

# Applied Drama and the Higher Education Learning Spaces: A Reflective Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper explores Applied Drama as a teaching approach in Higher Education learning spaces. The exploration takes a reflective analysis approach by first examining the impact that Applied Drama has had on my career as a Lecturer/Educator/Teacher working in Higher Education environments. My engagement with Applied Drama practice and theory is examined with the view of accessing its contribution to shaping my career as a Lecturer/Educator/Teacher. The paper then goes on to explain how I have used Applied Drama techniques and skills to craft teaching approaches that are engaging and fruitful to 21<sup>st</sup> century University students. Action Research as expounded by Edmiston B. and Wilhem J. (1996) is used as lens to explore the subject of this paper. The study notes a need to make use of innovative and engaging teaching approaches for a more meaningful experience for Higher Education learners and Applied Drama comes in handy as one of the answers. I conclude that Applied Drama is useful both as a standalone course and as a learning approach for Higher Education students (particularly those in Humanities and Social Sciences) as it gives them a broader outlook of things, encourage engagement and debate and aid in explaining complex issues within the academic environments.

**Keywords:** Applied Drama, Higher Education, Learning Spaces, Action Research, Reflective enquiry, Practice as Research, Theories of Education

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I am sharing my thoughts on the impact that Applied Drama has had on my university lecturing/teaching career. I am sharing this from my perspective as a Drama lecturer at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe. I am of the view that benefits that I have gleaned from Applied Drama may be of great benefit and handy to other lecturers in the Higher Education of Zimbabwe and beyond and I am also of the view that my reflections will also be found palatable and beneficial to university students, in Zimbabwe and beyond. I see this as a balanced view and a very genuine one as it is rooted on hands on experience coupled with academic research and a practitioner minded approach. It is, at this point, important for me to state that I am a Drama for Life alumni. I graduated with a Master of Arts in Dramatic Art degree from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa in 2010 and I majored in Applied Drama. It is therefore from such a background that I approach the area of my study. My undergraduate Studies at the University of Zimbabwe also add an important angle to my experience which cannot be ignored.

To reflect is a vital ingredient of growth, for it is when one reflects that one fully comprehends where they are, how far they have travelled to get where they are, where one is going and what are the things to continue with and things to leave behind. It is also through reflections that one embraces fully the role of the things that one has allowed to permeate self, both spirit and mind through the process of learning. Such a reflection, when done through an ongoing process with a desire to improve oneself as a Drama/Theatre practitioner (Educator/Lecturer) and to improve the learning environment of concerned students is, to a certain extent, Action research and reflective Drama practice. When reflective enquiry is pursued relentlessly and purposefully it is capable of producing results that are beneficial to the practitioner/lecturer/teacher and to the students who devote themselves to such a learning process.

As Drama lecturers and lecturers of other different disciplines involved in the learning processes of Higher Education, processes which themselves demand a high level of organized, intelligent approach, we need to constantly question our methodologies of pedagogy, the methodologies that form, as it were, the fundamentals of our work. Such questioning should, of course be not a questioning that is leveled at criticizing, doubting or pulling down. It should however be a kind of questioning with an honest intent of building, creating a better way of doing things, improving the existing methodologies and increasing and deepening our understanding of our nature of work. When all efforts are rightly guided then we will definitely find ourselves opening up to new ideas and brightening with them exactly the same way that the sunflower plant blossoms in the warm sunshine. Emphasizing the benefits of constant reflection, Edmiston B. and Wilhem J. (1996) point out that:

When we question an aspect of our practice, reflect on events from one day and subsequently change our plans for the next day, we are informally researching our teaching. Action research formalizes this process and enables us to become more systematic and rigorous in our analysis of our teaching. We become better teachers because

we understand how our actions affect the classroom context. (Edmiston and Wilhem 1996: 85).

It is such a dedicated, focused and a practitioner minded approach that I see as a vital ingredient to active, intelligent and insightful learning that is expected to take place at any institution of Higher Learning that teaches Drama courses. This is not only limited to Drama courses but extends also to other courses from other disciplines, particularly those in the Humanities and Social Sciences category.

## 2. Background

Applied Drama, by its nature, is capable of impacting lives, both at individual and group/community level. It is loaded with a potential to transform communities and also to transform those involved in it as scholars or practitioners. It is from such a perspective that I endeavor to explore such an impact and to make recommendations and draw conclusions that might be beneficial to those working within the tertiary education environment. By these conclusions, I do not intend to close the continuous search for better ways of approaching the learning environment but I hope to present possibilities which can be found useful and which can also inspire further inquiry and discussion in this field. Darling I. (1998) notes that:

The notion of reflection-in-action and the Reflective practice practitioner were first posited by Donald Schon in *The Reflective practitioner* (1983). Schon described how reflection- in-action could be used by professionals as a tool to improve their practice...Schon's concept of reflection has attracted a great deal of attention across several disciplines, as the idea of the Reflective Practitioner has been adapted to suit the circumstances of different professions. (Darling 1998)

I found Schon's idea of the Reflective Practitioner enriching in this work and closely linked to the process that I followed in this work. Within the scope of this paper, Higher Education in Zimbabwe refers to Tertiary education which involves mainly University and College education.

My reference to applied drama experience drawn from my postgraduate studies at Wits University can be categorized for this study into these three sub-categories:

(a) My entire study period at Wits

This involves both my academic experience of the lecture room which is centered on the engagement with theories of Applied Drama and research methodologies and the practical applications of these theories and research methodologies. Personal reflections, growth and advancement are also included in this spectrum.

(b) My experience drawn from my Practise as Research project entitled AND NOW WE SPEAK which I did both as a first semester Applied Drama practical assignment and also as a fully fledged Research Report practical project.

This is centered specifically on my research report practical project. The project started as a semesterized research for practice as research but its full potential was only realized when the project was done as a Research Report practical project. The project was aimed at investigating performance poetry as a medium for addressing HIV and AIDS stigma. A Palestinian concept of poetry presentation called the Improvised Sung Poetry was explored. This was done through organizing a series of poetry workshops with a group of poets where the poets were trained in improvising poetry and using poetry to debate. At the centre of the concept was improvisation and spontaneity. Poets improvised their debates on various issues that have fuelled HIV and AIDS stigma. The idea was that if young people can, through poetry, voice out those issues that are stigmatized then a live debate/discussion can be kindled with a vision to get people to let go of taboos and speak out in a way that is liberating/freeing. Describing the atmosphere that is created by the release of taboos, Fox J. (1994) says:

Conversely, when a group of people really do let their spontaneous responses flow, I have found they often turn quite childish, scatological and often creative. There is tremendous energy in releasing taboos (Fox 1994: 86).

In order to create an atmosphere described above I devised a train metaphor. The workshops that we had done culminated into a final workshop/performance, the big event which became a train journey experience. On the night of the final workshop we invited audiences from different walks of life. We had arranged the room set up and turned it into an imaginary train. As they came in we were symbolically welcoming them into the train. Once they were inside the train we introduced them to their train hosts and assured them of their safety. We told them to relax and enjoy the journey. The poets, who were train hosts, started debating in poetry, picking their cues on various areas of HIV and AIDS stigma. We then asked train passengers (the audience) to write their thoughts, comments, views in regard to the areas of discussion being raised by the poets. The audiences wrote their responses and as the train master (an equivalent of the Joker in the Boalian theatre), I took the audience's comments, views and thoughts written on pieces of paper and gave them to the poets to improvise on. The poets improvised on them and the audience members helped to prompt the poets in what became a collective

storytelling kind of atmosphere.

On that day, I witnessed live the power of poetry to engage audiences, probe discussion and release taboos. Areas that we could have felt uncomfortable to discuss outside this workshop suddenly became easily accessible for discussion, questioning and offering of answers. On this day poetry did exactly the same thing that was witnessed by Smith M, a Slam Poetry guru. Describing this experience, which I find similar to ours we had on the night in reference, Smith M. (2004) says:

One fall night, in this place, poetry did something...It rose off the page and wafted into the lungs of its passionate creators...It embodied itself in the very poet-performers who created it. And it screamed. It whispered. It pranced and danced. It cried and laughed. Most importantly, it engaged the audience, entertained it, and deeply affected it. And it hasn't stopped since (Smith 2004: xxxiiv).

This is the kind of experience that I had during my Research Report practical project. The project was entitled AND NOW WE SPEAK! Indeed, now we speak. We came out of the workshop space knowing that we are free to speak of those stigmatizing terms that are associated with HIV and AIDS, to disarm their power and to address HIV and AIDS with boldness, openness and sincerity.

(c) My experience gained during the Drama for Life community projects that I got involved in during my studies at Wits University.

Central to this experience is the Waste Management Project that I participated in. This project was conducted in Siyabuswa Township, J. S. Moroka Municipality, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. During this project, as Drama for Life Applied Drama practitioners, we worked on training artists from Mpumalanga Province in Applied Drama skills that they can use to come up with intervention strategies to address the waste management challenges which were facing the township. The major challenges were that cans (metal ones for drinks and beer) were all over the place as people were not interested in turning them in for recycling, bottles were being dumped carelessly in a way that was unhealthy to the environment and also dangerous to people especially children playing in those areas, and that people were dumping hot ashes in plastic bins. To address these problems we (Applied Drama practitioners from Wits and members of Drama clubs from the township) came up with some plays that showed the dangers of poorly disposing of waste and at the same time encouraging people to consider recycling possibilities which could even come with some money or job creation rewards.

When we left the township (that is Drama practitioners from Wits) the intervention plays had been rehearsed and polished and were ready for the second phase of the project – the roll out. This second phase consisted of a series of performances and reflection sessions which were to be totally handled by the Drama group members from the community. In preparation for this we trained the Drama group members in facilitation skills. Targeted audiences were school children and adults being reached out to through interventions staged at schools and community halls.

In addition to the project detailed above, I also participated in a number of community projects that include but are not limited to the Drama for Life festival (held at Wits University, Soweto and Museum Africa, Newtown, Johannesburg). I also participated in a number of community projects within the Wits University community. Some of these projects include the presentation of a Tuberculosis Awareness play at the Education Campus in 2009 and the writing and presenting of a WALE (Wits Arts and Literature Experience) festival theme poem entitled Arts On The Edge. It is also during this time that I attended the 4<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Culture held in Museum Africa, Newtown, Johannesburg, South Africa.

My University of Zimbabwe undergraduate studies experience comes in as the phase that ushered me to my postgraduate studies. During my undergraduate studies I did Theatre in Education and Theatre for Development Communication as part of my Applied Drama training. This training was sharpened and improved during the intense grounding on Applied Drama that I received during my post graduate studies at Wits. This is the grounding that left an impression on me that has inevitably impacted on my lecturing career in a way that I find worth reflecting on.

### 3. Academic Inquiry

Firstly, the question I have asked myself as a Lecturer coming from an Applied Drama background is “What is my role as a University Lecturer and what unique skills am I bringing into the university learning space?” In pondering on this question I often think about Paulo Freire’s description of the learning process. In describing this process he says

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through relentless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world and with each other (Freire 1968:58)

In light of my applied drama background and of this statement I have therefore approached the higher

learning environment as an arena where knowledge emerges primarily because there are those engaged in the academic inquiry. If it is an academic inquiry then it is an atmosphere of 'becoming' where knowledge emerges in process form stages that puts both the teacher and the learner in the central position of the process. I approach my lectures, therefore, as one cautious not to thwart the emerging blades of knowledge but to encourage their development, to nurture them, to prune them, to put a balancing stake where necessary and to water them with both theoretical frameworks and practically implementable practices.

My Applied Drama background has taught me that the learning space is so full of inquiring questions which, when pursued strategically, are capable of making the learning process more broad in outlook and more rewarding in knowledge. Questions should be encouraged in the lecture rooms. Higher Education has, at its backbone, research. No academically serious learning can take place at an institution of Higher Learning without a deliberate emphasis on research. Leedy D. P (1989), emphasizing the necessity of research says:

Everywhere our knowledge is incomplete and problems are  
waiting to be solved. We address the void in our knowledge  
and those unresolved problems, by asking relevant questions  
and seeking answers to them. The role of the research is to provide  
a method for obtaining those answers by inquiringly studying the  
facts... (Leedy D. P. 1989: 3)

Working with different participants in applied drama projects has prepared me for a vast variance of questions that are a common characteristic of a group of people learning or creating together. It is this prior awareness that, when brought into the lecture room, has given me the tact to handle different questions in a way that will not suppress them but that will sharpen them as gems, propelling them forward in intelligent inquiry. I therefore structure most of my lectures with an allowance for discussion.

#### **4. Facilitation Skills**

The task of guiding an academic inquiry requires one to be a good facilitator. This is where my facilitation skills gained during my study at Wits come in. Though the academic environment of Higher Learning encourages enquiry, intelligent analysis and academically balanced criticism, all these, if not guided, will be a futile occupation or at worst a misguided thought energy that aimlessly wander into oblivion. That is definitely not what the university system wants to produce. Academic inquiry needs to be harnessed and guided. It is at these critical moments of guiding an academic inquiry that I have found my facilitation skills most needed and most useful. As a theatre facilitator I find it easy to facilitate academic arguments in a way that allows me to remain in good control of my group of students while at the same time releasing them to explore the area under discussion. These, I believe, need to be balanced. My thorough training in facilitation has sharpened my ability to accommodate all the arguments brought up by the students while at the same time guiding the argument by keeping it on track without necessarily pouring cold water on some enthusiastic students whose points, on that day, might be missing the mark.

As a Drama/Theatre Lecturer I have found facilitation skills very useful in my performance classes. Even when teaching students Stanislavsky's psycho technique, I have found that there is no room for poor facilitation. To get performers to a plain where they can, for instance, imagine the Given Circumstances as true, one needs to be a good facilitator. One needs facilitation as a lever to lift the student performer to such an imaginary plain.

I have started teaching Applied Drama to Drama and Theatre students. One of the major projects that I have worked on with my students is a prison theatre one where we have worked with prison inmates, facilitating theatrical interventions with them. The project has gone on very well. My facilitation skills gained during my studies at Wits, which I still practice and have taught my students, have proved to be very effective. I am glad that I am equipped with such skills. The nature of our profession, as Drama practitioners, strongly demands one to be equipped with facilitation skills. I do not think that one can ignore this important aspect of our profession and still succeed.

During my Applied Drama studies, I became acquainted with Paulo Freire's theories of education within the framework of Theatre in Education. Paulo Freire asserts that the conventional methods of teaching that supposes that the teacher knows everything and students are blank slates are not effective. Freire thus points out that the students know something and they can participate actively in the learning process instead of being viewed as containers waiting to be filled. Well, looking at university students it will be unfair to suppose that they are all waiting for the Lecturer to deposit everything in them in a banking system manner. I therefore approach my lectures from a perspective that my students have something in them that is in some way useful to the learning process, so I actively involve them. Of course, most of the courses that I teach have a performance aspect so it is sort of mandatory, as it were, for them to be actively involved but I would like to point out that I do teach a Theatre Management course where performance is not an aspect. In this course I have found Theatre in Education techniques very useful in explaining certain aspects.

## 5. Train Metaphor – Practice as Research Experience

During my studies at Wits I did a practice as research project entitled AND NOW WE SPEAK. This project was an Applied Drama project centred around the Boalian concept of the Spec-actor, focusing on the coming together of the community to raise problems and offer solutions. The project also employed different Forum Theatre techniques. In this project I had devised a train metaphor as an approach to accommodating people from different walks of life. This train metaphor was based on the premise that in a community people view things from different points but they can come together, travel together, argue, raise problems and offer solutions as a community. I find this very beneficial when brought into the lecture room.

When it comes to Tertiary Education, the students are coming from different backgrounds. Some know certain things that others do not know; some have their own misconceptions and so on. My Applied Drama background has made me to be more aware of this and has sharpened my skills in handling such a scenario. How? It's simply. I apply the train metaphor strategy. I assume the role of the train host, I help my students to travel safely and I endeavor to make their journey an interesting one. This, indeed, has been made easy by my experience gained during my Applied Drama studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, my involvement in Community Theatre projects both in South Africa and in Zimbabwe. My undergraduate studies and its associated experiences are not, at this stage, thrown away at all. They come in handy. Learning, as I see it, involves a lot of gaining new knowledge, unlearning wrong concepts, relating the learnt material to life experiences, learning from one's own life experiences and the experiences of others. All this come at different stages, varying packages and at varying degrees of impact on one's learning. Each stage of learning is therefore unique and special in its own way. It is, I believe, a person who weaves together these different learning experiences in a way that makes a better meaning and a better impact who emerges as the truly learned.

## 6. Learning as a Journey and a Need for Words

AND NOW WE SPEAK project has also shaped my way of approaching learning. I approach each week, month semester and academic year as a journey with many stages that are all important and unique. This helps me to maintain a coherent, progressive learning structure that has, at its core, a vast potential for student growth in terms of academic, personal and social development. This I see as a very integral ingredient of university learning.

I would also like to point out that the modern university environment is full of students who, many of them are becoming quieter in public and more outspoken in internet social sites such as facebook, twitter and so on. Of course the social network is a very good platform for discussion that can be socially rewarding. My point however is on that; we still need our students to engage in live, academically intelligent arguments in the lecture room. One of the scholars that I engaged with in my Practise as Research Applied Drama project, Rodenburg P. (2001) notes:

Over the last fifteen years for example, I have noticed my own students grow quieter, less willing to challenge and more willing to submit, precisely at a moment in history when voices need to be raised against the new perils that assault us each day. And yet voices are retreating into silence. The response to famine or war, for instance seems to be 'What can you say? What weight does my voice carry?' (Rodenburg 2001: 5)

Rodenburg mentions war and famine as one of the challenges that face humanity and I would like to point out that the list there is long. There are, for instance challenges like HIV and AIDS, crime, corruption and so on. My Applied Drama experience, which takes into account facilitation skills, working with communities, ability to probe and encourage discussion have therefore become very useful in positioning me where I can probe and encourage discussion within the learning environment.

## 7. A Broader Outlook

Based on the situation at Lupane State University where students who are currently doing Applied Drama Courses are doing different Degree programmes within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences I realize that their applied drama skills would be very useful in their approach to studies and also when they do their research, for example, a student researching on a topic on the Language of a Minority group may find themselves having to facilitate a group discussion with the informants. Facilitation skills gained in the Applied Drama Studies will thus become useful in such a situation.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to say that my applied drama experience has been very important and beneficial in my career as a University Lecturer. I am convinced that these skills I have been sharing would be also of good



benefit to Lecturers in different learning disciplines in Tertiary Education in Zimbabwe, Africa and beyond. I find also the Applied Drama courses to be useful to students who are in different learning disciplines. It helps mould a broader approach to studies and advantageously position Humanities and Social Sciences students in their research endeavors. The concept of Reflection-in-action and the Reflective Practitioner is vital to Applied Drama practitioners working within the Higher Education environments as it allows practitioners to observe themselves in action, reflect and continuously tread the path of knowledge generation, improvement and exploration. The concept therefore presents opportunities for growth as reflection is a vital ingredient of growth.

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