Navigating the Labyrinth: A Study of Engagement and Artistry in Process Drama for Additional Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this reflective practitioner research I investigate process drama for additional language teaching and learning (AL/process drama). In particular, I examine two constructs relevant to AL/process drama aesthetics: ‘learner engagement’ and ‘teacher artistry’.

To explore these constructs I draw on three case studies, developed within two adult schools of Italian (AL) and a university, in Milan, Italy. As teacher/researcher, I designed and facilitated a series of process drama workshops for each context, resulting in 45 hours of video-recorded material. I kept a reflective journal (written in English) and a logbook (written in Italian) where I recorded my reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. As a translingual researcher, I deliberately switched between languages, in an attempt to capture different nuances and better understand my attitudes and beliefs towards AL/process drama teaching.

Within each case, I worked with a group of up to 16 international students of Italian (AL) at an intermediate level of proficiency (student-participants) and up to seven teachers (teacher-participants) who observed the workshops and took notes on the learners’ engagement. Both students and teacher-participants took part in individual and focus group interviews. At the end of each workshop, student-participants were invited to choose a specific moment from the drama and self-evaluate their engagement. These moments informed the selection of video extracts that were later used within video-stimulated recall interviews.

The ‘learner engagement’ construct was explored through the Vygotskian lens of ‘felt-experience’ (perezhivanie) in which individuals perceive, feel, interpret, internalise, and re-create meaning through a cognitive, affective and social investment. I analysed the nature of engagement from a sociocultural perspective, across three domains: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Intercultural Education and Aesthetic Learning. The analysis revealed that the nature of learner engagement in the SLA domain seems to appear and manifest as a cycle of ‘perception-in-action’. This cycle entails a ‘felt-experience’ in the drama, beginning with dramatic action affording the exposure to ‘authentic’ language, enhancing the states of receptivity and vigilance, and generating agency in the target language. This agency manifests in a variety of ways: self-regulation in verbal and non-verbal communication, playfulness with the Italian language, and playfulness with the elements of drama. Through this process, fuelled by dramatic tension, the student-participants seemed to engage in meaningful, dialogic communication in the target language.

The nature of learner engagement within the Intercultural Education domain seemed to appear and manifest as a process of intercultural meaning-making. This process, fuelled by dramatic tension, generates intercultural tension, lived through a ‘felt-experience’, and triggers a degree of intercultural awareness and intercultural meaning-making. I associate this process
with the degree of ‘intercultural tension’ in the pre-text, noting that its presence directly affects the intercultural dimension of the drama, as well as the opportunities for intercultural reflection. I refer to this framework as the ‘intercultural/dramatic structure’, and observe that this framework changes considerably across the three case studies, resulting in different levels of intercultural engagement.

The nature of learner engagement within the Aesthetic Learning domain seems to appear and manifest as a process of transformation, beginning with a ‘felt-experience’, entailing creative perception, interpretation, connection to an idea and, in some cases, heightened self-awareness. To some degree, all the student-participants were affected by the form of drama. Some students were affected by the content of the drama. Whenever they were affected by the influence of form on content, they appeared to undergo a transformation that led to a heightened self-awareness. This shift in awareness seemed to be related to their voice and identity as additional language speakers, as well as intercultural speakers. Those participants who were found to engage at an aesthetic level were able to ‘feel’ the Italian language and the culture at a visceral level. Thus, findings from the research suggest that the language, intercultural and aesthetic domains are inextricably inter-connected in AL/process drama.

Findings relating to the ‘teacher artistry’ construct reveal that I was initially tacitly clinging to the notion of a linear, Aristotelian narrative in the drama. Through reflection-in-action, and on action, I expose some covert beliefs. In order to make sense of my reflection-in-action, I differentiate between my ‘intra-episode’ reflection-in-action, i.e., thinking on my feet within one dramatic episode, and ‘inter-episode’ reflection-in-action skills, i.e., re-structuring episodes thinking on my feet. I identify my weakness at an inter-episode level, and map my progression through the three case studies, in order to understand how to develop and harness the artistry of process drama to facilitate engagement in an AL teaching context. Ultimately, the research suggests that, as my artistry developed, the participants’ engagement also grew, and that a playful attitude, both mine and the learners’, is at the core of my understanding of AL/process drama aesthetics. The aspects that I recognise as important for teacher artistry to impact positively on learner engagement are: dramatic tension, a sense of form, heightened self-awareness, the ‘intercultural-dramatic structure’, reflection-in-action, agency and a sense of playfulness.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)____________________________________
Erika C. Piazzoli
RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

These publications have been informed by my experiences and understandings developed within and beyond the thesis process:


CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


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Researcher’s Background

As Neelands (2006) suggests, in reflective practitioner research we share the assumption that “what we see, is what we see” and that the same events are experienced, observed and interpreted differently, by different individuals (p.33, original emphasis). For this reason, I include here a short account to help the reader understand the researcher’s background.

I was born and grew up in Italy. My mother grew up in France, and I was raised with French nursery rhymes and lullabies. I took French as my first language in High School. During my secondary studies, I also studied Latin for two years, Spanish for three years, German for one year, and, of course, English. Indeed, it was the English language that seduced me. I had studied English since I was six years old and, by the time I was 15, I was obsessed. I so fully identified with the British culture that I rejected my own Italian identity. Those were the years of being embarrassed to admit I was Italian; trying to speak English at all times, at all costs, in front of passers-by. By the end of high school, I had been to England more than 10 times, working as a hotel cleaner in the French community in London. This identifies a curious pattern: wherever I was, I was longing to be elsewhere.

At the time I left Italy to come to Australia in 1998, I was a rebellious teenager fully rejecting my Italian heritage. I simply hated Italy, and I wanted to be un-Italian. At that time I started to keep a journal, and became accustomed to reflective writing as a tool for introspection. Curiously, in those years I wrote in my journal in Italian when I was in Australia and in English when I visited Italy. I just needed to be ‘other’. I attempted to fulfill this need through my ‘translingual writing’, i.e., writing in more than one language (Kellman, 2000). As I settled in Australia, I met my husband, an artist from Krakow. I began studying the Polish language, and re-created my identity with a newly found Eastern European touch.

After the first few years of euphoric freedom in Australia, I started missing Italy. This manifested as a nostalgic longing for my little brother Daniele, who was eight when I left for Australia, and for my baby cousin Cecilia. To overcome this feeling, I began working with children. I started volunteering in children’s hospitals’ play schemes, and ended up working full-time in child care. Working with children for four years helped me to re-discover my ultimate passion: play. I took great joy in dramatic play and storytelling. Through the years, I developed a story that I explored and re-created with different groups of children. After facing a period of depression, I decided to put this story into writing, and wrote a lengthy children’s book (unpublished). To overcome my depression, I also began writing poetry. This has given birth to four manuscripts (unpublished), containing hundreds of poems. While I wrote the children’s book in English, I wrote all my poetry in Italian. I tried to compose poetry in English, but I could never quite reach that inner level of poetic imagery that I could in Italian.
As an undergraduate student in Australia, I majored in filmmaking and Spanish studies. I wrote my first Honours Thesis in Spanish, researching the cultural maintenance strategies of Spanish women living in Australia. At the same time, I investigated the role of the filmmaker’s creativity when doing visual ethnography. Alongside my majors, for my degree I took courses like creative writing, media studies, anthropology, psychology and theatre directions. As part of my assessment, I had to write short stories, feature articles, screenplays and stage plays. These experiences have undoubtedly shaped who I am as an individual.

After I finished my undergraduate degree, I became fascinated with the art of improvisation. As I read *Impro for Storytellers* by Johnstone (1999), a new world opened up for me: I attended several workshops in improvisation, voice and creative arts, culminating in the creation of my own Arts Therapy business. Here I combined improvisation with drawing, singing and creative writing. With my business partner, a psychologist/hypnotherapist, we worked with groups of women from disadvantaged backgrounds. These arts-therapy workshops were exciting; yet I felt there was something missing in my practice.

In parallel, from 2001, I started working as a teacher of Italian language to both adults and children in schools in Brisbane. This gave me great fulfilment, as it was a means to reconnect with my Italian cultural identity. However, after about three years of teaching, I started to grow dissatisfied with the so-called ‘communicative’ strategies, with the role-plays and language games that feature in most communicative textbooks. I started to design my own lesson plans, incorporating the arts and experimenting with drama. After a number of years teaching Italian through improvisation, drama games and play reading, I came to the realisation that my use of drama in the classroom was scattered and inconsistent. I lacked direction; students seemed to have fun, but were they learning anything? My approach felt somewhat aimless; borrowing Fleming’s (1994) words, it felt “educationally bankrupt” (p.1). I did sense a great potential in drama for languages, but I was not sure how to harness it.

For this reason in 2008 I decided to go back to university and enrolled in an Applied Theatre Honours degree, exploring process drama for adult language teaching. Thorough that experience, I learned the difference between drama games and process drama as pedagogy. I observed and analysed several process dramas, and then I designed and facilitated six process dramas for a third-year university course. This experience strengthened my passion in this direction. However, it also confirmed that I was missing something in my practice, something I could not identify precisely. It was something related to the aesthetic dimension; something related to reflection; something to do with managing the elements of drama. That ‘something missing’ is what inspired me to embark on this PhD project.
“Not all those who wander are lost”

(J. R. R. Tolkien)