

Developing Students' Skills through Drama in Education

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Abstract

Learning democracy by doing, living meaningful authentic experiences in engaging empowering ways, students getting involved in collective decision-making processes, self-directed learning, and autonomy, all these need to be fostered in the so-called democratic schools. This paper claims that Drama in Education (DiE) could be an appropriate experiential teaching and learning method with high potential to provide an inclusive non-threatening environment for students and teachers to practice democracy.

Keywords

Drama in Education, experiential method, personal & social skills development, educational leadership, practice-based learning

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1 Introduction

Drama in Education (DiE) is a totally experiential teaching and learning method implementing theatrical techniques and specially designed individual and/or group activities; it can provide an inclusive non-threatening environment for students to learn from each other whereas teachers act as facilitators and tasks-to-be-done offer useful motivation. Self-awareness, creativity, decision-making, problem-solving, conflict resolution and various social skills can be developed through personal involvement, emotional engagement, and reflection during DiE workshops. In an emotionally safe environment, participants live-in-role problems, challenges, and dilemmas before having to face them in real life. They may find alternatives, share thoughts and emotions, test ideas, put them into practice, comment, reflect, redesign, retry, make decisions, and try out collectively chosen actions.

In the current paper a DiE experiential workshop is described as an example of how such a method could enhance democratic education within schools. The initial idea was based on the life and personality of Alexander the Great, the son of Macedonian King Philip II, who in the 4th century BC united all Greeks and conquered the vast Persian empire, thus presenting an indisputable example of authentic leadership in International History (Maninis, 1997). This story provides a suitable pretext for appreciating the potential of the method and at the same time showcases how necessary skills fostering democratic education can be enhanced, e.g., active participating in decision-making processes as well as taking initiative and exercising autonomy in self-directed learning are included.

In the first part of the paper, basic characteristics of Drama in Education method are described. Reasons are provided for: a) considering it an effective experiential training method in educational contexts and b) suggesting the introduction of this method in democratic schools to help students obtain and develop mostly needed skills. In the second part, the reader will find the description of the DiE workshop mentioned above. Similar workshops may be prepared – by trained teachers or students – in any discipline, to investigate challenging issues concerning everyday situations in democratic schools as well as their future development.

2 What is DiE?

According to Greek drama theorists and practitioners Avdi & Chadjigeorgiou (2018), Drama in Education is a theatrical art form of pedagogical nature, a learner-centered dynamic process that combines emotional engagement with cognitive processing, individual and collective living experiences with reflection. Initially influenced by the theories of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, it was shaped over time through the work of inventive practitioners and drama theorists around the world such as Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Cecily O' Neill, David Davis etc. DiE implementations explore various issues concerning humanity, social change, self-awareness as well as learning and teaching matters via appropriate theatrical techniques and conventions; it can enhance understanding and critical thinking through reflection sessions. A drama scenario includes at least one major contradictory issue which can be explored from different points of view – the more the better.

In DiE, learning is conceived as a process, not just in terms of outcomes. Participants learn from each other, reflect on their situation, and make connections with their own lives; answers to vital open-ended questions emerge during the process as they are believed to exist within individuals' minds. As the workshop evolves, participants draw out, re-examine, and integrate anew beliefs, ideas, perceptions, taken-for-granted assumptions, and hidden stereotypes; thus, a transformative action is initiated, subconsciously at first through living experience, then by metaxis and finally by reflection. Metaxis is a notion used by the Brazilian theatre practitioner and drama theorist Augusto Boal to describe a situation where participants live in two worlds at the same time: the imaginative one emerging during drama and the real world they live in. The open-ended learning process takes into consideration body, mind, and heart of the participants who can grasp better understanding of themselves and the world around them (Edwards, Elliott et al., 2015; Nielsen & Hustvedt, 2017; Pearce & Jackson, 2006; Steed, 2005).

The interaction between actual and fictional context makes learning meaningful, memorable, embodied, active, enjoyable, spontaneous, challenging, and stimulating even in cases of dealing with potentially difficult or sensitive situations. Although participants are physically, creatively, culturally, and emotionally challenged, the frequent highly important reflection sessions following action sessions during the drama, transform experience into learning

(Finch, Peacock et al., 2015; Joronen, Rankin, & Astedt-Kurki, 2008; Sutherland, 2012).

For the last ten years at the University of Macedonia, the two researchers and authors of this paper have been using DiE as an effective experiential method for developing personal, social, and professional skills in teenagers, university students, young adults, and professionals. Based on this experience they suggest that DiE be issued in democratic schools as a core training method for both teachers and students. (Papavassiliou-Alexiou & Zourna, 2016; Zourna & Papavassiliou-Alexiou, 2021).

3 DiE Workshop

This particular DiE workshop entitled *'Educational Leadership: Authority or Authenticity?'* was facilitated by the two authors several times for teenagers and adults in the last two years. The assessment and feedback results are provided in the end of the paper. The drama scenario pretext was the life and achievements of Alexander the Great, who provided the world with a most recognizable example of an authentic leader. After each activity the enhanced skills of the participants are also presented.

3.1 Purpose

Through personal involvement, emotional engagement, and reflection, via individual and group activities, the particular workshop aims at helping participants experience the behavior, needed skills, dilemmas, and informed choices of a historical leader. Since one of the aims of democratic education is empowering young students to become leaders of themselves and of the learning community they belong to, an appropriately designed DiE experience could be most helpful; they will realize what being a democratic leader and/or an active member of a democratic learning community means.

3.2 Structure

The structure of the workshop, the flow and goals of the selected activities, as well as the skills to be enhanced are given in detail in the next paragraphs.

Pretext

After some introductory ice-breaking group activities aiming at keeping the energy in high levels, attention focused, and getting to know each other, the participants are introduced to the scenario that will be explored in the drama-to-follow: in 342 BC Alexander is 14 years old; in the School of Mieza, near the modern city of Naoussa in Central Macedonia, he is being educated by the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle. His classmates are the sons of high-ranking officials of King Philip II. He is being educated to be the next king; nevertheless, he is a teenager seeking his identity, following his intuitions, feelings, passions, and dreams.

In *improvised scenes* the participants in groups enact the experiences Alexander could have had during his adolescence and investigate the revealed attributes of his personality and the gradual development of his character. A future leader may be acknowledged early by studying his behavior towards important people in his life – peers, teachers, parents. During improvisation, participants practice teamwork, creativity, imagination, spontaneity, and empathy. In a group discussion they can be facilitated to connect this activity to their own past experiences where early signs of their competences may have been revealed but remained hitherto unrecognized.

After each improvised scene, action freezes and the technique *inner thought tracking* takes place: when indicated by a facilitator, the participant-in-role unfreezes and explicitly expresses the inner thoughts of the impersonated role concerning Alexander. To articulate meaning and keep record of these revelations the activity *character on the wall* follows: on a piece of cardboard hung on the wall a simple outline of a Macedonian military casket is drawn; inside the casket the participants write the inner thoughts of Alexander expressed in first person and outside the casket they write the inner thoughts about Alexander expressed in third person by the significant others in his social environment. Through this activity, feeling safe and protected by the role they have taken on, participants become personally engaged and are trained to explicitly reveal hidden thoughts and emotions without hesitation.

Episode 1

The story evolves: in 336 BC Alexander's sister is getting married; during the ceremony King Philip is murdered. Alexander is the heir to the throne. But

is he legitimized to become king? Will he be recognized as leader by military officials, former friends, and the people?

These questions can be answered through the activity *taking position* where intentions may be subconsciously revealed: Alexander's chair is placed somewhere in the room. Participants choose to impersonate people of Alexander's social environment and stand in such a distance from the chair in direct proportion to their support – or challenge – to the new King. After everyone has taken position, they are asked to explain who they impersonate and how they feel. Motives, desires, feelings, and doubts about the new leader are revealed. Participants are thus trained in empathy, critical thinking, taking responsibility, decision-making and exposure.

Episode 2

The story goes on: military officers, officials and lords in Macedonia recognize Alexander as their new leader; but not in Southern Greece. In Thessaly rebellion starts, in Athens opponents' voices keep rising. King Philip's achievements are in danger of collapsing. How will Alexander react? His plan is to unite all Greek city-states against their common enemy, the Persian Empire. Before taking action, he consults with friends and close counselors.

In the activity *negotiating action* the participants divided into two groups present their arguments in favor of reacting fast or wisely. One half of the group impersonate Parmenion who was Philip's favorite counselor and of old age; the other half impersonate the younger officers, eager to fight. Both groups offer alternative options and points of view for Alexander to take into consideration before making final decisions. Participants are trained in negotiation, debate, persuasion, conflict resolution, and crisis management. Students being prepared for a more democratic environment may find such DiE activities useful for their training in communicating with collaborators and making unanimous decisions.

Episode 3

The story still evolves: The united army of the Hellenes starts to conquer the East. Victory follows battle after battle: by the river Granikos in 334, in the Issos valley in 333, freeing Ionian cities one by one. Persian King Darius III prepares his unprecedented huge army and waits the Greeks near the city of Gavgamila. What is more, the night before the final battle, September 20, 331

BC, a total eclipse of the moon spreads fear within the Greek military camp. Superstition, incoherent beliefs, spreading rumors escalate to an urgent crisis that Alexander must resolve at once. He cannot succeed in winning the *battle of all battles* by fighting all alone.

In the activity *war council*, participants in the roles of Alexander and other stakeholders – close friends, officers, soldiers facing death the very next day – express fear, hope, faith in Alexander who led them so far from homeland but rendered them rulers of the world. As various points of view are deployed, Alexander answers accordingly and negotiates by revealing his own thoughts, fears, and doubts; he demonstrates openness, courage, empathy, and communicates his own vision of the future with confidence. In the end of the negotiation, the men must state explicitly if they still stand by Alexander or will leave before dawn. Through this activity participants practice focused listening, communication, crisis management, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills.

In the follow-up activity *wandering in the room*, while listening to appropriate music, participants-in-role express Alexander's feelings. The activity aims at showing that an authentic leader also has feelings, empathy, shows interest in his collaborators, and can be influenced by his followers' attitudes; decisions will soon follow. Empathy, emotional awareness, and collegiality are cultivated via this activity.

After the war council, Alexander in his tent writes a letter to himself. Leaders need to face their own doubts, innermost fears, self-questioning, uncertainties, and dilemmas, and make informed choices and decisions, not at all lightheartedly. In the activity *writing a letter*, by revealing weaknesses and strengths, participants practice imagination, empathy, and creative writing skills. By reading their letters to the plenary they practice openness and exposure. As Dorothy Heathcote claimed, drama techniques allow the facilitator to freeze the flow of the events at any point of the evolving myth so that the participants may focus on important matters and deepen their thinking in the five layers of every action: the action itself, the reason behind it, the motive or future investment, the model/prototype being imitated and the stance of life (Avdi & Chadjigeorgiou, 2018).

Episode 4

The story evolves a little further: Alexander attacks the huge Persian army, which gets heavily defeated thanks to the Greek army's high skills and morale and Alexander's brilliant strategic moves. Persian king Darius flees the battlefield; later he dies. In 326 BC Alexander arrives at the border to India and plans to conquer more lands. However, his troops are now tired; they have been following him and his vision for ten years now; exhausted and nostalgic they wish to go back to their homeland and families. Alexander argues: *'We are creating History together'*.

In the activity *corridor of conscience*, the participants divided in two groups stand along two parallel lines forming a narrow corridor. Each one chooses the best argument in favor or against the proposal to continue the campaign. Then, one at a time passes through the corridor in the role of Alexander, eyes closed, and listens to the arguments consecutively, one in favor and one against. In the end he/she needs to decide what the hero of the myth will do. In this most engaging activity participants practice focused listening, critical thinking, and informed decision-making skills. After all of them have passed through the corridor, then standing in a circle, they reveal and justify their decision. Regardless of the decision of the participants, of course history cannot change: Alexander indeed decided to listen to his troops' request, stop the campaign, and return to homeland after he had a special commemorating monument built with the carved inscription: *'Here stopped Alexander'*.

In the course of human history there are other examples of leaders e.g., M. Gandhi, N. Mandela, etc., who could be chosen as central heroes in similar Drama in Education workshops, specially designed to explore leadership issues. Once the DiE method is experienced by teachers and students, extensive training may lead to high competence in designing tailor-made scenarios for investigating important issues emerging in democratic schools. The authors believe that these workshops may deploy the full potential of the dynamic method within the given democratic school principles.

4 Assessment – Feedback

In the University of Macedonia, the above-described drama scenario has been implemented several times during the last two years and was assessed by the participants, high school and university students, adults, and professionals. In

online Google forms or written questionnaires, they recorded their perceptions of the skills that ameliorated during the workshops and their beliefs about the usefulness of the method in social and professional skills development. Some of these are presented in the next paragraph.

The participants realized the challenges of the procedure to make informed choices, how difficult it is to establish unanimity, to argue in favor or against alternative proposals, and to act upon the decision made. Furthermore, the participants commented that the activities used in the workshop were helpful; they enjoyed experiencing emotions they were not aware of, being in two worlds at the same time, expressing inner thoughts while in role. According to the answered questionnaires, skills enhanced in the DiE workshops include focused listening, empathy, self-awareness, teamwork, creativity, spontaneity, enjoyment, critical thinking, decision making, and personal engagement. The participants also stated that the DiE method could prove useful for educational purposes, in training teachers and students in decision-making processes, crisis management, ameliorating the school climate, and positively affecting attitudes towards self-directed learning, problem solving and crisis management.

5 Conclusion

In democratic school communities, decision making calls for responsibility, accountability, authenticity, and active involvement of teachers and students alike; nevertheless, the skills that can lead to effective processes can indeed be learned, obtained, and practiced. Skills such as independent and critical thinking, risk-taking, pro-activity, goal setting, motivation, knowing group and relational dynamics, mastering self-confidence, and resilience, can play an important role when one gets involved in collective decision-making processes concerning everyday issues at school. Most interesting findings on teenagers' skills development through Drama in Education can be found in the full report 'Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education' (DICE, 2010).

In Kiess's most recent research study (2022) in nine European countries, including Greece, with a sample of more than 27,000 young adults aged 18 to 34, results showed that "regardless of the national context, people who have experienced democratic engagement [while in schools and universities] are more active as democratic citizens" (p. 88). Findings also emphasized the "impor-

tance of establishing opportunity structures for learning democracy by doing” which is exactly the case in democratic schools. Learning by doing, getting involved in collective decision-making processes, living meaningful, relevant, authentic experiences in a playful, engaging, empowering way is a must.

The authors believe that this goal can be reached by using Drama in Education method for training, experiencing, and developing necessary skills. It can provide teachers and students with a risk-tolerant environment, where they can investigate emerging issues from various points of view by asking appropriate open-ended questions and by reflecting on their own experiences and actions (Papavassiliou-Alexiou & Zourna, 2016).

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