

How can I improve my students' learning through the medium of performing arts in a way that will enable our school community to meet more of our educational needs?

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Introduction:

After studying the Bath material for the unit on “Methods of Educational Enquiry” and having chosen a subject and title for a possible enquiry which I think relevant to my work as a Headmaster and teacher, I came to what I consider a “key” issue to be addressed in order to commence any study or investigation whatsoever and reach results that might help me, and or other fellow teachers better their practise.

This issue is the **context** in which I am to conduct my enquiry.

The following questions immediately arose:

Is my future enquiry something that can only be studied in books?

Is my enquiry going to be conducted within my educational community as a whole?

Am I going to work alone?

Where do I start investigating?

What evidence will I need to collect in order to reach a valid conclusion that will help improve my student's learning?

I believe that by understanding the context in which I will be conducting my enquiry I will be able to decide upon my approach, choose my data collection methods and adopt a pertinent methodology.

I also consider my first step towards determining the context of my enquiry to be a formal definition of the word “context”.

Webster's New World Dictionary (Third College Edition 1991) defines “context” as: “...the whole situation, background, or environment relevant to a particular event, personality, creation, etc.”

If the proposed title for the educational enquiry is: “How can I improve my students' learning through the medium of performing arts in a way that will enable our school community to meet more of our educational needs?”, then I will try to determine the context by posing a series of essential questions which will hopefully serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they will help determine the context itself and necessities for the completion of this unit by reaching conclusions in order to make my choice of research methods and secondly, they will hopefully serve when conducting the actual enquiry to complete my investigations.

The essential questions I have formulated for this purpose are:

- What do the educational goals at Bluebell, P.A.S and Victoria College have in common?
- Are Drama and Performing Arts just a form of entertainment or recreation for students?

- Are Drama and Performing Arts then, a tool, a craft or just a lot of “hot air” and marketing hype for private schools and institutions?
- What do students have to say about Drama?
- How about parents and their opinions?
- Can Drama and Performing Arts go beyond common subject expectations and also serve as a bonding source for emotional intelligence?

What do the educational goals at Bluebell, P.A.S and Victoria College have in common?

When I talk about educational needs in my proposed title, I am basically referring to educational objectives or goals, so my first question concerns finding out as much as I can about the educational goals at the institutions that I am presently working at. This involves research and study of each institution’s educational objectives and might include the **classification of information** such as the following:

Bluebell school offers a variety of curricular and extra-curricular subjects, which are all geared to engage students and even their parents in order to promote continued growth and active participation in the student’s learning process.

The student profile sought demands that staff comply with some or all of the following objectives:¹

- *That students respect themselves, their bodies and others while attaining healthy exercise habits and caring for their surroundings.*
- *That students generate solid social bonds and respect their family as a key towards maturity.*
- *That students develop their investigative capacity and learn to work creatively adopting a critical attitude when needed and stimulate other abilities that involve the use of memory, synthesis, and insight.*
- *That students develop their creativity, citizenship, responsibility, solidarity, communication skills, and consider peace and justice as overarching values in life.*
- *That students attain excellent academic standards, proficiency in the English language and information technology.*

Similarly to what was just stated in Bluebell’s general objectives, and without going into great detail, Victoria College also stresses the fact that students must be taught to be “critical thinkers” and that this school strives to achieve life-long learners and achievers who are sound in both mind and body and whose motto is: “Fortis et Fidus”.

Both schools seem to differ greatly in educational objectives when compared to the educational goals set at The Performing Arts Studio.

As can be found on the P.A.S. web-site www.pastudio.com.ar, and contrary to both schools (Victoria and Bluebell), The Performing Arts Studio is an Argentine based educational centre that is dedicated almost exclusively to teaching a variety of Arts and Performing Arts to a large age group. It produces original shows as well as artists, provides consulting services for schools, organizes events for companies and has started a three- year career course to educate future directors/ drama teachers.

¹ Objectives Condensed and taken from the Bluebell P.E.I. (Proyecto Educativo Institucional which translated into English means; Institutional Educational Project- Unpublished)

All of the courses include a variety of subjects, which help students gain confidence and experience in theatre and performing arts.

I would later **compare the information** collected and basing myself on the evidence found come to pertinent conclusions.

Are Drama and Performing Arts just a form of entertainment or recreation for students?

This next question has to do with determining whether or not Drama and Performing Arts are a viable medium towards achieving the institutional goals mentioned earlier or just subjects intended to provide recreation and “fun”.

As part of my enquiry I would definitely be **including my experience** in the matter with comments such as:

“After many years’ experience in this particular field, my personal belief is that Drama and Performing Arts are not only a subject to study at both schools and P.A.S. but also a source of genuine engagement for today’s students. I say this with absolute conviction because there are very few scholastic activities that I have found at the schools or P.A.S. that get students to participate actively both within and outside traditional timetables.”

In order to validate my affirmations I would always try to **relate bibliography to my opinions** and the information gathered for example:

“In my enquiry, I now think it important to include what I believe to be a clear vision of what teaching Drama/ Performing Arts implies (as stated by Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton in their work “Teaching Drama...a Mind of many wonders” -1991)”

“Practically every modern teacher works with or has heard of Drama or Drama techniques. Every time role- play or some type of presentation is involved, dramatic activity is directly or indirectly present in the classroom.

Some teachers use Drama to promote understanding within the different subject areas while others work towards performance but more and more teachers are becoming aware of the fact that Drama is more than just entertainment.”

“In drama, students and teachers are engaged in collective enquiry and exploration. Learning is likely to occur through cooperation, interaction and participation.

Drama teachers need to have at their command a wide range of personal skills and interactive techniques, as well as a sound understanding of the nature of drama and theatre. They need the ability to structure a lesson, not just for the transmission of information, but also for the shaping of a shared learning experience. They need considerable powers of observation, perception and organization. They must be process oriented. They need to be able not just to answer students’ questions, but to ask questions which lead to the formulation of more important questions by their students.”²

²Taken from Foreword “Teaching Drama ...a mind of many wonders”. Norah Morgan/ Juliana Saxton (1991)

At this point I find that I must include **other people's opinions** and views that are part of the process being studied, to help confirm my findings³. In accordance with the dictionary's definition of "context", I think that some of the first people to contact are those who are directly involved in the same "situation and environment". My colleagues.

I would probably start with **informal interviews** and move on to conduct a **survey**. Some of the paragraphs in my enquiry might read:

"I approached one of the Headmistresses with my proposed title and queries and was amazed at the amount of information she was willing to offer. I then asked her if she would be willing to answer a short Head's survey and she agreed."

Or:

"When asked about Drama and Performing Arts as being a source of student engagement at school, she inferred that this is due to the fact that students are more relaxed and are all involved in the task at hand⁴."

Once I have proven that Drama and Performing Arts is a medium through which students can improve, I might also state that they are a "learning tool".

Are Drama and Performing Arts then, a tool, a craft or just a lot of "hot air" and marketing hype for private schools and institutions?

In my enquiry, I feel that I cannot disregard external social and economical aspects that may influence students, schools, staff members and our community as part of the context.

I would provide both personal and **third party opinions collected through questionnaires or surveys** enabling me to link my ideas and reinforce my sayings with others' such as the following:

"Private schools are going through a slump nowadays as economic fronts are all but stable and this is especially true in Argentina. With many schools closing down due to economic difficulties or mismanagement, each school tries to find a competitive edge in order to market their school more effectively and "stay in the race".

Drama and Performing Arts is sometimes being used to seduce parents into choosing one institution over another and all this has given Drama and Performing Arts a bad reputation when unprepared or untrained personnel handle these subjects.⁵"

³ "people may search out sources beyond their immediate circle, ones we designate as "authoritative". From "Research Methods in Education"- Fourth Edition Cohen and Manion (1997, pp 1).

⁴ Appendix 1 validating statement: "Drama has a positive effect on learning. By becoming involved in struggles and conflicts of others, students are likely to profit from the benefits of reduced anxiety levels, increased self confidence and esteem and develop capacity for empathy. Moreover they may learn the value of group work and cooperation, since the success of a show or play depends on all those involved, not only on the stage manager or Drama coach, but also on the backstage crew and the actors and actresses as well."

⁵ Results from the Heads survey (Appendix 1) stress the fact that it is very difficult to find qualified staff to teach these subjects and that "experience" is very necessary in order to achieve success and not turn the Drama lesson into a "free period".

I must then prove whether or not Drama and Performing Arts are a learning tool, so I should look for **additional literary material** for my “supposed” enquiry to find bibliography that could be of use to enhance, confirm or dismiss what I wish to state
One example may be:

Many activities involving Music, dance and acting (or role-play) are included when planning exercise to enhance multiple intelligences.

This is supported fully by Kristen Nicholson-Nelson in her book “Multiple Intelligence Lesson Plans” (1998, pp 43)

If we consider the eight intelligences discussed so far by Gardner as categorized by Kristen Nicholson-Nelson (1998, pp13) we immediately associate performing arts or drama to almost all of them. According to this book and Gardner’s findings:

Linguistic Intelligence: *“people learn best through reading, hearing, and seeing words, writing, discussing and debating.”*

In Performing Arts and Drama students read scripts, listen to music and instructions and their fellow actors and actresses, build characters by discussing details with their Director/ teacher and amongst other students.

Public readings or public speaking are also performance- based activities.

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence: *“... learn best through working with patterns and relationships, classifying, categorizing, working with the abstract.”*

Actors and actresses must be able to deal with the abstract; from imagining something that is not there (props or furniture) during rehearsal to conveying “false” emotions or relationships as if they were authentic while on- stage.

Spatial Intelligence: *“...learn best working with pictures and colours, visualizing, using the minds eye, drawing.”*

Again, the “mind’s eye” is fundamental for imagining things, or situations in rehearsals, plays or performances.

Bodily – Kinesthetic Intelligence: *“...learn best through touching, moving, processing knowledge through bodily sensations.”*

Students who excel as actors and actresses have this type of intelligence developed most of all as movement, and bodily contact are always present in performance.

Musical Intelligence: *“...learn best through rhythm, melody, singing, listening to music and melodies.”*

When staging musical theatre (especially at P.A.S.) students are constantly in contact with music and must sing as well as dance or react to music and musical stimuli.

The Personal Intelligences-“Interpersonal: *...learn best through sharing, comparing, relating, interviewing and cooperating.”*

Every show demands cooperation and sharing. Students understand that they are both a “part” and the “whole”.

“Intrapersonal: *Learn best working alone, doing self-paced projects, having space and reflecting.”*

In Performing Arts students must do a lot of solo work when practising and preparing for their actual presentation. They must also learn to accept criticism and reflect upon what they have accomplished and what they must still work on harder in order to do their absolute best when the actual presentation occurs.

“Naturalist: *Learn best by working in nature, exploring living things, learning about plants and natural events.”*

Although students do not work directly with nature in performing arts, they are asked to relate to outdoor events and must imagine themselves in different environments (many times this is achieved through direct observation).⁶

I now come to the heart of my enquiry.... STUDENTS!

What do students have to say about Drama?

If I “intend to improve my students’ learning...” as my proposed title states, then I think students, their opinions and my experience with them are definitely to be included within the context of my enquiry.

In any enquiry such as the one I am hypothetically proposing, it is what happens with our students, what they think and what we teachers can do to help them become effective learners that make us want to do this type of research in the first place so that we can get better at our job and widespread “educational evolution” occurs.

In trying to answer this question, collection and analysis of data will surely be carried out through interviewing and or surveys (which can be both versatile and “personal”) and **sampling** may have to be used as not all of the students study Drama and Performing arts in a similar manner, but certain age groups do. **Additional information (such as photographs, videos or audio tapes)** should also be included to enforce what is being said in writing.

Although my students are from Latin America I consider conducting an **Ethnography** for example, to be irrelevant as an alternative because the conclusions in my intended enquiry should serve to be used in many countries and or situations and not just refer to what was dealt with strictly within a particular group of students that live within a certain cultural context.

I have also ruled out the possibility of carrying out a “**Case Study**” (the study of a single student) because as many student’s views as possible should be taken into account in an enquiry such as this in order to be able to **generalise** and come to valid **conclusions** which should be applicable to more than one person.

Having discussed things from the student’s point of view, I consider it very relevant to concentrate my attention on their immediate surroundings.... THEIR PARENTS!

How about parents and their opinions?

I believe that another integral part of the context surrounding my proposed title is our student’s parents, as they are both “part of the student’s life” and “part of our community”.

⁶ All Words in Italics taken from “Developing Students’ Multiple Intelligences” By Kristen Nicholson-Nelson (1998). All of my conclusions or comments (not in italics) relating Performing Arts to Multiple intelligences is fully supported by Constantin Stanislavski in his book “ An Actor prepares” (1989), Uta Hagen in her book, ”A Challenge for the Actor” (1991) “Teaching Drama” by Morgan-Saxton (1987) and “Staging Musical Theatre” by Novak and Novak (1996)

I would use **verbal or open questions in my questionnaires** to generate **comparisons** and **methodological triangulation** to **validate or disclaim** my opinions and third-party personal views regarding Drama and Performing Arts. I may even try to identify different “types” of parents and whether or not their actions/ reactions have a specific effect on their children.

I would possibly choose to **include some psychological reference material** too.

Some segments might read like the following:

“In my many years of teaching I have found that in our frenetic society, due to work and or personal problems, parents are not always aware of what goes on at school. The only feedback they have as regards Performing Arts is what they see when they attend an open class or some sort of presentation or “what goes back home” through their kids. After conducting my surveys and questionnaires, I have confirmed my assumption that many parents think Drama and Performing Arts is “good for their kids” although they do not know what is done in these subjects or how things work. When questioned by me and asked about the matter, some parents have told me that Psychologists or Heads recommended these activities and that the activity is “great” ...”

My next step would be centred on new educational possibilities or horizons, which might be tapped by working with Drama and or Performing Arts.

Performing Arts and Drama as a bonding source for emotional intelligence

I think it necessary to include as broad a scope as possible in my investigation, so I would try to include **additional theoretical aspects** in my work such as the following:

According to the findings of Daniel Goleman, Drama and Performing Arts is a bonding source for something that has only recently been taken fully into account:
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

According to Goleman (author of “Emotional Intelligence” -1994) “EQ or emotional intelligence is extremely important and must be considered seriously *“if we want a better tomorrow”.. and... “people can have an extremely high IQ yet be a failure as far as relating to others”*”.

So I take into consideration the following possibilities, which are fully documented and discussed by Goleman in his book “Emotional Intelligence” (1994):

That IQ should not be the only important thing brought into consideration at schools and that emotions are an integral, indivisible part of the student.

That it is practically impossible to leave feelings aside when you are directly involved in a “living process” such as education.

One can easily infer that Performing Arts directly benefits students by helping to work their emotional intelligence when Goleman (1994) clearly states: *“All emotions are, in essence, impulses to act, the instant plans for handling life that evolution has instilled in us”*. (p6 Emotional Intelligence) Even great master’s of the craft of acting such as Stanislavski in his book “An Actor prepares” (1989, pp 64) tells us; *“an external production is formal, cold and pointless if it is not motivated from within”*. Or, to put it in layman’s terms *“for every internal action there is an external reaction and vice-versa”*. This fits like a glove with another of Goleman’s comment: *“With new methods to peer into the body and brain, researchers are discovering more psychological details of how each emotion prepares the body for a very different kind of response.”* (1994, pp6 - Emotional Intelligence)

CONCLUSION:

I was so enthusiastic about my studies and the proposed topic of my enquiry that I found myself putting what I was studying into practise.

I started collecting material, reading books I thought relevant, interpreting and evaluating material for use in the enquiry and even carrying out interviews and conducting surveys that I have included partly “in italics” within my written assignment and in the appendix section.

These real facts should help to reinforce my use of certain collection techniques for my formal future enquiry and the advantages of the chosen methodology.

My Tutor, Sarah Fletcher has been of great help at all times and was also responsible for “fuelling” my enthusiasm and helping me to steer clear of completing an actual enquiry in order to concentrate on the collection methods and approach to complete this unit.

With all this in mind and after analysing the answers to the questions posed to help find the context in which I would be carrying out my enquiry and taking all imaginable things into account, I have come to a conclusion and chosen **action research** as my overall approach.

I have chosen **action research (naturalistic methodology)** as my approach because I believe that this method of enquiry suits my needs and possibilities and will work even under the limitations (time, funding, technicalities etc.) present at all institutions and in the immediate social surroundings. I am sure that this approach is the most suitable as everything that I am investigating has not only happened in the course of my twenty years of experience in education, but is also happening at this very moment. The dynamics involved in an investigation such as the one I am proposing make it practically impossible to carry out a formal scientific investigation.

I strongly feel that I need to adopt this approach because I would be exploring and analysing individual and collective phenomena at the three institutions both alone and with a group of collaborators, conducting interviews, surveys and observations and trying to, as Cohen and Manion (1994, pp 186) put it: “improve practise in some way or other.”

Or, as defined in the Bath unit outline by Mc Kernan (1991, Chapter 7, pp 9), be carrying out “... a systematic self-reflective scientific enquiry by practitioners to improve practise.”

My enquiry would not be Cooperative, as all collaborators would do just that; collaborate, and not participate in any conclusions etc.

I am totally in accordance with Manion and Cohen when they state other ways in which action research would directly benefit the institutions I work at and hopefully other institutions or educational communities.

Following, is a list of the advantages of action research I coincide with. (Manion and Cohen, 1994, pp188-189)

- 1- It is a means of remedying problems in specific situations, or of improving in some way a given set of circumstances;
- 2- It is a means of in-service training, thereby equipping teachers with new skills and methods, sharpening their analytical powers and heightening their self-awareness;
- 3- It is a means of injecting additional or innovatory approaches to teaching and learning into an ongoing system, which normally inhibits innovation and change;
- 4- It is a means of improving the normally poor communications between practising teacher and academic researcher, and of remedying the failure of traditional research to give clear prescriptions;

5- Although lacking the rigour of true scientific research, it is a means of providing a preferable alternative to the more subjective, impressionistic approach to problem solving.

As mentioned before, I will be working within an ongoing process, so my data will not be related to or treated as statistics or have to do with the recording of such evidence. Nonetheless, I would be employing qualitative methods and including scientific facts based on recent research in learning and teaching wherever possible to further support my findings. This is all discussed fully by Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion⁷ and Jean McNiff-First and Second Editions© Jean McNiff 1995, 1997-Third edition © Jean McNiff 2002 in her work entitled “Action research for professional development-Concise advice for new action researchers”.

After putting “theory into practise” during my self-motivated investigations and seeing what worked and did not work through trial and error at times, and evaluating results, I have decided that I would be conducting descriptive surveys to enable further analysis and stratified sampling with same age groups selected from all institutions, conducting interviews and registering as many events as possible on tape, video or photos.

As far as interviews are concerned, I found a need to conduct a variety of different interviews depending on “who” is being interviewed so I will not determine a specific type at the moment. I will probably start collecting my initial data from peers and collaborators through un-structured interviews though, just as I naturally did in real life. I think I would also include questionnaires, although the information sought is of a personal character and not easy to explain in a few words at times.

I am sure that through action research it would be necessary to conduct observations and register my findings appropriately on paper, video, photographs and or audio tapes to support my findings and conclusions. They would serve as tangible proof to prevent mistakes such as the possibility stated in the Bath “Methods of Educational Enquiry folder “...a skilfully constructed, but biased, questionnaire can confirm almost any hypothesis”⁸

Some of the limitations I may encounter in an enquiry such as this might include; The scarce bibliography on this subject, the little amount of time one sometimes has in order to carry out an in depth investigation with students, the breadth of the context surrounding my proposed title and the complexity of dealing with and working almost exclusively with human beings in order to complete an enquiry such as this.

I would not like to limit myself, or my work in any way, so I may need to incorporate new methodologies or collection methods in the course of the enquiry itself due to the dynamic nature of classroom and performance situations.

After the experience gathered in this, my first unit towards my Masters in Educational Management, I consider it an asset for researchers to incorporate first-hand experience before conducting a formal enquiry as this should help them (as I think it has helped me) to trace the path they intend to travel along.

I am sure that, after I have formally conducted my enquiry, many teachers (including myself) can accomplish new and beautiful things with students in Performing Arts and Drama related activities and that this will benefit the schools that we all work at.

⁷ “Action research is situational- it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context; it is usually (though not inevitably) collaborative”- Chapter 9 p186 Research Methods in Education-Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion- Fourth Edition (1994)

⁸ taken from Bath Methods of Educational Enquiry folder- ch 5 p3 quote by Webb et al (1969)

I think that my enquiry will also aid those teachers and administrators who may not have considered Performing Arts as a useful method or tool to do more than just “entertain” or teach students facts.

The challenge lies in the will to formally carry out an enquiry such as this and advance another step forward, enabling education to continue its evolution, or remain as is and assume that teaching and learning can go no further.

I embrace the challenge!

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