

Article No. 10

MORE THAN WORDS - A PASSIONATE VISION: BUILDING CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE THROUGH DRAMA/THEATRE.

By Rosemary Blight (Australia) Abstract

Cultural competence is critical to international students' successful tertiary study in Australia. In 1990 a compulsory study of Drama, as a prerequisite for entry to university, was pioneered as a means of overcoming the shortfalls of the language-based approach. Paradoxically it is the use of mime, movement and non-verbal activities that build the foundation of confidence and empowerment for the non-native speakers of English. Fourteen years since its inception, the Drama program goes from strength to strength and is more relevant than ever.

[EDITOR: It is impossible to reprint the abstract in French and Spanish, owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this]

Author's biography

Rosemary Blight (formerly Dansick) is currently a Drama lecturer and previously Director in the Foundation Studies Program, Trinity College, University of Melbourne, Australia. She toured nationally for Arts Councils in a mime/magic show for five years. She has written and directed for the Melbourne Comedy Festival, adult cabaret and children's theatre. Recently she has designed and facilitated communication skills training programs for corporate firms in Australia and Asia. She is a guest lecturer on cultural diversity issues in education. She has a passionate interest in intercultural theatre.

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The Foundation Studies Program began in 1990 at Trinity College, The University of Melbourne, as an orientation and bridging program to assist international students with the difficult transition to tertiary study in a country with a different culture, language and education system. The aim was to promote excellence, well-being and success for students through support and teaching in English and in pre-requisite subjects required for their degree at the University. I introduced Drama as an important part of this preparation, as I believed that theatre techniques offered a substantial skill base for students negotiating their way through educational, cultural and language differences. Other practitioners including Schewe (1993 and 1998), the contributors to Byram & Fleming (1998) and Hughes (1990) have expressed a similar view.

What I discovered in working with international students of mainly Asian origin was that the path to cultural competence was blocked by an inability to deal with their newfound freedom of choice. 'They were free in Australia, but had brought the restrictions imposed by another lifestyle with them' (Dansick, 1994). The way around this impasse was Drama, mime in particular, because it transcends the use and limits of verbal language. After more than ten years' experience with these students, I believe the success of this approach demonstrates that the use of drama as a tool may have near- universal application for foreign students crossing a cultural divide.

At Trinity College, I pioneered the study of compulsory Drama as part of the core curriculum for all students. In 2003, our innovative and respected Foundation Program has over eight hundred students coming from more than fifty-five countries, and we continue to develop and flourish. In its fourteenth year the Drama course maintains its highly significant and relevant place in the orientation training of these students.

Methodology

In 1994 I completed a Masters degree using Reflective Action Research on the development of the drama course (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1981). From the beginning, it has been my practice to record my planning, action and reflection in diary notes, as well as using video and tape recording. Unless otherwise indicated, all the quotations in the article come from a range of male and female students whom I have taught in the yearlong Drama program. The students' ages range from 17-25. They are all international students who have studied in Australia, from different countries. For this article I will generalise the term international students to mean mainly from the Asian region 'Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Japan' as these countries represent the majority cultures of the student cohort. It is also representative of the cultural backgrounds of the students who participated in the research.

During my development of the early curriculum in the first four years, I used questionnaires and interviews regularly to get feedback from the students. I organised additional theatre work outside the program and students enthusiastically volunteered to be involved. They also participated in additional workshops and academic seminars, which were recorded and videotaped. I have therefore drawn from a comprehensive range of documentation and experiences with students. This collection of material was my way of making sure the design of the drama curriculum was closely linked to the needs of the students and did not make unfounded assumptions about their cultures, nor their goals for university. A committee of University 'shepherds' monitored the course, which meant I had to justify the curriculum design. In 1990 it was considered radical to propose compulsory drama as part of the core curriculum for international students of non-English speaking backgrounds.

Background

The international students' difficulties of adaptation, survival and success in a culture that expresses itself in ways that seem alien to their experience are well documented. Life in Australia has been described by a former international student from the University of Melbourne as 'culturally shocking' (Leong, 1992: 8-10). Problems of acculturation block learning and represent an extra burden on energy (Taba, 1962). It is harder for students from different cultures to participate in the mainstream of activities, because they have the added pressures of negotiating their way with the foreign language, as well as having to interpret and understand the various cultural differences. It has been researched that Asia born students display less confidence and more social difficulties, in a range of academic and general social situations involving interactions with host nationals, compared to Australia-born

students (Mak, 2000).

It isn't just a question of English; they need a way into the culture to experience and participate in contemporary life with their peers, as well as to develop an assertive and empowered voice that is their own in the new language. 'Everybody must find an expression, a wording of his own, a strictly personal way to condition his own feelings' (Grotowski, 1968:204).

Based on my experiences with young people in Australia, I felt that theatre as a medium increases students' confidence, so I was keen to apply its benefits in the second language cross-cultural context. Also, it seemed to me that the form a workshop takes means the participants experience culture in the exploration of daily life issues, characterisation and stories, and are given opportunities to contribute their own interpretations and ideas. The drama class as culture is a view that is echoed by Bolton and Heathcote (1998:160).

I was in the fortunate position of being part of a team designing a course for international students that offered more than just English. I felt that drama workshops could provide an ideal forum for international students to access, experiment with and explore aspects of contemporary Western thought and culture which existed on and off campus. Here was an opportunity to raise ideas about a whole range of issues, which were of interest to young people, who were away from home for the first time. Also, drama provided an avenue to explore the academic ideas of the other compulsory core subjects - Literature and History of Ideas. The course was designed to enhance the academic experience of the students, so close attention went into designing material that was relevant.

[Missing] an Asian cultural context, from a text book emphasizing vocabulary and grammar, with little, if any, oral work. The students are not personally empowered to deal with life in an English-speaking context.

Knowing the words and phrases to use is different to delivering them in the actual context. Communication requires cultural understanding, otherwise problems of misinterpretation, isolation, loneliness, lack of understanding and assertiveness could hinder the students' academic achievement. One male student explained, when I interviewed him at the end of the year, the differences between Australians and himself:

When Australians speak they claim the space and expect to be heard, whereas Asians are more modest, don't expect much'. We don't have the skills to put ourselves forward.

What he generalised as claiming the space was simply an Australian expressing an idea, as they have been trained to do from an early age 'participation in class.

The value of theatre in establishing human relationships beyond the limits of languages is expressed in the research of Brook, Schmidt and others. I have demonstrated elsewhere that theatre evokes a commonality among people despite age, status, culture, language or circumstances (Dansick, 1994). According to Grotowski: 'Theatre provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions' (1968:204). From my experience students gain this integration through the drama workshop process. Dealing with working in groups, sharing ideas, presenting ideas, making decisions about the choices available give the students opportunities to manage the language, as well as mastering the ability to foster their own growth in the different style of education. Each individual student takes from it what s/he needs and wants, as if selecting from a smorgasbord of communication skills. The more confident student and the shy student are looking for different assistance.

One female student commented in a group discussion that:

The younger generation of Australia may very well have come from another planet as far as freedom is concerned.

The other students in the group, coming from cultures different to hers, agreed with her interpretation. In Melbourne's local newsagents students see magazines available for purchase with graphic articles and photos, television shows with sex, violence and drug use, lack of apparent censorship on people criticising government policies or politicians, young women sunbathing topless on inner city beaches. This freedom is similarly observed on campus with students expressing ideas about a range of issues, taking part in demonstrations and marches, running clubs promoting gay pride and political activism, for example.

My understanding of international students, particularly from the Asia/Pacific region, has convinced me that the opportunity we provide in drama to enable them to make sense of their world ensures a more confident involvement in a culture of individual participation and performance in and out of class. Students learn that there are rules and codes of behaviour alongside the perceived freedom. Using drama as a tool leads to 'deeper understanding' because drama does not remain at the surface of abstraction (Schewe, 1998: 214.). Otherwise, unaccustomed as they are to personal freedoms in education and lifestyle of this kind, the international students face potential hurdles as they negotiate their way to success. They talk about behaviours that wouldn't be permitted back home and of being tempted. It is also hard to adjust to talking to lecturers and expressing your own ideas in tutorials:

In Malaysia there are so many regulations in schools. For example, you can't mention the word 'you' when speaking to a teacher, you have to look away when being scolded, and you can't use first names. In Malaysia we seldom participate. Smiling is ok but laughing out loud is considered rude. In Australia we have 'rights'.

[Missing]... you belong, how do you own this experience in a foreign place for yourself?

The intercultural challenge is not just about the communication of a second language. The interpersonal and intra-personal demands on your thoughts and feelings are considerable. How do you maintain the integrity of your own cultural background and yet be an assertive participant in the new cultural context? A female student voiced her fears in a small group discussion, which was heartily endorsed by other girls of different nationalities:

Back home your parents are there to stop you and to say, 'don't do that that's wrong', but here you're more open. We need help with exploring ourselves 'we have never had the chance to explore ourselves. I have to think that this is an aspect of myself that I've never seen myself in and I'm frightened. I don't know whom to turn to. I'm alone.

In developing confidence in actors, Grotowski and Stanislavski say that it is impossible to separate personal development from teaching effective communication. I instinctively applied this philosophy to the situation facing overseas students. It wasn't just what they said, but what they thought and felt.

Using drama

The use of drama and theatre techniques provides a powerful means of exploration, for 'the techniques of the theatre are the techniques of communication' (Spolin, 1977:14). The language of theatre in process and performance gives a means of communication that appears universal to both confident and shy non-native speakers of English. Migdalek writes that through the drama workshop the students develop an 'English habitus' whereby they can practise the different approaches to learning. He says that it takes practice, not just learning to understand. The full-bodied understanding that theatre brings he describes as 'embodied practice' (1997:10-13).

In the workshop, students are like participant observers, both engaged in the world and distanced enough to be able to reflect on it (Byram & Fleming, 1998). They are not restricted by their vocabulary, or by their cultural origins. Instead, each individual's uniqueness enhances the experience for everyone. Students comment on the experience of sharing experiences and ideas with people from different cultures, and of appreciating their differing views of the world.

I have observed that through drama, then, the students' capacity for experience increases, and 'it is in the increasing of the individual capacity of experiencing that the untold potentiality of a personality can be evoked' (Spolin 1977:3). As the drama workshop involves the students 'physically, emotionally and creatively' it gives them an experience that is 'lived' not 'borrowed'. Therefore 'drama offers a uniquely integrated approach to the development of both oral communication skills and personal growth' (Gassin, 1986:60). This view is reinforced by Jensen and Hermer who emphasise that the full sensory, physical and emotional experience provided by drama can be seen as 'a form of cultural education' (Jensen & Hermer, 1998:179).

Applying these ideas within the context of the Drama curriculum in the Foundation Studies Program, I have found that the creativity in theatrical activities develops flexibility in the students' thinking and broadens their awareness of people and life in the foreign culture. They become more critical and perceptive of life in Australia and form their individual views. One student commented in an interview that improvisation was helpful in the way it helped her access the world:

I like being made to notice the world around you. Drama forced me to watch TV and read

newspapers to bring ideas to class 'very important to open up the outside world.

Most importantly, the experience of drama I've discovered gives these students an opportunity to express ideas on a range of topics, to explore different perspectives, to find meaning in the confusion and to develop the confidence to be themselves in the new culture. This is a view reinforced by Fleming in talking about the potential of dramatic art where participants 'explore and examine experience in ways which would otherwise be denied to us in real life' (1997:4).

The workshop allows the student the right to be who they are, while giving permission to explore something and someone else. 'Little is known how Drama releases the imagination, providing teacher and their students with a voice they perhaps are not ordinarily invited to have' (Taylor, 1993:17). It is not that at the end of the year a student is less Thai or less Korean; on the contrary, the drama experience gives them greater confidence and assertiveness to express their Asian identity in English within the Australian context. It does not mean they do as the Australians do.

Using mime

As I indicated at the outset, the most significantly innovative aspect of the curriculum is mime, and it is this that demonstrates the unique relevance of drama in the context of using a second language by tertiary students. When I first met a room of Asian students they watched me in what seemed like a thick silence. Inscrutable. It was like an invisible and impenetrable wall separated us. By introducing the mime activities, I focused the silence as something to communicate (Dansick, 1994). Maley and Duff affirm my approach as they see that physical trust is an important pre-requisite for the psychological trust involved in free, creative (verbal) interactions (1990).

Mime is an important foundation of my approach, because it is language without words and it gives students an opportunity to explore ideas, unhindered by levels of English. However, the benefit of bodywork is more than this. Mime involves learning to use your face and body to convey clear messages, as well as developing a sense of timing, receiving and giving cues and being conscious of the use of space to convey meaning. Mime forces outward projection of the face and body, promotes rules of logic and order, improves observation and understanding and establishes equality within cultural diversity.

One female student thanked me halfway through the year for teaching mime, for it was the first time in her life she was able to look in a person's eyes while speaking to them.

It feels like I'm a different person, much more confident and also more aware of other people's shyness.

Peter Brook writes that what 'blocks' people today is the word, therefore one must start with freeing the body; and Schmidt recognizes the workshop opportunity for the 'freedom of daring to be oneself' that occurs in intercultural theatre (1998:198). The trust, fun and interest created by the mime and movement activities leads to an extraordinary journey of personal development for the students, as it forces them to think and to universalise their ideas before expressing them to the audience. This leads to a deeper understanding. Drama primarily operates on an affective level and can evoke strong emotional responses (Schewe, 1998). From my experience it is only when you challenge individuals to go beyond their usual patterns that they progress and develop (Dansick, 1994).

In a recent workshop (July 2002), which I ran for 14 Australian and 14 International students, I again resorted to mime and body work activities, as the vehicle for communication in performance. Spoken English happened off-stage, as the students planned and worked out their mime idea for presentation to the audience. The workshop gave the students an opportunity to work together in problem solving with the focus outside of each individual. The mime lent itself to humour, gestures and movements that went beyond vocabulary in the spontaneity of the moment (Dansick, 2002). Two students wrote after the workshop that:

It felt great to know there was no sort of friction between us and we worked together.

The locals were just as nervous as we were to meet them. I found this similarity comforting.

Through my extensive experience with Trinity students, execution and mastery of using the face and body, movement and mime skills seem to enable the students to develop a sophisticated understanding of non-verbal communication as well as to develop greater self-confidence and self-

awareness. A male student from Korea said that for the first time he saw 'how to communicate in the Western way'. He apparently practised in front of the mirror to use his face more, to improve in his communication in English.

Other students wrote in a questionnaire about the benefits of learning mime and usually wrote about being more confident:

I feel more open. I find I don't stammer much and I also find that when people talk to me, I don't feel like running off 'I used to feel like this.

I liked to learn about eye contact and gestures as well as body movements, because it helps to improve my way of being more confident.

I enjoyed learning about body movement. My movement had been rigid and forced. So now my movement has a more natural feel to it.

Learning about body language and eyes is useful because it is an act of telling someone what one wants it is useful in our real life

Students communicate in English when discussing and brainstorming a set mime task. English is thus inextricably linked to the use of the face and body 'gesturing ideas for clarity becomes natural and the students become comfortable with this form of self-expression. Speech is linked to gesture as an automatic response to the problem. This means the gestures come naturally from an internal motivation. In doing so the students develop a sophisticated use of their whole expression in English while focussing on something else. The students were accustomed to exerting great control over their faces and bodies when speaking English. With mime activities they are still being asked to do so, but this time with the intention of expressing ideas, rather than hiding them (Dansick, 1994).

Gesticulation is an integral part of speaking and is not an optional extra. It is impossible to improve a person's overall communication, including speech, without taking account of the gestural messages. Using gestures doesn't mean an embellishment of what is spoken, but it is a message system in its own right. Gesticulation may also be used to encode more abstract features of the utterer's discourse and significantly, the gestural channel is easier and more readily called upon, so that there are fewer steps to the process than there are when a formulation of the idea into speech language is to occur (Kendon, 1980). This is an example of how drama works obliquely in as much as the implications of the discussion are great in the second language context (Fleming, 1998). One student wrote at the end of the course that:

Through Drama, one pays more attention to body co-ordination and body language. The former is important because it helps us to be more alert and agile. The latter is important because it makes us aware of the usage of our body in communicating.

It is not unusual for students to say that they had never realized before that the body could be used in communication. As they begin to receive and interpret the signals others are sending, they begin to monitor their own signals and achieve a greater control over them, and in turn, function more effectively (Fast, 1971).

I had the opportunity to interview some parents about their views on compulsory drama. One parent said that he was very pleased that his daughter had this opportunity.

Asians need the opportunity to learn to be confident and to speak out and express themselves 'the body language component is equally important.

In deciding to emphasize non-verbal work, what I do is take the focus off speech completely. The students are forced to use their bodies. This means losing protective layers (symbolized by controlled faces and gestures and an attitude of silence) that belongs to a different type of communication and culture (Dansick, 1994). Mime gives them another means of speech 'everyone is equal non-verbally, speech and nationality differences are shelved for the time being and there is no pressure to be right. The use of appropriate non-verbal cues is crucial for effective English language use (Hughes, 1990).

Being expressive doesn't mean you're less private, it means your communication is clearer and you're more conscious of your message. In one tableau-style activity I give a title and the students physically construct their interpretation of it. One time the topic was lunch. Four male students from different countries, with varying levels of English ability, devised a hilarious and inventive sculpture: chicken

wings on a plate. It was with a great sense of pride that they presented their ideas to the group. Imagination and invention challenges others to go further with their ideas. The students love to play with ideas in this way. The visual and kinaesthetic communication systems appear to be two of the most used in Western cultures therefore it is important for Asian students to develop a keen understanding of body language (Lewis & Pucelik, 1990:2).

With the focus on the body as the channel for the messages, the physical acting itself helps diffuse potential sexual attitudes. This deals with the underlying sexuality issues as the students ceased to be

[Missing]...are neutral and capable of giving clear messages. Coming from cultures with different attitudes related to touch and sex, it is important that the students don't misinterpret some Australian gestures as necessarily sexual eg a pat on the arm or other sort of casual touch shown in friendship, or their own use of the body as sexual. Accepting bodies as parts of the whole person is a relief for the students; it means they can get to know each other without this concern. What is sexual in one context may not be so in another: 'an experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings'(Caplan, 1987:2).

I've discovered that mime provides the means for overseas students to integrate their ideas. The idea that is expressed and understood is the important thing, not the ability to be mime artists.

We're all from different countries, our images might be from our culture, but our language in Australia is in English.

I knew from watching the students talking to Australians, that even if a student's English was excellent, the communication was not as it should be (Dansick, 1994). Use of eye contact, gestures and movement of the body is part of confident communication in Australia. It has been stated that 55% of our communication to others is a result of our non-verbal communication (James & Woodsmall, 1988:10). By becoming aware of your own body language you automatically start being more observant of other people's. In the building of cultural competence, this is essential, as understanding the non-verbal meta-messages is necessary to interpret the full meaning of the spoken message.

The more astute we become at seeing, hearing, and feeling the total messages being sent, the better able we will be to perceive what is really meant. This awareness will also enable us to better use our own channels of communication to express what we need and want, not only to others, but also within ourselves (Lewis & Pucelik, 1990).

Drama gives me a sense of identity, helps assimilate the messages. We are free to express our joy and this is the type of class that I never thought of before. It is a precious experience for me, studying in Australia. My mind has been opened and I have become aware of the things which happen around me.

Speaking to the audience

When I introduce speech activities both in improvised and scripted formats, the students already have a solid foundation of communication skills to tackle the ideas. If missing a word while speaking, they can gesture an intention or use emphasis to convey meaning. This shows the strength of the mime foundation as a resource to use throughout the year.

Improvisation skills give them the flexibility to think quickly under pressure in the foreign language. Students quickly perceive the benefits of it as expressed by this student after learning to play Theatresports (Johnstone, 1982).

Improvisation developed ability to think on my feet ' cope with unexpected questions or challenges, relate to other people's thoughts, everyone has their own ideas, not to block them and to see what can happen.

International students, sometimes coming from hierarchical and didactic societies, once they have gained confident communication skills in English, are better equipped to negotiate their place within the University. These skills enable them to achieve their potential in our education system, and importantly to protect beliefs from another society.

Conclusion

The major areas of interest for overseas students include self-confidence and establishing identity in the second language.

Drama helped me become more confident, open and not so reserved like I was before I arrived in Australia.

This is needed to negotiate ideas, (sexuality, individuality, freedom of expression) that they may not have explored back home and which take on different consequences here. In a different society there's a different emphasis 'in Australia they have to learn about their rights as an individual. They have to learn to think what they want for themselves away from their society and to make the right choices in their education and in their personal lives.

Schewe says that students need to 'show their in-between-worlds' in imagined reality between one's own and the reality of a different culture. The drama workshop provides the opportunity to do so. This does not mean dismissal or denial of their beliefs, but a need to re-organize their frames of reference and thinking, to accommodate the differences. They are capable of this without loss of identity. They explore a reconstruction of meaning for the new context. This gives them an opportunity to check their ideas against the construction of others to achieve 'great closeness to the foreign culture' (Schewe, 1998:220).

How to cope with the liberal system here but still keep your culture and tradition with you and not forgetting where you're from, your origins.

Language, as we experience it in life, is not linear. Neither is the play as the audience experiences it. We remember the message, but not necessarily the order in which the words were delivered (Smith, 1984:27).

Actors attempt to make conscious every movement and utterance, so they can clearly and convincingly express emotions, thoughts and relationships to the audience. When an actor thinks about communicating to an audience, s/he thinks about effectively using the whole communication repertoire 'face, eyes, body, gestures, posture, tone of voice, movement, stillness, and so on in whatever way is necessary to get the message across. For international students, training in acting skills is not only about improving their communication, but also to assist their understanding of the non-verbal and verbal messages of a culture that can be quite different to their previous experience. To understand difference is to be unafraid.

From my years of experience with international students in the Trinity program, self-knowledge is central to communication, confidence and understanding. Success in the second language is a search for your identity in it. It is a matter of transferring self-confidence in one language to self-confidence in English (Dansick, 1994). Drama workshops are about solving problems of communication of one sort or another. They encourage people to express who they are, with the vast range of means available. This is like Schewe's 'artistic grammar' where students actively participate as actors, directors, playwrights and audience (1998:216).

In my workshops, I focus on developing the confidence of each student by providing experiences to explore, which also means teaching them to observe and understand what they are seeing in others. Learning to adapt and participate in this way, I have found they are better equipped to deal with the challenge of their stay in Australia. It is this process of mime-drama that enables international students to increase their cultural competence so readily. Since we began in 1990 at Trinity, we have trained students from more than 55 countries and the role of Drama in assisting them to bridge the gap is more important than ever.

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