that focused on their various tenets of learning, behaviour and communication (Neubauer et al., 2019). We utilized the interpretive phenomenological approach (Heidegger, 1962/2019) as this study was very much about the "lived experiences" and realities of the AD students' "narratives of their experiences of and feelings" of their "specific phenomena" and "in-depth descriptions" of their experiences during their authentic collaborative learning project and its effects on their learning experiences (Cilesiz, 2009 p. 240). For the purpose of this study, we embraced Kaur, Kabilan, and Ismail (2021)'s suggestions that researchers' epistemological position in interpretive phenomenological study may subsume the notion of qualitative data as evidence that is "contained within the experiences" (p. 2301) of the AD students, who were involved in authentic collaborative learning project. Moreover, the fundamental supposition of the interpretive

phenomenological proposes that "presuppositions or expert knowledge on the part of the researcher are valuable guides to inquiry and, in fact, make the inquiry a meaningful undertaking" (Lopez & Wills, 2009, p. 729). These methodological approaches guided us in addressing the central research question, "What are the effects of an authentic collaborative project on AD students' learning experiences?"

Participants and Sampling Techniques

This study was carried out in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), which is one of the leading research universities in Malaysia and located in Penang, a northern state in the Peninsular of Malaysia. This study was based on a collaborative project between TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) students from the School of Educational Studies and Acting and Directing (AD) students from the School of the Arts. The TESOL students were enrolled in an "Oral Skills in TESOL" course while the AD students were enrolled in a 'Fundamentals of Directing' (FD) course that aims to "produce thinking and critical actors, directors and arts scholars through performances, research, dialogues, and forums and creative arts industry and community engagement" (School of The Arts, 2019).

The sampling technique for this study is based on the concept of naturalistic essence of the qualitative approach, in which "real people in natural settings" are identified and selected based on the "individual's characteristics" and the context of the study i.e., "temporal, spatial and situational influences" (Marshall, 1996, p. 524). More specifically, an overlap of convenience sampling and purposive (or judgement) sampling was used due to the complexity of this research (Marshall, 1996).

All 91 students (TESOL = 62, AD = 29) were identified as participants for this study since carrying out this project is part of their academic requirement for their respective courses (convenient sampling). The groups were formed during a meeting between the lecturers (NHR, MKK and NSS) and all 91 students; based on a single important criterion i.e., ability to sing (purposive sampling). Since the performance is a musical (based on Disney), we ensured that each group would have an equal number of TESOL students who are able to sing well. This was decided by NHR, who assessed the abilities of every TESOL student by asking them to sing live on the stage. As a result, six groups were formed (based on the students' singing abilities). The AD students were not involved in the process as they had a focused task i.e., to direct the performance. The AD students were then asked to line-up and were assigned, alternatively one by one, into the formed groups – AD student 1 into Group 1, AD student 2 into Group 2, AD student 3 into Group 3, AD student 4 into Group 4, AD student 5 into Group 1, AD student 6 into Group 2, etc. Each group consisted of at least 10 TESOL students, and at least 4 AD students, totaling to at least 14 students per group. In their respective groups, the TESOL and AD students were required to collaborate and produce an adaptation of 30 minutes that was based on the theme, "Disney." Adaptations, from the theatre perspective, is a process of re-writing according to needs and requirement of the theatre and turned into a play or musical based on another artistic medium such as novel or films (Sanders, 2006; Hutcheon, 2004). Adaptation are dependents on the literary cannon for the provision of a shared body of storylines, themes, characters and ideas upon which their variations are made. The spectator or reader must be able to participate in the play of similarity and difference perceived between the original, source, or inspiration to appreciates fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken – basically, adaptations are a simplified version or, an interpretation or inspiration of the original work

Research Settings and Procedures

The collaborative teaching and research between SES and SOTA were approved based on the existing and accepted "norms, practices and protocols of principlism" of both schools' administrations (Halse, 2011, p. 244) and were documented in the official course outlines of the respective courses. In addition, to further safeguard the rights of the participants, we prepared a letter of informed consent (LIC) to obtain their voluntary involvement in this study. The LIC explained the aim of the study, asserted the participants' rights and voluntary participation and stated the purposes of data collection (see Appendix A). All the participants signed the LIC.

The 10 design characteristics of AL suggested by Reeves et. al (2002) were reflected in the aims of this project and integrated into the various aspects of the project that accommodated both AD and TESOL students' learning experiences. In order to attain this, the researchers determined a common learning task that necessitated the expertise of both TESOL and AD students and their respective course aims, learning outcomes, and requirements: TESOL students for script writing and editing and acting, and AD students for the directing of the theatre performance, as well as managing all facets related to developing a production. This strategy was employed so that the AD students, the focus of this study, would be able to understand and identify their roles and involvement in this collaborative project, as well as develop their personal and professional identity in a Community of Practice (CoP) (Snyder & Wenger, 2010) as future theater directors. This CoP is a group of future theater directors who share a common concern and interests and come together to fulfill both individual and group goals for the purpose of developing "theories and understanding of the world" in the realms of acting and directing (Wenger, 1998, p. 48). Therefore, the aims of this collaboration were to:

1. Facilitate new learning experiences for AD students in an authentic collaborative environment (working with peers and TESOL students).
2. Allow AD students to apply theories and experiences, and experiment with methods and techniques of directing learned in the course by directing a one act theatre performance - authentically and in collaboration with TESOL students.
3. Challenge AD students to utilize creative and critical thinking in addressing any problems/difficulties arising during planning, training/rehearsing, and performing.
4. Prepare AD students for their professional endeavours as future or potential directors

All six groups were given total freedom in terms of selecting the play and how to construct/visualise it into a performance, with no interference or suggestion from the lecturers unless it was absolutely necessary. Both AD and TESOL students attended their respective lectures, as they normally would, whereby they learned the fundamentals of directing (for the AD students) and topics related to oral skills, including presenting and acting (for the TESOL students). Each group rehearsed and trained on their own and made their own preparations (such as script reading, costumes, backdrops etc.) outside their lecture schedule. All six groups, as one entity, were asked to take ownership of the overall project and therefore had to: (i) book the theatre hall, (ii) prepare stage setups such as technical aspects including music and lighting, (iii) promote the event to the campus community as well as outside campus, (iv) sell tickets, and; (v) support and help each other regardless of their group, especially during the day of the actual performance.

Instrumentation and Data Collection, Analysis & Presentation

Instrumentation refers to research instrument that was used as tools to collect, measure, and analyze qualitative data obtained for the purposes of answering the research questions for this study. Two research instruments were used in data collection - individual weekly reflection in Facebook Group (FBG) and open-ended items (OE). Using triangulation techniques, the two types of data were used to address the aim of the study. The open-ended (OE) items were developed by the researchers and were distributed to the students at the end of the semester after the completion of their theatre performance. They were given one-week to return the questionnaire and OE. The four OE items were:

1. Which aspect of the project was the most meaningful/significant/relevant to you, as an AD student?
2. Please identify the learning experiences that were meaningful to you in this project. Please provide examples from your experiences during the project.
3. What are the critical challenges that you faced (as a director/actor)? Explain how you resolved each challenge.
4. What is your overall assessment of the collaborative project in terms of its strengths and weaknesses?

In addition to the OE, students' weekly reflection shared in the FBG was also a vital source of information. The AD students' collaboration and experiences and engagement with the TESOL students during the training and directing sessions were documented in the FBG that was setup specifically for the 29 AD students involved in this study. Their weekly reflections, which lasted for the entire semester i.e., 16 weeks, revolved on these specific topics: i) their engagement and experiences of collaborating with the TESOL students; ii) learning experiences during planning, training/rehearsing, and preparation for the performance; iii) challenges and difficulties faced and how they were resolved and; iv) any other experiences or aspects of the project that they felt were relevant and should be shared with others. Each week the researchers would collect, arrange and organize the data into themes constructed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The suggested structure of this method contains several phases as below:

- Phase 1: Familiarising with data (getting familiar with the depth and breadth of the content)
- Phase 2: Generating initial codes from the data (producing codes based on the most meaningful element of data that may form the basis of themes)
- Phase 3: Searching for themes (Analysing and sorting codes into themes)
- Phase 4: Reviewing themes (refining the themes based on each theme's validity in relation to the data, and irrelevant themes may be revised or discarded)
- Phase 5: Defining final themes (identifying each theme "essence" and conducting detailed analysis of each theme's relevance in relation to how it fits the whole data set)

In Phase 1, all the individual FBG weekly reflection entries were read at least twice by the three researchers separately prior to any discussion. As the researchers did not impose any rigid structure in writing the suggested topics, this phase was considered as the discerning and conjuring of the early impressions of the data, and thus the need of familiarising with the students' writing style and structure of the FBG posts. For example, the

average length of posts by the students or referencing any supporting images or videos in their posts. In Phase 2, the researchers, working collaboratively as research members to attain triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017), generated initial codes from the data set that they considered as suitable to form as themes. As they already had developed an idea of the content and how it fit the research questions, this step was about organising the large data set into a meaningful and systematic manner. Open coding was adapted for this phase, in which no pre-set codes were used, and codes were developed and modified throughout the coding process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This process was done collaboratively among the researchers. An example of the code found in the FBG data set was about the problems that occurred throughout the performance. Entries include content on the students' strategies in handling problems, avoiding problems and types of problems that they faced. This related to the third and fourth phase of the analysis. In Phase 3, the codes identified earlier were sorted into themes that fit the objective of the research or addressed the research questions. Referring to the earlier example, codes related to the problems of the performance are collated into the theme 'Identifying and Problem Solving'. For other codes that were found, any code or theme that were found to be overlapping were reviewed and refined by the researchers together. Last but not least, in Phase 5, the final themes were defined.

In presenting the data, we embraced Lee (2014)'s suggestion that qualitative data should be "identified in a way which enables the readers to judge the range of evidence being used" (p. 96). This allowed the us to distinguish data and their interpretation and, to attain validity by demonstrating the "relationship between the evidence and the conclusions" (Lee, 2014, p. 96). Hence, we used codes such as 'S1OE1' that referred to 'data obtained from the first student (S1)'s open-ended items (OEI) and 'S1FBG' that referred to 'data obtained from the first student (S1)'s reflections. The S1 code does not refer to the same student as we randomly assigned the codes for OEI data and FBG data to ensure that the identity of the students would not be clearly known (Kaiser, 2009). Nevertheless, all the 29 participants agreed for the data to be published or used for presentations even though these would reveal their true identities. They embraced this stance since the main purpose of this project and research was for learning purposes improving self (see Appendix A).

Research Rigour and Trustworthiness

Triangulation of data from FBG and OE enabled trustworthiness and reliability of the overall data (Thurmond, 2001). In addition, the researchers working collaboratively to accomplish the five phases of thematic analysis contribute to researcher triangulation (Nowell, et al., 2017). These two processes lead to credibility, as claimed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). We have also presented a thick description of the research methods for this study as to ensure transferability i.e., the applicability of findings to other contexts that could be similar to the current study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Finally, confirmability, which means "interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination" (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392), was established by analysing the data using audit trail, assigning codes and generating themes, as mentioned and described in the five-phase above.

Findings

The analysis results in the conceptualization of six meaningful learning experiences that were gained by the AD students when directing an authentic and one act theatre performance in collaboration with the TESOL students. They are: (i) constructing, sharing and utilizing knowledge; (ii) understanding roles as directors; (iii) identifying and solving problems (iv) creating and building teamwork; (v) developing creativity in directing; and (vi)

practising professionalism in directing. The findings are presented according to the order of the above themes.

Constructing, Sharing, and Utilizing Knowledge

This project provided a platform for AD students to construct new knowledge from the collaborative experience by "learning from each other," which is "not easy" but a "great" learning experience (S18OE4)." The construction of knowledge is also evidenced by a student's reflection of how he is able to "get more knowledge and change opinions." Apart from that, they are able to fully utilize the knowledge that they have learned in class such as "directing and acting techniques" (S15OE1) and "the theory of Constantin Stanislavski on the method of acting" (S22OE1), which are shared with the TESOL students (S1OE1). AD students are able to apply these techniques in the different stages of preparing the actors for the performance, such as body prep of actors (S7FBG; S5FBG; S26FBG), proper breathing techniques, (S13OE1; S19FBG; S26FBG) and blocking, (S9OE1; S13OE1) with the aim to "produce the best actor" (S9OE1). "Vocal training" (S5FBG) is also emphasized and shared with their peers so that the actors are able to "project their voices" (S9OE1), stabilize and sharpen their voices, (S26FBG) and improve their "voice intonation" (S28FBG, S12FBG).

Training the actors to be "in character," which relates to the task of a director, is also part of what AD students are able to practice. A student reflects that the "style and identity of the TESOL students" should first be identified so that they can be matched with the "right position and indeed the right character." Character building is also done through the sharing of how to "show facial expressions, convey certain emotions and body language" (S28FBG). S5 reflects how she trains her peers to be in character,

> We usually don't advise them to straight jump into acting as their role. I personally ask them to picture themselves as the character and also think of the characteristics. They were also told to think about the types of situations they can be in and what actions they can do. Then, they were asked to act out each situation in different ways and then choose which one suits their character the best.

AD students value the knowledge they have learned in class, and understand the importance of learning from experience. For instance, S19OE explains the need to: "Pay attention to given circumstances, because we can learn their weakness(es) and try to fix them by using method(s) that we (have) learned in class…." AD students concur such practices contribute to their development as conscientious learners, who "realized/found out" that they "needed to train the actors more" (S18FBG) and are able to discern the TESOL students "being a better actor day by day after practising" (S5FBG).

Understanding Roles as Directors

The findings from FBG and OE show that AD students underwent a "real experience to be a director" (S13OE) since it assisted them to develop the "correct mindset" (S8OE) in the directing process. S16's explains her understanding of her role as the director:

> The director is the one who must be able to understand and convey the core idea or theme of the script in the form of a theatrical play, direct the team on their respective positions to present the play based on the main message of the story.

S5OE1 acknowledges that it is important to "understand the idea/theme of the script in order to come up with the concept." Likewise, S12OE1 believes the real experience of directing gave her the opportunity "to understand the concept so that they know how to draft the performance." AD students state that in order to "transform a text into a performance," (S29FBG) a director should be able to "understand the core idea of the play" (S16FBG) by undergoing a "careful script analysis" (S7FBG) process so that the main idea of the play will be presented well. An insightful remark regarding a director's role in script and storyline analysis was given by S26:

> I also learnt that the storyline will be the same which makes the core idea but how we manipulate it differs from others. As a director, he or she also need to analyse the story that had been chosen carefully before proceed to a show.

In terms of training the actors and actresses, S5 acknowledges and admits that it is a challenging but enjoyable process – "Teaching someone what to act and how to act is not easy but the whole process is fun!" The AD students accept that it is their responsibility to make sure the actor "understands the character and characteristic of the character" (S1OE) and they need to be able to be "flexible in training the actor" S23OE). In this sense, S18 realizes that applying one of the specific methods learnt has helped him to understand his role better: "...The Stanislaski technique and method must be used in the training of a new actor. I now understand the definition and importance of the Stanislaski method, and how it benefits actors."

Identifying and Solving Problems

Identifying and solving problems is another benefit of the AL project as the directing students emphasize that it gives them the opportunity to manage difficulties and problems "better and in a more mature manner" (S1OE), as well as being "wise to find ways to solve problems" (S9OE). These are done collaboratively, whereby the directing students "help each other when they face [a] problem" and take strong initiatives to identify other difficulties that may hinder the project from "going smoothly" as planned (S24OE). For example, S28FBG explicates one of the problems that they face and how they solved the problem:

> The difficulty arises when there are two people that are suitable for the same role which puts us in difficulty choosing the suitable role. Also after all the casting is done, there is a realisation that there are 10 TESOL students but in our play, there are only 9 roles. The solution we came up with is to add on another role which is the queen, as in Disney's Cinderella, the king has no wife, therefore the script and storyline was altered and her lines were added.

In the process of identifying the problems, the directing students conceive and learn "a lot about how to manage and direct a play, which consists of actors who might not have basics and might require more time for training" (S2OE). They also become cognizant that "most of the actors have the same issue, which is "voice projection" (S19OE). Other problems that they identified include designing the costumes, building sets, and making props (S3OE).

In the phases of planning, designing and training the actors, the AD students seem to understand and accept that "many elements were lacking" in their play such as "blocking, phasing and tempo and characterization" (S5FBG). To address these issues, they planned a

training session "to brush up the parts which need to be corrected" (S29FBG & S5FBG) and "pay (more) attention to the given circumstances as it is very important for us to correct their mistakes" by "doing more training and exercise" (S12FBG) as they did in addressing vocal problems among actors.

Creating and Building Teamwork

AD students learn to work not only with their coursemates but also with students from a different field of study--TESOL students. S18 commented on this collaboration: "The collaboration of PPIP and ART students is very meaningful…. (We) can work and have fun together and learn many things from one another." The bond and interaction between AD and TESOL students flourished in a positive manner from the beginning of the project as they grew "closer and closer" (S12FBG), where TESOL and AD students worked "together as a group" (S21FBG). This is accomplished as a group since they have to brainstorm, discuss (S12FBG), and decide their play title, for example. In addition, they were "sharing" ideas and information (S6OE), being "flexible" (S4OE) and "tolerant," (S18OE) and learning to "accept the change(s)" (S21FBG) throughout the project. S23 also shared her positive experience from the collaboration: "…The experience and memory have taught us the meaning of tolerance, teamwork, respecting others and more."

AD students also shared their experience of organizing their own working system as a team by creating their "own schedule" (S13OE) in order to coordinate their "auditions" (S28FBG), and "rehearsals" (S15FBG) despite the "differences of other classes schedule" (S13FBG). S27 pointed out an interesting point regarding the challenge in adapting to the different views and opinions of his team members:

> For artistic differences, I have my own vision and it's different from others. It is challenging to be 'in the same mind' with them. But they help me by leading me into their vision and telling me what they really want.

As the progress of each department is very important, both AD and TESOL students "work together to solve all the problems" (S13OE, S18OE, S23OE, S28OE) and "help each other to make sure their work is done" (S7OE). For example, S13FBG and S7FBG reflect that they stayed late at night to help each other prepare costumes, lighting and sets for the performance. This extensive effort makes the "working process smoother" and also "strengthen their relationships" (S9OE). Besides that, S10 mentions that the collaboration and teamwork has also made them: "… inspire each other by giving motivation about the importance of working together in order to make the production successful...we can see the changes in "attitude and commitment getting better towards the performance day."

By having an effective working system and planning, the teamwork of team members shows that "both TESOL and AD are all dedicated and committed in their efforts during rehearsal" (S29OE). Students are seen to "give a good commitment" as well as exuding "professionalism" (S10OE). The system they created and put into practice also helps them oversee production progress from time to time as they will "make sure that there is outcome for every training and not just maintain at the same pace" (S2OE).

Developing Creativity in Directing

This project enables the AD students to creatively direct novice actors, as they have to "train or build the story" due to the inabilities of the actors (S19OE1) and be creative in directing. S16 explains how she utilized her own learning to help in direction: "…The

techniques and theatre games used really helped the actors to break out of their norms and push the performance beyond their comfort zone." As "thinking out of the box" is seen as "a must" in this project (S40E1), several AD students experiment with the plots, concept, and acting style, by starting "the play with a flashforward" (S25OE1), improvising "the blocking to exaggerate movements/acting" (S29FBG), "manipulating the storyline" to be "different from others" (S7FBG), and changing and developing "the concept using creativity" (S19OE1). The importance of being creative in directing was emphasized by S11OE1 and S2OE1, who accentuate the "need to be creative" and "being creative in directing" respectively. Such beliefs and approaches undertaken would result in their performances being "different from others" (S11OE1) and they would be able to "come out with a good show" (S15OE4).

Practising Professionalism in Directing

The findings elucidate the importance of practicing professionalism in the working process as a director among AD students. AD students reflect that they "must be professional in every aspect" (S5IOE) such as "in delivery of every task given" (S23IOE), and also assume "responsibility in every action taken during the directing process" (S7IOE). S28's take on the practice of professionalism throughout the project:

> I develop(ed) patience and tolerance. I learn(ed) to deal with things with EQ (i.e., emotional quotient) and most importantly, by doing so it can reflect our professionalism. We could not fuse our personal emotions into working matters, we should handle our emotions well.

This project revealed to them the "real scenario of directing and the requirement to be a director in a musical show" (S16IOE), and the AD students learned to manage their time and organization (S24IOE) throughout the process so that they will "achieve their vision in this project" (S22IOE). S8IOE reflects that this project taught him to "face different types of people," the need to find a "different way to approach" his peers, and to help them "give their best during their acting and also directing work." AD students are also aware that by "looking at every detail in every step and actions" (S5FBG), not only will it contribute to their final performance, but also "build their confidence" (S24IOE) to become a "professional director" (S23IOE).

Challenges Faced

Though the AD students benefited from meaningful learning experiences in this project, they also faced difficulties and challenges and found that certain tenets of the project affected their learning. S21OE4 describes the project as "difficult due to the short amount of time given." Several others agreed that, due to the limited timeframe, it is difficult to "train and educate them (the actors) about acting" (S19OE3), "catch up with all required skills (as a director) in such short time" (S29OE3), and how the time-consuming project affected the time they needed for other matters relating to their daily life or other academic matters outside the scope of the project (S18OE3; S8OE3; S24OE3). Another challenge of the project is about the cooperation among group members. S5OE3 and S200E3's lamented about not getting enough cooperation from their respective team members while 21OE3's remarked how "many wanted to take charge and couldn't come to an agreement." Although this impeded the students to complete their tasks smoothly, the researchers' view on this matter is

that this kind of challenge reflects the authentic setting of what they will encounter in the real world and therefore should be seen as a positive take-away of the project.

Discussion

The findings are first discussed according to the six themes derived from the data, and then further discussion are made in addressing the problem statement and the research questions, as well as deriving implications and suggesting future research. In addition, in discussing the overall findings, we discussed the themes in such a manner that the discussions portray the group's experiences, and not of individuals.

Constructing, Sharing, and Utilizing Knowledge

AL provides students with opportunities to construct new knowledge from collaborative experience, apart from fully applying the knowledge that they learned in class. The collaborative knowledge construction in the current study is derived from the AD students' interaction with their peers, which provides them with new insights or problems that they never knew existed. This is because students were able to "notice the details they initially do not pay attention to" and how students learn to focus on the core problems first instead of focusing on the tools or outputs (Chernobilsky et al., 2005 p. 60). By allowing the students to share knowledge with their peers and practice functioning as a real director, the students were able to value the knowledge that they learned in class and appreciate and embrace the importance of learning from experience or learning by doing. The AL context in this project facilitates the increase of knowledge productivity in terms of acknowledging the students' professional "contribution to knowledge exchange" or knowledge sharing, and recognizing the joint approach of students as "professionals working together to reach tangible (conceptual) outputs for their own practice" (Tillema, 2006 p. 187).

Understanding Roles as Directors

AD students' reified notion and concept of a director is situated and contextualized by the practicality of the many roles and responsibilities of a director, ranging from the process of interpretation, concept, and preliminaries, to managing and training of actors on stage. In a way, the AD students are inherently acknowledging the importance of the fundamental processes of directing a play where they now have become intensely aware of the structure of plays and some of the prevailing theories and the training processes of acting (Hodge, 2000). The use of AL has afforded the students to apply the learned theories into practice, which is an important element in the development of an aspiring director since practical experiences cannot be substituted for theories, guidelines, textbooks, or manuals (Morrison, 1984). This is the concept of "notion of active participation, or learning by doing", which is "intentional and active in creating their identities" as future directors, as opposed to "having things done to them as 'objects,' or being passive receptors of external action" (Wright, 2011, p. 111) that may result in students not learning and engaging in valuable, relevant and meaningful experiences.

Identifying and Solving Problems

The AL project afforded AD students with the experience of developing and using different kind of strategies to solve problems and making critical decisions especially in directing a play. This crucially reflects the overall students' realization of facing and

surmounting problems while directing in an AL environment. This helps the AD students be cultivated and familiar the practice of theatre that depends on a series of practical skills and strategies (Sidiropoulou, 2018) in order to overcome the problems in directing a one act performance. By going through the exercise of directing a one act rather than a short scene usually practiced in most directing classes, AD students would be able to grasp and fathom the real challenge of being a theatre director. For instance, training an actor on the rehearsal floor was one of the biggest challenges faced by the AD students throughout this project, but it is through this process that they learned and sharpened their skills as the "director often learn their skills on job" (Jonson, 1999, p. 37). As directing is a "personal journey of an always-developing artist" (Kirk & Bellas, 1985, p. 193), this project challenges AD students to grapple with real problems and resolve them. This experience makes them even more conscious and aware of the existing problems and how to adapt to and manage similar ones in the future. Such an approach would benefit the AD students because directing is "an art to be experimented with and reflected upon" (Fliotsos, 1997, p. 60), and this project encouraged students to experiment with their own ideas while considering the available resources and pressing limitations. This learning through experimenting explores what is obvious and known and of what is less obscure and not known, allowing students to make mistakes without fear in the process, while questioning authority (Cavicchi, 1997). These lead to dynamic and flexible relationships among students, strengthening work ethics, and creating new understandings of existing knowledge as well as active engagement of AD students in real-world activities (Ishak & Jamil, 2020), culminating in the development of their leadership skills and teamwork.

Creating and Building Teamwork

Teamwork is one of the key components in realising a production in which the AD and TESOL students need to work closely and collaboratively. Critical skills for directors, particularly communication, flexibility, and commitment, are evidenced and displayed by most of the AD students in this study. These skills are reflected by and embedded in Hodge's (2000) conceptualization of a director, who "is a talker, a verbal imagist, for his primary work is communication – not directly to the audience but to actors and designers who then transmit his ideas and pressures to the audience (p. 3). The flexible attitude toward directing and the working culture in a theatre production, as portrayed by the AD students, is both necessary and rewarding as directors are constantly juggling "expediency with artistic purpose, production issues with human psychology" (Peithman et al. 1999, p. viii). In addition, the findings demonstrate and exemplify "shared leadership" where both TESOL and AD students are being participatory and involved (as both as leaders and subordinates) in leading and making decisions related to the final performance (Kramer, 2006, p. 144).

Developing Creativity in Directing

AD students' creative thinking is enhanced in various parts of directing a one act play, as they are able to practice and apply directing techniques through plot experiments, acting improvisation, and concept development. This kind of creativity nurturing is in line with the discourse of 21st century learning that centralizes creativity as a priority for education (Collard & Looney, 2014). The AD students benefit from the many creative processes throughout the project that challenge their previous conceptions, requiring them to think in new ways and make new connections with prior knowledge and beliefs (Timperley et al., 2007), and the implementation of AL is seen as a possible method to achieve this. In this project, AD students are challenged to work with novice actors with minimal exposure and

training in acting, and therefore, have to think of creative, novel ways in training the actors and conceptualizing the entire performance to fit the circumstances. Hence, creativity in the form of improvisation is acutely needed and one that allows the AD students to "access liberty from the confines of a designated platform" - this study has shown how the AD students, as future directors, clearly have improvised the way they trained the TESOL students, as well as making improvements to overall performance (Byrnes, 2015).

The AD students comprehend the importance of being creative in directing from their engagement with their peers, and this intertwines with the concept of a community of practice (CoP) that entails the three dimensions of engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1998). Engagement allows the AD students to share their practices with their peers, while imagination, which is about creating "new images of the world and ourselves" and dealing with the realm of expectations, enhances the creativity of AD students (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). The third dimension of a CoP, alignment, provides them with an understanding of how they can coordinate their efforts to fit lived and imagined experiences (Wenger, 1998), and understand why being creative is important in their field.

Practising Professionalism in Directing

The importance of practicing professionalism in the situated workplace or as real directors is because, in the project, they are continuously engaged in activities that are highly pertinent to the way learning functions especially "within a culture similar to the applied setting" (Lucu & Marin, 2014, p. 414). The project, which is ingrained and integrated with elements of AL, is able to nurture professionalism to some extent, and prepare students "to deal with ambiguity," apart from putting into practice higher order thinking and analysis, as well as effective but complex communication that are required in future directors (Lucu & Marin, 2014, p. 414). In the case of the current study, effective yet complex communication is embodied within the meaningful experiences gained by the AD students, especially from their challenges in approaching different types of people and the need to avoid emotions from taking over their decision-making process. Higher order thinking and analysis, on the other hand, is shown through their understanding of their responsibilities involving organizational skills, time-management, and visionary goals for the final performance.

The above six learning elements should energize and motivate aspiring directors toward effective directing, a "practical art" that engages directors as the "arbiters of both creative taste and resource management in the complex threading together of different disciplines towards a common end product" (Byrnes, 2015, p. 7) in a manner that requires and reflects professional dynamism and integrity. Despite the challenges faced by some of the students, these six learning experiences should also be useful and meaningful if they are to be imbued in other fields of study or professions, such as architecture, engineering, language, and pharmacy.

In discussing the six learning elements, we would like to unpack some of the key elements in identifying some of the underpinning implications for the field of acting and directing, and the education of future directors. For example, constructing knowledge and enhancing skills of directors is extremely important so that they can sustain and extend their praxis, with the aim of reacting and responding to the constraints and challenges faced in directing. Future directors also need to understand and practice the above and be sensitized as to why these are overarching in their development in the field of directing. This bring us to the theme, "understanding roles as directors," which implies that, before emerging as an appreciated and acknowledged director, one has to fundamentally know and understand what their roles as a director are and the kinds of leadership that they have to exemplify while directing. These are important because directors who do not comprehend their roles and lack

leadership skills will result in miscoordination among the group, leading to frustration and, naturally, a low quality and unsuccessful performance (Kramer, 2006). Hence, identifying problems and being a creative director in resolving those problems using the limited resources available to them are important, and should be one of the aims of education programmes for future directors.

While all six themes appear to be different and segregated, they are connected to each other - intertwined and tangled - in many ways. For instance, directors who understand their roles and responsibilities radiate positive vibes and demonstrate leadership skills by establishing an efficient communication network/system and teamwork among members of the production. Such an understanding does not transpire out of thin air but through constant experiencing, engaging, and constructing of knowledge and sharing and utilizing them with others in expert communities through collaboration. And all these, in amalgamation, may assist the directors in identifying and solving problems creatively and, eventually, emerge as directors with professional credentials, displaying professional dynamism, and upholding professional integrity. We believe that it is through such collaborative projects that challenge directing students to become the established directors described above, especially in terms of forming new ideas and arguments, compelling the understanding of issues from different perspectives, reflecting on their own practices and actions, and testing their hypothesis against those with differing or opposing views and thoughts (Yaacob et al., 2019). More similar projects, with different emphasis, should be planned and researched in the future.

One of the objectives of this project is to give students the real-world experience of becoming a director, and not so much on emphasizing the quality and outcome of the final performance. Findings, analyzed from pedagogical perspectives, establish that this project facilitated meaningful learning experiences among the AD students and hence, is able to ignite their passion for directing and nurture their potential as future directors of real caliber.

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Appendix A

Letter of Informed Consent (LIC)

   I willingly agree to participate in the research, "**Authentic Collaborative Learning (ACL)**" that is conducted by Madam Nur Hilyati Ramli and Madam Safia Najwa Suhaimi of The School of The Arts and Professor Dr. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan of School of Educational Studies, Unviersiti Sains Malaysia. I understand that the aim of ACL is for me to learn and improve myself as a future director.

   I understand that data collected from me through the Open Ended Items (OEI) is anonymous and confidential. A pseudonym will be used at all phases of the research, including the write-up. No one will have access to the code name, except the researcher and me. Again, pseudonym will be used if the results of the present study are published or reported at professional meetings and conferences, unless permitted otherwise by myself in a written consent.

   As for the Facebook Group (FBG), I understand that the reflections posted, shared and discussed in the open mode are primarily for learning, research and publication purposes. Thus, I give my consent for the data to be shared in publications or/and conferences and meetings even if the content of the data would expose my identify. If I feel uncomfortable with the above at any point of time during the project and research, I will inform the researchers and using my prerogative, I will decide either to withdraw from the project and research entirely OR, have the specific data expunged and not to be used at all.

   In no way will my above decision on whether to participate (or not) in the project or continue (or not) with the research OR have the specific data expunged, affect me as a student.

Please write your name using **CAPITAL LETTERS** (All Caps), which also means that you have read and understood the contents of LIC, and you agree to voluntary participation in **ACL**.	
Name:	
Date:	

Author Note

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