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To learn how to learn as a subject

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Abstract

Problem Statement: The use of a concept like learning in policy documents for Higher Education is said to serve instrumental goals (Biesta 2010). Who is the subject and where? The existential perspective in drama seems to represent the total opposite to instrumentality. When aiming for depth in the studies for future making professionals in a context of formal education, concepts as well as actions need to be elaborated. **Research Questions:** 1. How could drama pedagogy as a reference point offer an alternative interpretation of learning in Higher Education? 2. Which drama-pedagogical tools foster students to position themselves as learners and teachers of other students? **Purpose of the Study:** To explore features of a drama approach to research-based education and demonstrate how fostering this perspective in daily activities for teachers and students in HE enables positioning of being subjects. **Research Methods:** This study is undertaken by a directed analysis of literature review (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The study is a result of a cumulative process based on our former empirical papers (Silius-Ahonen & Gustavson 2011, 2013). **Findings:** Demonstration through drama exposes knowledge, skills and values authentically to a reader with drama literacy. Fostering students to be able to observe and interpret professional contextual know-how requires a pedagogical design where learners can switch between the “mantle of the expert” (Heathcote 1986) and the curious exploring child. **Conclusions:** We argue that the existential perspective in the arts opens up a deeper insight and a human response to other people, salient for a professional context.

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1. Introduction

Higher Education of today is framed by policy documents (see Drudy & al. 2008). The notion of learning regarding them is ambivalent. On one hand we find that the activity of the learner is emphasized, on the other processes narrowed to meeting up specific outcomes are named learning without any notion of activities in the process of coming to know.

This paper is a result of a cumulative process deriving from our former papers (Silius-Ahonen & Gustavson 2011, 2013). Analyzing and inventorying our earlier experience we have gathered a material of five articles concerning drama and learning. Hence our purpose is to explore features of a drama approach to research-based education and demonstrate how fostering this perspective in daily activities for teachers and students in Higher Education enables positioning of being subjects. We find continuous search for guidelines in reflect upon our assumptions and actions in class to be important, this in helping our drama sessions in class to be as research-based as all other pedagogical activities.

Our research questions are:

1. How could drama pedagogy as a reference point offer an alternative interpretation of learning in Higher Education?
2. Which drama-pedagogical tools foster students to position themselves as learners and teachers of other students?

2. Background

Our departure in two of our previous studies sets the stage for this paper.

2.1 First paper - To learn for competence

In our paper at the conference 2011 (Silius-Ahonen & Gustavson 2012), we focused on the learning potential in drama. When working in a professional university with competence-based curricula and formulated learning outcomes we wished to introduce a drama workshop in a course of health promotion for third year multi-professional students. Our overall intention was to problematize the forms of examination in our own context of professional higher education. By introducing alternative forms of examinations we actualized the notion of knowledge and learning practices.

Results from our empirical study showed that the approach did enlarge the range of learning for the students. Both in the analysis of the evaluation of the students and in their own self-reflection according to the outcome of the course we established the fact that a demonstration of knowledge through a dramatic presentation met the demands formulated in learning outcomes for the course.

Focus group interviews with students and the teachers involved showed that dealing with art gives a spillover effect. According to Bachtin (1986) aesthetics and all its expressions manifest humanity. One could say that when dealing with arts this spillover effect is inevitable. Sometimes these effects are found to be the core result of a drama process and it is satisfactory for a process-orientation. However, in this study (paper 1.) we aimed to prove how drama as a form of examination can be used in higher professional education to assess students' competencies regarding course targets. Drama as a participatory art form enabled students to get to know each other better through the collaborative nature of working. They especially emphasized how they also became acquainted with the teachers in a closer way. The students expressed that the process itself had influenced them and broadened their understanding of themselves as well as of the matter itself (here health promotion).

We found interesting for further elaboration how the roles of the teachers in the process differed from ordinary classroom teaching. The performance of students combining cognitive, meta-cognitive, ethical - existential, inter-

personal and intra-personal skills within a professional capacity required a reading of verbal and non-verbal signs. One could worry about the fact that drama training was a pre-supposition for an aesthetic reading of these performances, assessed in the examination. Another kind of reading could for example have considered the entertainment value rather than the students understanding of an article (the course target). Wishing to enhance the use of drama in the curriculum we were aware of the fact that years of drama experience cannot be expected from colleagues whose support we however needed for establishing the idea of drama as a form of knowledge that was legitimate in Higher Education. Through examination results and feedback from students and teachers we could still act with confidence. The following courses with the same team of teachers confirmed the results (poster presentation on conference 2013).

Higher Education with its tradition of abstraction on one hand and professional education with its interest in concretizing on the other, offer an intriguing frame for applying the arts outside the artistic domain. However, whether abstraction means thinking without body and the concrete takes instrumental or technical skills as a basis for assessment, the above mentioned ethical, existential and aesthetic values easily become overlooked. We argue that a university context aiming for becoming a fruitful environment for exploring the world and reasoning on the human dimension applied drama and participatory drama offer activities to enhance that process.

2.2 Second paper - Subjects invite subjects

In our following paper (S-A & G 2014) we focused on both teachers' and students' learning processes. Our empirical study was linked to a wider pedagogical development process in our university where the gap between declarations and realization in practice was put the fore.

Our empirical material was gathered in relation to a course of elderly care where students' critical thinking and self-awareness considering their positions as future makers, was the core aim. We asked "what does learner need to know to enlarge her perspectives?" and directed to the student group: "Who am I as a change agent?" Method for collecting data was done by a participatory action research approach including questioner for 24 students. Method for analyzing data was done through an abductive reasoning between the theory and the empirical data in order to create a narrative where the different subjective forms of positioning where given voice.

Among alternative approaches facilitating this aim, drawing and drama tools were applied. When students positioning themselves in different roles related to clients in nursing homes (relative, staff members of different kind, researcher, politician; see Heathcote 1986 for distances in role taking) they expressed in the interviews how this experience widened not only their understanding of the client dilemmas but made them realize their own responsibility. The drawing they did of how they imagined themselves as old narrowed the distance to the clients. Positioning in different roles enabled them to oscillate between closeness and critical awareness.

In the end of the course students performed their theoretical and practical knowledge in making a drama performance. The practical teachers from the placements (nursing homes, centers of elderly care) formulated afterwards what they had learnt from the audience perspective. According to them they could see themselves acting out their attitudes as well as their beliefs. Their notions seemed to contradict the statement that a trained eye sees more and deeper. However, in our analysis we did not look for either – or outcomes. Our conclusion was that when assessing students a whole range of aspects is to be taken into consideration. While experiencing, enjoying and being touched by a drama performance (in this setting) is a matter of empathy and recognition.

For a teacher to become subject in his/her teaching process the notion of learning is crucial. Is it a matter of “the other”? Is a teacher position a vulnerable power position? According to Freire (1974) subjectivity is everyone’s call for life. The tradition from Adult education and the one from the idea of schooling differ. To be able to mentor students to realize their potential and take responsibility for contributing to the future, teachers cannot themselves act like objects. This is a problematic process as one has to admit not knowing before, not being right, lacking some insight. The self of the person is activated differently whether you regard *learning* as being put in the position of the object or an opportunity to personal growth. We do not picture ourselves as objects where somebody “makes us do things” from above, rather we explore to find out what we actually need to know. When positioning yourself as a teacher as the one “who knows” and the processes of coming to know something that concern “the other”, the students, one becomes critical to the idea that learning might be an act of transformation for one’s enrichment.

2.3 To learn how to learn as a subject

In our current paper we concentrate on the notion of learning from a drama perspective. In the earlier papers we have argued that learning as a notion concerns both teachers and students as a process of recognition. Whether one more or less automatically associates learning to instrumentality the idea of applying arts become unnecessary. The processes are time-consuming, open-ended and difficult to control. However, in professional education values are as important as skills and knowledge; together they construct competence. To be able to take charge of your conduct and not merely act accordingly to rules is a process of both socialization and subjectification, if one seeks to regard sustainable education as a value. In contemporary times of favoring individual choices, a student or a teacher easily miss-interpret subjectivity as individuality, where recognition of the other is not considered. The context for the courses we refer to in our studies dealt with health and social care why “the other” in a complex society becomes the core of professional conduct.

For teachers to find a common ground for exploring matters together with practical teachers as well as with students the idea of learning as a subject became an issue to explore. In participatory activities as drama practice, the inter-subjective parts of the processes of inquiry are in itself a site for mutual experiential learning processes. A teacher, who gets involved in participatory activities that touch subjectivity, learns more about being a subject herself. This is a complete turnover from the traditional concept of learning that governs the arrangement of Higher Education.

3. Method - literature review

Method used in this paper is a directed content analysis in our literature review (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). This paper being a cumulative process building on our earlier experiences and aiming for deep reflection directed us to literature review as the most suitable method. With this method we are able recognize how learning and drama is discussed and tackled in earlier research. Conducting a literature review offers a method where we are able to assess our experiences with current state of drama pedagogy and by which we can identify areas for further development. Our criteria for including articles in this analysis was; topic being about drama pedagogy and learning, published after 2003. Criteria that were not given attention were research method or size of population. In table 1 we shortly present the articles included in our analysis.

Table 1. Articles analyzed and numbered

Number	Titel of paper	Authors	Published
1	Creative pedagogy – supporting children’s creativity through drama	Toivanen, T., Halkilahti, L. & Ruismäki, H.	2013
2	Applied theatre at the heart of educational reform: An impact and sustainability analysis	Gallagher, K. & Service, I.	2010
3	From community theatre to critical management studies – A drama contribution to reflective learning	Beirne, M. & Knight, S.	2007
4	Reflective learning with drama in nursing education – a Swedish attempt to overcome the theory praxis gap	Ekebergh, M., Lepp, M. & Dahlberg, K.	2004
5	Theatre and pedagogy: using drama in mental health nurse education	Wasylo, Y. & Stickley, T.	2003

The first analysis for the selected papers was guided by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) towards content analysis. In the analysis we started by identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories aiming for answering our research questions. The second phase of the analysis we integrated our mutual experience and a former theoretical drama reading.

3.1. Presenting papers analyzed

Here follows a short presentation of the papers analyzed, their context and methods used. Article (1) is a theory-based article focusing on the relationship between children’s creativity and drama used in schools. Second article (2) is a report based on an intervention where the play *Danny, King of the basement* where preformed in 15 Canadian schools in order to raise students awareness about issues of poverty. Then third article (3) aimed at evaluating the contribution that theater and drama can make to active management learning and personal development. The method described in the article was a combination of innovative practices and quality assessments applied in workshops attempting to broaden students’ reflective capacities. The fourth (4) article developed a didactic model based on drama education and implemented it in nursing program with the aim at overbuilding the gap students can express between theory and praxis. The fifth (5) article analyzed advocated for the use of drama in mental health nurse education.

4. Findings and analysis

The purpose for our directed analysis of the literature was to highlight central concepts around learning and drama pedagogy. An abductive reasoning on the articles and other readings concerning the topics is structured around the notion of learning 4.1 and illuminating drama as a pedagogical tool mentioned in the articles 4.2. Finally we looked at how the authors refer to questions of subjects in relation to drama practice 4.3. from our own platform of experience and empirical material.

4.1. The notion of learning

In article nr 1. drama as support for creativity was elaborated. Enhancement of creativity in groups as creative communication focusing the processes is, we argue following the tradition of children’s natural activity and play as reference points. These underpinning points in drama education as well in the early publications of child drama

(Slade 1954, Siks 1958) and contemporary child pedagogy on a whole (see for example Dahlberg & al. 2014, Nordin -Hultman 2004) have had an impact on the interpretation of learning. Learning in pre-school and in leisure time offer an arena for drama where the practice is concrete as well as open for creative initiatives and imaginative actions. As is notified in the article learning environment becomes an interface of these processes. The authors argued indirectly for a broader understanding of the concept learning where environmental aspects, group activity and the role of tuition are examined in practice.

The second article is guided by another tradition; drama as an agent for change. The idea of making a better world by the applied and participatory drama derives from a melting point of approaches actualized in the late 1960ies. Critical theory, as formulated in the Frankfurter School; with Habermas, Marcuse, Adorno were central figures (Braanaas 1992) in combination with experimental theatre forms often in companies outside institutions laid a ground for deliberation through the arts in society. The influence from Paolo Freire (1974) and his adept in theatre, Augusto Boal (1979) has simultaneously both broadened the concept of learning, detached from the ideals of school to the ideals of society and put drama in the fore of the anticipated activities for that ideal. Stretching the aims for drama work to a world- wide dimension, the ecology of practices is emphasized (the sustainability). The impact concerns educational thinking where “making school better” contributes to the bigger picture. Still, the word learning as in “learning from the drama” is frequently used to express consciousness and comprehending analogy.

In the third article, drama as a critical perspective in education and its impact on understanding learning was discussed. With reference points to both community theatre and critical pedagogy the dramatic contribution to learning as reflection was highlighted. Arguing for a form of learning, not trainable nor controllable; mutual, open-ended and more immerse, the authors pointed to theatre as a kind technology to apply. Emphasizing an active approach to learning and notifying feasibility in realization the authors gave examples how drama seems to capture intensity.

In the fourth article, references were made both to epistemology and professional knowledge. The gap between theory and praxis was acknowledged as an educative dilemma. The concepts learning and didactics were both used from what one could call a Nordic understanding, where the presupposition is found to be another than in the English interpretation. From a life – world perspective towards professional competence the authors put drama with its tacitly embedded practice and embodied memory as an approach to learning. The two-world experience of fiction and reflection (see also Östern & Heikkinen 2001) and its affinity as such to a learning process was argued for.

The fifth article deals with drama pedagogical tools from the tradition we can call drama as education, a perspective that Bolton (1984) formulated. The authors also refer to an educative environment for a realization of this perspective. They present core skills and concrete tools according to drama and a reader outside the drama field might find this vocabulary technical. The tacit understanding in the article is however moving towards other characteristics. Skills mentioned are for example empathy and reflection. From that point we will move to the issue of tools in drama work.

4.2. The understanding of drama as a pedagogical tool

In drama practice students are invited to be someone else even if it may last only a short moment. In the world of fiction students have the opportunities to explore other emotions, ways of understanding and genres of talking and listening. Enabling this kind of response in students, learning is never seen as a mechanic or technical device. Instead, all articles above exemplify practices of this work; with children, pupils, students, adults. The notion of tools derives from the Russian humanist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and its application in drama rests on the belief that concrete actions shape the art form during time in space and that these actions are potentially educative.

In article four a didactic model aims to bridge theory and practice and the authors in article 3 stated that distancing potential in drama fosters dialogue and develops experiential learning where theory and practice are not separated. The interpretation of learning here contradicts old tradition in professional studies; that theory precedes practice. A saying among drama pedagogues “learning from experience” is compatible with numerous theories of learning, like Kolb (1984), Mezirov (2000). In article 4 the epistemological presupposition underpinning embodiment of thought and memory is still “to be done” and these doings can in this discussion act as a tool. Putting students in roles of closeness and distance stretches the learner’s capacity to understand from many perspectives. Switching these perspectives is also a meta – cognitive tool of brain stretching. In article 1, Toivanen & al. exemplified tools like observation and exploration which to their character are open-ended like the learning processes that were pointed out in the third article.

Both in the third and fourth article examples of conceptualization are mentioned (to understand and apply concepts; a way of thinking found for example in Boal 1979). Beirne and Knight (2007) suggest that attributes and skills like interpersonal communication are developed through drama. The ability to sensitively read and interpret events emerges and the authors emphasize drama’s ability to humanize management studies. Hence, opposing the detached fashion of conduct is even more strongly suggested in the fifth article. Gallagher & al. (2010) refer to the force of theatre where intersection and confrontation (conflict) “do not calcify the loops of imagination”. The aesthetic engagement becomes an intrinsic value of experiencing also from an audience. It helps the performer and the viewer to take on topics of importance (like poverty). The play became a pedagogical tool, a means of commitment. It providing content and had an impact on social relationships at school. The authors refer to Heathcote (1975/1984) and the idea of drama as representation of issues of concern.

Drama in classroom may also become a tool for articulating past experiences than might be even difficult to articulate, something that is discussed in the fifth article. Experiences that student might have or have been going through might be easier for them to act than talking or writing about. Hence drama is referred to almost as a therapeutic tool as working with drama in class becomes a tool for personal growth and process of learning weather about self or the world. As such drama also becomes tool for developing empathy and reflective practices. (Wasylo & Stickley, 2003:444).

4.3. Positioning as a subject in relation to drama practice

We are working in the context of social- and healthcare why students’ personal growth becomes a central issue in our analysis. Here we are discussing in what ways articles gave attention to students potential for being and becoming subjects in drama work.

Starting by referring to the fifth article where the authors write: *we argue that freedom to play (freedom to learn) is vital to personal growth* (Wasylo & Stickley, 2003:447). Hence, making drama sessions in classrooms in to therapeutic sessions is not an educative task. As the authors themselves point out the risk of confusing roles in these situations easily occur. However, J.L Moreno deserves credit for being the creator of many of the tools that are practiced outside psycho-drama. Similarly Boal’s (1979) Forum Theatre is applied as a tool in other than genres based on critical pedagogy. The mission for education rests on the belief that it requires a subject to be a learner, a one who examines and reflects upon herself and the matters of the world, knowledge issues. A pedagogical tool can, as Wasylo & Stickley advocate, challenge power positions. They claim that traditional environments inhibit the learning processes. As Toivanen & al. (2013) notify, environment is a part of the process that supports creativity. Atmosphere of permission and freedom is something that is felt by participants. Experiences from drama activities

in social interaction require courage to think and act in unconventional ways (op.cit. 1173.) The same courage is also required from teachers (Parker, 1998) why pedagogical development is about expansion of traditional teacher roles.

When affection and involvement moves to the center of learning (see Wasylko & Stickley, 2003) the student becomes the owner of her knowledge. Naturally she is not the single owner but having obtained and got access to areas of new understanding and insight, words like incorporation and embodiment found in Ekebergh & al. 2004 connote to both body in movement and placed actions.

Gallagher & Service (2010) highlight their experience of working with drama introducing the form to other teachers. The impact they found was that it provided new ways of constructing lessons at the school and also gave these teachers the kind of reference point which is needed for connecting lessons with each other (i.e. made education more sustainable). It could act as a catalyst in exploring new pathways to learning and teaching. The relations between students and teachers changed as the self-narratives of the students began to flourish. Our own experience (Silius-Ahonen & Gustavson 2012) demonstrates how students found that the presence of other teachers than the drama teacher during workshops had a great impact. These teachers of theoretical matters were engaged in doing things on the floor and together with them, not posing as experts but in other roles that demanded playfulness. The interest of applying drama in professional courses has also increased during four years.

For developing connections between teachers at the university and practical teachers the idea of practice guiding theory gives both partners more of “a mantle of the expert” than in a traditional model where theory preceded.

5. Conclusions

Students’ competence in professional conduct is an object for formal education and the articles demonstrate well, as our own experience, that drama work integrates theoretical and practical issues and values behind them. However, we argue that working with arts always moves beyond learning outcomes and professional competence. That however is the bonus, the results in our studies show that the educative purposes are possible to achieve.

In a reflective narrative we have presented reasoning on how a critical scrutiny of the concept learning as well confronts an instrumental view of the concept and challenges traditional procedures in Higher Education. We argue that the existential perspective in the arts opens up a deeper insight and a human response to other people, salient for one’s personal growth, well suited for a professional context. Facing constraints that have emerged outside a pedagogical context, Higher Education can find its mission when: 1. concepts of learning and knowledge are scrutinized by teachers; 2. Alternative designs of curricula and teaching environments are introduced and developed in this context.

Drama as a reference point does not merely provide but demands a process – thinking; demonstrating affinity to learning cycles. Combination of action and reflection, both in phases and interwoven, is analogue to the purpose for professional education. Regarding knowledge as changing and never neutral does not dismiss that studying is epistemic work. Enactment using the whole person engages body to act more sensitively when meeting “the other”.

Our next step in further investigations we will empirically examine how older students teach younger ones in tutorials. By placing students in the expert – role it changes power relationships between teacher and student. Placing teachers in situation where “the curious child” in her playfulness serves as an ideal makes it easier for students to take the role of teacher. Recognition of the learner in the teacher comes to presence in alternative ways

of which play is one. When teachers are able to swap the perspectives and move into different roles depending on the educative aim, student-teachers hopefully will try out their “mantle of expert” with courage.

The tools that drama pedagogy provides in genres of drama are applicable when values, encountering of others, collaborative and interactive skills are prerequisites for professional conduct. The interpretation of “tools” as means aiming for either or both complex and concrete interventions, they will be applied with pondering. The tools themselves challenge how learning processes and knowledge production relate to educative purposes. Tools make tacit learning visible and become a means for changing and enhancing practices. We argue that the existential perspective in the arts opens up a deeper insight and a human response to other people, salient for a professional context. Research on drama hence becomes research on education. Learning to learn as a subject – turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, leaving traces of hidden memory and personal touch – through drama processes expands human subjectivity.

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