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A Phenomenological Observation of Two Theatrical Learning Environments

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Abstract

This modified qualitative study focused on observations of learning procedures and performance outcomes of two theatrical learning environments (TLE), using a select set of phenomenological observation and recording procedures to ensure minimization of researcher bias. Observational results were compared to previously published observations of a large lecture hall learning environment at a Midwestern university. Observational results were also compared to a select set of learning theories to determine similarities in observed learning procedures to those theories. This study reveals differences in methods of acquisition of knowledge and skills in a TLE and the acquisition of same in the lecture hall environment. In the large lecture hall descriptions, the individual learner's preset learning measurement options of ABCDF or Pass/Fail, individual option of choice to be present but non-interactive within the learning environment, individual option of choice of when to learn material and in what manner (for instance, cramming for a final), option of choice of attention level when physically present in the learning environment, and other options all affect the individual learner's achievement level while minimally impacting the learning and achievement options of other members of the lecture class. This contrasts with a TLE, where failure is not a pre-listed option, maximization of learning and skills development is a constant goal individually and severally, interactivity with other learning environment members is mandated, material must be progressively learned and mastered by all members at essentially the same rate of progress, attention level must remain high, and there may well be multiple 'final exams' wherein virtually 100% of text materials must be transmitted verbatim in a meaningful way to a third party (an audience) through skills learned and/or improved. Comparisons of learning theories reveal this process to be most closely allied with, but still significantly different from, collaborative learning theory.

Purpose of The Study

Theatron is Greek for 'the seeing place'. Observation is part and parcel of what goes on in that type of environment. Is it possible, through an unbiased observation of how a theatrical learning environment works, to improve the potential for learning in a large lecture hall environment, a 'typical' smaller live classroom environment (whatever that is), or other group learning environments?

Perspective

Theatre is an educational device. The earliest forms of theatre were concerned with the transfer of and preservation of information through oral recitation of stories, songs and poems. All of the

advances in theatre from that early point of oral recitation on to present day Broadway extravaganzas can essentially be defined as technical improvement. The basic functionality of the theatre environment remains the same – information transfer. Even theatre that is classed as pure entertainment involves information transfer.

Brief Examples of Theatrical Learning Environments (TLE) in Use Today

TLE as an instrument of information transfer within a primary educational system occurs to a limited extent in some primary and secondary school environments in the United States. It is much more extensively used at that level in other countries such as Israel, where traveling professional theatrical companies are regularly employed to broach subjects such as bullying, anti-smoking campaigns, road safety, and health issues. Another example of a TLE would be Focused Interactive Theatre, or Forum Theatre, used by the political activist Augusto Boal (1973) as part of his “Theatre of the Oppressed.” Originally the technique was developed by Boal as a tool for social and political change, principally in Brazil, but since then it has been widely adapted and used for purposes of education worldwide, including the subject areas of politics, human rights, ethics, sexuality, globalization, multiculturalism, and social action. Psychodrama and Sociodrama are clinical and semi-clinical social and therapeutic applications of a TLE.

Research Design

This study involved a method of phenomenological observation and recording that Groenwald (2004) referred to as simple descriptive phenomenology. Simply put, the researcher observed and recorded the phenomena occurring from the beginning of the rehearsal procedures all the way through to the final production and audience-attended presentations of two plays while excluding as much as possible any researcher/observer bias in either the observations or the recording of those observations. Recording methods included on-site field notes and videotape, with post-observational correction of field notes to further eliminate spontaneous bias and to incorporate reviewed observation via the videotape to enhance the field notes. This process was devoid of any other goals.

Research Questions

None. Phenomenological observation is just that – observation. The usual methodology of a pre-research list of assumptions, research questions, and focus of research observations do not apply. To have research questions thought out and written down prior to an observation or observations implies having an agenda that negates the neutrality of the observation (Flesher, 1997). Additionally, observation needs to be widespread and inclusive. To concentrate on particular phenomena during an observation, such as focusing in the camera on a particular actor or area of action in a scene, is to commit observational focal point bias. Friedman (2010) illustrated this latter observational bias of focus in a published research critique titled *Why Scientific Studies Are So Often Wrong: The Streetlight Effect*. In it he states that if you only focus on what is brightly illuminated (deemed important or relevant by the observer, or phenomena easy to observe within the illuminated zone of the 'streetlight') you hazard missing what is going on elsewhere, which may be just as important or relevant, or possibly more so.

Relevance. The practical implication of this approach in the field of educational research is summed up concisely by Chamberlin (1969, p. 127) as follows: “Most educators fail to understand what they do because they are preoccupied with what they *should* do (italics mine). Responsible educational decisions can be made when careful description comes before prescription.”

Limitations and Interpretive Bias

Despite the rigorous attempts to avoid bias mentioned above, the researcher's field notes and subsequent written text describing observations are in actuality a truncated and approximate interpretation of events, not a literal ongoing minutely detailed transcription of events, which would be almost impossible to accomplish. Likewise, anyone reading the researcher's written text is performing an exercise in hermeneutics - in essence re-interpreting the transcribed interpretation, which is a symbolic approximation (written words) of the observer's original interpretation. Some bias inevitably creeps into the process. Nevertheless observations must be transcribed in some manner, and the transcription process necessarily involves interpretation, approximation, and symbolism. Thus observational bias is never truly eliminated, only minimized through vigilant effort to do so. Even the grinding realism of the video camera is accomplished from a specific point of view.

Population Sample

The populations used for this study consisted of 16 actors and one unpaid director involved in the production of *The Wiz*, and 12 actors and one salaried faculty director involved in the production of *The Adding Machine*. All actors and directors were adults ranging in age from 19 to 59.

Plays Observed

The study utilized long-term phenomenological observation and recording of the organization, development and production of two plays that were brought to fruition on stage before live audiences in Kansas in 2011. The first theatrical production observed was *The Wiz*, a 1974 musical adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. The production was comprised of an all-volunteer unpaid cast involving the participation of local residents from two Midwestern towns along with several transient students from an education and career technical training program administered by the U. S. Dept. of Labor, focused on providing career technical and academic training for young adults. *The Wiz* was presented to live paying audiences at a community theater in nine performances from Sept. 23 to Oct. 9 in 2011. The second theatrical production observed was *The Adding Machine*, a 1923 expressionistic drama by Elmer Rice that is often cited as a landmark of American Expressionism. This production was presented to live paying audiences as a main stage performance at a large university Auditorium on the campus of a Midwestern university in three performances, November 10, 11, and 12 in 2011. All players involved in the production of *The Adding Machine* were unpaid volunteers and were current students of the university.

Actor and Director Interviews. Post-observational interviews were conducted with all actors and directors within approximately one week following the final performance of the play. Actors were presented with a standardized question asking them to compare their theatrical learning experience to previous learning experiences, similar or dissimilar. All responses were videotaped. Both directors were interviewed on videotape separately and at length (approx. 90 min. each) concerning all aspects of the learning and production process.

Analysis of the Data

Content analysis of written notes transcribed by the observer were subjected to certain qualitative data mining procedures recommended by Berg (2008) in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, including open coding, manifest content analysis, and latent content analysis, defined as "...analysis extended to an interpretive reading of the

symbolism underlying the physically presented data” (Berg, 2008, p. 176). Post-observational actor/director interviews were examined for supportive/contradictory statements concerning the phenomenon observed by the researcher during the recording process. Interviews were subjected to the same qualitative data mining procedures.

Findings and Conclusions

Phenomenological observation of the two theatrical learning environments revealed consistent volunteerism of participants, strong commitment to process and goals, multiple reading and clarification of text materials, interpretive presentation of text material to a third party (audience), striving for high performance levels, self and group awareness of shortcomings in skills and knowledge acquisition, a positive attitude about improvement, and several instances of overcoming of shyness. Categories addressed in findings were commitment, knowledge attained, competency, memorization, repetition, the role of the director/facilitator, interactivity of participants, maximum goal attainment, interpretation of text and physical delivery of text, dealing with inattention or lack of focus, and pride of accomplishment. Post-observation interviews supported the observational findings listed above, with five actors (all in *The Adding Machine*) expressing regret that they “fell short of their personal best” in some of the performances and wishing there had been more performances scheduled (additional final exams!) so that they could have improved or perfected their skills. Director comments concentrated more on critique of technique and individual performance, but generally supported the observational findings as well.

Comparison of Analysis of Data to Learning Theories

It is very easy to get lost in the weeds when discussing learning theories - there are so many. A brief and truncated selection follows that reflect at least some theories that may apply to the learning behavior observed in the two theatrical learning environment observations. This researcher makes no attempt to insert an opinion about which theory is best, or to implicitly rank learning theories via the order of their appearance. They appear in alphabetical order.

Andragogy. Knowles (1984) stated that the process of learning is considered to be more important than the specific content of what is being learned. Also that (1) adults need to know why they need to learn something, (2) adults need to learn experientially, (3) adults approach learning as problem-solving, (4) adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value, and (5) instructors should adopt a role of facilitator or resource person rather than lecturer or grader.

Collaborative learning. Team learning, study groups, cooperative learning, collective learning, learning communities, peer teaching and learning, etc. are examples. Collaborative learning happens when groups of learners choose to help each other in the learning process with a common goal in mind, namely that they will all succeed together (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 33).

Community learning. Community learning generally takes place outside of conventional education practices. It is deliberate and purposeful learning, seeking to acquire knowledge and/or skills; it does not necessarily follow the strict timetable of a regular academic institutional year; and there is no academic institutional accreditation or validation (Brookfield, 1983, p. 12).

Constructivism. Constructivism is concerned with conditionalized knowledge, information paired with an experiential activity, event, environment, or all three. A learning environment that is cooperative rather than a group of individual learners, the establishment of sequential activities for achieving objectives, and learning objectives that are based on needs and interests of learners, are all concerns of constructivism (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992).

Situated learning theory. Situated Learning Theory is another form of collaborative learning theory concerning knowledge acquisition in specific environments or locations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In part, it states that learning that takes place in a regular classroom environment is often an abstract learning experience. It concentrates on the establishment of a ‘learning community’ rather than a room full of individual, minimally-connected individual learners. It emphasizes that many types of learning should ideally require a certain amount of social interaction and collaboration. (Anderson, J., et al. 1996, p. 5)

Social learning theory. In Social Learning Theory people learn through observing others’ behavior and the outcomes of those behaviors (Bandura, 1977). It is chiefly concerned with real-world, real-time human interaction. Necessary conditions for effective learning are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

Comparison of Analysis of Data to a Lecture Hall Environment

Briefly, the level of a particular learner’s participation, interaction, cooperation, and investment is generally arbitrary in a lecture hall learning environment. The author has coined the term “wallflower effect” to indicate that it is entirely possible for a student to attend every meeting of a lecture hall class and participate minimally or not at all without affecting other students or altering the lecture hall process.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Attempts to integrate parts of the theatrical learning environment into adult education practice that facilitate continuous and continual competency during the course of learning material and skills, high rates of constructive feedback, individual investment in the learning process, a collaborative effort to maximize goals, and a sense of personal accomplishment in the form of “owning” the course material and skills gained, can only be helpful. Many learning theories, as noted above, already incorporate parts of this process.

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