

Teachers' Attitudes towards Theatrical Laboratories and Experiential Learning: Lithuanian Case

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Abstract

This article reports the general findings of a survey study designed to extend knowledge about secondary school teacher attitudes and experience toward the Theatrical Laboratories implemented in the project OFF-BOOK (Erasmus+ programme) in non-formal education. Teachers use Theatrical Laboratories as pedagogical methods to create a better understanding and environment in classrooms, thus enhancing teachers' capacity to involve and motivate students in their learning processes actively. Specifically, the study examined extension to which and how secondary school teachers apply the methods of Theatrical Laboratories, in which manner, what results they noticed, and what problems arise. The participants included 19 teachers from 7 secondary schools in Klaipeda (Lithuania), voluntarily completed the diary and participated at the focus group discussions. The data was collected and analysed using qualitative diary research design and focus group discussion. The results suggested that in general teachers have positive attitude toward Theatrical Laboratories as pedagogical instruments. Teachers who reported less experience in drama teaching was found to hold more positive attitude toward Theatrical Laboratories. Teachers who already have positive attitudes toward students with special need may be predisposed to seek out additional experiential education practices and be more willing to be use theatre/drama methods.

Keywords: *Theatrical Laboratories, experiential learning/teaching, teachers' attitude, method, students.*

Introduction

The challenges facing the contemporary teacher are to respond effectively to the diversity of learning/teaching styles and successfully engage students in active learning approaches. Experiential learning/teaching instils positive, confident and enquiry focused attitudes in student building on their inherent experience to make sense of the world around them, and thus provokes increasing depth of understanding [4].

The Erasmus project "Objective: Foster theatrical performance to combat discrimination in schools & tackle early leaving" (OFF-BOOK), No. 2017-1-LT01-KA201-035235" set out to develop practices and training materials based on the theatrical laboratories (hereafter - TLabs) and experiential learning cross-disciplinary thinking. The project's main aim is to develop and support teacher skills in experiential teaching/learning by integrating creative tools as the TLabs methods in non-formal education, engaging students to participate in collaborative work and involving them into active learning process based activities (<https://off-book.pixel-online.org/>). A key example of innovative approach to fostering motivation to learn in schools is the TLabs approach being developed by project partners from Italy (Teatro Stabile di Grosseto, University of Siena, Pixel) Lithuania (Klaipeda University, Klaipeda Puppet Theatre, Klaipeda Simon Dach progimnasium) and Romania (Colegiul National de Arta "Octav Bancila", EUROED Primary school) and adopted within the project. Through the project there were developed TLabs methodology and best practice examples of non-formal learning led by a set of principles: involve students in playing activity, exploration, inquiry-based discovery, engagement in experience oriented questions, connection of explanations to experience, democracy and collaborative work. The project OFF-BOOK integrates TLabs into the original way by involving students and teachers on experiential learning process demonstrating common impulses shared by theatre/drama. The project's uniqueness also lies in its capacity to leverage some of the emotional and cultural aspects of the TLabs in national context.

In the present research we explore the case study of the Lithuanian teachers. The main purposes of the study were to identify the major obstacles in implementing TLabs practices in mainstream schools and to analyze different aspects of teachers' attitudes towards this method.

Theoretical background

The ideas of experiential learning in scientific literature relate to J. Dewey's approach to teaching and the starting point of his theory of experience is daily life. This means, that experience and learning

through doing or playing is encouraged over 100 year ago. According to J. Dewey, the nature of art as experience and art functions as experience [7]. Process of inquiry, observing and finding meaning are transformative, and expanded perceptions open venues for understanding and action [7]. C. Rodgers stated that experience is the meaning that one perceives in and then constructs from an experience that gives that experience value. An experience exists in time and is therefore linked to the past and the future [17]. Experiential learning undoubtedly involves the 'whole person', through thoughts, feelings and physical activity. The recognition of this 'whole environment', both internally and externally, is important [1]. Experiential learning can take on many appearances in life, such as recreational or leisure activities, exhilarating journeys or adventures, experimentation or play [7]. It can also be in the form of painful events. „This consciousness-in-action involves, intentionally, both participatory and individuating functions: feeling and emotion, intuition and imagery, reflection and discrimination, intention and action“ [2]. During the process of experiential learning, students are able to learn with and from each other, while problem solving and collaborating to complete tasks during experiences that occur in real contexts [4]. Experience pervades all forms of learning; however, its value is frequently not recognized or is even disregarded [5]. Experiential learning is a client-focused, supported approach to individual, group, or organizational development, which engages the young or adult learner, using the elements of action, reflection, and transfer [2]. As stated by D. A. Kolb, *experiential* describes “a theoretical perspective in the individual learning process that applied in all situations and arenas of life, a holistic process of learning [13]. Experiential education reflects many methodologies in which teachers purposefully engage with learners in direct experience in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. As [13] stated “learning by doing – the experience – during the learning process is a major source of learning”. Learning is therefore achieved by taking action, on the condition, however, that learners have the opportunity to take a step back and think about what they have just experienced, draw a lesson from this experience or gain a new understanding of the phenomenon and experience it once again [1]. Experiential learning is a dynamic view of learning based on a learning cycle in which the learner travels through four steps: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation [13]. As mentioned by [1], for students, this cycle begins with an experience; a tangible problem with which they are faced. They then reflect on and critically examine this experience from multiple perspectives. D. A. Kolb put forward an experiential learning theory (ELT). The aim of ELT “is to create, through a synthesis of the works of the foundational scholars, a theory that helps explain how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge [13].

P. Goldblatt provides us a link between art in education as a way to learn experientially [7]. By considering the theory that art functions as an experience we can assume that it has the potential that brings changes in learning process and leads to transformative learning. This means that theatre/drama activity has the ability fostering not only experience itself, but to promote a dialogue in social awareness and critique [14]. Theatre/drama education can potentially impact students' achievement by using creative thinking techniques, looking for innovative problem solving, and communicating ideas [5]. Furthermore, theatre/drama can positively contribute to the transmission of their skills development, influencing and supporting intellectual development, as well as empowering them to affect change in their own lives by opening up further education opportunities [12]. Drama and democratically based theatre models provide tools that the educator can use to incorporate dialogue and experiential learning into each classroom and subject area [5]. By examining the importance of experiential learning and making the link between experiential learning and drama/theatre as tools to be used for experiential learning in classrooms [10].

The Laboratory Theatre the best-known and most commonly used general name for Grotowski's theatre company. J. Grotowski created the first “theatre laboratory”. He mentions in his book that theatre becomes a tool of knowledge for the actor as a person [8]. The laboratory objective is to discover the man who exists beyond the actor and learner by looking for the origin of one's actions, awareness of values and urge to socialization [8]. Theatre Laboratory approach and place in education was analyzed by T. Chemi. She accounts that various theatre/drama games require listening, cooperation, make relationship, attentiveness, discuss and respect other opinions. Along the years, the theatre games within the theatre laboratories were called “physical acting” or merely “movement” or “physical theatre training” [6]. Regardless of what they are called, the technique is spread throughout the world in different fields, such as: team building sessions within companies, courses of all kinds and all subjects, camps and even gyms [14]. TLabs activity combines kinaesthetic, emotional and intellectual involvement in improvisation activities to promote a range of experience and empathy [15]. Yet the most effective and appropriate is the technique applied to secondary school education, in the best period of students' life: adolescence - when they have the chance to shape their



personality themselves. Therefore, theatre laboratories are processes of acquisition of meaning, connecting thoughts and movements, verbal and non-verbal expressions towards a greater understanding of the self and of the others [16]. The TLab is a friendly environment where the student is able to develop his psychophysical well-being without the fear to be judged, because the laboratory is set up on the solid foundation of respect to the others. Students' spontaneity will go beyond expressing emotionally and intellectually towards creating themselves strong persons

Methodology

This study was conducted as a part of our research on the teaching practices in non-formal education in the Lithuanian schools. In the framework of the project OFF-BOOK, the TLabs method has been evaluated through a series of focus group discussions and diaries written by teachers. At this point, three focus groups discussions (2018 September, 2019 January, 2019 April) were conducted and the diaries of the teachers were collected.

A focus group discussion was used for this research with a main focus on evaluating teachers' beliefs about the TLabs method and the OFF-BOOK principles and exploring possible barriers in the integration of the approach in teachers' teaching practices. In addition, the diary aimed to identify and evaluate the impact factor of the approach on participants' attitude towards theatre/drama activity and experiential learning integration. The focus group discussion was designed and structured around five topics: *expectations, evaluation of the implementation, impact of the activity, suggestions for improvement* and other commentary and teachers' personal data.

The sample of research consisted of 19 secondary school teachers in 7 schools from Klaipeda (Lithuania). Sampling data (the distribution of teachers by age, pedagogical experience, gender and teaching subject) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Age	Pedagogical experience	Teaching subject	Gender
up to 30 years - 3	Up to 10 years - 6	Science (biology, chemistry) - 2	Female - 18 Male - 1
31 – 40 years - 6	11- 20 years - 9	Humanities (languages) – 6	
41 – 50 years - 7	21 - 30 years - 4	Art (drama, music) - 7	
Over 50 years - 5	Over 30 years - 0	Ethic, primary school teacher, social pedagogue - 5	

Results

The overall impression suggested that in general teachers have positive attitude toward Theatrical Laboratories as pedagogical instruments. Teachers who reported less experience in theatre/drama teaching was found to hold more positive attitude toward Theatrical Laboratories. Moreover, the teachers who already have positive attitudes toward students with special need may be predisposed to seek out additional experiential education practices and be more willing to use TLabs methods. This should be kept in mind while conducting training activities for teachers in future.

Expectations. The first topic included two open questions. In the first question the participants were asked to share their expectations from participating in the project OFF-BOOK. From the gathered data it was indicated that the teachers mostly expected to learn about TLabs method and how to use this method in school but also to get new ideas and learn about new teaching techniques in general. Many expected to get tangible tips on working with students and engaging them, their motivation through the TLabs in the learning process. Some of teachers were expecting exchange of experiences with colleagues from different disciplines, schools and backgrounds. The second question "Did the TLabs method implemented in OFF-BOOK project met your expectations?" requested teachers to assess the method in terms of their expectations. According to their answers, the TLabs method was evaluated positively with a great part of the teachers (16) indicating that their expectations were completely met. Only several teachers (2) expressed a negative stance in terms of their expectations. However, based on the diaries notes and spontaneous reactions of the teachers during the group discussions, it seems that focus easily slips on doing theatre/drama and being creative, while the TLabs ideas somehow gets forgotten on the way.

Evaluation of the TLabs methods. In the second topic addressing the issue of evaluation of the TLabs methodology. The first question's main aim (Have you learned something new regarding applying the TLabs method?). The most common answers (14) referred to learning to connect/combine theatre/drama with experiential learning, learning to organize and create the TLabs



in the classroom and to use in a way that will get students more interested and motivated. Other answers concerned the identification of tools that would facilitate the integration of theatre/drama classroom and some of them addressed the issue of collaborative techniques and their implementation through this approach, and only two answers replied that they had not learnt anything new. In terms of the evaluation of the TLabs method a number of teachers stated that the integration of the method into non-formal education could enhance the learning outcomes and motivation to learn. In addition, 5 teachers stated that the TLabs method was suitable for their subject area and expressed their intention of applying the method into their teaching practice. The general impressions are positive, the implementation period are perceived as quite useful and mostly very enjoyable for students. The focus group discussion disclosed that teachers believe that the TLabs method advocates experiential learning/teaching as well that this method could result in enhanced learning motivation. Teachers agree that inclusion of this method in teaching subjects could result in enhanced learning outcomes, boosting self-confidence of students. The aspects of TLabs method that are perceived by teachers as the greatest advantages are group work and greater interaction among students. Another comparative advantage that could be communicated is interaction between teachers and students that results in improved students' perception of that relationship. Emphasising benefits should motivate teachers to engage in implementation of TLabs methods in their classroom.

Implementation and impact of the TLabs methods. In the third topic 'Impact of the TLabs methods' in order to explore the effect of the TLabs on the participants' perception of integration of this method in their teaching practice, teachers were asked to reflect on the implementation of the method and its effect. The topic included two open questions. In the first question the teachers were asked to indicate possible advantages and disadvantages by implementing the TLabs methods in their classroom. A vast majority of the teachers (16) indicated the game nature of this method as a major advantage. Furthermore, a number of teachers (5) highlighted the efficiency of the method in integrating alternative ways of active learning in the educational process. The teachers also indicated the collaborative nature of this method and its significance in building students' collaboration, also its contribution in setting a friendly classroom environment. The advantage of boosting students self-confidence was indicated by a few participants. At this point, it is important to state that the categorised advantages as illustrated above by far outnumbered the disadvantages that were only reduced to potential technical limitations for the implementation of this method. More specifically, the disadvantages involved the potential difficulties in affording the adequate equipment and lack of time with reference to curriculum and school peculiarities demands for implementing this method. The second question of this topic aimed to evaluate the effect of the method in terms of teachers' intention to implement it into their teaching practice. Particularly, we requested participants to state whether the training activity had inspired them to introduce this teaching technique in their classroom. Moreover, we requested for the teachers' evaluation of the implementation process in terms of its efficiency in providing them with necessary knowledge in order to introduce new method in their teaching practice. In general, the implementation of the TLabs method had a positive effect on the teachers who expressed strong intention of implementing this method into their teaching practice in future. The majority of the participants (15) stated that they were inspired by the TLabs method and that they had gained knowledge (12). Again, a number of the teachers stated that they had gained adequate knowledge from the project OFF-BOOK to even independently develop theatrical methods towards to TLabs idea. It is very encouraging that many felt inspired by the TLabs implementation to introduce new techniques into their teaching practice.

Potential barriers in the implementation of the TLabs, suggestions for improvement. Finally, the fourth topic of the focus group discussion was addressed to suggestions for improvement comprised of two items. The first question was structured in flexible form, in which participants were required to reflect on potential barriers in their attempt to implement the TLabs methods learning and teaching principles in their teaching practise. The majority of the teachers (15) indicated as a barrier for the implementation of this method the lack of financial support, a number of teachers (10) stated the lack of time as a problem. Only 2 teachers stated that the lack of skills and adequate knowledge were difficulties during the implementation period. The second question also was an open question in which participants were required to contribute with suggestions or notes that would help to improve future of TLabs method. In general, the participants had a positive stance on this method and expressed their satisfaction. Most recommendations addressed the issue of presenting the TLabs examples in a real classroom or video before the implementation starts on (in the project OFF-BOOK).



Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of the research study was to disclose teachers' attitude towards the TLabs method and the project OFF-BOOK pedagogical principles. By communicating the TLabs method and experiential learning integration through project activities in non-formal education we aimed to explore possible barriers and identify the approach on participants' attitude towards this phenomenon. This way we would identify the kinds of relationships that occur in the meeting points of theatrical activity and experiential learning and the way teachers perceive or identify such relations. Furthermore, the one more goal of the TLabs method implementation was accomplished: to instill inspiration to the teachers and encourage them to implement the TLabs method in their teaching practice.

The research data have shed light to Lithuanian teachers' perception on the issue of combination and mutual contribution of theatre/drama and experiential learning in non-formal settings, based on this case study. The findings of our case study have shown teachers' positive stance and reaction towards the TLabs method. Furthermore, one of a key point in this study was the interaction among teachers from different disciplines and theirs' perception of theatre/drama activities. The participants' contribution during the focus group discussions was significant seeking to raise the different aspects of the TLabs method, bringing to the surface both creative and pedagogical parameters, and facilitates students' engagement and development of collaborative skills and self-confidence.

In terms of possible alternations and improvements on the implementation of the TLabs methods, the research findings have shown that more focus should be given on the elaboration of the main principles of experiential learning/teaching and their recognition in theatre/drama methods. Given the positive stance of the participants regarding TLabs into the teaching practice it is necessary to increase the number of training activities for teachers and demonstrate the underlying TLabs approaches in real classroom settings.

Furthermore, at this point it is essential to explore the results getting from other countries This way we will have valuable information and data on the way the TLabs mehods have impacted the overall non-formal educational context and get important feedback on the further development.

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