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Using Applied Theatre toward Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Applied theatre and youth participatory action research engage students in powerful discussions on complex issues. A culturally responsive middle level teacher used applied theatre to motivate and empower academically and linguistically marginalized students and study the outcomes with the support of her university advisor. Their findings suggest that implementing strategies associated with applied theatre, youth participatory action research, and culturally responsive teaching have the potential to can help students develop new perspectives, learn to work with others, gain a sense of community, increase confidence through student voice, and obtain a greater comfort level with public speaking. This paper explores the effects of using these methods in a linguistically and culturally diverse Midwestern middle school classroom.

Keywords: applied theatre; youth participatory action research (YPAR); English language learners; K-12 ELL pedagogy

Introduction

Applied theatre is the commonly used umbrella term for various types of educational theatre and theatre for social change such as forum theatre, museum theatre, and theatre for development, just to name a few. Throughout the many types of applied theatre are common threads of learning, engaging others, and taking action. More specifically, many sub-genres of applied

theatre utilize role-playing and inquiry to help unpack serious issues related to education, development, healthcare, etc. According to Prendergast and Saxton (2009), “Across cultures and traditions over time we can trace patterns and instances of groups of people using the stage as a space and place to tell their stories and their lives. This aesthetic and emotional outlet allows for potential catharsis, a safe way for citizens to express their concerns, criticisms and frustrations to each other and to society at large” (p. 7).

In much the same way, youth participatory action research (YPAR) allows youth a safe space to engage in inquiry and to express their concerns, while also incorporating data collection and analysis and constant reflection. YPAR empowers youth to “embrace an understanding of knowledge that moves beyond the acquisition of known facts to the active construction of knowledge by people, including students” (Van Sluys, 2010, p. 141). According to Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun (2010), YPAR is increasingly common as an approach for engaging students in conversation about issues within their community. Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis (2010) agree noting, “There has been recent attention to PAR as a promising practice in the youth development field” (pp. 152-153) due to its ability to teach advocacy, voice, research, and decision-making while promoting youth ownership and engagement. Likewise, in Gallagher and Service’s (2010) applied theatre study of fifteen Ontario elementary schools, several themes emerged from the data including engagement, conversation, understanding, compassion, and social change.

Several other past studies involving applied theatre and youth participatory action research demonstrated benefits to self-esteem in participants, voice in the community, public speaking, self-expression, and increased understanding that every issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Gallagher & Service, 2010;

Kellett, 2010; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). The foci of these applied theatre studies range from theatre education to health education, and the common link among the studies is the commitment to inspire new discussions about important issues. Missing from the extant research, however, is focused inquiry into applied theatre in K-12 classrooms. In this article we describe how we used a youth participatory action research approach in order to explore the use of applied theatre in a culturally and linguistically diverse middle school language arts classroom. We describe the impact of applied theatre on students' communication skills as well as the sense of empowerment students perceived throughout the YPAR experience. Finally, we consider how applied theatre could be used to support the linguistic, socio-emotional, and academic development of English learners in culturally responsive content area classrooms.

The first author of this article, Meg Troxel, was the teacher in the classroom we describe. She worked with the students on applied theatre and was the primary researcher. Anytime the pronoun "I" is used, it is the voice of the first author. The second author, Brooke Kandel-Cisco, served in an advisory role during the planning and implementation of the applied theatre experience and supported the first author during data collection and analysis. The authors collaborated in writing the present manuscript.

Applied theatre and YPAR allow students to examine the various roles that sociocultural identity plays in societal issues, provide opportunities for typically marginalized groups to voice their opinions, and encourages participants toward engagement and action. Youth participatory action researchers must learn how to analyze and articulate an issue from multiple viewpoints, anticipate responses from various constituents, listen to ideas and suggestions from others, and negotiate meaning making in order to be able to take action. These are not small tasks; preparing a group to take action can be time consuming, depending on the initial skill set of the

participants. Furthermore, the instructor, facilitator, or director needs to be prepared to release control of the situation. The facilitator is present to help assist with development and construction of the lesson, research, or script by helping the participants rehearse possible scenarios or outcomes and come to their own conclusions about how to adjust the course of action. The facilitator should not try to manage or control the direction of the discussion, but rather his or her role is to ask compelling questions that allow the participants to consider new perspectives.

Our Inquiry into Applied Theatre

Based on the communication competencies necessary to navigate applied theatre and YPAR, informed by the work of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Michael Rohd, we hypothesized that applied theatre could benefit students through improved language arts skills, confidence, and voice in the community. More specifically, we sought to explore how applied theatre techniques could support the developing language arts skills of struggling middle school students who had been placed in a remediation class while also empowering these culturally and linguistically diverse learners to find their voice at school and in their communities. Many of these students felt disenfranchised by their education and did not believe they could ever be successful in language arts. They were fully aware they were placed in this class based on low-test scores; therefore, they felt unsuccessful and approached this class with disgust. One of the goals of using applied theatre in the classroom was to help change the self-perceptions of the students and to empower them to use language arts as a tool to voice their opinions.

Data Collection

In order to complete this participatory action research study, I used several qualitative data sources including a teacher research journal that included class reflections and related article or

reading reflections, student "classroom artifacts" such as classwork assignments, student reflections, projects, class skits, etc., and videos transcribed for critical incidents only (Creswell, 2003; Lanksheer & Knobel, 2004) . I considered a critical incident to be an observation of an incident that seemed significant because it either concurred or refuted the expected outcomes of a study or situation. When such an incident occurred, I took detailed notes regarding the facts of the incident, avoiding subjectivity, in my teacher research journal. I consistently looked back at the incident and reflected on the impact of the incident on the overall course of this research project. For the purposes of this study, we describe here one key critical incident.

The Critical Incident and What Happened Next

A conversation in my classroom led to the development of the participatory action research project that helped influence the lunch menus for the entire district. No other moments during the research process seemed to have this considerable impact in changing the course of the study. It all started when I created a modified version of Michael Rohd's monologue work in which I had the students create pro and con monologues about school lunches. First, I had to explain the word monologue because many of my students had never encountered that word before. I explained the etymology of the word *monologue* by dissecting the word into parts. We discussed the prefix *mono* and eventually the students figured out that *mono* means one. They ended up defining a *monologue* as a script for one person. After they understood the meaning of *monologue*, I explained they were going to create two monologues of their own, and they could work in groups to accomplish this task. Additionally, I told them, "And I don't expect that it's a full out written script. You are going to have to look at some notes to know what to say, but you don't like have to write a whole script word for word and memorize it. You just need to have some notes, so you know what you are going to talk about" (Transcript, Jan 26, 2012). Then we

created a list on the whiteboard of people that would be for, or pro, school lunches and people that would be anti, or con, school lunches. The students came up with several ideas for both sections including the First Lady Michelle Obama, lunch ladies, nutritionists, principals, parents, students, teachers, etc. Next, I had the students write on a piece of paper for one minute about their own personal perspectives on school lunches before writing one pro and one con monologue from a perspective other than a student.

Students worked in small groups trying to find information to defend their character's point of view, whether the students agreed with the character or not did not matter. The purpose of the activity was to expose the students to new perspectives regarding the school lunch issue. I noticed "most [students] were actively engaged in the monologue activity. Several students looked for pro and con information on the internet and asked compelling questions. ¹Rosetta, Elizabeth, and Gabby seemed to be the most engaged. They wanted to ask the lunch ladies and the principal questions about the school lunches. They began taking polls in the classroom" (Teacher research journal, Jan. 30, 2012). In the moment I did not realize it, but after triangulating my data, I saw how truly critical this moment was to my overall study. The incident is best unveiled through a transcription of conversation between Rosetta and me on January 26, 2012:

Later in the period, students are working in small groups researching for their monologues. Some are at desks; some are on the floor; and some are standing. Miss Troxel walks up to a group to check on how they are doing. The two girls, Rosetta and Gabby, are still at desks working on their project together by researching on computers.

Rosetta: Miss Troxel, there is actually one lunch lady that um thinks school lunches are terrible.
Miss Troxel: Who?

¹ All students were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Gabby: Her name is Mrs. Smith. She's a parent of a student here, and she doesn't care for the food here either.

Miss Troxel: So, that could go under a parent, if you know information from her. Now, obviously you are not going to say "Oh, I'm Mrs. Smith," but

Rosetta: Oh my gosh, she might actually know what they put in the food.

Miss Troxel: Yep.

(Time lapse)

Rosetta: Are we allowed to interview people?

Miss Troxel: What?

Rosetta: Are we like allowed to interview people to get their opinion?

Miss Troxel: You can ask her if that's okay. Yep. Ladies and gentlemen, pause for a second! Rosetta just brought up a good point. She asked, "Can we do interviews with people?" And I said, "You are more than welcome to ask people, if they would be willing to answer some questions." That's fine.

Rosetta and Gabby high-five.

My students were taking polls and wanted to talk to people outside of our classroom. The students created a survey to better understand the perspectives of students and staff throughout the building in regards to school lunches. Through discussions and data analysis, they worked together to make meaning of the surveys results. They added to these discussions by reviewing articles related to the school lunch issue. As a result, my students conducted a youth participatory action research study about school lunches that stemmed from their applied theatre role-play.

After compiling information, the students asked me, if they could share their survey results with someone with the power to influence the school lunches. I was able to get in contact with the district nutritionist, and she came to our class. She was very impressed with the students' work and took several of the students' suggestions. She returned in May to get more student feedback. At the May meeting, she had the students serve as a student menu advisory board. The students served as official taste-testers and evaluated the taste and appearance of three different healthier pizza options. They were very excited about this aspect of being part of

the board. As a result of this youth participatory action research study, my students have impacted school lunches for the entire district.

Presentation to the District Nutritionist

Ultimately, my students analyzed 291 surveys that were completed by 239 students, 17 staff members, and 35 unspecified persons. My students tabulated the answers to all of the questions on surveys (see Figure 2) and shared this information with the district nutritionist on March 1, 2012.

Figure 2

Question	Percentage of Yes Responses	Percentage of No Responses
Do you think vending machines keep students from making healthy lunch choices?	53%	47%
Do you think flavored milk should be banned from school?	20%	80%
Do you think school lunches are unhealthy?	56%	44%
Do you think the food students eat affects how well they pay attention in class?	53%	47%
Do you think the school should serve more than milk and juice?	70%	30%
Do you personally eat the school lunch?	76%	24%
Do you think the school lunches are nutritious?	41%	59%
If school lunches were healthier, would you eat them?	68%	32%
Do you like school lunch?	37%	63%
Do you think our students eat healthy?	33%	67%

The nutritionist was very open to student feedback and discussed each of the student questions on the student created survey. She thought they were all excellent questions and felt the students deserved having a response to each question. She gave our class a wide assortment of additional resources, brought snacks, and gave the class some games for future outdoor activities.

Furthermore, she asked me about possibly starting a student menu advisory board at the school.

The resources were phenomenal; the students felt like they had been heard; and I learned a lot about the changes that were happening with school lunches nationwide. It was an overall success.

The students claimed they immediately saw a difference in the lunches and really felt like they were heard. I was skeptical because they thought the school lunches were different the next day, and I doubted it would change that fast. Still, even if the students only thought the lunches changed, their outlook on school lunch improved and, more importantly, perceptions about the impact of their voices in the school community improved. I am not sure the rest of the student and staff population noticed the change, but my sixth graders felt like they had been heard.

My students wrote thank you letters to the nutritionist and an article for the local newspaper modeled after an article I read to them about the power of conversations in the community. Gabby wrote in her thank you note, “I am happy that you wrote down some of our requests for our favorite foods. Thank you for listening to us about our opinions for school lunch and listening to our ideas” (March 3, 2012). Another student wrote, “you listened and understood how we felt about the school lunches.” The notes reflected their sincere gratitude for being noticed and heard by someone with the power to activate the changes they were hoping to instate.

In May, the nutritionist returned to my school, and the students were given the opportunity to be official pizza taste testers as part of the student menu advisory board. They tasted three types of pizza and evaluated it based on taste and appearance. They provided written and verbal feedback for the school lunch menu for the next school year.

As a result of their participatory action research project that developed from their applied theatre role-play, my sixth grade language arts students who were in danger of failing the state

language arts exam impacted future lunch menus for entire district. Applied theatre helped me to create impactful culturally responsive lessons that inspired my students to voice their opinions in a clear and respectful manner; therefore, I concluded that applied theatre was successful in improving feelings of student self-efficacy, community, and understanding while also improving important language arts skills such as voice, word choice, public speaking, and comprehension. While applied theatre is not a replacement for direct language arts instruction, my students' literacy skills were certainly enhanced in their interactions with one another, classmates, and the larger community. By engaging my students in an issue relevant to them, they were more interested in reading and writing about the issue. These findings concur with Gallagher and Service (2010) that, for my students who were in danger of failing the state language arts exam applied theatre "acted as a catalyst in exploring new pathways to teaching and learning" (p. 251).

I believe the most powerful implications of this project for my students and the school district were best expressed through the voices of my students. My students wrote small group articles for the local newspaper explaining the whole applied theatre process through their eyes from starting with a conversation to changing the school lunches for the district. While I took the lead in compiling small group articles into one cohesive article, their words remained the core of the article. The article, seen below, allowed the students to tell their story and demonstrate their powerful voice.

School Lunches Changed by Students

Picture this: you're a student at [a middle school]. You are getting a school lunch at the cafeteria. You get a piece of pizza.

You sit down and notice the pizza tastes like cardboard dipped in

grease. You see your friends look at their food with disgust.

Would you eat that? NO!!!!

Have you ever had a bad lunch? We, as loveable sixth graders, hated our school lunches. A few weeks ago, our class decided to do something about this problem we have been facing in our school. Here at [our school], it all started with just one conversation about school problems. Then, we started talking about our lunch and how it affects us. We started with short conversations that lead to deep discussions. We had a lot of questions like: What do the lunch ladies put in the food? What kind of nutrition is in the school lunches? Are the lunch ladies as sanitary as they should be? Do they serve good food? We made skits and read articles from Teenbiz3000 to help us get more depth into our understanding of this issue. We learned more about what happens in other states and countries and realized that we weren't the only people that think school lunch is an issue.

Next, we decided that we wanted to talk to more people. After that, we created a survey to see if others agreed or disagreed with our class. Two hundred ninety-one students and staff took the survey. We analyzed all of the surveys and found out that sixty-three out of two hundred ninety-one people that took the survey don't like school lunch, and fifty-six people said the lunches were unhealthy. We asked our teacher, if we could share this

information with someone. This led to the district nutritionist coming to our classroom.

On March 1, 2012, the nutritionist came to talk to us. It was the first time the nutritionist had ever come into our class, or anyone's class at our school. She wrote down requests that the class made and brought in food samples that the class could taste. She made a fruit cabob for us, and it was good. As we were eating the cabob, we got to see her collecting some ideas for our new school lunches. She thought that it was a good idea to do a survey to see what people like and what they don't. Additionally, she taught us how to make good, healthy choices about our lunches. She listened to us, to our ideas.

We learned many great things in this lunch project. We are so proud of what we have accomplished, and we continue to look at the school lunch menu to see the changes. It all started with one conversation.

I submitted the above article to the newspaper, and even though it was never printed, the students were extremely proud of themselves. The newspaper editor commended them on their project and commented on the power of one conversation.

What We Learned

The most profound thing that emerged from the experience was the idea of applied theatre as a pedagogical tool. Through the applied theatre approach, my class played games that increased students' comfort level, listening, focus, and communication. The role-playing associated with

applied theatre allowed students to take on perspectives different from their own, opening them up to learn more about the issue instead of keeping a one-dimensional view. Beyond the development of dispositions and skills, my students became so actively engaged in the school lunch experience that the focus moved beyond teacher-initiated applied theatre to authentic student-directed inquiry. Applied theatre was the tool to empower students to engage in deep conversations and reflective practices about an issue relevant to their lives.

As a teacher researcher, this study has had an enormous impact on my practice. I became an “accidental” leader in my school because of my students’ accomplishments. I never went around the building boasting about what I was doing in my classroom. Instead, my students’ work spoke for itself; it did not go unnoticed. The same week that the district nutritionist visited my class for the first time, other teachers within my school began to notice what was happening in my classroom (Teacher research journal, March 9, 2012). I immediately had two teachers wanting to do co-teaching projects with my class. One teacher wanted to do an art and poetry project to help students to voice their perspectives of art pieces; the other wanted to do a science experiment for my students to see how lab rats are affected by being fed sugar water opposed to milk. She thought the lab rat experiment would give the students a deeper understanding of how nutrition affects the ability to focus, behave, etc. Unfortunately, the lab rat experiment was too big a project to do at the end of the year, and my school did not have any lab rats. Instead, my class completed the art and poetry project with an eighth grade class during April and May; these projects provided student voice and perspectives to posters of famous pieces of art that are displayed throughout the building. The students worked together to explain what character values were displayed in the artwork as well as wrote poems to express the core emotions and concepts of the art pieces. The invitation for my sixth grade class to do this project with the

eighth graders was a direct result of their YPAR project.

Implications for Educators

Applied theatre coupled with culturally responsive teaching and YPAR has the potential to transform education. My experiences described above document the positive outcomes in student voice, community building, and engagement in the classroom. When students are actively engaged in their learning, educators have the greatest opportunity to see academic gains. I recommend other educators try using a few applied theatre techniques in their classroom as a complement to other instructional strategies.

Implications for ESL Educators

While this study was not conducted in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, the approach described in this article would be relevant and effective in the ESL classroom or any culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. The integration of YPAR, culturally responsive teaching, and applied theatre provide rich opportunities for student engagement in the learning process. Applied Theatre and YPAR would provide ESL students with opportunities to develop social and academic language, explore the importance and impact of word choice and audience, and develop community across languages and cultures. Most importantly, perhaps, are the opportunities for developing student voice and agency that applied theatre and YPAR could provide.

Conclusions and Next Steps

By using the language arts classroom as a stage for applied theatre, students can play several roles. They become the backstage crew as they develop background knowledge and add to that knowledge base through active research. They work together as a production team considering how each audience member will view their work, and they adjust their language and presentation

to meet the needs of all of their audience. Throughout the entire process, each student has a chance to stand out from the chorus as a lead by providing individual perspectives that add to the overall understanding of complex issues that affect the students' community. The teacher assumes the role of the director who helps the students reach their potential by facilitating different exercises and asking thought provoking questions that help the students gain new perspectives and consider other views.

Applied theatre provides a new possibility for active engagement in the classroom. It can help students develop new perspectives, learn to work with others, gain a sense of community, increase confidence through student voice, and obtain a greater comfort level with public speaking. As a result of using applied theatre in my classroom, I saw my students become more intentional with their word choice, which showed a greater understanding of coding switching between social and academic language. They grew as active readers and descriptive writers who demonstrated voice because they were engaged in the topic and the content. The story of my students' work with schools lunches and the parallel development of their engagement with and growth in the language arts curriculum suggests the tremendous potential of applied theatre with all students, but especially with those who are linguistically, culturally, or academically marginalized in our school communities.

Something magical happens when we allow students to freely express their ideas and teach them how to articulate those ideas, so other people will listen and hear. The applied theatre process is not for everyone. It requires a lot of time to help the students to develop a level of comfort, and it requires the teacher to be extremely flexible and willing to discard the lesson plan when students latch onto an idea that really drives them. For those willing to take the risk, using

applied theatre, culturally responsive teaching, and YPAR has the potential to transform a community beyond the confines of the classroom.

On day one of my class, my students had built a huge fortress of self-doubt; they had built walls of belief in their inferiority and stupidity. My students lacked confidence in their academic ability, but this project allowed them to deconstruct those walls. My students felt successful, empowered, and heard.

I challenge you to see what walls you can tear down. What will your class build instead? An active community of learners? A new perspective? A change? The possibilities are endless, if you are willing to take the risk.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Meg N. Troxel is currently a Secondary ESL Specialist and instructional coach in Indianapolis Public Schools. Ms. Troxel conducted her teacher research as part of the Master's program at Butler University with the support of Dr. Brooke Kandel-Cisco, her thesis advisor.

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