

Acting Up: PGCE and secondary students in collaboration

David Frost

The accounts in the first two sections of this Anthology indicated the many roles that drama can serve as a cross-curricular learning medium at both primary and secondary level. What are its pedagogical possibilities in relation to teacher education? Can it be used as a means of analysing the process of teaching itself from the viewpoint of both teachers and taught? David Frost, Senior Lecturer in Education at Christ Church College in Canterbury, and Pauline Gladstone, head of drama at neighbouring Geoffrey Chaucer School, describe a drama-based project involving a fruitful collaboration between college and school staff and pupils.

It is the perennial complaint of students on PGCE courses that they are not taught how to cope with classroom control problems. It seems to be an unfortunate fact of life for many students that they spend the first few weeks of their course considering educational aims, lesson planning, theories of learning and so on, only to find on their first teaching practice that most of their creative effort is taken up with classroom control strategies. In the most extreme cases all aims, plans and theories are distorted by the need to control the pupils and keep order in the classroom.

In school many students are told that colleges of education know nothing about the ‘real world’ of schooling and ‘all that theory’ is so much useless baggage to be jettisoned as soon as the training course is over. This dichotomy of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ bedevils not only the initial training courses but arguably the entire profession.

Our concern on this particular PGCE course is to try to help students to explore this supposed gap between theory and practice. Perhaps the first stage of this bridge-building exercise is an activity which involves the students in making explicit their values about human relationships. They then translate these values into principles which should underpin teaching and learning strategies. What emerges from this exercise is the realisation that the students’ beliefs about what is educationally valid are not derived from some sort of imposed college theory but are based on their own values. One group, having completed a programme of school-based observation, brainstormed ‘factors which promote learning’. The group agreed on such statements as: respect individuals - their independence and spirit.

- Be sensitive.
- Foster tolerance.
- Promote the self-esteem of the learners.
- Be patient.
- Encourage open discussion.
- Admit when you are wrong.

- Be approachable.
- Use experience as a teaching tool.

The clash then is not between college theory and school practice but between students' idealism and the pragmatic survivalism they may find themselves depending on during teaching practice. There is a real contradiction between educational ideals and short term survival strategies and it is this contradiction we seek to explore through our 'care and control conference', a week-long examination of issues and strategies related to classroom control and pastoral care.

A major feature of this conference is the 'Acting Up' project. This activity takes up the whole of the second day of the conference and involves the reenactment of pupils from the Geoffrey Chaucer School of scenes dealing with classroom control which they have improvised with their drama teachers over a period of weeks. Members of the student audience are invited to comment on the plays and to discuss the motives and behaviour of the character with the actors. This tends to lead to general discussions about classroom behaviour and pupils' attitudes to teachers.

If the students are to emerge as professional teachers (and this emergence may not happen until the second year of full-time teaching) they need to be able to explore the pressures they will be under in school in the relatively safe context of the college course. We are committed to the idea that students do not learn best by 'being thrown in at the deep end'. Confronting students with the harsh reality without preparation could lead to total failure with damaging consequences of the student's self-esteem and their ability to continue with their training. Possibly more harmful, however, might be the sort of instant yet superficial success that can sometimes result from this baptism of fire approach. The student who has the natural force to be able to achieve classroom control very quickly may well become complacent and never be able to distinguish between control strategies and genuinely educative activities.

So, if students can explore and come to terms with the problem of classroom control before they actually begin to teach, they may be better able to find ways of preserving both their professional idealism and personal integrity until such time as they are able to move beyond mere survivalism and start to become the sort of practitioner they really set out to be in the first place.

As its inception the Acting-Up project rested on the belief that it is not possible simply to tell people how to handle classroom relationships. There is no recipe which will get the average student out of the average difficulty. There are no instant, off-the-peg solutions. Our assumption was and remains still that each new teacher will have to develop their own repertoire of strategies for dealing with people and these will of necessity be determined by

the nature of each teacher's personality, the values and beliefs they hold and the precise nature of the context they are working in on any given occasion. We went on to assume, therefore, that the best we could do would be to try to reveal the nature of the problem. The project grew out of the idea of using case studies to examine classroom control problems. In planning discussions within the PGCE team it was suggested that it might have more impact if we could act the cases out. It was fortunate that a personal contact enabled the interests of the PGCE course and the interests of the drama group at the Geoffrey Chaucer School to coincide. The first attempt at the project occurred in October 1987. It involved three drama groups: a TVEI¹ community theatre group, a fifth year option group and a sixth form group.

Ideas for the plays were written and put forward by a member of the PGCE team but the action and dialogue were largely improvised. The three groups performed three times in rotation to groups of about thirty students. The discussions that followed were sometimes conducted in one large group and sometimes in small groups. The scenes tended to portray quite dramatic or extraordinary classroom events such as confrontations and fights. It is notable that the 1988 version of the project featured scenes which were based on more subtle and, arguable, more realistic themes.

There were a number of other alterations and improvements to the 1988 project: we were determined on the second occasion that the quality of the group discussions following the performances would be improved. We arranged the student group in advance so that pairs of pupils could simply be invited to join groups of six or seven students.

At the school end of the operation Pauline Gladstone had taken over from John Hole as coordinator. She worked with a low ability fourth year group. Maureen Hole worked with a sixth form group and Jo Freeborn, a newcomer to the project, worked with another fourth year group. This time around the plays were all improvised by the pupils without any prewritten material and it is most significant that the role of the teacher was prescribed by the pupils. In this way we were tapping into the pupils' experience and perceptions of what constitutes a 'bad' teacher.

In each case the teacher's role was that of a weak teacher or an average teacher having a bad day. Maureen's group had her playing the role of a tired and underprepared teacher. This teacher's casual and neglectful attitude engendered chaos and disrespect in the pupils. Jo Freeborn's character was the classic new teacher determined to 'crack down hard' on the pupils and 'show them who is boss'. She played it haughty and imperious. Order was maintained for a while but eventually resentment generated by the teacher's unjust behaviour led to confrontation and disorder. Pauline Gladstone's teacher was simply too nice and the pupils took her to the cleaners.

¹ TVEI Technical and Vocational Education Initiative

On of the major developments of the 1988 version of the project took place in the sessions which featured Pauline's group's play:

'My group's work focused on the dangers of being 'too nice'. To do this the pupils assumed roles as pupils in a class of their own age, and advised me as the teacher how to 'get it wrong'. The role play was developed by the pupils stepping out of role and taking responsibility for the content and structure of the scene, then stepping back into role to check the appropriateness of our material. The finished product was rehearsed and polished, in the sense of refining the shape and hence the focus of the drama, with an appropriate beginning and ending. These scenes were re-enacted in front of the PGCE students. The pupils then divided into pairs and joined groups of students to discuss 'the performance' and talk about their perceptions of teacher practise.

'The scenes were then re-enacted with the PGCE students in a position to 'freeze' the drama at any point and suggest alternative strategies that could be employed in order to keep control of the situation. The pupils agreed to react as they would do were the teacher acting in this way. There were two dramatic 'pulls' at this point: one was the pupils' desire to preserve the shape of their play in such a way that the proposed changes would not alter their storyline, whereas the students' intentions were significantly to change the direction in which the drama was going; the other was that the pupils were pitting themselves against the teacher so that they continued to fail, whereas the students' aim in suggesting new strategies was to make the teacher successful. The pupils found it difficult to step in and out of role because they had lost both artistic and 'real' control.

Learning outcomes - for the student teachers

The following aims were not fully articulated at the outset of the project last year. We began with a fairly simple concern to try to portray the realities of classroom behaviour within the safe college context. It was only after the experience of the first attempt that we were able to identify other benefits. We are now in a position to state some clear aims:

- We would hope to raise students' confidence by enabling them to see that pupils who engage in disruptive behaviour in the classroom are nevertheless recognisably human underneath.
- We would hope that confidence would be raised by demystifying the stereotypical disruptive behaviour and revealing it as a 'game' which pupils play for amusement.

We are inclined to think that the game serves a more fundamental function related to security, authority and independence but perhaps this paper is not the place to explore this.

- We would hope to enhance students' ability to cope with difficult classes by enabling them to learn the rules of the 'game' from the experts (the pupils).
- We would hope that the students would derive great encouragement from seeing several good teachers working with potentially difficult pupils in a productive and creative way.
- We would hope that the students could develop a view of teaching as a form of role play which can be self-consciously analysed, reflected upon and altered.

Learning outcomes - for the pupils

The pupils were fourth years with very low self-esteem, perceiving themselves to be at the bottom of the school's academic ladder. They received what amounted to special education in that forty-five per cent of their timetable is structured as an RSA² course instead of following the usual package of GCSE course. Many had behavioural problems.

The basic material of the drama is the individual and their imaginations. The process is one of exploring and representing meaning as they move out of an actual into an 'as if' situation. It involves an element of risk in responding openly and honestly to an unfolding drama, an intense amount of interaction between individuals both in and out of role, and continual discussion and decision making.

We considered the work to be of educational value to the pupils for a number of reasons:

- They are framed as experts on classroom control and respond accordingly. Other staff observing the preparatory lessons were astounded at their level of commitment and involvement.
- They have significant roles within the drama and therefore have significant power.
- Being in role puts them in a protected situation and provides them with an experience which enables them to reflect upon and re-examine their positions as pupils relating to teachers.

² RSA – Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce – a vocational exam provide

- They work within theatrical conventions and take responsibility for shaping, focusing, creating tension, building to a climax, selecting an appropriate finishing point and choosing language. In other words, they are working within drama as an arts process.

Reality and role play

The very fact that we decided to try to examine classroom control in college at all meant that we would be engaging students with a representation of reality rather than have them engage with reality directly. It is this question of reality which proved to be most fascinating and crucial to students' understanding of pupil behaviour in classrooms.

The case study approach is commonly used as a way of representing reality for the purposes of college-based discussions and it has many advantages. It is easy to manage: it is accessible and seems to be authentic. We felt, however, that it lacked impact on an emotional level.

Simulations and role play by the students have also been tried but tend to lack any authentic content. Students may play what they believe to be typical pupil roles but the behaviour they portray tends to reflect their own somewhat inadequate stereotypes rather than authentic pupil behaviour.

During the very earliest planning stages of the project we saw the purpose of the pupils' enactments as making the case studies 'live' so as to increase their impact. The content was still perceived to be something which needs to be written. A member of the PGCE team who happens to be part time novelist (Jim Hunter) wrote scenarios for the pupils to work on for the 1987 version but this year we decided to go for improvisation from scratch. We felt that without pre-written scenarios the drama would represent more authentically the behaviour the pupils actually engage in. We wanted to tap into the pupils' intimate knowledge of the subject matter. We are reasonably happy therefore that the enactments were very 'real'.

However, to suggest that you can imitate everyday classroom situations is an oversimplification. It is, after all, a compressed timescale; the language is actually carefully selected and shaped, creating the illusion of unrehearsed normal classroom dialogue. In the process of making a point about 'nice teachers' they were also artistically shaping it in the interests of a 'true to life' product. The criteria for success is the approximation to real classroom life.

It is interesting that the realism/artificiality of the drama was a key value judgement in the written comments by the PGCE students. For example:

“Good because of contact with the real thing.”

“...currency of realism”

“...the revision was appreciated”

“...real situations designed and explained from the children’s perspective”.

It is an interesting framework in which to consider this work, since many would regard the teaching position as an ‘artificial’ playing of a role within the classroom: a ‘game’ in which both sides know the ‘rules’ and play out certain roles. In a sense, we are using role play to examine role play! The idea of teaching as merely playing a role may strike some people as artificial and inauthentic, but this can be exploited as a strength rather than a weakness in that role as role can be clearly perceived and constructed.

Evaluation

Evaluation on the day of the actual event proved impossible to organise but the evaluation sheets completed at the end of the conference gave us some useful insights into the project’s success. Most commonly, students commented that the experienced provided good insight into the pupils’ perspective. The students appear to have become more aware of the real sense of injustice some pupils have. Students also became aware of the extent of the pupils’ playful wickedness – their determination to unseat an unsteady teacher apparently for the amusement value.

For some students a more subtle message came through. The ‘wind-up’ game pupils play was not just for cheap laughs but an almost instinctive attempt to force the establishment of a symbolic power relationship. The pupils gave the impression that they were looking for some sort of security and were only satisfied when they had evoked firm and caring responses from teachers who knew how to play the game.

Not all students found the experience positive, however. A few even found it to be disturbing and discouraging. For some the day consisted merely of a display of bad behaviour without any hope of a remedy. It is interesting that the students who took this perspective did not perceive the display of excellent drama work which was the result of weeks of hard work on the part of both pupils and staff. They appeared not to notice that these pupils who knew all about rowdiness and riot had in fact spent the day ‘working’. They were able to go in and out

of role whenever their teacher demanded it. They had shouldered enormous responsibility and clearly had very productive relationships with their real teachers.

The fourth phase

At the conclusion of the day and in subsequent post-mortem we realised that in order to provide a positive image of classrooms and to explore further the reality/artificiality of 'playing the game of teaching', we would need to add a fourth phase to the project.

In this final phase the PGCE students would take the role as the teacher with the same group of pupils, but the pupils' brief would be to shape the drama as a successful lesson. Out of role the pupils would be advising the students on how to react at each point, before stepping back into role to test the strategy in practice. Adjustments would be made to strategies until a successful lesson emerged.

The value of this phase would be:

- The students would conclude on a positive note, as successful teachers in that the drama would have come full circle – from the initial situation where the teacher was being unsuccessful.
- The construction of classroom games would be exposed and exploited in a positive way.
- The pupils would be tapped for their knowledge of successful classroom control strategies, having been given significant power within protective roles. In this phase the success of their drama would depend on making their teacher succeed.

Acting up and action research

The message embodied in this project goes far beyond that which particular students might learn about classroom control strategies. Of course, if the aims of the activity were restricted 'practical tips' for new teachers we would be open to the accusation of promoting a narrow behaviourist view of pupil-teacher relationships in which teachers act and pupils react. We do not believe that students should cynically adopt and rehearse a range of behaviours which are likely to produce particular responses in pupils. Neither do we believe that students should learn to be masters of manipulation or experts in the science of behaviour modification.

We see the outcomes of the project as being far more complex. It must be remembered that a major part of this project is the exploration which takes place in the small group discussion following each performance. Through these discussions each side of the great divide may be able to develop empathy and come to understand the motives and feeling of the other. Certainly, the students may learn how to avoid being taken to the cleaners by keen pupil gamesters, but they may also come to understand the pupils' natural, if inarticulate, outrage arising from some teachers' ill-considered or inconsiderable practices. So, students are also learning, for example, how to avoid the pitfalls of being disorganised, unfair, inconsistent, irrelevant and insulting.

Through this examination of the wind-up game, the teachers' control strategies and the pupils' sense of injustice the students can come to question and explore their values as teachers. It is perhaps true that we tend not to question too much the power relationship between a person and a pet dog. Similarly, if we are an anxious student teacher we tend not to question the power relationship between ourselves and a crowd of one-dimensional stereotypes. The only criteria for judgement when we are dealing with stereotypes are the outward signs of order and control. In contrast, we would hope that students who have experienced Acting Up or who have seen the proposed film would apply criteria which include questions like. 'Is the teacher's exercise of power legitimate?' 'Does the teacher's behaviour attack the pupils' self-esteem?' 'Does the teacher confront pupils with alien and objectified knowledge?' 'Do the pupils feel secure?'

Conclusion

Finally, we would like to emphasise that the main purpose of Acting Up is to disseminate a particular way of thinking about teaching. Through the making of the proposed film, we would be seeking to disseminate an 'action research' perspective of teaching. This perspective involves teachers becoming more self conscious about their own practice by developing what Douglas Barnes has called an 'anthropological' view of classrooms. We would hope that this will lead to an understanding that teaching strategies are not natural or inevitable behaviours but a form of role play. They are actions which are subject to professional choice and that choice should be influenced by a greater awareness of the ways in which pupils respond to a range of teacher behaviours.

Most importantly, students could come to see the value of informing their professional choices by actively seeking the views of pupils; by listening to them; by giving them responsibility for the success and failure of the educational enterprise and by developing greater empathy so that they can come to understand more fully the pupils' perspective.

The reference for this article

Frost, D. (1989) Acting Up: PGCE and secondary students in collaboration in *Drama in the Curriculum: The Arts in Schools Anthologies*, Coventry: National Foundation for Arts in Education.