

A Brief Literature Review of How Drama Enhances Empathy for Both Its Performers and Audiences

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Abstract: My most successful learning experience often happened on stage. Ever since I took theatre and musicals as my hobby, I experienced the flow of focus and the strength of quick learning. To be a good actress took more than good memory of the scripts, beautiful voice for the songs, and elegant postures for the performances. To understand the characters, the settings, and the context brought me into a new realm of how drama education and theatre itself could enhance other areas of learning. It prompts me to question the cognitive relationship between acting and understanding. Therefore, I chose to study how drama could enhance empathy for my Yuanpei Academic Project. My own experiences in acting taught me to feel what the characters feel, so as to perform and act out with more reality. Good performers and artists have more empathy towards humanities because they are usually more perceptive to the world and more expressive to convey their understanding of events and emotions to the audience, moving the spectators from passive observers to active empathetic participants.

1. Introduction

Ever since the outbreak of the COVID19, we see an urgent need to maintain our mental healthy during the traumatic experiences. Meanwhile, there is a crucial need to improve empathy and compassion. Drama, originated and populated in the Hellenistic era, should continue to help humans learn about ourselves. Among those learnings, cultivating empathy have multiple benefits. According to Psychology Today, empathy helps people become sociable and understanding, connecting one another and thinking from others' perspectives. Nonetheless, Psychology Today also indicated that "empathy is on the decline in the United States and elsewhere," where people refused to think for the others and cooperate in social events. It was evident that empathy has dropped during the COVID19 in the US. Moreover, for people who work in scenarios that would face a number of traumatic events and emotions, such as medical workers, social workers, and educators, their empathy level is hard to maintain due to the strong exposure to those tragic events. Therefore, it is important to study the effectiveness and the methodology of how drama as an accessible approach could help different group of people develop empathy. This research would base on the more recent research and literature in this area covering young children, teenagers (high school students), adults (undergraduate students), and medical students and workers.

2. Literature Review

Drama, the most prevalent performing art, involves both performers and audience. Empathy, rooted from the Latin word “pathos,” means “into emotion.” Unlike “sympathy,” which is focus on the feeling from the perspective of oneself, “empathy” indicates the understanding and feeling from the perspective of the others. According to Rhonda Blaire, who has done a thorough research on the neurological connection between drama and empathy, drama and acting illustrated “a monistic view of actor’s process.^[1]” It corresponded to how neuro- and cognitive sciences viewed humans: “mind and body are not separate.” Recounting approaches and acting theorists’ work, Blair integrated Stanislavsky’s monistic view and extended to how neurologically and psychologically drama could enhance empathy. Blair has introduced the theory of conceptualized blending, which was developed by cognitive linguists Gilles Fauconnier. She argued that “understanding is imagination” and imagination is “the central engine of meaning.” After all, conceptual blending is “a fundamental part” of the performers’ (both actors’ and directors’) “manipulation of language and imagery” so as to convey their message to their audience. She thus used examples to illustrate how we perceive ideas in blending with imagination. Both George Lakoff and Vittorio Gallese considered conceptualization and conceptual knowledge “mapped within our sensory-motor system.” She believed through conceptualized blending, humans could understand concepts and reimagine within them and then shape with their own language to internalize the concepts. In the said process, it is possible to use drama to develop empathy, to “help audience better understand the plight of others in situations different from theirs and lead to positive change.^[2]” The aesthetic experience involves “inner imitation of the perceived movement of others,” embodying the situation, and drag the subject (self) to understand the perspective of the other. Blair believed that humans are “wired for empathy” because our bodies and brains would “mirror each other in terms of perception” and thereby prepare us for action to show our empathy, which would eventually lead to positive behaviors. From Blair’s research on how neurologically drama could enhance empathy through a clear path proved by both neurologists and psychologists, scientists and performers should work together to find ways that performers found how they are moved first and then transfer it to move the audience, to extend empathy.

3. Enhancing Empathy through Drama among Children in New Zealand

The first example would be Chris Holland’s findings in his “Reading and Acting in the World: Conversations about Empathy.” Drama has been widely used in educational purposes and it is not surprising that educators would use this approach to strengthen empathy among children and youths. The researcher found that it was a severe issue that many New Zealand children suffered from domestic violence. As victims, these children tended to develop lower level of empathy. He documented how school districts in New Zealand has employed Everyday Theatre as an educational tool to improve these students’ empathy and their “sense of social justice and equity.^[3]” He also quoted Neelands that “to place empathic imagination and creativity at the centre of learning if we are to build a ‘pro-human society.’” With several drama workshop approaches, Holland proved that drama can arouse “people’s innate and infinite sense of empathy for the others” and as the level of empathy improved, students and children would feel less aggressive and violent. They would learn how to handle difficult situations they used to suffer from.

For Holland, he quoted Taylor’s statement that “Good drama praxis in education aims to devise roles and situations which explore the human condition.” He has included many Everyday Theatre strategies and practices such as the donut, where two groups of children form a double-ringed circle and each would take part in the performance, instead of the traditional performer/spectator roles.^[4] Holland mentioned several practices like such and endorsed how these approaches have helped the

students to understand different perspective and internalize the process and the learning. Indeed, drama in education could bring and promote social justice and social action. Even for audiences or general spectators, they shall be more than regular observers or witnesses towards the performances. Holland introduced the idea of “Spec-Actors” where these audience are “self-conscious observers of the performances’ purpose, and they shall powerfully literate and reflect on real-life parallels. ^[5]

The drama education is essential for children in New Zealand and it is an effective way for them to enhance empathy. It is different from the more traditional drama therapy, where the performer is also the subject and they would take the active role to get treated for their mental issues. Drama education is more intricate and subtle as it also have other particular functions and they are more directed to help children to grow.

4. The Laramie Project Helps High School Students Cultivate Empathy

The Laramie Project is one of the most successful example in drama enhanced education these years among high school students in the US. The theatre production itself was inspired by the real incidents of the brutal murder and hate crime towards Matthew Shepard. To reflect on the cruelty originated from homophobia, the producers and authors of the Laramie Project were aware of what they intend to bring. It is an educational theatrical production that aims to teach tolerance and understanding towards the LGBT+ group. According to Sleeter and Grant, the work has a particular goal to promote positive feelings among students and to reduce stereotyping, thus to promote unity and tolerance^[6]. The work not only is widely performed and introduced to drama classes but also is adapted to a film. It is considered one of the most frequently produced high school plays in the past decades yet theatre teachers still deemed it “challenging” due to its unconventional nature. The Laramie Project has retold the victim’s story on stage, revealing the human relations within the conflicts and developments of the characters: their homophobia, the result of the hate crime, so as to teach both the performers and audience, who are usually high school students and stakeholders like parents, teachers, and school officials, about human respect and harmony. Moreover, it avoided to repeat the murder of the victim by leaving Matthew Shepard, the sole protagonist and victim of the incident, absent onstage.^[7] The drama created a more powerful spiritual dimension without casting a performer as Matthew Shepard.

5. Drama as an Intervention for US Undergraduate Students

For older students, drama still works. Johnathan Steward has written a dissertation on how empathy development occurred among students who take theatre as major or related classes. He pointed out that the significance of using drama to increase empathy was due to a significant decrease in empathy level in the US society.^[8] Unlike previously mentioned projects and drama theorist works, Steward used psychological survey to summarize the path of how theatre major students and non-theatre major students in a mid-sized university have shown a different level of empathy. Sufficient statistics demonstrated a strong relation between high empathy level among students who had drama classes and Steward confirmed his hypothesis that drama could be employed as an effective intervention to raise the empathy level among the undergraduate students. He then suggested that college students, parents, school officials, and especially business program students should look into drama courses and practices to improve their empathy, which is an essential and desirable quality for future leaders.^[9]

6. Drama Practice to Enhance Empathy Among Medical Students and Workers

Using drama as a tool to enhance empathy not only happens in K12 and higher education, it is

widely used in professional training scenarios, especially as workshops for medical workers and medical students. According to Eve and David Jeffrey, doctors and nurses in clinical settings were likely to find it difficult to empathize with their patients when the patients leave out significant details of their traumatic events.^[10] Therefore, they have introduced the drama workshop to the medical workers and facilitated their experience to enhance clinical empathy. Meanwhile, Deloney and Graham used the drama *Wit* in an experiential learning module for first-year medical students and studied how the performance, when students and faculty were actively involved audience, could provoke a change of attitude and encourage them to pursue altruistic and empathetic values. Their result was positive and encouraging. The drama has stimulated learning, self-exploration, and personal reflection among the audience to develop higher-level thinking. As most of the audience reported to be moved by the play, they also found the necessity to emphasize on the “humanity” side of medicine.

7. Conclusion

From many aspects and scenarios, drama has proved to be an effective tool to enhance empathy, one of the most important quality of human beings. It is highly suggested to use drama education as a pedagogical tool in not just theatre or acting classes, but in other subjects, to have more active engagements from students of different age. Now it seemed that it is also useful to cultivate the students moral value, such as to enhance empathy. This approach, even when sometimes is therapeutical for young victims in traumatic experiences like violence, bullying, or war, is still different from the more formal psychological method of a drama therapy (or psychotherapy). Drama therapy is a new psychological counseling model that has emerged in recent years. Visitors reconstruct themselves through drama performances to achieve the purpose of treating psychological problems. After reviewing the development status of drama therapy in terms of development history, treatment characteristics, treatment stages, and treatment techniques, it is easy to point out that the development of drama therapy and localization of the method could also be closely connected to drama itself. In the past three years, China has seen a rocketing number of role-play fun houses under the formal name of “Murderers in Drama”. The emergence of this type of entertainments indicated the urgent needs among the young people in China to explore new social playgrounds. In Shanghai, there is a fun house named “Art Healing” employing the form of drama and drama therapy. In the future, it is worthwhile to investigate and compare the empathy level between those frequent players of the role-play houses and people who dislike or have never tried the funhouse. Moreover, there is very few literature on the effectiveness of drama classes among Chinese students, especially those who entered international curriculums. These are all areas that I wish to explore in the future.

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