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Street Theatre: Critical Pedagogy for Social Studies Education

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This paper aims at exploring the usefulness of street theatre as critical pedagogy in teaching of social studies education. It gives a brief background of street-theatre and its linkages with critical pedagogy. In the light of theoretical underpinnings of this arts-based pedagogy, the paper deliberates upon the relevance and efficacy of street theatre in a social studies classroom. This paper uses a street theatre performance case to look at the techniques such as: body motion, body work, props, use of visual and audio aids, etc.; processes such as: conscientization and catharsis; and dialogical approach employed by street theatre to bring awareness about socio-political and cultural issues prevalent in a society. The analysis of this performance act shows that street theatre successfully encourages spectators or the oppressed masses to reflect, and triggers action in them to come out of socio-political oppression. When looked at from educational perspective, street theatre encourages the employment of multiple-intelligences of both students and teachers; and therefore, it can be one innovative strategy to make students aware of the issues infecting their society and also to empower students for action.

Key Words: critical pedagogy, arts-based pedagogy, social studies education, street theatre, socio-political oppression, conscientization, dialogical approach

Introduction

This paper highlights the background, rationale and significance of using ‘street theatre’ as pedagogy to teach social studies education, especially with reference to raising critical awareness of issues that plague our society. It talks about how this strategy can help stimulate actions on the part of students to transform the social situation for the better. The paper draws insights from my experience of introducing street theatre as pedagogy in social studies education for a group of M Ed. student-teachers who have later formed a street-theatre

group at the university where I currently teach. Additionally, it presents theoretical concepts of street theatre and shares a brief narration of a performance case enacted to demonstrate how street theatre works. The paper then presents a post-performance reflection, teacher-role, and procedure in the light of theoretical concepts. While shedding light on the pedagogic aspects of street theatre, the paper concludes by connecting the performance case with social studies education that how this arts-based pedagogy can be innovatively used in teaching of social studies education.

Arts-Based Pedagogies in Social Studies Education

Social studies has been represented as a vast learning area of interdisciplinary knowledge; therefore, its effective teaching requires multidisciplinary and innovative methods of teaching and learning. Given this motive, arts-based pedagogies can be aptly used in the teaching of social studies education, because these pedagogies are non-traditional approaches which facilitate both learners and teachers to view situations from different vantage points. Arts-based pedagogies encourage students to think creatively and to analyze existing knowledge in the light of their experiences. Furthermore, these pedagogic tools can be effective in teaching because they “stimulate our capacity to wonder, and allow us to see or understand the world in other ways” (Eisner, 1997, as cited in Conrad, 2002, p. 254) and thus broaden the perspectives of teachers and students, in turn encouraging active learning. Arts-based pedagogies include teaching and learning through music, fine arts, dance, puppet shows, and performance arts etc.

Performance arts offer a powerful representational mode to express and address individual and collective self and identity. It involves variety of senses; kinaesthetic and visual intelligences, that influence our emotional intelligence. Performance arts as a pedagogy for social change enables students “to intervene and reclaim their bodies from oppressive academic practices that assume students’ personal memories and cultural histories to be insignificant to identity construction and new mythic representations” (Garoian, R., 1999, p. 57). As scenes or scripts the students construct in performance arts are based on their lived experiences, they become reflective and in consequence, reality becomes subjective to them.

Street Theatre: A Background

Street theatre, as we see it today has its roots in Theatre of the Oppressed, initiated by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian drama-artist and a social activist. Its linkages with the field of education, especially non-formal education can be traced back to inter-connection/channelling of ideas between Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Street theatre is a genre of performance arts which is participatory in nature whereby the actors make use of nature and their body to create effects in the play. “This form of theatre aims to join entertainment with an exploration of attitudes and to share knowledge in order to stimulate positive social changes.” (Training Manual, n.d., p. 5)

Boal was inspired by the works of Freire, (Singhal, A., 2004), an educationalist and his country mate, who rejected the idea of a learner as an empty bank account; therefore, he introduced critical pedagogy; the concept of teacher as a learner and learner as a teacher (Darder, Baltodo, & Torres, 2009). Similar was the approach of Boal whereby actors became the spectators and spectators the actors, to discourage the idea of oppressor and the oppressed. Boal saw theatre as a pedagogic tool which could enable the masses to confront social issues prevalent in Brazil. For this reason, he invited his audience to intervene and re-perform a particular scene, to encourage them to reflect on a social issue contextually portrayed, so as to facilitate a dialogue between actors and spectators (spec-actors). This enabled the spectators to take power; “to take control of situations, rather than passively allowing things to happen to them” (Singhal, 2004 p.145). Hence, what Freire was doing in the field of non-formal/adult education, Augusto was doing through performance arts; both were challenging and subverting the power – the hegemonic force- in their respective societies. In this way, the foundation of street theatre, theoretically, got

underpinned by strong undercurrents of critical theory of education, whereby the knowledge and power relationship was exposed and challenged.

For the similar purposes as mentioned above – to empower the masses, street theatre was introduced in South Asia by some activist groups and NGOs. Ajoka is one such group working in Pakistan since its inception in 1983. The group emerged in repudiation to the dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (Ajoka Theatre Online, 2010), a very common political impetus which has given birth to many such groups and NGOs internationally. Besides this, Tehrik-e-Niswan, a feminist theatre, is also working in Pakistan. “Based in Karachi, the Tehrik-e-Niswan uses various forms of the performing arts such as dance, drama, music, also poetry and song, and symbolic sets and props in order to raise voice against injustices, particularly against women” (Hussain, 2010). In the list of theatres for social change, Lok Rhas and Rasti’s efforts cannot be undermined. Through their street performances both the groups are busy educating the oppressed masses. Apart from the groups in Pakistan, Aarohan Street Theatre in Nepal “started performing street plays about the problems of deaf people called Aawaj (The Voice). They have moved on to put on plays about voting rights and democracy, ... about the relation of population and environment; about sanitation, based on a famous folk story of Nepal; and about leprosy, among other topics” (Training Manual, n.d., p.10). Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh is working along the same lines. Moreover, Art Street Theatre in San Francisco, initiated in 1995 aims “to provide an opportunity for people to gather in the same space at the same time for an experience that was simultaneously funny, moving, thought provoking, and only possible in a live theatre” (Art Street Theatre Online, 2010). In Canada Bathurst Street Theatre is working for

similar aims. Many other such organizations around the world are doing street theatre to empower the masses and educate them about various social problems. These organizations also collaborate with schools to facilitate teachers and students in learning the techniques to perform.

Street Theatre – Key Theoretical Concepts

This section discusses the related key concepts (theory-practice), which underpin the practice of performing street theatre. The idea is to outline some important perspectives on the concepts that are operative in the performance act. Having done so, the discussion presents performance act/aspect of the street theatre contextualized within social studies classroom session held for M Ed. students at AKU-IED.

Primarily, performance arts and especially mediums such as: dance, theatrical performances employ gestures, expressions, actions (as in acting), speech/voice, and bodily movements etc. These expressions aid to the discourse that individual or a performing group wishes to portray. In this manner, visual and audio aids are economically used to bring effectiveness in expression. The strategic use of body in street theatre is one of its significant features, because the performers consciously use their body (twisting and turning, shivering, facial expressions, raising and lowering the voice, voice texture, body motions, hairstyle, dressing, etc.) to project specific moods and themes of the play and to have a reactionary impact on the audience.

Other key features of the street theatre are: the involvement of spectators in the play, its interactive nature, and room for spontaneity in the performative script through dialogues. The performers engage spectators in a dialogue by allowing them to intervene, employing a plethora of strategies. This they do by first

presenting socio-cultural political problems (via problem-posing approach) in the performance and inducing the audience through various performative devices to reflect. Since, only critical reflection cannot suffice to bring a change, the audience too is invited to act, thus blurring the boundary between actors and spectators. The performers through this exercise co-create the play to make the masses critically conscious of the social issues which helps achieve conscientization. Conscientization can be defined as “the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 14). In the context of street theatre ‘spectators’ are the ‘empowered subjects’ who are made aware of the ‘social realities’ to help them play a role in consciously constructing their own identities. Conscientization is achieved through dialogical approach, which in the case of street theatre, is interaction between actors and audience and in the case of education, interaction between teacher/educator and learners. Freire believes, “education should be a dialogical process, in which students and teachers share their experiences in a non-hierarchical manner” (Palmer, 2004, p. 2). This dissolution of hierarchy also eliminates oppressed-oppressor relationship. “Oppression, according to Augusto Boal, is when one person is dominated by the monologue of another and has no chance to reply” (Gewertz, 2003, p. 1); therefore, dialogue helps the oppressed to voice their problems and act against the oppressing factors. However, in the context of teaching and learning, dialogical approach is the carrying out of conversation between a teacher and learners. This dialogue is facilitated with the belief that teaching is not a dictatorial process but a collaborative one, where both teachers and students are consumers and producers of knowledge. They together journey

through this process where new knowledge is produced through creative energy.

In street theatre, as the spectators engross themselves in a performance which depicts contextual social realities and which projects lived experiences, people can actually imagine an episode of their life being played in similar spirits but in different bodies. In this way they relive an already lived experience, thus going through catharsis. Spectators after experiencing catharsis are relieved of personal and societal fears. This psychological relief helps them to view social problems from the never visited terrains or view points.

Practice Case: Bijli

This section presents a succinct account of a performance at IED. A group of six actors: two females and four male actors perform this play called Bijli (electricity). All of them are dressed in white Kameez and black trousers. Since the actors are less in number they will play multiple roles. The props these actors will use in the play are some placard or posters with a question written in Urdu, an Urdu newspaper, a thick rope-whip, black sleeveless shirt with open sides and a similar white shirt splattered with red ink. (The performers are professionals who do street theatre for an NGO in Pakistan. Their script is fully original, made by themselves with assistance of their group director.)

Before starting the play one of the group members introduce their group and orient the audience about theme of the play which revolves around problems faced by the people of Pakistan, especially regarding load shedding which leads to other issues. This member then exits the scene and three people holding placards come forward: a blind-folded girl, another with her mouth tied shut by a piece of cloth and a boy. Their placards together read, “qasoor kis ka hai? (Whose fault it is?). A boy then pushes the

three people out of the scene. This question is a prelude for the spectators which invite them to reflect on different scenarios which the play will be presenting. In the first situation two contrasting characters are shown: 1) a concerned young boy, who is worried about the various issues prevalent in the country and 2) a carefree and complacent youth, who wants to party away his days. During this scene the boy with concern, asks several rhetorical questions to bind the audience and to prompt them to think.

The next scene is based on a conversation among a government officer, his boss and a subordinate colleague. Their talk revolves around squandering government treasury for their personal luxuries, granting scholarship and admission to their favourites on merit-blind basis and postponing projects which are meant for the good of public. This scene overall is a portrayal of the corrupt state of government leaders and their callousness towards the public.

Third is a domestic scene where a conversation between a mother and her daughter, who is striving to study, is shown. Night has fallen and she is nervous and worried for her exam in the morning. The mother presses her to retire to bed but this crying girl refuses. Suddenly, as if to add to her trouble the electricity goes out. Her mother, keeping her calm, goes to fetch a candle but returns disappointed. Now they involve in further dialogue which goes as:

Daughter: Mother, why does electricity go out so frequently?

Mother: Dear, it is the ill luck of our country that despite having all the resources, there

remains energy crisis. That's why we have excessive load shedding.

Daughter: Mother, don't we pay our electricity bills?

Mother: We do pay our bills and taxes.

Daughter: Why do they levy taxes?

Mother: They tell us that they will buy and produce electricity.

Daughter: Okay, mother let's go. We too will make electricity.

Mother: Dear, it's not easy to make electricity. Big companies make electricity. Now stop it and go to bed; the night is deep. You have to take your exam in the morning.

Daughter: But mother I have not studied anything...

(The mother takes the daughter with her and so the scene closes.)

Next is a very emotive scene where four sleeping actors represent the laid back attitude of the oppressed masses. While they are asleep, a man robed in black, representing oppressive forces, awakens them by lashing his whip against the floor. The sleeping people are awakened physically and to stir them out of mental ignorance he, in an enraged voice, utters a poetic monologue in which he strategically uses the refrain, "aur tum so rahe ho!" (and you are sleeping!), to stir the spectators. This dominant character tells the people that he is the super power and they are obliged to serve him because he is the one who runs their country. He over and over again rams his whip against the floor and reminds them of his favours and monetary loans to which they are indebted. While delivering his lines he looks directly at the spectators too to provoke them. This scene is followed by another, where a man, as an incarnation of peace, asks the people that why he is stopped from reaching the masses as it is their right to be happy. He tells the audience that in spite of having all the natural resources they are

dependent on others. As he asks that where our natural resources are, a girl playing the role of dam comes and talks about her benefits. Similarly, other resources; gas, coal and petrol come and talk about their benefits. Meanwhile, a girl performing the role of electricity comes and quickly runs away to depict the frequency of load shedding in the city. Together they all request the audience to save these resources and like this the play concludes leaving the platform open for the interactive phase.

In this phase more social issues and the responsible factors are highlighted. Also, solutions presented by the actors are questioned by the spectators. The first spectator to participate is an inhabitant of Thar, a desert in Pakistan where coal is found in abundance. This 'spect-actor' challenges the solution for energy crisis presented by an actor by saying that coal is excavated from their land and the local people provide the labour for it yet they are deprived of its benefits. This leads to vigorous participation by other members of the audience whose contributions bring forward more related issues. The spectators become so enthusiastic that the actors stand aside allowing the spectators to carry on the dialogue. The conversation about common issues veers towards the proper allocation of resources and wealth of the country until in the end, a spect-actor comes forward and in a dominant voice announces that his' will be the lion's share from the government treasury since he is the 'super-power'.

Post-Performance Reflection: Theoretical and Performative Lessons

This play was a critique on administration, community and the government on how the flaws in broader political and economic structure pose socio-economic problems for the general public. A sense of social chaos was conveyed by the presentation of socio-political-cultural-economical problems embedded in or emerging

as a result of each other. We saw in the play that spectators were taken through the process of problematization. First through problem posing approach, real issues were presented and contextualized, for example, the issue of load shedding. Following this, the oppressive mechanisms that instigate these issues were highlighted. Also, the causes of these issues were presented and government was deemed responsible for their occurrence. Subjugation of masses by the oppressive forces and the consequent frustration and helplessness of agency was also presented. All this portrayal aimed at enabling the masses to reflect and act against oppression. In the concluding stage of the performance some solutions were suggested and indigenous insights into the issues and solutions were invited from the audience. During the whole performance some pedagogic elements were observed to be at play.

Trying to achieve the educative objective of street theatre performance which is to empower the masses, the performers stimulated critical and reflective thoughts in the audience and silently motivated them to act. They did this by employing various techniques, for instance; the usage of props, body motions, voice textures, etc. Actors, "by using their bodies as cultural artefacts, materials, and processes in their performance, ... produced visceral responses that could be enjoyed yet reflected on critically" (Garoian, R., 1999, p. 62). Screaming and shivering bodies showed oppression of the masses, for instance, in scene four, the hunter used his whip to awaken people out of their sleeping state. Here the whip acted as an awakening force communicating to the insides of the audience that they needed to come out of their helpless state, reflect on the present issues, and look for the possibilities of solving them and act. The hunter aimed his whip at the feet of his targets setting them afoot and the people screamed and ran from fear. This tells us how

the socio-economical issues are attacking the masses who cry helplessly in reaction, stopping their bodies and minds to think creatively and to come up with viable solutions.

The hunter used poetic discourse to achieve an emotive effect on the audience and to lead them through a cathartic experience not only to give vent to their feelings of frustration, but also to invite them to reflect on the issues and to make them realize the urgent need of action. The adroit use of rhetoric questions by the narrator also achieved the similar effects.

Factual issues were also presented in the play. This was evident by the use of newspaper in the first scene, where a youth reads out the news of hype in the prices of basic commodities. The audience could relate to the problem as it was not fictitious. Issue of electricity was also presented accompanied by a suggestion of using Koyla (coal) to cope up with energy crisis. Through the portrayal of problems the actors were communicating with the audience, hence involving them in the process of conscientization, which as defined earlier, is the process where by people become critically conscious of the factors shaping their society, and their individual and communal identity. Conscientization can be achieved through dialogical approach. So by employing this approach, audience was motivated to come forward to provide a native insight into the issues or their solutions presented. For instance, an actor had suggested the use of coal to overcome energy crisis. In response to this, a member from the audience, who incidentally belonged to Thar, pointed out the critical issue of human displacement in the name of development. That the resources are excavated from their land and yet it is them who suffer and are thus deprived of their rights and benefits. At this point, another actor jumped in to defend his point, starting a dialogue between actor and spectator. This contribution of the member from

Thar motivated other members of the audience to intervene and so other issues were unfolded and solutions were offered until the actors withdrew from the scene and a dialogue (spect-actor) started among some spectators who switched their roles to actors. During this phase the audience was becoming socially conscious of the issues surrounding them thus conscientization was achieved through dialogical approach.

The above theoretical pointers were at work during the complete performance aimed at awakening the masses and conveying to them the need of action. In this connection, the objective of developing critical and reflective thinking of students and making them active citizens of the country can also be achieved by exploiting street theatre in social-studies classroom.

Pedagogical Values - Educational Values: Making Connections with Social Studies Education

Street-theatre derives its powers from expressions, invoking emotions to trigger realization; conscientization what Frerie would call. It gives space to students to see connection of issues in their real life, as both the issue and material expression of those issues are embedded in the real lived context of the community or the social group for which this performance is made.

The power of street theatre as pedagogy can complement current modes of teaching and learning and can enhance confidence, expression, imagination, voicing and articulations of the qualities of students which are very essential for any individual learner. Furthermore, the use of visual and audio aids enhances learners' ability- and capitalizes on the learners' multiple senses and intelligences,

which if properly groomed, can prove to be effective learning tools.

This pedagogy may pose some foreseen challenges. For example: strong formal structure of teaching and learning may initially find it difficult to be flexible and adopt alternate ways of learning and expression. Furthermore, authoritarian regimes of teaching may be a challenge to the demand of this pedagogy, where students take on various roles and express themselves –express power. If these initial barriers are crossed, then this pedagogy can be both fun and action oriented making some genuine difference in the mind-set of the society. Additionally, it can trigger a wave of change for the better which is one of the key aims of social studies education. This arts-based pedagogy can offer both these elements in learning through performance. Above all, this expressive medium can enrich different capacities of individuals, learners or teachers alike. As every human has an aesthetic dimension intact, such art-based pedagogies appeal and stimulate that very aesthetic, which informs human intellect and imagination and can make the world more loveable and enjoyable place to live and be.

Street theatre as a pedagogical strategy bears some resemblance to another popular teaching strategy called role play which is often actively employed in social studies teaching and learning. The role play strategy also involves active participation of students, role identification and role performance through which the students can explore social issues surrounding them. Maddrell (2007) defines role play as a qualitative teaching tool which involves simulation and problem solving approach. Just as in street theatre, students acting out a role play present a problem by assimilating themselves in the character but on the other hand they perform the already scripted scenes and there is no “audible” conversation (a silent conversation may take place) between the

actors and the audience. However, street theatre gives the participants an opportunity to reach out to the masses, to interact with the audience and to spur the script through mutual spontaneous conversation. It promises wider communication and an expansive impact.

Street Theatre in Social Studies Classroom: Teacher Role and Procedure

After the performance of Bijli, the director of the play introduced the students to some basic elements of a play: selection of an apt theme or issue, effective narration, character, body work, and use of props and costumes. He gave the students a few scenarios to act upon for practice. For example he asked a girl to imagine that she is standing on a rope at a height and the ground underneath is ablaze. Now she should show everyone how she will cross the road. The girl tried and another student also tried. After this, the director called three students and gave them another situation to act upon. After students’ presentation the director gave them advices on how clear exhibition of emotions, voice effects, coordination and communication with the audience is important.

Later, in a week’s time, the students prepared a play to perform before a larger audience. I took up the role of a facilitator. This group of eight students chose the issue of flood that hit the Northern areas of Pakistan to show how different agencies were exploiting the situation for their private good. These students wrote a narrative and clearly decided on the point where they would ask the audience to intervene. I assisted the students in improvising the script, finalizing the draft and gave feedbacks during their rehearsals. Students made use of props which they made themselves using low-cost material. They paid attention on emotive language and gestures to stir the audience and to touch their spirits. At the time of performance two members from the audience were privately

told about the intention of involving spectators in the play and they were requested to stand up and join the performers on the cue to motivate each of the spectators to participate. The play went smoothly and the audience actively participated.

During the entire process, from preparation to execution the teacher's role is to facilitate and guide students. The rest is left on students' creativity, imagination and their view of the society. Teacher, through his/her questions and comments helps the students to think critically. Also the teacher facilitates students to become empowered citizens and critically conscious members of their society.

Conclusion

As discussed in the beginning, social studies education deals with a vast range of social, political, cultural, psychological and anthropological issues, which need to be addressed in holistic and multidisciplinary manner. Its one of the major goals is to arouse students into becoming critically conscious citizens of their country. Fragmentary knowledge approaches therefore, can not cater to the complexity of issues prevalent in the lives of learners. For this reason, integrating arts-based pedagogies in education in general, and social studies education in particular, offers potential to not only teach and co-construct knowledge of the learners in interesting ways, but it also enriches the learner through unshing reason, emotions and imaginations which in turn can fuel the engines of social action and change.

Street theatre, as one of the arts-based pedagogies, as shown in the case presented above, can offer interesting and participatory ways to identify and address the issues that students and their community face in real life day to day situations. It reaches out beyond classroom and to the personal and communal

lives of students. Street theatre involves body and projection of the self, and it represents 'society' from a lens of a theoretical (critical) observer and offers a 'solution'. By doing so, it presents an alternative reality, and holds power to trigger the imagination for social change and action.

Street theatre form of education combined with fields of arts, critical sociology, cultural, and educational studies, offer a spectrum of intellectual and performative windows to learners and teachers. This consequently, can add power to the ways we teach in the social studies classroom. Not only this, the very process of preparing and acting out the play also unleashes and refreshes the doers. In this manner this pedagogy can offer fun and active form of learning which can make social studies education more meaningful, enjoyable and connected to the real world. This pedagogy can prove to be very effective in mass-education, adult education and rural education, especially in context such as Pakistan or South Asia, where majority of the population is living in rural areas and where mass-literacy remains a challenge for the government and the people at large.



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