“Just a Short Note”: Student Educational Journeys Reflecting Across a Range of Educational Drama Conventions.
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Abstract

This paper, grounded in literature relating to experiential learning and ‘the hero’s journey’, reports on the use of an evaluative procedure entitled “Just a Note”, in which students provide a one-to-one anonymous feedback expose of what they really wish to say about the range of experiences and thoughts they had in a drama-based unit. Opening lyrics from a classic Australian song (‘Short Note’) about a note being left for someone are used as a framework for analysing student responses. Results from the study indicate that students perceived the use of drama as a learning medium to be not only enjoyed and learnt from, but also experienced, hopefully in some transformational way. Results of this exploratory study have implications for marketing educators seeking to evaluate student perceptions of learning using experiential methods.

Keywords: educational drama, experiential learning, evaluating student learning

Introduction

This paper seeks to assess student reaction to the use of educational drama in marketing pedagogy and presents some preliminary findings from a student evaluation technique called ‘just a short note (to the lecturer)’. On the surface, this technique resembles standard student feedback questionnaires that Gibbs and Habeshaw (1992) lament are often used to review teaching without adequate reflection, but its uniqueness can come from a combination of: a. the atmosphere of openness and personalisation that is associated with a short personal one-to-one note; and b, the note being a summation or overview of a student’s educational journey of experiences across a wide range of educational drama conventions. These students had just been through an unconventional unit at an Australian University that had given them experiential involvement in role playing, role taking, (including ‘hot-seating’, ‘meetings’ and ‘still-imaging’) debates, puppetry, and intense diary reflections.

Independent of these points came the inspiration of this 1980’s song by Matt Moffitt, singer/songwriter of the Australian band, Matt Finish:

“Short Note”

Just a short note/You’ll find the key inside
There’s no-one home tonight but come in anyway.
The shallow sea/calm, but not asleep
You’re going to wade into the deep
Tomorrow’s years away.”

These poetic lyrics also convey a sense of ‘journey’, of ‘drama’, and of an invitational note to share deeper experiences, and thus these stanzas will be used to attempt to structure the themes uncovered in the data set.
Compared to other educational approaches, a ‘journey’ in experience-based learning is characterised by three factors: (1) involvement of the whole person - feelings, senses and the intellect; (2) recognition and use of a learner’s life experiences in order to create personal meaning and relevance of new learning; and (3) continued reflection on prior experiences so as to build and transform deeper understanding (Andresen, Boud and Cohen, 2000). These three factors are significant for the study of educational drama reported in this paper in that each contributes to the ultimate goal of experience-based learning being the learners’ own appropriation of something that has personal meaning or significance to them (Andresen, Boud and Cohen, 2000). A major reflective activity for students enrolled in the drama-based New Frontiers in Marketing subject was to select, capture on film and extract meaning from drama activities which were particularly significant in terms of their learning.

Experiential learning has no shortage of advocates. In particular, Dewey (1963) endorsed the fundamental nature of experiential learning when he commented:

“In a certain sense, every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, and reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, 1963, p.47).

The experiential learning model proposed by Kolb (1984) was adopted and used as one of the main theoretical perspectives in having students learn through drama. Kolb (1984) described the experiential learning model as consisting of four stages: concrete experience; observation and reflection; formation of abstract conceptions and generalisations; and the testing of implications. This experiential learning model has been adapted to incorporate an adventure-based learning model (Richards, 1992). Richards (1992) drew his inspiration from the mythical adventures of Ulysses and his model of learning has four distinct phases: separation; encounter; return; and reincorporation. Like Ulysses, participants in the university subject using educational drama studied in this paper (metaphorically speaking) took “the hero’s journey (i.e. separation, initiation and return)” (Spreitzer et al., 1995, p.17) and in the process played-out certain dramatic roles. Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model was used to guide students’ reflections on their learning from their drama “adventures”.

In his “adventure” model, Richards (1992) regarded “separation” as pre-journey preparation. For this paper in educational terms this phase involved preparation for learning and involved participants volunteering and being prepared or conditioned for the educational experience, determining objectives and anticipating outcomes.

“Encounter” is the undertaking of an experience, challenge or activity. In terms of the study in this paper, this stage involved doing drama in the form of various conventions. In adventure training as defined by Irvine and Wilson (1994), this stage may be the only phase of the cycle experienced (Richards, 1992). It is for this reason that Dewey (1963) referred to the preoccupation with adventure tasks as “mis-educative” (Dewey, 1963, p.159). In the formal learning setting of the university in the study in this paper the encounter phase was where learners were challenged to solve problems and in the case of classroom drama, resolved dramatic tension.

Learning during this phase can focus on drawing meaning from “reflection in action”
that is from the intuitive responses during an activity. This form of reflection has been regarded as the “core of professional artistry” (Cervero, 1992, p.96).

“Return” refers to the telling of stories on return from an adventure. It is at this stage that narratives can take shape. For the study in this paper this stage involved the debriefing of the drama activity and determining such things as what students have learned, how they have changed and what they intend doing differently in the future, as a result of the experience.

“Re-incorporation” is the stage which allows the “adventurer” to plan the next challenge. It is this stage that Outward Bound style programs first developed in Scotland by Kurt Hahn (Hoberman and Mailick, 1992) may be considered ineffective due to a lack of follow-up. In the study in this paper the residual impact of an experiential learning program through educational drama was explored through students’ academic writing on memorable learning episodes and development of marketing plans where classroom learning was transferred to possible commercial approaches.

The stages of mythic adventure have been used by Campbell (1993) as a metaphor for life events that bring about change and challenge. Simpson (2002) utilised these stages to illustrate transformational learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991,1997) in adults experiencing a bridging program at an Australian university. The emancipatory nature of such adult education journeys - being freed from the shackles that bind - is regarded as a central tenet of adult learning (Cranton, 1994). Pearce (2001) argued that educational drama emancipates students by liberating them from restrictions and problems associated with traditional educational practices.

Methodology

In the final class of a one-semester drama-based marketing unit, students provided voluntary feedback in the form of an anonymous note to the lecturer under the heading, ‘Just a short note (to G)’. In this evaluation exercise, students were encouraged to say whatever they felt or thought about the lecturer and his teaching methods – in this case the use of drama to enable students to explore contemporary issues in marketing.

Students were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the evaluation task, during which time the lecturer was out of the room so as to avoid potential bias. Although a total of 27 students were enrolled in the class, 23 completed responses were collected. Written responses were transcribed into a Word document for cross sectional indexing and thematic labelling. Transcribed responses were labelled for identification purposes as ANTM (A Note to Me) Student 40 through to 62.

Findings

Clustering of the student feedback within the “Notes” seemed to fit rather nicely the lyrics of the powerful song referred to earlier, including their reflections on the different phases and aspects of their ‘journeys’. The more distinctive ones are highlighted in the following section:
“You’ll find the key inside”. In this category we collected together the following themes: the key to learning clearer/better/easier; to remembering more information; to improving communications skills, and the key to linking their Unit with their earlier education and experiences.

“It helped me better understand concepts and issues in contemporary markets” (Student 45)

“I have learnt so much from this course that you cannot even imagine” (60)

“It was an excellent course to recap all my marketing learning” (58)

“It has given me the opportunity to express business theory in a creative and communicational way by using drama” (41)

“This is something I have missed since high school” (41)

“This has been by far the best learning experience I have ever had throughout all my schooling” (53)

It is important to note that ‘the key’ is being seen by the students not only in terms of factual learning but also as ‘the key’ to opportunity and new perspectives.

“There’s no-one home tonight but come in anyway”. Here we see an invitation to confidence, courage and overcoming one’s apprehensions along ‘the journey’. It allows students to feel confident about the way they feel about their ideas” (41)

This class helped me to be prepared for situations I could not prepare for and I had to react well” (47)

“I’m glad I changed subjects to be able to do this class” (62)

“The diary was a bit scary but I got it okay” (40)

The students here seem to be ‘taking the key’ and ‘coming inside’ the journey ‘anyway’.

“The shallow sea/calm, but not asleep”. We interpret this as being about the mysterious and adventurous journey, the unique, and about contrasts. Here we see some ‘dramatic tension’, along with students’ ‘reflection in action’.

“It is a really unconventional method which is already so rare at Uni” (46)

“When I first started this I was sceptical about doing drama, but to be honest I have found this class to be more interesting and educating than any of my others” (49)

“We had the chance to go out there and do assignments on topics we were interested in. You did not force topics on us; you lead us in the right direction” (42)

“I learnt about myself and marketing issues” (48)

“I liked how the subject was mixed up with drama that was suppose to relax…I also liked that there were challenging tasks” (40)

“Was a laugh but very educational” (41)

“Enjoyed the class but I have to say that the assignment was the longest which I have ever done during my study” (42)

Students are often seen as (and often even see themselves as) passive, calm, almost asleep, and maybe also rather shallow, but these students clearly are awakened. “One should never underestimate a calm sea” goes the old expression, and the same applies to underestimating these students as they catch their next ‘waves’. Hopefully,” a rising tide lifts all boats” and these students will want to share their journey with others (see below for some evidence of this).

“You’re going to wade into the deep”. Here this is interpreted as wading into the depths of theory vis-a-vis practice, creativity and motivation, and even wading into criticism of the lecturer or the approach. It also included being prepared to wade into
the depths of students’ acknowledgement of their own inadequacies and revelations about the experiences opening up their eyes and minds in a way not done before. “Opened my mind to this…It opened my eyes to new and interesting ways of learning” (49)
“Exposed me to a multitude of different opinions, thoughts and perspectives that I normally wouldn’t have considered” (58)
“This was drama to teach theory and drama to teach life” (40)
“I feel I am now more prepared to tackle the ‘big bad world’” (54)
“What a time it has become when war is done. The subject of marketing is a difficult issue; thanks for the insight of how things really are outside” (48)
“This is mostly our fault because we still think we should get a light load…You expected more from the students than they could possibly do” (42)
“The drama diaries were very helpful, but they took so much out of me” (42)
“Sometimes you seemed to get a little too serious and annoyed” (52, also 62, 55, 51)

“Tomorrow’s years away”. This part we interpret as an appeal to live for today, to enjoy, to learn useful things for now, and also to appreciate right now both the efforts put in by the lecturer and students wanting others to gain what they have gained.
“I have seriously enjoyed pretty much every aspect” (46)
“I can see that you have put a lot of energy into every single convention” (43, also 42, 40, 41, 47, 48, 50, 58)
“I have never had a lecturer so passionate about his work and this passion is infectious” (58, also 42, 45, 47).
“I admire your courage in such unconventional teaching” (45)
“Something you can brag about to your friends” (57)
“It was the drama that helped the class to connect and form new friendships” (59)
“Hopefully you will continue running this subject next year…so that other students can also benefit from the drama based educational experience as I did” (43, also 56, 58, 59)

Discussion

This qualitative study highlights the value in using alternative evaluation methods to collect student feedback on matters relating to teaching and learning. One can see that the drama-based experiential approach to the class does transform the traditional course evaluation into a much richer feedback document. The students clearly feel that they have been given ‘licence’ to more usefully describe and explore their learning experiences and the (hopefully heroic) changes to themselves as well. There were a number of limitations associated with such an exploratory study. The students could not give feedback on specific individual drama conventions that they either preferred or disliked. In addition, exploratory studies like this can only report on student comments rather than on measuring actual learning performance improvements. Future research might involve a more direct link to improved performance measures. This research has shown (more than conventional classroom teaching and evaluation methods can) that students can experience and benefit from the various stages of their own ‘heroes journey’. In addition, the ‘Just a Note to me” technique within an educational drama context enhances the students’ narratives in terms of their ‘return from the adventure’, and even hints at the ‘re-incorporation phase’ as they seem to plan their next challenge better for the experience that educational drama has given them.
References


