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TRANSFORMING LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION INTO A LIFE-CHANGING EVENT: THE CASE OF THE MUSICAL *THE GREEN CRYSTAL*

Abstract

This paper reports on how participation in a secondary school musical production, within a life skills education programme, may contribute curricularly and pedagogically towards equipping learners for meaningful, successful living in a rapidly transforming society. Using the life skills curriculum for the subject Life Orientation, and employing constructivist hermeneutic phenomenology, I compared the dialogic educative space offered by a musical production with that of an ordinary secondary school classroom context.

This comparative study suggests that secondary school musicals, as holograms of life and reality may, curricularly as well as pedagogically, be understood as practice grounds for life skills attainment (including social justice), whereas traditional classroom practice perpetuates monologism. The musical provides a space for discovering and exercising human talents, social interaction, co-responsibility, mutual and reciprocal trust and knowledge and meaning-making whereas the traditional classroom no longer seems to be able to provide a nurturing and safe practice ground for life skills.

Dialogic space

Dialogue is a tool for cultural and pedagogical intervention in human development and learning (Du Preez, 2006: 43; Rule, 2004: 1). Dialogue mediates the cognitive and socio-conventional (i.e. cultural) spaces between all relevant role-players and stakeholders in a musical production, as well as between what the learner (as participant in the musical production) knows and understands and what he or she has yet to learn, know and understand.

One of the principal functions of a secondary school musical production is to provide appropriate and adequate dialogic and educative space to allow for the creation of interactive opportunities and encounters for all relevant role-players and stakeholders (Du Preez, 2006: 44). The fact that these activities seem to develop skills more effectively in extra-curricular activities than in traditional teaching-learning spaces (like classrooms) is also emphasised in the body of scholarship and learners reflected that they had learnt emotional, cognitive, physical, interpersonal, and social skills better through participation in organised out-of-school contexts (Wood, Larson & Brown, 2009: 297; Fredricks, 2011: 2; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005: 508). Participation in organised school activities also helps learners to develop life skills such as problem-solving, time management, goal setting, decision-making, and leadership skills.

The secondary school musical production as dialogic space

The secondary school musical production provides an opportunity for learners to enter into a safe dialogical space for life skills attainment. Educators usually provide the opportunity for learners to take part but it remains the learners' choice whether they want to participate or not. By participating in the staging of the musical learners acquire reasoning skills through interaction with their peers, as well as their educators and other role players involved in the production (Potgieter, 2012: 121). The interaction between these role players is often confrontational but always encourages authentic dialogue. My study documents a single secondary school experience in a developing country context and highlights the role of extra-mural secondary school musical productions within a Life Orientation education context. It enhances our understanding of the ontological and epistemological limits of Life Orientation education. Musical productions support learners towards a culture in which the constitutional, democratic values of *human dignity, equality and freedom* can be realised as an integral part of the subject Life Orientation.

A secondary school musical essentially remains a pedagogical event, because it represents a purposive socio-conventional intervention in individual and communal human development which is saturated with the values and history of the particular society and community in which it is located and contextualised. As a tool for cultural and pedagogical intervention, dialogue is not only pervasive in its range of use, but also powerful in its pedagogical possibilities. It is realised through on-stage dialogue between characters and off-stage dialogue between members of the cast and the production team, as well as between the production team and the audience. It is also realised through moments of interaction between the cast and the audience, dance, music or eclectic combinations of the above. Authentic dialogue mediates the cognitive and socio-conventional spaces between all role-players and stakeholders, as well as between what the learner as participant knows and understands and what he or she has yet to learn, know and understand.

It follows that one of the principal functions of a secondary school musical production is to provide appropriate and adequate dialogic-educative space and to create interactive opportunities for all relevant role-players and stakeholders so that it becomes possible to engineer such mediation.

Weiße and Knauth (1997), Alexander (2005) and Du Preez (2006) all reflect on the use of dialogue in educational contexts. Du Preez (2006: 33) critiqued the conceptions about educational (i.e. mainly pedagogical) dialogue by arguing that dialogue should not be regarded as a commodity to be used to gain a predefined end or become a tool geared towards achieving a pre-conceptualised goal. It should be the aim of education to break the traditional mould of sage-on-the-stage monologuing where the educator speaks and where the learner sits quietly absorbing his / her wisdom (Alexander, 2005: 3-4). The nature of the secondary school musical as specific genre is essentially geared towards breaking monologism¹ and to promote dialogue by cultivating a coming together of culturally and religious

¹ Monologism in this context refers to humans developing in a void through the perpetuation of cultural essentialism, cultural relativism and traditional communitarianism, where the voices of alternative possibilities are usually deliberately silenced (Du Preez, 2006: 35).

diverse communities in order to understand and accept each other's life-worlds. It is a vehicle to use dialogue to shape children's thinking and thus the societies they live in (Alexander, 2005: 1).

It should never be the aim of the secondary school musical to promote dialogue in order to solve the predicaments of society. This concurs with the view of Weiße and Knauth (1997: 39-42) that diverse experiences are prerequisites for dialogue. The musical production creates space for exploration about life where interlocutors from diverse backgrounds such as educators, learners, parents and other role-players who are part of the production meet to compare and reflect on their differences. Although the musical production is currently an extra-mural activity, it remains pedagogical in nature and can be adapted for the intra-mural curriculum as it is a purposive socio-conventional intervention in personal development, drenched with the societal values and history of the community it serves (Alexander, 2005: 2). As such, it provides a safe space for dialogue about social conventions, norms and values where mutual understanding is empathetic rather than critical in nature (Du Preez, 2006: 44).

The secondary school classroom as monologic space

The curriculum provided by the Department of Education (2010: 3, 4) for life skills education within a Life Orientation programme envisages a practice ground where individual and communal skills may be acquired and honed by secondary school learners. The traditional classroom has its origins in the factories of the Industrial Revolution where bells regulated time and spaces were manipulated by walls, hallways and gates (Barret & Smigiel, 2007: 39).

In contrast to the scheduled², yet pliable nature of the musical production where any space may be used for rehearsal and practice, the classroom situation seems to be a space for monologue rather than dialogue. The educator has to create a dialogic space for life skills attainment in a classroom that does not reflect a real life situation. To generate suitable opportunities in which learners are able to practise in a real life environment at least the majority of those life skills as stipulated by the curriculum, creates a real challenge for educators, especially as principles such as democratic and human rights, social justice, and reconciliation and equity should not only be taught but also instilled (Department of Education, 2010: 8).

If educators do not approach Life Orientation and particularly life skills education as an opportunity to realise the potential of the learners as functional individuals and community members they will not be able to contribute to the community where they work and live. The school as extension of the family, given its accountability in terms of acting *in loco parentis*, is obliged to accept its co-responsibility for educating these learners within the framework of the curriculum to acquire those life skills as stipulated by the curriculum for Life Orientation (Department of Education, 2010: 3). The aim of life skills education is to teach learners to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, norms and values, and to be able to participate meaningfully in their own communities irrespective of their individual

² It is scheduled, because of, for example, practice schedules and rehearsal slots. These are usually negotiated collaboratively between learners and teaching staff – hence the use of the term “pliable”.

diversity (Griessel, *et al.*, 1990: 50; Department of Education, 2010: 3). Educators should be aware of the limitations of the classroom environment as dialogic space as it does not easily allow for other role players or for transformational conflict to enter the classroom in order to provide input for the creation of a natural dialogue for exploration about life.

Findings of the comparative study

In this comparative study I found that secondary school musicals, as holograms of life and reality may, curricularly as well as pedagogically, be understood as practice grounds for life skills attainment which also incorporates issues of social justice. Although life skills could be taught conventionally, they should preferably be practised in an integrated and spontaneous manner and within a secure and safe space. Life skills attainment is, therefore, closely related to lifelong learning. The musical production could consequently be a useful pedagogical innovation through which the outcomes of the subject Life Orientation could not only be taught and practised but also be studied and assessed by educators, learners and other role-players and stake-holders.

The secondary school musical production endeavours to entertain and to educate. It becomes an instrument of discovering and exercising human talents as each learner finds his / her place in the production. Aspects of drama, song and choreography are present in the production and provide opportunities to learners to discover and enhance their talents. In the traditional classroom the detection of talents is limited by opportunity and the development of these talents are hampered by time constraints such as asynchronous pedagogic disruptions (i.e. scattered lesson periods on an official time-table). Technical aspects offer different areas of talent development to learners but cannot be fully developed in a traditional classroom environment. According to the data there is opportunity for all learners to participate in a secondary musical production – irrespective of their talents, skills or abilities. Musical ability, alone, should never be the prerequisite for participation in a secondary school musical production. Learners (should) become co-responsible for all aspects of the production with educators as their mentors. The classroom environment rarely provides talent development on this level. It is restricted in the variety of talent development options, because of time, spacial and subject-pedagogic limitations.

The secondary school musical also facilitates social interaction. Life skills linked to social interaction include effective communication, cooperation, working together towards a shared goal, mutual trust and acceptance of differences (Barret & Smigiel, 2007: 38). These skills are best attained when working together as a social community on a shared project that also includes the society-at-large. The musical production provides opportunity for learners within a safe dialogic-educative space to share social similarities but also confront social differences. The teaching space of a traditional classroom isolates learners, rather than unite them (Norberg, *et al.*, 2011: 215). The traditional classroom displays a propensity towards monologism whereas the musical acts like a centrifugal force towards authentic dialogue and social interaction.

Finally, the musical production encourages co-responsibility, mutual and reciprocal trust, as well as knowledge of otherness and the construction of meaning

with regard to social constructs. Trust and co-responsibility are mostly dependent on the presence of the social constructs of *sharing* and *cooperation* – which most producers, educators and scholars argue form an intrinsic part of the pedagogical and educational make-up of any secondary school musical production (Wolhuter, *et al.*, 2009: 50). Sharing a mutual goal should result in the participants having to trust their fellow-participants and to believe entirely in their mutual trustworthiness. Within this subculture of shared dialogue created by the musical production, participants are encouraged to practice their interpersonal skills and learn how to get along with and accept people from diverse world-views and backgrounds. Although it is expected of learners to be accepting of diversity within the classroom environment, it remains mostly a simulated situation which is often driven by fear of punishment rather than by true acceptance. In the traditional classroom, life skills may be explained, but behaviour usually associated with a particular life skill is seldom altered through mere instruction alone (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005: 508).

Conclusion

Further research with regard to the dialogic nature of secondary school teaching and learning environments should shed light on the implications for a South African developing country educational context. Perhaps the problems experienced in our current education system have their roots (of evil?) in the essentially monologic nature of our conventional classroom practices. The ontology of the proposed secondary school musical production and its implementation in schools should be clarified. Including a musical production in the Life Orientation programme could remediate contentious social problems and facilitate social justice within South Africa's diverse communities through the creation of dialogic educative spaces for effective knowledge, skills, norms and values education.

I conclude with a quotation from a participant as a summation of this discussion:

“...try something new. If you don't try you will never know what you can achieve.” (P8: R 38)

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