Management Learning

Animating the classroom: Pedagogical responses to internationalisation

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Animating the classroom: Pedagogical responses to internationalisation

Abstract

Internationalisation of the postgraduate classroom has become a feature of UK business

schools, but traditional seminar-led learning often does not suit international students'

learning needs. This article reports on a pilot project that used experiential drama

workshops, held in a local theatre, as a response to the challenges created by

internationalisation.   As part of a collaborative auto-ethnography between two academics

and a theatre practitioner, the article focuses on a theatre workshop where UK and Chinese

MA Management students (the latter being the majority) were given full creative control to

create a theatrical performance about the collapse of Enron. We outline how the project

provided students with an opportunity to learn about ethical leadership through a series of

experiential drama exercises and how it equipped the lecturers with tools and

understandings that were subsequently used to teach leadership and critical management

studies in a more inclusive way. We conclude by discussing the benefits of using drama

techniques to address internationalisation challenges, and urge business schools with a

large international cohort to engage in a degree of pedagogical risk-taking in order to foster

alternative ways of learning that are more inclusive and experientially based.

Keywords

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Introduction

Internationalisation has become an important part of UK universities' strategy, with many

institutions expanding their international recruitment to earn additional income in an era of

continuous budget cuts. Postgraduate recruitment is seen as a growth area and

international students now make up a high percentage of postgraduate taught (PGT)

programmes in the UK, with China being targeted as a particularly lucrative market (Turner,

2006). While internationalisation is championed by university management as a solution to

the problem of falling university income, the delivery of the programmes is given less

attention and is often assumed to be unproblematic. While many UK students will be

familiar with discussion-led seminars common on PGT programmes, international students

often struggle because their previous learning experiences are of different classroom

pedagogies (Simpson et al., 2010; Currie, 2007; Turner, 2006). It is not surprising, therefore,

that internationalisation of the classroom has become a growing concern (Crose, 2011),

with particular attention being given to the high numbers of international students doing

postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes in UK business schools.

As the number of international students in the classroom increases, often outnumbering UK

students, universities are finding that traditional delivery methods do not suit the learning

needs of international students (Crose, 2011; Turner, 2006; Currie, 2007). At its most

extreme, all parties involved in PGT programmes experience a sense of crisis: international

students feel isolated and question the wisdom of deciding to study abroad, UK students

complain that international students do not contribute in class, while the lecturers discover

that tried and trusted teaching methods are no longer effective. Finding ways to address

this crisis is imperative, given that internationalisation continues to be a high priority for

universities.

This article reflects on a project that uses experiential drama techniques as a pedagogical

response to the internationalisation of the postgraduate classroom. It was devised in

response to student feedback about internationalisation and two of the authors' concerns

about the difficulties they were experiencing when teaching topics such as organisational

power, politics, leadership and ethics to MA Management students who had little work

experience and were unfamiliar with the UK university system.

Such learning and teaching challenges have been widely acknowledged by the

internationalisation literature (Crose, 2011; Turner, 2006; Sun and Richardson, 2012) and

there has been a growing call for programmes to move beyond traditional approaches and

to adapt to the needs of international students (Kelly and Moogan, 2012; Valiente, 2008).

Drama techniques are often used to tackle problematic situations in organisations with the

goal to elicit a range of reactions from multiple organisational actors, from experiencing

individual catharsis to creative problem solving (Meisiek, 2004). This inspired us to design

and conduct a series of drama workshops to tackle some of the challenges we faced in the

classroom.

We worked in collaboration with an award winning theatre which has a long tradition of

working with marginalised communities and individuals from all walks of life. The theatre

states in their published materials that their way of working 'gives voice' to individuals and

groups who sit on the margins of the society, and in so doing creates environments

where traditional hierarchies and barriers are dissolved, new dialogues are possible and

different useful relationships formed. As verbal and non-verbal activities were given equal importance in the workshops, issues of voice became less important, allowing students to participate in more embodied ways 'by doing' rather than just 'by talking'. This approach 'animated' the students and even those who were usually very quiet in the classroom found ways to express their views and contribute fully to the exercises.

The article is organised as follows. It begins by discussing the literature on the internationalisation of postgraduate education. It then provides an overview of the use of drama as a teaching and learning technique and outlines the rationale for the way we designed and conducted our drama workshops. This is followed by an account of one of the workshops, where students moved from improvisational exercises to creating a series of non-verbal presentations (i.e., performances) about the Enron case study (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005; Boje et al., 2004; 2006; Boje and Rosile, 2003) which they had initially studied in the classroom. The article concludes by discussing the benefits of using drama techniques as a way of managing internationalisation of the classroom and reflects on how the study influenced us as lecturers.

Internationalisation of the postgraduate classroom

Definitions of internationalisation are vague. For some universities, it means offering learning materials with an international flavour, while for others, it translates into increased numbers of international students (Elliott and Robinson, 2012). In the case of UK business schools, internationalisation refers to students from outside the EU who are charged higher fees. In response to funding cuts, UK universities are pursuing internationalisation agendas, with China as the main market for UK PGT programmes (Turner, 2006). In practice, Chinese students make up the majority of international students on UK PGT programmes. When

international students outnumber UK students, it also means that the majority of students

in the classroom are Chinese (see: Currie, 2007; Sun and Richardson, 2012; Simpson et al.,

2010).

The positive view of internationalisation is that it enables students to take advantage of

what globalisation has to offer and prepares them to work with people from a range of

cultures. Too often, however, internationalisation leads to a 'learning shock' (Griffiths et al.,

2005) where international students are disoriented, confused and upset by unfamiliar

teaching methods or by the gap between their expectations and the reality of the

programme (Elliott and Robinson, 2012). The learning shock can also be experienced by UK

students who find themselves in a minority in the classroom. The following review of recent

literature on international students' experience of Western postgraduate education

highlights what are seen as key problem areas. Much of this literature relates to Chinese

students on standard UK PGT programmes, with particular emphasis given to MBA

programmes.

Currie (2007) defines the predominant pedagogical model used in UK business schools as

'Anglo-American', arguing that it organises learning in constructivist, rather than

behaviourist, terms. Thus, unlike the behaviourist approaches to education, where learning

is understood as being transmitted from lecturer to student, the majority of UK PGT

programmes emphasise the co-creation of knowledge (Light and Cox, 2001). Classroom

activities thereby include techniques such as student-led seminar discussions, exploration of

multiple viewpoints, critical analysis and debates. As Currie (2007) notes, students are

expected to be proactive learners in this environment and to be vocal participants in the

classroom and during group work. In contrast, Valiente (2008) outlines a 'Confucian'

pedagogy, familiar to many East Asian students, that priorities memory and rote learning as

a key feature of the learning process. The differences between these pedagogical approaches are often deeply embedded in the learning environment and rarely reflected upon by institutions and individual academics (Currie, 2007; Simpson et al., 2010; Turner, 2006).

The result is that international students report experiencing marginalisation (Simpson et al., 2010; Turner, 2006), anxiety (Currie, 2007; Valiente, 2008) and culture shock (Kelly and Moogan, 2012) in the classroom as they struggle to adjust to new teaching and learning methods, language barriers and an emphasis on critical analysis. Research suggests that Chinese students, in particular, experience difficulties when asked to engage in individualised debate in class (Simpson et al., 2010; Currie, 2007). Debate and analysis can cause anxiety (Turner, 2006) because it requires students to query the teacher and their classmates in a way that many of them are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. As a result, Chinese students are often characterised as passive learners, with the underlying (normative) assumption that UK students are more active learners. However, what might be labelled as 'passive' could be the result of cultural misunderstanding, linguistic difficulties or lack of confidence (Valiente, 2008). Furthermore, caution should be exercised when characterising 'the Chinese learner', because students' approaches to learning are not just culturally determined (Sun and Richardson, 2012) but also influenced by the social situation (Stead and Elliot, 2013), individual expectations and understandings of what an ideal student is. Moreover, as can be seen from some of the labelling and stereotyping, the studies sometimes assume that national 'types' exist and that students from a particular region can be treated as an undistinguished, homogenised mass.

Language ability is a sensitive issue (Turner, 2009), with Cheng (2013) highlighting the power

relations that exist within student groups, where international students feel powerless and

undervalued when working with native English speakers. As Simpson et al. (2010) note,

unequal power relations are frequently overlooked when thinking about the international

students' experience of Anglo-American pedagogy. This creates a situation where 'home'

students are set up as the 'norm' and international students become 'the other'. These

cultural norms can also be problematic, as teacher-led discussions can easily reproduce

cultural insiders and outsiders (Turner, 2009) by privileging students who are fluent,

confident speakers and familiar with the local classroom norms. Thus, in the classroom

'othering' becomes a constant issue; cultural differences can exacerbate misunderstandings

leading to students becoming withdrawn and/or labelled as free-riders because they do not

communicate well (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2008). At the level of student interaction, students

can be inclined to create unfavourable national stereotypes of each other: UK students

characterise their Chinese classmates as having poor English skills, being unwilling

participants in class, slow and needy, while Chinese students see the UK students as

domineering, aggressive, intolerant and unfriendly (Turner, 2009). The stereotypes would

seem to develop because there is little opportunity for socialisation and cultural exchange in

tightly scheduled, modularised PGT programmes. On year-long programmes, where there is

little scope for ideas to emerge at a leisurely pace, UK students can become ethnocentric,

labelling their international classmates as free-riders (Currie, 2007; Gabriel and Griffiths,

2008) because they do not contribute to class discussions and group assignments. This often

leads UK students to assume that they are 'carrying' the international students. As a result,

international students become marginalised during group work (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2008)

or have their contribution reworked by home students because it does not conform to local,

implicit understandings of what is required (Cheng, 2013).

There is frequently a disjoint between students' expectations and what the PGT programme

will deliver (Elliott and Robinson, 2012). Turner's (2006) year-long study highlights the

emotional stress and lack of confidence experienced by Chinese students on a taught MA

programme, suggesting that many Chinese students spend the first semester acclimatising

and only fully engage with course material in the second semester. Students may take a

long time to make the transition from one pedagogy to another (Kelly and Moogan, 2012;

Currie 2007). Because the UK institutions and individual academics rarely reflect on their

own pedagogical biases (Currie, 2007; Simpson et al., 2010; Turner, 2006), in order to make

a successful transition, international students need to learn how to negotiate specific

discourses of knowledge and socio-political contexts (Cheng, 2013). Thus, while some

international students manage to develop coping mechanisms (Cheng, 2013), others'

learning strategies remain unchanged (Turner, 2006) and they struggle throughout their

PGT programme.

Responses to these issues are varied. There is a growing call for taught PG programmes to

move beyond the traditional approaches and to adapt to the needs of the international

students (Kelly & Moogan, 2012; Valiente, 2008). Others stress the need to create better

integration between UK and international students (Currie, 2007). Similarly, Turner (2006)

advocates greater socialisation of international students, arguing that they need to

understand the 'cultural epistemology of their day-to-day experiences' (47) in order to

appreciate the specific pedagogical requirements of a UK PGT programme. Sun and

Richardson (2012) argue that Chinese students need greater support structures in order to

develop deep learning strategies, while Turner (2006) recommends intensive mentoring of

international students by staff on these programmes. Turner notes, however, the emotional

drain she experienced during the research, as she emerged as a trusted mentor to the

student participants. Thus, although Turner's suggestion would be welcomed from a

student perspective, it could have the unintended consequence of increasing the emotional

labour required of academic staff on PGT programmes. What seems clear is that these

requirements are responses to inequalities that are deeply embedded in programme

structures, with Western pedagogical and epistemological biases rarely being reflected upon

(Turner, 2006; Currie, 2007). As Turner (2009: 243) notes, however, while the literature is

beginning to consider 'implicit local norms that silently privilege home students over

others', there is little agreement on the degree of institutional bias (structure) and

responsibility of individual learners (agency) in any given classroom. Thus, solutions or

alternative approaches to teaching an international classroom in an inclusive manner are in

short supply.

To summarise then, the internationalisation literature points to myopia in Western

management education that focuses on a pedagogical approach that many international

students find alienating. Research has explored the isolation experienced by international

students and the difficulties they experience when making the transition from 'passive' to

'active' learning. Various solutions are suggested, ranging from greater socialisation and

integration of students to structural changes. The overwhelming impression is that of a crisis

in the classroom, with students and lecturers searching for ways to make sense of a new

teaching and learning experience. The next section explores the use of drama in the

classroom, as well as considering improvisational theatre as a response to the crisis.

The use of drama in management education

In recent years, drawing on drama techniques has become increasingly popular in

management education (Moshavi, 2001; Lesavre, 2012). Research in this area includes

practical advice on using drama in the classroom, to accounts of how the use of drama as a

pedagogical tool can benefit students. Theatre is seen to build inter-personal skills (Stager

Jacques, 2013), promote creative problem-solving (Moshavi, 2001), acknowledge neglected

strengths (Feagan and Rossiter, 2011) and reduce hierarchy in the classroom (Lesavre,

2012). Moreover, it is argued that theatre exercises are suitable for different learner types

(Corsun et al., 2006) because they encourage experiential learning (Huffaker and West,

2005). Drawing on theatrical practice allows students to gain emotional, as well as

intellectual knowledge, giving the opportunity for holistic learning (Elm and Taylor, 2010).

The most common drama technique used in education is based on role-play. Baruch (2006)

focuses on lecturers' use of role-play as a teaching aid, presenting a model of various

metaphorical masks a lecturer can adopt, loosely arranged around two axes:

interactive/passive and thinking/feeling. The framework include roles such as coach, sales-

person, stand-up comic and preacher, each of which can be used in different classroom

situations to enhance learning. Role-play is not guaranteed to succeed, however, as there

are contingencies to consider such as class size, the students' maturity and level of

experience. Much can also rest on the individual lecturer's level of skill and ability to act in

class. A more common approach is to focus on engaging students in role-play, whether by

acting out existing scripts (Prichard, 2009) or by improvising different scenarios (Moshavi,

2001) to prompt class discussions or develop practical skills.

Although arts and management are now so deeply entwined as to constitute a distinct field

of study (Meisiek and Barry, 2014), drama techniques such as role-play should not be seen

as simply another tool in the arsenal of managerial techniques and practices to be

transmitted to students. Many discussions of drama and management veer into

functionalist approaches where theatre is seen as an organisational resource, one that

management can deploy in order to exert some form of control over employees. As Beirne

and Knight (2007) argue, this can suppress creativity and dissent because participants are

steered by the strong managerial vision behind the dramatic work. They argue that, at its

most extreme, this constitutes a colonisation of the theatrical form by management,

whereby theatre is reduced to just one more pedagogical tool deployed as a novelty. In

response, they advocate drawing on radical theatre traditions which allow students to

develop their own voices and explore ideas in a creative, safe environment.

As such, management education could benefit from the emancipatory power of drama.

Sutherland (2012: 40) argues that arts-based methods make possible the development of

aesthetic workspaces in which management learning is de-routinised and aesthetic

reflexivity becomes the norm, leading to improved capacity for leaders to 'responsibly and

ethically engage with the complex, dynamic, chaotic and highly subjective, interactional

environments of contemporary organisational life'. Arts-based methods help leaders to see

more and see differently (Barry and Meisiek, 2010) and to develop self-knowledge and

knowledge of the others that would not be possible via traditional developmental methods.

The resulting aesthetic reflexivity allows leaders to apprehend tacit knowledge (cf Taylor

and Ladkin, 2009) and to appreciate leading as a craft (Taylor and Ladkin, 2014). The

meditative and contemplative element has also come to prominence in arts-based

methodologies, with proponents arguing that through art making, leaders become more

holistic people and can express themselves more freely and creatively, unburdened by

organisational codes of behaviour and related power structures (Cunliffe, 2009).

For those who encounter drama as a pedagogical tool for the first time, a common

assumption is that it is synonymous with role-play. There are, however, a wide range of

alternative approaches available based on improvisational, experiential techniques. Many of

these are inspired by the forum theatre of Boal (2008), who wanted to radicalise audiences

by transforming their experience from passive spectacle to active engagement with the

material on stage. He coined the phrase 'spect-actor' to encapsulate a theatrical process

where the audience are actively encouraged to query the material being presented, debate

key issues and present a range of solutions, which are then enacted on stage. Boal's work

has been adapted by practitioners and researchers to suit local contexts, with the express

aim of encouraging reflexivity by defamiliarising common situations in order to raise debate

and facilitate learning (Beirne and Knight, 2007; Pässilä et al., 2013).

The work of Boje et al. (2003) on theatre and metaphor opens up the possibility of using

theatre to unearth individual motives and meanings as well as the political structures in

which they are embedded. For Boje and colleagues, organising is simultaneously 'like

theatre' in that organisational actors engage in on and off stage performances, as well as

'being theatre' for much of organisational life is literally dramatic and theatrical. They have

used this approach in a series of studies on the collapse of Enron (Boje et al., 2004; 2006;

Boje and Rosile, 2003).

In one sense, the improvisational (improv) approach is similar to the experiential learning

linked to outdoor management development (OMD). It has several features in common with

OMD, including a novel environment, an element of risk, flexibility of activities to match

participants' needs and the importance of facilitation to translate the experience into

lessons learned (Ibbetson and Newell, 1999; Irvine and Wilson, 1994; McEvoy and Buller,

1997). Indeed, Broderick and Pearce (2001) suggest that OMD activities can be brought

indoors by replacing the outdoor activities with educational drama elements. There is

debate, however, as to the value of the OMD learning experience, with critics arguing that it

is over-reliant on anecdotal evidence (Irvine and Wilson, 1994) and 'happiness' evaluations

rather than evidence of learning (Ibbetson and Newell, 1999). However, as Hinchliffe (2000)

notes, OMD is a different kind of learning, one that cannot be easily translated into

'management speak'. For Hinchliffe, OMD incorporates embodiment, play and experimental

learning. He argues that these require a shift away from functionalist evaluations of OMD as

a way to create better corporate workers, to a broader appreciation of their power to

sensitise us to our embodied existence and the ways in which knowledge can emerge in

unpredictable ways. This is a similar argument to that which Taylor (2012) makes about craft

skills in organisations.

It is this embodied, exploratory aspect of OMD that we find most relevant for our discussion

of the role of improv, because we are more concerned with classroom learning, rather than

workplace training. Some important features of the improv approach is that it empowers

students (Monks et al., 2001) by disrupting traditional classroom hierarchies and creating a

space for open, non-judgemental communication (Moshavi, 2001). This enables students to

construct meaning for themselves through interaction with their peers (Corsun et al., 2006;

Gagnon et al., 2012). Discussion can evolve in a non-linear fashion (Huffaker and West,

2005), with students learning skills of reciprocity, collaboration and group harmony (Stager

Jacques, 2013).

Given the benefits of an improvisational approach, drawing on experiential drama

techniques would seem like a useful way of responding to the challenges posed by the

internationalisation of the PGT classroom. In the case study that follows, we analyse one

such experiment, where students on an MA programme in Management took part in a

series of three full-day theatre workshops.

Background

The case study reflects upon a small teaching innovation project undertaken in a UK

management school where over 80% of the PGT cohort is international and 90% of the

international students are Chinese. Inspiration for the project came from two sources: the

students and a serendipitous conversation between the authors. In the first instance,

student feedback received during a staff-student liaison meeting identified three areas of

concern: integration, classroom participation and cultural differences. The student group,

which included home and international students (mostly Chinese), echoed many of the

themes discussed in the literature (e.g. Currie, 2007; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2008). Students

expressed concern that there was little interaction between the UK and international

students and that the latter were not contributing in class. Moreover, the students made

broad statements about the cultural differences between the students, reinforcing negative

stereotypes about each other (Turner 2009). The second source of inspiration was a chance

conversation between the authors who, for a number of years, have been involved in joint

community-based participatory research that used theatre-based techniques. The two

academics were complaining to the theatre director (third author) how hard it was to teach

ethics and leadership to international students: the response was 'why not bring them to the theatre to try out some improvisational techniques!'

The workshops were intended as both a response to the needs of international students (Kelly and Moogan, 2012; Valiente, 2008) and an innovative approach to management education (Prichard, 2009). Firstly, we hoped to promote greater integration and socialisation of the student cohort, while giving them opportunities to think about the module content in new ways. Secondly, rather than creating specific learning objectives, we were interested in promoting a broader understanding of education that encouraged a reflective approach to future endeavours, drawing on the theatre's nationally recognised record of empowering marginalised communities and examining quality of life issues. Thirdly, we hoped to acquire new tools and understandings that could be brought back into the classroom in order to teach critical management topics in a more effective way. Key to achieving these aims was the combination of academic and theatre skills. This was facilitated by the ongoing relationship between the authors (two academics and one theatre practitioner) who had been working together on various sponsored research projects and had a trusting relationship in place.

 Another important factor was the culture and ethos of the theatre, which has a long history of engaging with marginalised individuals and communities, winning national awards for its work and working in partnership with a range of local and national government departments, third sector organisations and universities. The theatre's main aim is to change lives and this is delivered through its main productions as well as through specific theatre outreach projects. The theatre has developed a long-standing reputation for delivering artistically ambitious, powerful interventionist theatre projects, building on fifty

years of a documentary and participatory theatre tradition. As such, it develops projects

either in direct response to the needs of the local communities or as commissioned around

specific themes. The theatre takes the work out to places where it will have the maximum

impact but also brings individuals into the theatre where participants will find a creative,

accepting and supportive environment and where they can explore their lives, contribution

to local community and in so doing play their part as active and responsible citizens (web

link will be added).

Students were brought to the local theatre for a series of three full-day residential

workshops, led by Author Three, an experienced theatre director, and two other theatre

practitioners. The first two workshops were timetabled to take place in Week 5 (October)

and Week 11 (December) of the first semester, while the final workshop was timetabled for

Week 3 in the second semester (February). The workshops took place on a Wednesday, as

the relevant modules ran in the morning and there were no scheduled classes on

Wednesday afternoons. Each workshop explored a specific theme (power and control,

organisational culture and ethical leadership, respectively) and was scheduled to happen

after students had attended the module seminar on the topic.

Each workshop was timetabled in a similar fashion. The day began and ended in the

university. We would gather with the students in the university reception in the morning,

get a bus to the theatre and be ready to start work immediately. The bus brought them back

to campus in the evening. As noted in the previous section, it was important to bring the

students off-campus to the theatre, because it broke their expectations about how to

behave in the classroom (Lesavre, 2012) and disrupted existing power relations (Currie,

2007). Each day began with warm-up exercises, usually an energetic 'name game' designed

to get people moving around, gaining confidence and learning the ground rules for the day.

All activities after that were linked to specific issues raised by the readings. Typically, the

students, the academics and theatre practitioners (hereafter 'the group') would complete

two warm-up exercises, plus two or three short activities before lunch. The lunch break

lasted about an hour and students were completely free during this time. We used the

lunch break to discuss how the day was going and what emergent themes and topics we

should develop in the afternoon. After lunch, the group would be given a longer more

complex task which took the entire afternoon.

Although improvisational (improv) workshops seem to happen spontaneously, thorough

preparation was important (Monks et al., 2001) both for students and staff. Two key

readings were set for each theme, drawing on trusted teaching materials that the academics

had used for several years. Students were expected to study them in advance, as they

would for a tutorial or seminar on the topic. The theatre director then used the readings to

create a series of exercises, games and problems for the group to engage with. She

commented:

> *I was delighted to see that the attention I would pay to a piece of work such as*
>
> *Shakespeare could be applied to academic papers, and would bring about moving*
>
> *and exciting results played out not by professional actors, but by equally talented*
>
> *management students (Reflective diary, Author Three).*

For example, students learned about disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) in the lecture on

power and control. During the workshop, they played a game called 'Prisoners and Guards'

which explored the metaphor of the panopticon through the activity of trying to 'escape'

from their guards. The group explored wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) in the

'Human Knot' (where the group randomly joins hands and then tries to untangle to form an unbroken circle, see Picture 1) and emergent leadership in 'Spot the Leader' (where the group was told that the director had picked someone to be a leader and they had to spot who it was; the catch being that nobody had been chosen).

Debriefing was an important feature of the workshop timetables. At various points during the workshops, mid-activity and at the end of each exercise, we asked the students to reflect on the exercises and to relate them to their academic learning and practical experiences, facilitating collaborative learning (Light and Cox, 2001; Valiente, 2008). As the OMD literature also notes, expert facilitation is a key part of the learning process (Ibbetson and Newell, 1999; Irvine and Wilson, 1994). Thus every workshop ended with a general discussion and debriefing, led by the theatre director, which encouraged reflection on both the process of learning and significant events during the workshops. It was during these final discussions where we often saw reflection and learning taking place. As an extract from Author One's field diary notes:

> *You could see TO (international student) almost thinking out loud as the day*
>
> *progressed. A few times during the first workshop she looked like she was about to*
>
> *have an epiphany. It happened during the final circular discussion. [Author Three] was*
>
> *wrapping things up when TO jumped forward, breaking out of the circle, and cried 'I*
>
> *want to say something'. I can't remember exactly what she said because I was in the*
>
> *circle too and it happened so quickly that by the time I got on the bus, it was gone*
>
> *from me. My memory of it was that she synthesised all the material we'd covered*
>
> *during the day and managed to link it to some basic ideas about power and control.*

The Theatre Director commented:

It was wonderful to see that the playfulness required to benefit from all these exercises

manifested clearly in the students who came alive in playing these games showing not

only their intellectual understanding of the topics but also their ability to move

between theory and practice with such ease and having so much fun (Author Three).

Breaking expectations was important (Feagan and Rossiter, 2011) in order to disrupt

learned classroom behaviours and create a space for new forms of learning. In the theatrical

space, traditional classroom hierarchies are disrupted as 'all participants are beginners'

(Lesavre, 2012: 246), including the lecturers. Interestingly, however, the students

automatically reproduced classroom hierarchies when they arrived for the first workshop.

While the lecturers and theatre practitioners were greeting each other, the students

automatically began to set out rows of chairs for themselves at the far side of the studio

space and sat down with notebooks out and pens at the ready. In subsequent workshops,

however, students dumped bags and coats in the audience area and ran onto the stage.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, our approach to the project is a collaborative auto-ethnography

(May and Pattillo-McCoy, 2000) between two academics and a theatre practitioner, which

draws on our personal narratives (cf Daskalaki, 2012; Stoudt, 2009), field diaries and

conversations about the project. The project presented us with an opportunity to reflect on

the liberating experience of fusing drama and teaching, yet it has also left us with conflicting

emotions about our experience; a subject which we will return to in the final section of the

paper.

The project received ethical approval from the university's Ethics Review Panel, part of which required the academic authors to give special consideration to issues of power and vulnerability. The panel was concerned that the academics' blurred role as lecturers and researchers would make the students feel pressurised into taking part in evaluative sessions. We were required to use an intermediary both to obtain student consent and to run the focus group. Information sheets and consent forms, approved by the Ethics Review Panel, were distributed to students prior to the project starting.

As critical scholars, concerned with issues of power and ethical leadership, we were also anxious to disrupt the power imbalance between students and researchers. To this end, we explained the project in full at the start of the academic year and again before each workshop. Students were informed that we had to submit a project report for the university and that we wanted to publish an academic paper based on the project. We also explained our note-taking process. This information was also included in the consent forms and information sheet. In addition, when Author Three was first introduced to the students, she emphasised the theatre's tradition of inclusivity, creating a theatre 'company' of all those present (students, academics and theatre practitioners – 'the group'). During the workshops, people were constantly referred to as members of the company, or participants, rather than students and teachers/researchers. We remained conscious of our privileged position throughout the project, but were also aware of the paradox that while we might be anxious to disrupt hierarchies, some of the students might not be as keen. While we would not claim to have eliminated power relations (Foucault, 1977), in what follows we outline the methodological steps we took to run the workshops in an egalitarian manner.

As lecturers and theatre practitioners, we were responsible for organising the workshops, but we also were active participants in the improv exercises; for us, disrupting learned behaviours included abandoning our own status as 'experts' and claiming no special privileges. Thus, for the first workshop, field notes and reflective diaries were compiled immediately after the first workshop by the first and second authors, but no notes were taken during the workshop itself because to do so would have taken the academic authors out of the improv activities and re-established hierarchical power relationships of students/lecturers and actors/audience. For the second and third workshops, with agreement from the students, the first and second authors took turns to participate and observe, with field diaries written up at the end of the day. Observations consisted of hand-written notes and photographs of activities. Students often asked to see what we were writing down and added their own comments on what they observed happening. Further data was collected as part of the routine module evaluation forms. However, although this feedback was overwhelmingly positive ('profound', 'creative', 'interesting and useful'), the observations were pithy at best and not sufficient to use in a paper. Similarly, the feedback focus group, which was organised and run by intermediaries, only had two participants. Their contributions included feedback they collected from their peers. This was valuable for our internal evaluation of the project, but insufficient for an academic paper. Moreover, as none of the students wished to be involved in writing a paper on the project, the data presented here is drawn solely from our reflective diaries and field notes.

In terms of analysis, all three authors began sense-making activities (Weick et al., 2005) while planning the first workshop and continued to reflect on our interpretations of events throughout the short project. Informal debriefing sessions were held after each workshop where the authors discussed key events, shared observations and discussed tentative

conclusions about how the workshops were working towards the project's aims. The authors also reflected on how their relationships with the students were changing over the course of the project, commenting on how students were beginning to break out of their 'national' groups and their growing confidence, both at the theatre and in class. As previously mentioned, all three authors have been working together for a number of years and so we have continued to discuss the project over two years since it ended. To develop our ideas for this paper, we shared our field diaries and the theatre director's preparatory notes, commented on each other's interpretation of events and discussed how the theatre experience profoundly changed our perceptions of international students' abilities and our teaching practices.

In what follows we present data from our reflective diaries and field notes and the third author's preparatory notes to present the story of a full-day workshop which explored ethical leadership issues. We chose this workshop, the final one in the project, because it was the first workshop where the students were asked to create a performance piece on their own, based on the techniques they learned in the previous workshops, as well as their knowledge of the Enron case, which they had studied in the first semester (in a session on 'organisational culture' in Critical Management Studies) and again in the second semester (the 'ethical leadership' section of the Leadership module). Activities in the previous workshops were strongly guided by theatre practitioners, but in this final workshop, students had complete control over the creative process and it was the first occasion where they were explicitly asked to fuse their theoretical and experiential drama learning. This is what makes the final workshop an interesting case study because we had the opportunity to observe how students articulated their theoretical learning via experiential drama exercises. We present vignettes from our diaries and notebooks to articulate examples of students

engaging in experiential learning and demonstrate how our understanding of the students'

abilities transformed over the course of the workshops.

The workshop: Performing and reflecting on the meaning of ethical leadership

This workshop was the last of three full-day experiential drama workshops that had taken

place over five months, starting in the middle of the first semester. At this stage, everyone

was used to the workshop routine. As one of our diary entries notes:

> *Students seemed to be quite relaxed this morning. There wasn't the 'pre-exam anxiety'*
>
> *of the first trip, or the buzz of anticipation from the second. Maybe they're more*
>
> *confident or maybe they're tired because exams finished last week and now they're*
>
> *straight into a new set of modules (Author One).*

The theme of the workshop was ethical leadership and in preparing for it, the authors drew

on lecture, seminar and reading material that students had already covered in class (Tourish

and Vatcha, 2005; Grint, 2005; 2007; Kelemen and Peltonen, 2001). As discussed in the

section on internationalisation above, the international students' participation in the

classroom debates had been muted, despite the lecturer's efforts. The theatre director and

theatre practitioners read the set texts and devised a series of games and exercises that

drew on key theories from these texts such as wicked/tame problems, power, moral

leadership and ethical decision making.

The location for this final workshop was a studio in the theatre, which also doubles as a

performance space. This final workshop started more formally, with an introduction by the

lecturers who invited students to reflect on their learning thus far. Using fun in learning

(Huffaker and West, 2005) was an important component of each workshop and the various

exercises were presented as games. As the morning began, the theatre director asked the

group to 'play and have real fun, but think about what you are learning and your ideas

about wicked problems and their solutions, wicked or otherwise, about morality and ethics'

(Author three). These themes formed the basis of the debriefing sessions, which happened

at different points throughout the day.

The workshop consisted of seven different exercises, each of which explored a separate

theme of ethical leadership. Our focus for this article is on the final activities of the

workshop consisting of two small group improvisational activities. The first activity was a

game called 'giants, wizards and elves', while the second involved collaboratively creating

and presenting short performances about the collapse of Enron. Each activity was followed

by a group discussion and debriefing. These activities were designed in such a way that they

would encourage the students to drawn on the entire repertoire of drama skills they learnt

over the three workshops and apply them to highly sensitive issues in critical management

studies.

> *'Giants, wizards and elves' is an improv activity designed to get students thinking*
>
> *about ethical decision-making and wicked problems through use of metaphor. It is*
>
> *similar to the 'paper, scissors, stone' game played by children, where one category out-*
>
> *ranks the other. Like 'paper, scissors, stone', there is an action associated with each*
>
> *category and they trump each other as follows: giants stamp on elves; elves crawl*
>
> *under wizards and wizards freeze the giants. The game is competitive. Students are*
>
> *split into two groups and face each other in long lines. There is a group decision about*
>
> *which character to use (giant, wizard or elf), battle lines are drawn and on a signal, the*
>
> *two groups perform their action. Whichever group wins the round is allowed to take*

one person from the other group and the bigger group at the end of a fixed number of

rounds is the winner. As a reflection on wicked problems, the game is interesting

because there are no right or wrong decisions; the outcome is a product of both

groups' decisions and is thus dependent on context (Preparatory notes, Author Three.

See Picture 2).

The two groups (X and Y) quickly got into the spirit of the game, huddling at far ends of the

room so that their deliberations would not be overheard. Notes from the field diaries

capture the immersion in the game, as well as the emotions that the competition provoked:

Lots of scheming going on. Ys are confident and ready while the Xs are still in a huddle

and looking uncertain. They all march 5 steps forward and on the count of 3 make

their gesture. Surprisingly, the Ys retreated en masse back to the door and the Xs

charged (to grab a captive). Their attitudes changed and now the Ys are unsure while

the Xs are confident. The Xs capture KP. The Ys capture TZ - all the women in the group

grabbed her and dragged her along. TZ then tries to warn the Xs what gesture the Ys

are choosing. Chaos on the next go as both groups think they've won. It's vicious!

(Field notes, Author One. See Picture 3)

The students understood exactly what was required. Clearly the rules were up for

grabs and each group had a clever justification for bending them. (Field notes, Author

Three).

In the reflective diary written that night, Author One reflected on the 'unethical' behaviour

that had emerged during the game:

As the game progressed, I noticed that both groups were subtly altering the rules.

Sometimes they took two captives, captives did not transfer their loyalties but tried to

reveal the chosen action to their old team and teams used multiple actions at once so that they could not be trumped. In the debrief that followed, Author Three sternly reminded the groups that 'The game is like life and business and leadership and ethics and morals. There were ethics guiding this game. They were: take only one person and only use one power'. Both groups had broken the game's rules and the groups offered various excuses for their actions, such as 'we needed fast decision-making' and 'the Ys were trying to trick us', while accusing their opponents of unethical behaviour ('The captives were committing treason. They were telling the other team our tactics'). There was a clamour of voices at the beginning of the debriefing; the students were very worked up and eager to justify their actions. Several of the most vocal speakers (two men and two women) were Chinese students who never spoke in class and therefore we had assumed that their language abilities were poor. How wrong we were (Field diary, Author One).

There are two points to make about this game. The first is that it illustrates how improv activities can offer an alternative way of exploring complex theoretical material. Although the students had struggled with ethical leadership during the lecture, here they threw themselves into the activities first, then slowly began to absorb the implications of their actions in the discussion that followed. Guided by expert facilitation, the groups experienced a range of reactions including outrage, joy about winning and embarrassed silence as individuals realised the implications of their actions. The 'dry' academic literature on wicked problems was brought to life by an activity where participants could construct meaning for themselves through interaction with their peers (Corsun et al., 2006; Gagnon et al., 2012) and engage in collaborative learning (Light and Cox, 2001; Valiente, 2008):

I was overwhelmed to see the students so animated by a topic which in class did not

trigger much collective or individual response, maybe one or two questions at the end

of the session. At the theatre, the wicked problems exercise triggered serious debate

followed by laughter, frustration, and determination to keep trying until a suitable

solution could be found (Field notes, Author Two).

The second point relates to the academic author's preconceptions and unexplored

assumptions about our international students:

This experiential work with the students made me realise was that I was in their shoes

more than 20 years ago when I came to study for a DPhil in management in the UK. I

was equally quiet, my spoken English was not as good as my written one and if it

weren't for the one to one tutorial system at Oxford, I probably would have not had

the opportunity to find my voice. It was the human connectivity and the safety of the

one to one tutorial system that helped me flourish in the same way in which the

neutral space of the theatre and the experiential exercises made my students come out

of their shells and find their voice (Reflective diary, Author Two).

We had readily equated silence in class with poor English language skills, yet in the heat of

the game's 'battle', international students were communicating fluently with each other

and passionately justifying their actions to us in clear fluent English. This forced us to

reconsider our easy assumptions about class participation and to acknowledge that we were

often guilty of unreflectively reproducing Western educational paradigms (Simpson et al.,

2010; Currie, 2007; Turner, 2006).

The second improv activity built on 'Giants, wizards and elves'. The two groups were asked

to apply the game's rules in their interpretation of events in the Enron case study. The

director's preparatory notes ask:

> *What were the giants, wizards & elves represented by? It's not just inside the*
>
> *organisation. Who is who? Why did it collapse? Groups have to name each idea and*
>
> *come up with a symbol for each of them.*

Once symbols are chosen, each group has to create short non-verbal performances,

showing each symbol and how they interacted. The symbols reflected their interpretation of

Enron's collapse and all members of the group had to take part in the presentation. A

theatre practitioner stayed with each group to help them coordinate their ideas, but the

three authors left the studio so that students would be less self-conscious in their planning

and deliberations. Presentations took place on the stage, with the authors and non-

performing group sitting in the audience. A debriefing followed each performance, with the

performers then explaining their actions and audience also interpreting the gestures. This

collective sense-making (Corsun et al. 2006; Moshavi, 2001) was a significant moment

during the activity, as the performers and audience often had different interpretations of

the actions. The performers often decided that some of the audience's interpretations were

'better' than their original ideas.

> *The first group stood in a long, straight line and created four actions rather than three:*
>
> *rubbing fingers together, a train motion, binoculars and pouring something into their*
>
> *hands. Q announces that they had 4 types. Co-operation: money makes profit, crazy*
>
> *beat (train) of employees, pouring salt into the hand is the customer and binoculars*
>
> *are the monitors. They reported that as they prepared the presentation, they began to*

reflect on how problems in Enron had occurred, asking themselves what was missing in

the organisation. This is why they introduced a fourth symbol, that of the monitor who

would oversee the actions of the company. The group discussion that followed focused

on who the monitor should be, with suggestions such as regulators, leaders, employees

and society being offered by the students (Field notes, Author One).

The second group arranged themselves in a semi-circle with one person apart from them, in

the centre:

The three actions: Hands folded (L in the centre of a semi-circle, acting self-satisfied

and arrogant), hands in chain (L leading) and fists in circle facing in, then raising fists.

This group concentrated on organisational power structures. In the debriefing, they

explained that the first action represented Enron's CEO, standing in the centre of the

group with middle management arranged behind him in a semi-circle. They explained

that they had originally planned to stand in a circle, but changed their minds at L's

suggestion: 'He's in the centre as top manager. We were originally in a circle but L

suggested standing in a semi-circle to show arrogance and pride'. Their second action

of hands in a chain represented the interconnections between managers and the

organisation's strong culture. When asked to guess what the final action might

symbolise, one of the audience suggested that it looked like a workers' union. The

presenters agreed, saying that the idea was to 'unite together to do the task'. Like the

previous group's creation of monitors, the trade union was presented as an alternative

way of addressing Enron's structures and working practices, with students imagining

an alternative reality at Enron had employees been unionised (Field notes, Author One.

See Picture 4).

Both groups strayed from the brief by reinterpreting the rules to suit their understanding of

the Enron case study. In the debriefing that followed, however, students demonstrated that

they were moving from passive learners to empowered 'spect-actors' (Boal, 2008; Feagan

and Rossitor, 2011; Monks et al., 2001). They were willing to discuss not just the actual case

history, but also offered a range of alternative paths that the company could have chosen.

> *Their Enron presentations were filled with new insights which allowed me as an*
>
> *outsider to the management field to understand the complex dynamics which*
>
> *brought about the downfall of a giant (Reflective diary, Author Three).*

The improv activities allowed them to explore and define their key themes (Huffaker and

West, 2005), in a collaborative, non-judgemental setting (Stager Jacques, 2013; Moshavi,

2001). Rather than reproduce the classroom setting, where the students typically sat in

national groups, at the theatre, these divisions were erased and normally quiet students

spoke at length as well as taking part wholeheartedly into each and every performance. The

students who were vocal in class appeared happy to make room for quieter voices to be

heard: a sense of camaraderie and sharing was apparent. Moreover, the activity revealed

that far from being passive learners, the students were engaging with the reading list,

moving beyond the set texts to the additional readings:

> *During one of the exercises, one of students referred to a model of leadership that I*
>
> *had not taught in class, but was part of my rather long supplementary reading list. I*
>
> *was impressed (if not shocked) that this student went through the supplementary*
>
> *reading list in advance of coming to the theatre. (Reflective diary, Author Two).*

Discussion and conclusions

To summarise then, drawing on drama techniques has become an established feature of management learning. Our project used improvisational techniques, inspired by the forum theatre of Boal (2008), to encourage students to develop creative, collaborative responses to problematic situations highlighted by critical management literature studied in the classroom. These techniques encouraged interaction and learning in a safe, non-confrontational environment, where students could find their voice at a pace that suited their particular needs and abilities. In what follows, we reflect on our experiences of using drama as a pedagogical response to internationalisation, considering both the benefits and the harder lessons learned. We end by considering the disruptive and subversive role of experiential drama in management education.

When the project ended, we observed that the sense of camaraderie and sharedness developed at the theatre was brought back into the classroom. Students no longer worked in groups formed around national cultures but were happy to mix across cultures and their group discussions were more vivacious than before. Many of the Chinese students who were previously quiet began to ask questions during class, as well as offering comments during class discussions. Our own practice changed as well, as we found it much easier to relate to the quiet students and became more effective at encouraging creative responses from them. This was achieved by moving away from purely discursive ways of teaching to more experiential ones such as asking the students to draw images of leadership and then discussing them in groups or doing listening exercises which encouraged vocal students to be silent and quiet ones to speak up.

Our closer relationship with all students (UK and international) was made possible by the fact that theatre workshops created equality between us and them because the traditional

classroom structure and hierarchy was temporarily disrupted. Rather than reproducing

typical Western pedagogical approaches to learning (for example, student or teacher-led

seminars and debates), the theatre released student imagination through the creation of 'as

if' worlds (cf. Greene, 1995), promoted collective sense-making and co-creation of

knowledge (Light and Cox, 2001) and we aimed to replicate this learning model in the

classroom. Instead of promoting the most confident, articulate speakers, which often

happens in seminars, our teaching methods encouraged 'listening, observing and self-

awareness' (Stager Jacques, 2013: 251).

The project also forced us to confront our own pedagogical biases (Currie, 2007; Simpson et

al., 2010; Turner, 2006), an experience which led to some uncomfortable reflections about

how dismissive we had been about students' levels of engagement and their abilities.

Although our overall memories of the workshops are positive and joyful, at various stages,

the academic authors felt guilt, embarrassment and remorse when Author Three pointed

out students' abilities that had not emerged in the classroom ('*DZ was such a great leader

today'; 'look at CW arguing her point – she's so confident'*). As lecturers we were profoundly

changed by this experience and we have returned to the classroom less judgemental and

more open to creative, inclusive, non-linear approaches.

The learning derived from this project contributes useful insight to the literature on

classroom internationalisation. UK business schools have almost universally adopted

modularised programmes that promote self-contained, bite-sized learning. Creating

experiential drama exercises that go against this dominant model involves a degree of

pedagogical risk taking (Feagan and Rossiter, 2011), not least for the students who have

been disciplined (Foucault, 1977) into becoming consumers of easily digestible nuggets of

knowledge, but also for the lecturers who may not be keen or able to transcend the

expert/student dichotomy and experiment with teaching methods which destabilise taken

for granted hierarchies in the classroom. In this sense, drawing on the forum theatre

tradition (Boal, 2008) represents a subversive move, as it disrupts the commoditised

modular learning used in the majority of UK PGT programmes and replaces it with

something more fluid and uncertain, that treats learning as an embodied, emotional and

holistic experience.

Earlier in the paper, we compared improvisational theatre and outdoor management

development (OMD) literatures, suggesting that they share a common interest in

embodiment, play and exploratory learning, sensitising participants to the ways in

knowledge can emerge in unpredictable ways (Hinchliffe, 2000; Taylor, 2012). This reflects

our experiences during the workshops. OMD has been criticised, however, for not offering

sufficient evidence of these benefits (Irvine and Wilson, 1994; Ibbetson and Newell, 1999)

and, as one of our reviewers pointed out, OMD (and theatre) is site specific; there is no

guarantee that the disruption of power relations will last. This is something we have

wrestled with since the project finished. As Author One noted:

> *I'm getting a bit sick of colleagues asking me what difference it made. Everyone*
>
> *wants 'evidence', but they seem to want to hard scientific facts and figures. Nobody*
>
> *seems excited by the fact that the students (all of them – international, home, EU)*
>
> *are more confident when they come to my office hours (Reflective diary, Author One).*

We also realised that the worlds of universities and theatre are often difficult to reconcile

given their rigid timetables of teaching and performances. During the project,

administrative issues such as room bookings, time slots and capacity were at times our

prime concerns and what was intended as an emancipatory experiment in experiential

drama was overshadowed by hands on management and pragmatic resource planning. By

its nature, non-traditional inter-disciplinary teaching means that it is precarious and difficult

to fit it within a highly-routinised, modularised, inflexible and cost-sensitive teaching

environment. While these workshops instilled a sense of belongingness and camaraderie

amongst the students as well as giving 'voice' to those who usually sat on the margin in the

classroom, it is not easy to convince senior management that this way of teaching brings

benefits to the students and should become more institutionalised. While we were able to

secure a teaching innovation grant for this experiment, no formal commitment had been

made to continue with this type of teaching, beyond the original grant.

Despite these reservations, our experience to date suggests that business schools with a

large international cohort of students should work more closely with theatres which

endorse a social agenda and an ethos of community engagement in order to learn from and

reflect on the techniques used by such theatres to reach marginalised communities and

individuals and give them a voice. Such techniques could then be applied in teaching

management students in the classroom or in other environments to ensure the creation of

trust amongst home and international students, a more equal participation in the learning

process and even a reversal of the hierarchies between students and academics. As we

have hopefully demonstrated, these techniques can help create a safe environment where

students and academics can reflect on their own role in reproducing dominant discourses

and try out ways in which such discourses can be disrupted to make room for alternative

ways of learning which are more inclusive and experientially based.

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