The 5th Intercultural Arts Education Conference: Design Learning

To learn for competence and beyond – that is the question

Drama as assessment in higher education

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Abstract

Higher Professional Education provides a stage for developing new forms of examinations to better face the form of knowledge expected in today's complex working life. Drama pedagogy offers a rationale for enhancing collaborative practices of inquiry and social creativity. We argue that drama has a potential in Higher Education; one finding manifests that drama responds to learning outcomes, moreover, art always goes beyond what is formulated, towards meaning making. A third benefit we draw on demonstrates how drama exposes collaborative forms of assessment.

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1. Introduction

We explore how applied drama serves as assessment in higher education. The word assessment stands here for examination demarcated to a single exam or test situation. We are not reasoning on assessment theory and we leave out a discussion on discourses behind the construction of higher professional education. Our suggestion that drama functions for the purpose of assessing is grounded in its complexity, a feature equivalent to employment. The aim in the paper is to illuminate how art – in this case drama – bears a functional quality but moves beyond functionality by transcending boundaries. The boundaries we refer to are, how formal education is linked to the vocabulary of the Bologna Tuning process and how the social practice of planning, realizing and evaluating activities in higher education is realized as a space that avoids to be captured. The other consequence, that drama has a value when developing forms

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of examination is regarded a prospect for the future. Keeping this double perspective in mind rends us to display three different departures. We begin by setting the stage for the educative purposes behind, the context being the University of Applied Sciences. Which features in society are found to be fundamental to be considered when a professional education seeks its mission? Aiming to highlight the issue of examination of professional knowledge, we briefly raise following issues: the connection between examination and design of activities, the switch between individual and collaborative elaboration and the notion of knowledge and learning. Drama as departure is set as a home territory, an arena where the conference is inhabited. Staging elements of a territory in specific settings re-shapes and re-formulates the territory itself for further negotiation. We present our case study of drama as assessment and conclude with remarks for the purpose of enhancing collaborative learning outcomes as well as targeting issues beyond specific competences.

2. The-stage behind-promoting professional competences

Working life provides a stage behind assessment. Education is preparing students for working life, and what a working life is about. The health and social care setting offers a colorful mixture of the individual practitioner’s preparedness, the employing organization’s demands, the government’s requirements and clients and patients’ expectations and needs. The ongoing interplay of these interests creates a continuous challenging stage behind education. Our case study is situated in the context of work in health- and social care setting which is re-structuring continuously. We are facing demographic shift in Europe, rapidly changing technological environment, and a “new set” of clients entering health and social care organizations; with different expectations, requirements and knowledge about their own treatments, professionals facing turbulent changes. Further work content in itself is challenging; working with patients and clients who are especially vulnerable, which are in need of help and which is sometimes suffering and in pain. Since this work setting is changing beneath our feet every day so are also the competences required by staff in order to meet these changes. Our current development project at Arcada, University of applied science, has emerged from a need of reclaiming the vocabulary of pedagogy in education. The reason behind that claim is the need to strengthen students’ readiness as well as the universities’ ability to meeting future need of this backstage setting. New competences are required for professionals as they are asked to work in multi professional teams as good team players and at the same time working individually with anon-going self-developing agenda. Goffman (1959) started up a new branch in social science as well as in organizational studies when entering drama as a metaphor for analysis. Mangham (2005) describes how he used drama in management courses as a tool for raising the level of consciousness among managers and also how “altercasting” was used as a way of illustrating how ones act also affected the others in the play. Drama in order to lean is nothing new, whereas drama as assessing learning has been given limited attention.

Our students were preparing for becoming and acting as social pedagogues, physiotherapists, nurses and sport instructors. They were in their last year of studies before graduating. Their field covers work in hospitals, institutions, private companies and work as promoters and developers of health and wellbeing. The becoming of a professional identity is involving tacit and explicit knowledge. Part of these students are heading for management positions, but even so all are about to enter a working field were multi-professional competences are vital.

As these students graduate and enter the professional stage and enter new roles. At the crossroad from student to professional lays a role transition. Learning becomes life-long leaning and linking practice to theory and evidence becomes an on-going story. Still, students are to some extent treating theoretical knowledge as distant from practical one. Bridging theoretical inquiry into working life creates a challenge.
This could mean that there would be a lack of competences for acting and re-acting in the highly complexes and changing work setting of health and social work.

3. Drama as a stage for learning and living

Art deals with aesthetic processes; connecting senses to sense. Drama is concerned with making meaning of experience through fiction. The language of fiction provides education with an artistic lens where everyday actions and talk is placed in a frame of significance than the obvious. These features of drama pedagogy; a work with fiction, the use of imagination, the body and the esthetic meaning making processes will guide the following exhibit. The human ability to grasp both future and past in the moment of presence and playing with time and space is a dramatic accomplishment. Distancing what is at hand and engagement in the situation is a core paradox in drama.

Nissley and colleagues (2004) challenge the functionalist approach of the use of drama where its political potential is left out. We see the importance of moving beyond functionalism although the educational purposes are fore grounded. Pursuing learning by these means we can point at learning outcomes but also forecast something beyond the commodities. In our point of view, when working within the educational setting, the form of knowledge that is generated through this kind of work is emphasized, while other aims are actualized in the professional theatre, in organizations, in therapeutic work etc. The poetics of drama is still the potential that postulates that fictive drama touches the drama of life. The application of the theatrical medium to a variation of educational purposes does not aim to reduce drama’s artistic features to an instrumental level, as it would contradict the principle of arts education.

Knowledge emerging from the process of drama is therefore connected to the strengths and limitations of the medium. As Dewey (1934, 200-201) puts it “the medium is a mediator...what makes material a medium is that it is used to express meaning which is other than it is in virtue of its bare physical existence.” In Nordic drama pedagogy, drama worlds are regarded as learning areas. This notion is representative for one of the discourses in drama, a Nordic drama pedagogy which serves as a framework for our study. Strongly influenced by works from the English-speaking world it still has, during six decades, conceptualized drama practice in a Nordic perspective. The notion of learning corresponds with how learning is viewed in the sociocultural approach with strong support from Swedish child pedagogy and a Finnish interpretation of animation sociocultural. Vygotsky’s concept “the stage” (1978, Veresov 2004) refers the theatre stage literally, his references being literature and drama. To understand Vygotsky we need to understand theatre. Paavolainen (1995, 11) quotes Jerzey Grotowski “A man of knowledge has at his disposal the doing and not ideas or theories...He can understand it only after he does it. Knowledge is a matter of doing.” A “conflict on stage” referred to knowledge production in sociocultural theory lacks the connotation to trouble often linked to learning activity. By contrast, conflict is the tension that sets into motion, triggers learners to explore. Learning is a process is deeply rooted in our humanity. Learning viewed as an exciting foray of life practice bears therefore a transformative potential. Exposing students to a creative space pursuing their own activities promotes their positioning as subjects in their own learning processes, appears as a condition for transformation. Transformation, defined as the alteration or change in person or culture where understanding turns into something new or else by expansion, without rejecting the point of departure, shapes a possibility zone in education. Transformative processes are triggered within the zone of liminality, where knowledge claims and imaginative creativity are “clashing on the stage” (Silius-Ahonen, 2005).

Heikkinen, 2002 (title of dissertation)
Østern & Heikkinen (2001) coin the concept “aesthetic doubling” as a perspective in drama pedagogy. They argue that aesthetic doubling demystifies artistic learning, referring to, among others, O’Toole’s (1992) notion of “double tension”. Questions of authentic power and control in relation to the imaginative interaction and the situation at hand are exposed. We wish to add that an extension of the concept learning to meaning making embraces the similar dialectic. The process of devising and discovering is grounded in a double-sided awareness. O’Toole (1992, 2) defines process in drama as “negotiating and re-negotiating the elements of dramatic form, in terms of the context and purposes of the participants”. The students in their reflections in drama settings explore matters by using metaphors, not scientific conceptualizations. In this way the students form ways of thinking and enactments that are articulated within the artistic language.

Drama as a learning experience is process – oriented and conducted in collaborative workshops. The fictional world which appears through people’s imagination is simultaneously present with the material and tangible situation. A drama pedagogical tool which characterizes its own rationale is a conscious shift of perspective. This concerns role taking perspectives, time – space dialogue, closeness and distance between involvement in and reflection upon issues etc. The shifts of perspective facilitate the student into broader repertoires of professional behavior and deeper understanding. When questioning real problems and societal conflicts, drama introduces topics of world – making quality.

Human experience is located somewhere which actualizes the significance of bodily action. What does it mean when we say that knowledge is embodied? Embodied cognition² is given special focus. As students were bodily expiring learning they were also mentally expiring. According to Harquail (2010) embodied cognition assumes that an individual continually “reconstructs or construes and expresses the concept that he or she uses to understand their world... in addition, this knowledge that cannot be verbally expressed resides in our bodies”. Knowledge produced in drama sessions relates to bodily repertoires casted in the setting where enactments manifest “what is to be confirmed”. Body placed as a silent site for tacit knowledge is established in reasoning on professional knowledge. What is to be highlighted in ours is acting out theoretical knowing. Tcrrijoki (2004) points out that the task of drama is active. It does not mirror life; it’s a means of thinking and structuring it. The trying out and reconstructing imaginatively involves a whole person, including body and mind.

The theatre director and animator socio-cultural, Augusto Boal (1979) emphasizes the link between thinking and performing in action. He relates this to how habitual behavior shapes conventional thinking. Mechanical repetition of actions and words, proceeding “as usual” fails in introducing alternatives. It becomes an effort to enlarge the scope of reflective inner dialogues habitual behavior like sitting down, listening and writing - how important they naturally are in our society - orientates thinking. The relationship between the range of bodily expressions and mental creativity, grounds Boal’s drama work for empowerment and critical reflection. One of the conventions he uses with participants (actors and amateurs) is to shape bodily images of concepts which highlights the connection between body and mind and opens up the zone of inquiry.

Drama pedagogy offers tools, conventions and narratives to promote imaginative thinking and aesthetic elaboration. These conventions charge the participants and engage them on a personal level. The epistemic endeavor required for exploring theoretical issues through an artistic medium is constructed on playfulness. In best cases this kind of exploration manages to enlarge the scope of possible solutions to a problem and thereby both contribute to a professional field and inspire innovative thinking modes. Breaking the convenience zone is at stake. Whether the teacher finds this too challenging for him/her the potential in drama as meaning making might never be touched.

²people’s capacity to process information, draw conclusion and interact with the world
By the use of imagination as a means of coping with reality as a counterpart in aesthetic meaning making (Vygotsky, 1995), drama becomes a means for critical examination as well as for emotional experience. “Playing betwixt and between”, Turner’s (1982) own words for opening the concept liminality has become a metaphor for the field of drama in education (Østern & Heikkinen, 2001). A drama-as education – pioneer Dorothy Heathcote (1926-2011) puts focus in drama on “discovery at this moment”, employing past experiences and imagination to create a living picture of life, involving other participants rather than onlookers. To be in action, living through situations the participant commits himself/herself to the drama, he/she will discover the implications of the situation and his/her own actions. According to Heathcote (1976) “we take the human condition and we isolate a factor to bring it under our view and therefore we must distort. We have pulled something out of its general shape so that we can become aware of it” (in Eriksson, 2009, 210).

4. Between stages: a study from a platform of triple tension

In agreement on the ambiguity of the concept “knowledge” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the team has to decide on what knowledge claims they find crucial and how to relate them to student performance. Knowledge produced through visual means; through narratives or bodily performance concede different interpretations of a matter. The European Reference Framework of key competences demands the designing team, to find and formulate criteria for a successful demonstrating of the known. The challenge for the academic staff is to declare their position towards what counts as knowledge in this formal educational setting. Paying attention to the nouns knowing, the known and knowledge and their limitations in comparison to the verbs to know, to inquire, to make meaning, a rhetoric discrepancy appears. Presenting “the known” is also a great demand for a student as she has to adapt her understanding and skills to a given format. Written exams belong to a genre where the student announces access to theoretical statements and her interpretation of them. A student in higher education is often asked to “reason on...” and whether the student lacks independence, she easily fails when copying from her memorization. The skill of interpretation, articulating knowledge, is seldom trained in relation to the subject matter at hand. Training skills separately from theory, which often is the case in professional education, widens the sphere where students seek for connections to make sense – and find them. Students agentive visions as meaning makers might also clash with the formulated learning outcomes.

The challenges for new competences among personnel in health and social care settings are not unfamiliar to educators. However the challenge is and has been enhancing social interaction over individualistic progress, enabling transferring theoretical papers into practice and preferably in an enjoyable way. The limitations of traditional written exams have been widely discussed. Whereas this kind of audit procedure tend to not only miss its target, being learning processes on individual, social and societal levels, but also tends to back-fire as institutionally routine requiring extensive control and resources.

A sociocultural approach to knowledge focuses the activity within the knowing and coming to know. According to Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2002) these activities are regarded as mediated which refers to the cultural space between man and material. The cultural resources available, the material at hand and the semiotic artifacts within a practice in which they are deployed (Wells, 2002, 3) constitute a platform for learning. Among the cultural resources, formal education creates a specific tension. Formal

§ The word performance refers to student accomplishment when in italic. With reference to performance studies and drama education the denotation is completely another as it does not refer to assessment but to performing arts. Writing about how performance becomes performance requires this specification.
education should meet up with expectations from society. In professional education working life is a partner in the construction of curricula. Formative assessment carried out within a sociocultural tradition contradicts the measurement discourse (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008).

By designing platforms for students to produce knowledge of a specific area (a “material”) striving for coherence between the platform and the form of knowledge is emphasized. The tension from disciplinary knowledge claims on one hand and EQF, The European Qualifications Framework, standards on the other demand a design of examination that make it possible for the students to articulate knowledge coherent to how it has been represented in the design of studies. Designing through which media has the student a chance to demonstrate “the known” and through which lens has the ones who examine a chance to notify this demonstration is in itself a creative process. The social practice in higher education shapes with sufficient time and negotiation spent a community of practice. Procedures that communities decide to use (or just repeat “as usual”) uncover social nature of knowing. Processes of signifying and communicating are not formulated in the documents that accompany learning and teaching activities. Still, the creation of semiotic symbolic and tangible artifacts shapes for the students a hidden, third tension in learning processes between agency and structure.

5. Case study

Material was collected during two separate extensive courses: Wellbeing at work (10cr) which was conducted during the autumn 2010 and again during the autumn 2011. The cohort of students in the interdisciplinary course, Wellbeing at work, represented 28 students 2010 and 17 students participating 2011. The design of examination changed from the first year to the second due to response and feedback. In 2010 the drama part played a minor role in assessing when in 2011 the past experience made it possible for the teacher team to trust the new form of assessment, why we present results from 2011.

The learning outcomes for the selected course were for the students to: “acquire advanced skills on an individual-, group- and society level about well-being at work” and “for the student to develop innovative skills about how to perform a working perspective that will stimulate well-being at workplaces”. The students were divided into 4 different groups by the teachers. In this course 4 teachers were participating and one drama teacher guiding the students in a workshop and as an assessor. In the drama workshop both teachers and students participated. Each group of students were given one, by the teacher selected, scientific article to read and work around and finally dramatize about. The articles were distributed to the students one month before the assessment, the drama, was to be conducted. The drama was to be 30 minutes and presented for both the teachers and the other students. Each group went on working with the assignment in quite different manners. Some of the groups did contact the teachers for consultation about the reading and dramatizing the article whereas the others decided to work with less external consultation. This part of the course consisted of:
1. Reading one scientific article on health promotion selected by the teachers, each group received different articles.
2. Peer negotiation on the contents with other students in smaller groups
3. Preparing a drama where the core findings in the articles are articulated and expressed
4. Performing drama in class for an audience of other student and the teacher team with a feedback discussion right after the drama in class, each student participating.
5. A separate final reflective occasion where the process of learning media were made conscious through a discussion on form and content

The data collection consisted of ongoing field notes of an ongoing stream of consciousness about what was happening, separate discussions with the 4 teachers taking part in this course (one discussion in the beginning of the course and a second session after completion of the course). Small group discussions
with the student during preparation and in the concluding café session contributed to the empirical material. Feedback and reflections on students’ learning during the workshop and process was documented and presented in table 1.

To shed light on our specific research question: “how does drama function as an assessment instrument in this specific course an exhibit of three kinds of collected data follows below.

5.1. The assessment session

Table 1. Grading dramas in relation to learning outcomes on a scale from 1 to 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-stage</td>
<td>Managed to use drama conventions to an admirable extent. The students felt competent on-stage, the approach left out some potential in article.</td>
<td>Demonstrated some lack of confidence in the medium; the students used also other means as writing on the flap.</td>
<td>Managed to depict the ambiguity within the article (about critical thinking) off-stage. Internal power relationships was unfolded in their co-acting</td>
<td>Used drama conventions in two different ways. On one hand they illuminated the philosophical article to its depth; on the other they were scaffolding the concepts more traditionally. Approach involved the audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-stage</td>
<td>Their collaborative drama preparation spread enthusiasm across the “lights” to the audience.</td>
<td>The courage to try out more within the drama would also have made the group more confident on-stage, relying on each other.</td>
<td>They also unconsciously added some difficulties within the group preparation in their drama.</td>
<td>Taking care of each other through the process was shown as support in their co-acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind-stage</td>
<td>Their discussion afterwards connected their drama to the course content; the depth in the article was not fully appreciated.</td>
<td>Their strength was the way they conducted the discussion afterwards where they succeeded in involving the audience to reflect on article</td>
<td>This also had an impact on the discussion afterwards; questioning whether the audience had understood “correctly”.</td>
<td>Their weakness was unpreparedness in the discussion to make the audience reflect on article. They managed to improvise in situ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 4 student groups performed their – successful - dramas and conducted a reflective discussion with the audience afterwards. The notes in table 1 do not give the full picture but demonstrate the criteria given in advance:

- On-stage criterion: In what way does the student group demonstrate the use of drama conventions and means generated from the medium to illustrate their understanding of the article?
- Off-stage criterion: In what way does the group demonstrate the co-activity? Off-stage role taking concerns engagement and alignment in the whole process from reading to performing
- Behind-stage criterion: How does the group demonstrate the reflection in action so that the theoretical material is made manifest within the drama in connection to the professional field?

In the on-stage setting all teachers (4) gave their feedback and the drama teacher (1) gave her response from the assessor’s perspective (above).

5.2. Learning café session

In the concluding learning café setting students responded to a core question: what did I learn in this process? All students contributed orally and the drama teacher documented all utterances. The analysis
made by the co-authors put emphasis on the genre as a form of knowledge, the negotiation process, ability to connect to the professional field and the hidden potential in art as a means for personal growth.

Table 2: Student citations categorized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drama as a form of knowledge</th>
<th>Socially construction of knowledge through negotiation</th>
<th>Contextually situated professional competences</th>
<th>Personal growth from the field of experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To widen one’s perspective</td>
<td>Take other persons’ personalities in consideration</td>
<td>To promote the atmosphere in a working place</td>
<td>To climb over one’s convenience one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To open one’s eyes</td>
<td>Appreciate new dimensions in other people</td>
<td>To co-operation in working place would be enhanced</td>
<td>Human, fun; drama is fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To put oneself in another’s shoes</td>
<td>To come closer to teachers during the course</td>
<td>Drama for employers wellbeing days</td>
<td>To dare more, take own space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All drama does not happen on-stage</td>
<td></td>
<td>Can be used in therapeutic settings</td>
<td>A means to get to know oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make one’s voice concrete</td>
<td></td>
<td>A means for elaborating taboos and difficult issues</td>
<td>To get acquainted with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To express more clearly</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trying out a professional role</td>
<td>To be more relaxed when expressing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. Field notes from the teacher team

The data collection, on-going field notes and separate discussions with the 4 teachers taking part in these courses gave following findings. Teacher 1: How interesting it was watching students especially students of physiotherapy engaged in embodied cognitions in which students own bodies are being used and put on display, all so different from anatomy lectures and exercises in which others bodies are constantly placed under the spotlight. Teacher 2: It was good to find drama as a medium creating direct links to representation of learning outcomes and also for the content itself building up communicative competences. Teacher 3: The way in which students took care of each other on the stage, helping each other (as some of them were nervous) I saw as an act of caring. Teacher 4: The first year (2010) less effort was put by the teachers on underlining for the students the potential and imaginary power veiled in drama performance and some of the first year drama were reproducing some of the society structures and gender perspectives. With very little guidance on the drama as potentially imaginary, totally different plays were created. All of the 4 teachers were also agreeing on the positive additional effect this kind of assessment had on the teaching team. We were all enjoying the assessment and this course gave all of us teachers, extra positive energy, something that does happen far too seldom. One of the texts which one student group was working around was a doctoral thesis on Aristotle’s virtues connected to health promotion in workplaces. And a teacher note was that: watching Aristotle’s embodied on stage was a wonderful way of watching how ancients’ philosophy were made a live by students.
6. Conclusions – assessing performance as performance

When the purpose is to grasp situational activities, an aesthetic optic can be used both to demystify and to mystify. Demystification, to elucidate complex processes in readable form alludes to conceptualization of action. Mystification on the other hand, when familiarity is made strange by bringing words and gestures to the fore, aims to illustrate appreciation of particularity. By both interpretations the respect for human integrity is considered and nuances embraced. (Silius-Ahonen, 2010.) Looking at life and social interaction through the dramatic lens glosses performance as it appears, when and where it appears. Perceiving what is going on in classroom (or where the situation occurs), subtle movements are sensed, not “parallel processes to what is supposed to happen”, but what is going on in present time. One might argue that a fictional situation is a simulation without authenticity. As Geertz (1980) points out the idea with drama from a social perspective is the making, not the faking. This is a core value of drama practice. The dramaturgical principle focuses on what people do within contexts that are available to them which protect the participant from being assessed as her personal self. The laughter, the coughing, looking at one’s notes or talking beside one’s lines, doing something on stage while somebody else is talking, moving close to some people and far away from others etc. illustrate what is going when it is going on. Reading what is “there” on display exposes how students have made “the strange” (i.e. new content) familiar. Reading what is there on the stage what was never intended to present, reveals for the assessor elements from off-side. Familiarity has become strange and bears a new meaning. The suggestion in this paper that in performing live drama, the students not merely simulate, but demonstrate transformed knowledge we find confirmed. Embodied cognition exposes more; that is why it functions for assessment. Students perform what they have learnt and what they have not; according to learning outcomes. Aesthetic elaboration still works against instrumental efficiency; it opens up new, broader and deeper perspectives. In that sense an application like assessment does not reduce the art form to a mere function. The students in our study had an understanding of the potential in drama and they saw that more training would be required for them to use drama as a tool in the working place. Combining learning outcomes and the promotion of world makers is a prospect for the application of drama. This never intended meaning expose a reality aspect in fiction, human beings encounter and something unpredictable is set into motion.

References


