“Dialectical Currencies Between Architectural and Theatre Pedagogy: Establishing Dialogical Learning in an Internationalized Environment”

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Introduction

This paper is part of a currently funded research project at the University of Plymouth entitled “Language and Cultural Meaning: Establishing Dialogical Learning in an Internationalized Teaching and Learning Environment”, involving ten BA Year 1 Architecture students; six native English speaking and four having English as their second language in order to reflect approximately the percentage of native English speakers to non-native English speakers in the school. The project utilizes this paper’s methodology on performative pedagogy to investigate how the understanding of language is informed by cultural background as well as its impact on the teaching and learning experience. The students’ involvement happened in two key ways; via five, two hour research sessions distributed throughout the academic year, with performative exercises being the part of the core agenda and via weekly reflective journals where students recorded their thoughts on their personal experience of learning, related to issues of language and culture. Although this paper is focusing on architecture students, the research has begun to explore the potential impact of the suggested methodology to other pedagogical disciplines such as the Finance and Accounting students of the University of Plymouth.

Currencies with Theatre Pedagogy

The paper aims to address the dialectical currency between architectural and theatre pedagogy in order to establish dialogical and creative learning in an internationalized educational environment. Although there is a plethora of literature focusing on the need for a multidisciplinary architectural pedagogy, there is limited literature on theatre as a supporting discipline to architecture. Concurrently, the impact of its pedagogy on students learning and cross-cultural setting has not been effectively evaluated. The research identifies the valuable synergy between theatre and architecture for an inclusive architectural pedagogy, understanding, appreciating and responding to students’ various cultural backgrounds. In the present and increasingly internationalized environment of education, what is needed is further examination of this condition.

The paper examines the above condition by combining Augusto Boal and Jacques LeCoq’s critical theatre pedagogy with interactive performance practices, integrating them to architectural pedagogy. This approach creates a learning community that empowers participants, which generates critical understanding, and which promotes transformation. According to Boal, “theatre is “the art of looking at ourselves; all human beings are actors (they act) and spectators (they observe)”i. Through the two main theatre educators’ theory and praxis, students start to initiate critiques of cultural and linguistic norms and develop a richer understanding of the design process. According to the critical pedagogy paradigm based on Paulo Freireii, education should encourage students to think critically, to analyse social conditions, and to evaluate received information. To establish this kind of critical pedagogy educators must create an educational culture that empowers students by levelling the teacher-student hierarchy and reflects a re-imagining of the academic’s hegemonic communication patterns, and institutional structures. As a psychosocial exploration, performance is a method of self-understanding or a tool for personal changeiii. Performance provides individuals with an experiential and communicative tool to express what might otherwise be inexpressible.

By placing the educator as the facilitator, promoting dialogue and the students as the spect-actors, both observing and creatingiv during the teaching and learning process; the proposed pedagogical model emerged from this dialectical currency between two disciplines, revealing significant critical learning for both parts. The information raised from this synergy gives useful insights, which are analyzed further in the paper, on the various ways to engage with
the information and allow students to have autonomy in the learning environment.

According to Gibson⁷, people from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds not only speak different languages but, what is possibly more important, inhabit different sensory worlds. Therefore, what is perceived through one set of culturally patterned sensory views is quite different from the experience perceived through another. If one wants to speak of an architectural education based on the ethics of productive dialogue in a multicultural and multilingual environment, then first one needs to recognise, understand and appreciate these diversities⁸.

I would argue that the language we speak is more than just a medium of expressing thought. In fact it is a major element for the formation of thought. According to Merleau-Ponty, the logos of the cultural world is the recuperation of all the acts of expression – this logos is their history, their memory⁹. Thus, to reflect on culture, on that inter-world which occurs by means of symbols (and of which language is only one particular, even if privileged, instance), is to reflect on history, on a logos which develops and makes its advent in the simultaneous and successive community of subjectivities⁹. In order to understand the idea of a thought, without words within which speech itself gives rise to, one must begin by putting language back among expressive phenomena in order to see how it expresses. As part of this, a closer look should be taken at the relation between meaning and expression, between the visibility of the sign and the invisibility of meaning⁹.

**Physical Exercises - Games**

The methodology used for this research, based on the theory and praxis of Jacques LeCoq⁴, is outlined as a series of successive, scaffolding exercises. One of the most important currencies between architecture and theatre pedagogy is the notion of play as a core principle of critical pedagogy. The methodology includes warm up exercises to prepare the body for the next steps. Exercises to promote participation, team work and collaboration as well as general spatial awareness, named as ‘games’. Exercises intended to allow students to recognise, understand and analyse critical information behind the meanings within language, named as ‘mimodynamics’⁸. Exercises to empower students and promote critical and lateral thinking, as well as enhancing cultural awareness among the group, named as ‘states, passions, feelings’⁸. “The experiences through the exercises, ranging from silence and immobility to maximum movement, taking in innumerable intermediate dynamic stages, remain forever engraved in the body of the player. They are reactivated in him/her at the movement of interpretation. During these exercises the player speaks from full physical experience. For in truth nature is our first language, our bodies remember”⁹. The term ‘player’ is deliberately used instead of the ‘actor’, because it is more neutral and all-embracing. It describes a state rather than a function.

The performance of the exercises is considered to be all-inclusive, respecting and appreciating unique individuality as well as physical and mental disabilities. The exercises vary on group size according to the nature of the game; it may start off working with the whole group, and then divide into smaller groups or even to an individual level and then back to the whole group in order to work on individual student needs.

**Warm up**

In a circle elementary gymnastics are used, for approximately five minutes, such as swinging the arms, forward or sideways bends, swinging legs, etc. These are all exercises generally used in physical warm-ups, with the aim to create a feeling of wellbeing for the players by being all-inclusive and requiring nothing but basic gymnastic skills.

**Games**

These exercises act as support material to the whole process, meaning they do not reflect directly on the teaching and learning outcome, but rather through a prolonged ricochet effect. They are usually placed in between the ‘mimodynamics’ and ‘states, passions, feelings’ exercises and they usually last from 10-15 minutes. The structure of these exercises is around the notion of play, which is considered to be a very vital aspect of architectural⁷ and theatre pedagogy⁹.

One example of the games is the “balancing the stage”⁹. It consists of a game of balancing or unbalancing the floor by moving the players around. The playing space is rectangular with the players surrounding it allowing for all the
major dynamic movements: right angles, parallels, diagonals. Participants are asked to imagine that this space is balanced around a central axis. A player, who takes up a position alone, in the central zone, maintains the balance of the stage. If he moves outside this zone, he unbalances it and causes it to tilt. So, a second player is necessary to rebalance it by choosing a position in relation to the first actor. Once this is established, more players are encouraged to step in the space when they feel the floor starts to become unbalanced. The point of the game is to achieve a harmonious relationship with time, space and all the participants on and around the “balanced floor”.

Through these series of games, participants begin to experience life as part of a company. After, a certain time, players know one another well, they choose with whom they want to work with, and any tensions diminish. It is suggested nevertheless, that the players should not always work with the same companions but allow themselves to be stimulated by contact with other personalities as well.

Mimodynamics

These set of exercises are based on Jacques LeCoq’s poetic sense and mimodynamics. The poetic sense deals with an abstract dimension, made up of spaces, lights, colours, materials, sounds which can be found in everyone. Mimodynamics is a dynamic emotion combining rootedness with an upward surge, having nothing to do with the temptation to give a picture of the actual physical building, space, ritual, word, etc. (a figurative mime). It’s more than a translation: it is an emotion. Etymologically the word ‘emotion’ means ‘setting in motion’. According to Jacques LeCoq, recognition precedes understanding and creation. The paper argues that one can see neither the form nor the movement of a colour; nevertheless the emotion which they arouse may set a person in motion – even in emotion. Through these exercises the aim is to try expressing this particular emotion through mimages, through gestures which have no reference point in the real world. This exercise offers opportunities to translate / represent / present a construct / building / place / notion through the mimodynamics, putting them into motion in a way the verbal way can never attain.

An example of these mimodynamics was performed as part of the research project, using first year students’ project 0 (their first design studio project), where the students were asked to bring one photograph of their significant place and building with a brief annotation for each of the two. Taking this project forward, the players were asked to write a key word for each picture they have chosen and then to use their bodies by making gestures reflecting the meaning behind these words. After this initial task which lasted about 30 minutes, the exercise built up for the second part (equally length to the first part) and the players were asked to get in pairs and decide on one key word to improvise it together. This was a great challenge for both the participants who were acting and the ones acting as audience, as this was the time where cultural and linguistic interpretation convergences or divergences become visible.

During the exercises, the facilitator’s role should be particularly attentive to the quality of players’ movements. He/she should tell whether the movements arise from players own bodies or from an external image that they are trying to illustrate, or again if they are doing a symbolic movement, giving an external representation of the place / building / notion they are trying to describe for the rest of the group. This challenges the player and takes him beyond the fixed perceptions of a construct and what can be expressed. The pedagogical task is to isolate digressive movement without ever indicating what should be done. It’s up to the player to discover what the facilitator already knows. But at the same time, the facilitator must be prepared at every moment to question his own approach, to get back to seeing the world with freshness and innocence, to avoid imposing clichés.

States, Passions, Feelings

The point of these exercises is to reveal participants sociocultural perceptions about the world around them; how they perceive the social and built constructs through the interaction with other people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. An example of these exercises starts by prompting players to allocate themselves at a random position in the space provided. At this point there is a short discussion on the participants’ emotions by being in that position. After that, players are asked to start move around the space shuffling around and
changing the pattern in the space. The players stop to move when one of them takes the initiative – making himself/herself the enabler of the game - to stop and start speaking, sharing one passion of his/hers. At this point the rest of the group is asked to respond to the player’s passion according to the tension they felt by watching him/her expressing it. The word ‘tension’ is deliberately used instead of ‘attraction – repulsion’ which could have the potential to dictate specific movement. When all players complete their performance, the pattern is changed again as another player takes the initiative to express a passion. When all players have been the enablers of the game, discussion follows. The second part of the exercise continues in a similar manner as the first part, with the difference that this time the participants express a fear instead of a passion. The whole exercise is scheduled to last approximately an hour.

**Student Outcomes**

There have been some very revealing results regarding students’ perceptions of language and cultural meaning, through the discussions during the exercises and their reflective journals. A synopsis of the main outcomes is that students feel they are involved in a cyclical learning act because of their participation in the research project and the nature of the architecture course itself. 

“I am in a constant state of learning new ways to see, think, and communicate and ever so much more. But one of the most important things I have learnt through my participation on this project is that communication has many forms and does not have to be through conversation”xxx.

Moreover, the use of mimodynamics as a way to express their emotions, on specific key words helped them to understand and reflect on the meaning behind the words they were using so far, reflecting back on their previous projects in design process. “After the session I realized that there is a very distinctive difference between ‘gesturing’ through pantomime to communicate literally a concept and trying to explain the concept that we had chosen through a performance. I felt that this was a very similar comparison to a criticism of my previous project and the literal conceptualization of my narrative”xxx.

Also, students begin to engage with the interdisciplinary approach and start feeling a sense of autonomy. They understand their vocabulary is being extended and they start creating their own language. Students also commented on their experience of being encouraged to think in a broader scale and analyze the different meanings that words and constructs may have, depending on the participants’ origin, cultural and linguistic background. “Through the format of small group sessions which are regular occurrences, I feel my vocabulary has increased and knowledge of architectural language widened, I feel my confidence is scaling and I am now constructing thoughts into sentences. I feel we are to think for ourselves and be molded by our tutors edifying. I feel I am almost analyzing foreign aspect and on a very minimal level, beginning to de-and-then-reconstruct them into my malleable mind and manifest the infancy of an individual ideology”xxx.

Students received the physical exercises in a very positive way, commenting that with the perfect combination of movement and language they could express ideas perfectly and clearly while constructing new thoughts along the way. “So far we have viewed at a vast range of mediums in an aid to assimilate architecture; theatre, movement, mime and etc. A suggestion of that is that we should be inquisitive and curious, unafraid to study unknown and alien subjects in a hope to produce a product of thought. An education that can have no normal outcome, we won’t all graduate as UNI-fied robots”xxx.

Very important for the research was the fact that students start recognizing and understanding the fact that language is not static, it is alive and dynamic, it is embedded in our culture, and most importantly, that architecture has its own language creating a sub-culture around it. As very poetic a student expressed it “if language is alive then words are its water, if language is alive then experience is its air, if language is alive than longevity is its light”xxx.

**Teacher – Student Relationship**

Brazilian artist and director Augusto Boal’s work, like his fellow countryman Paulo Freire, has focused on creating opportunities for people to enliven their capacity to resist oppressionxxx. In his Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)xxx he has suggested the terms ‘spectactor’ referring to the students and ‘facilitator’ referring to the teacher. The students are both spectators who observe the performance, but they are also actors who act on the performance. There is a distinct difference to what Hegel calls master – slave condition”, or what Freire refers to as banking systemxxx, where the students remain observers of the received information without feeling they have the power and the right to actively engage and even question the teacher.

The suggested exercises follow similar hierarchical principles to Augusto Boal’s TO; although they are facilitated by someone who knows the structural forms of the exercises and who can promote discussion, there is no
‘director’, and anyone can suggest changes to the way an exercise is played.

The above facilitator – spectator relationship has proven, during the research sessions, to overcome issues of students’ shyness and lack of engagement in the games. It is an essential Freirean teacher/student approach, being critically aware of one’s social conditioning, constructing meaning from inquiry, and bearing witness to the world with humility, empathy and hope. Students are encouraged to really perceive these exercises as a play, and allow themselves to remember what it was like as a child, when everything seemed new, and a time when they did not know, but found themselves in a constant process of discovery. As children, this is a natural condition of existence; as adults it becomes a radical act. Students by being equal players of the game, are given the permission to depart from conventional modes of prescribed behaviour and to reflect on the ways they are located within those structures of convention and prescription. However, even though there was not such an occurrence in the performed exercises so far, for those who are present but have no intention to actively participate in the exercises, the simplest advice is to remain engaged with the process of the exercise and join in when they feel like it.

Conclusion

The paper recognises the fact that architecture as a subject, as well as academia and theatre, belongs to a sub-culture, has its own language to communicate and express thoughts and ideas. It becomes understood that for someone to join this culture, like a first year student in architecture, it may become problematic to understand the language embedded within this culture. What this paper is suggesting, is a possible route to make students recognise this sub-cultural condition, by making them aware of their own cultural and linguistic conditions and the others around them. Concurrently, to understand the meaning within language through the critical performative pedagogy’s theory and praxis has been a key to the research. According to Dutton in Voices in Architectural Education, design studio should give students the allowance to claim their personal history as part of an understanding of larger political and social processes. The multicultural and multilingual aspect of the group should be seen as a bonus by embracing diversity, by pushing students beyond comfortable cultural stereotypes. The students were encouraged to make the personal cultural and the cultural personal.

Arguing the perception that first year students are perceived to be like empty vessels and tutors as full vessels holding the power, the theory and praxis of Augusto Boal and Jacques LeCoq perceives players having a history, a past, a context and passions which all feed into their design process. Based on the notion of observation and discovery of life as it is through replay, the exercises raise the levels of playing by means of mimodynamics and gestures. Exploration of the poetic depths of words and constructs, resulting in the invisible act of students removing layers of the fixed social constrains they live in, unmask them. The exercises have no intention to make students express what they think the tutor would want; the main intention is to allow students to try to be honest with themselves and with the others. In that way, students can gain the ability, at some point in their learning process, to create their own language, having understood and distilled the meanings of the words and constructs they live and interact with. Human beings, according to Merleau-Ponty, are considered to be born and live in a logos, a cultural world. Therefore, language and the way people think and express themselves is a person’s “element as water is the element of fishes.” The suggested embodied act of pedagogy gives the possibility to students, as well as to tutors, the ability to achieve self-consciousness which eventually leads to sociocultural awareness. Participants also gain the ability to perceive their normalized patterns of expression as one of many possible configurations, rather than a given, inexorable state. According to Freire "we know ourselves to be conditioned but not determined.

All the information used during these exercises has been facilitated by the various experiences and sensations that students (and tutors) have, influenced by everything they have seen, heard, touched, tasted. All of these elements are inside them and constitute the common heritage, out of which springs dynamic vigour and the desire to create. In this way, through the suggested interdisciplinary synergy, students are empowered to gain autonomy in an internationalized teaching and learning environment.

Notes


Robert Brown and Patrick Clark, (2013) 'Facilitating Creative Thinking Through Play', University of Sheffield (currently under review)


See endnote 12

See endnote 16


See endnote 12, 17


See endnote 12, 17

Focus group student, participating in the research

See endnote 21

See endnote 21,22

See endnote 21,22,23

See endnote 21,22,23,24


Maria Dasli (2011): Reviving the ‘moments’: from cultural awareness and cross-cultural mediation to critical intercultural language pedagogy, Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 19:1, 21-29


Critical Pedagogy and Architectural Education


See endnote 30


See endnote 29

See endnote 29

See endnote 29