LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN: USING DRAMA TO SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO A NEW CULTURE OF LEARNING

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CONTEXT

- Joint initiative between School of Education Studies and School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies (SALIS)

- Drama intervention - pilot project

- Aimed at International Pre-Masters students (mainly Business, Computing, Science and Engineering disciplines)

- Diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (mainly Saudi Arabian and Chinese)

CONTEXT (2)

- Divergent learning environments (transition from teacher-centred to student-centred)

- No previous experience of collaborative learning or independent learning

- Resistance towards creative modes of teaching and learning (particularly dislike group assessments)

- Discipline specific modules and foundation course comprising a suite of support modules

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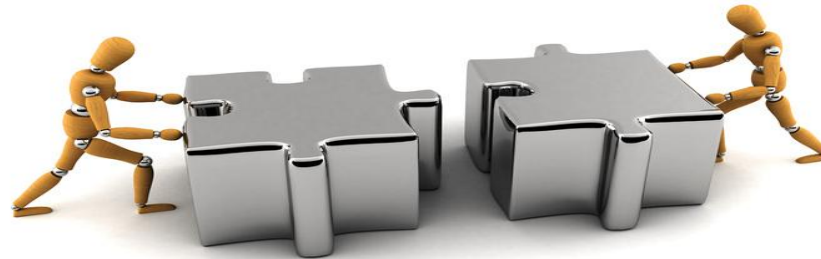Foundation course for International students

Language challenges
Academic literacy component target degree course modules

Cultural challenges
Intercultural Communication Skills Modules

Educational challenges
Study skills Component

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Study skills component to Foundation programme

- awareness raising in relation to own and Irish cultures of learning;

- awareness raising of own and other learning styles and preferences;

- development of learner autonomy and independence;

- explicit transferable skills training: (critical thinking and evaluation, reflection, time management, goal setting, team work, problem solving etc.)

1. Intercultural Communication Skills Modules

(key issues involved in understanding cultural diversity; increased awareness of own and other cultural norms and values; adaptation skills; intercultural communication effectiveness training)

2. Mixing with other students

A CULTURE OF LEARNING IS DEFINED AS:

socially transmitted and taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, beliefs and values about what good learning is, what constitutes a good teacher and student and what their roles and relationships should be. (Jin and Cortazzi, 1996)

FEATURES OF CHINESE CULTURE OF LEARNING

(Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Hu, 2002; Watkins & Biggs, 2001):

- Learning is taught from authorities – i.e. the teacher and the textbook

- Imitation and memorisation are highly valued

- Effort and good study skills lead to success, rather than ability

- To speak about what you do not know – not a familiar concept for Chinese students

- A lack of familiarity with concepts of authorship and ownership of information and knowledge

4 R'S AND 4 M'S (HU, 2002)

□ The learning strategies commonly practised in the Chinese culture of learning can be summarised as four R's and four M's.

□ Reception, repetition, review and reproduction

□ Meticulosity, memorisation, mental activeness and mastery

WESTERN CULTURE OF LEARNING

Higher Education "should sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones".

(Dearing Report on Higher Education in UK, 1997)

AIMS OF THE INTERVENTION

- To identify obstacles to collaborative learning from students' perspectives

- To enable students to find concrete strategies for dealing with these

- To support students in advance of group presentation assignment (40% of overall marks of module)

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY THE COHORT

- Member of group 'not pulling weight' / 'doing everything'

- Member of group dominates / doesn't get a chance to contribute

- Members of group not agreeing / too many voices

- Member of group forging ahead without consulting group (anger over an incident)

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PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY THE COHORT (2)

- Lacked confidence in expressing their ideas

- Language barrier

- Negativity among group members

RATIONALE

- Why drama?

- Requires collaboration and communication

  Heathcote (1984, pp.203-204) makes the following points:

  'drama demands co-operation'

  'drama puts life experience to use'

  'drama uses fiction and fantasy but makes people more aware of reality'

  'drama stresses agreeing to all trying to sustain mutual support for each other while allowing people a chance to work differently'

  'drama makes people find precision in communication'

- Precise match for participants' needs

METHODOLOGY

- Pre-questionnaire

- Drama strategies

- Two post questionnaires:

    - Immediately after the drama intervention

    - Following completion of group assignments

THE INTERVENTION

- Drama workshop introducing students to drama
  - Team building and group bonding exercises
  - Emphasis on fun

- Boal's Forum Theatre – suitable model to address the problems identified.

- Participants experience as '*spect-actors*' will lead to discovery of useful strategies where 'the rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality' (Boal, 2000, p142).

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SCENARIOS AND STRATEGIES (1)

Scenario One

- Members of group unable to agree
  - Clash of opinion - each pushing own agenda

- **Strategy:**
  - **Listen (positive body language).**
  - **Agree.**
  - **Follow with alternative opinion and justification.**

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SCENARIOS AND STRATEGIES (2)

- ## Scenario Two
  - Members of group with age, personality and priorities differences.
  - Highly motivated, time-pressed mature student versus 'shooting the breeze, good time Charlie'

- ## Strategy:
  - ### Listen.
  - ### Empathise – see situation from another's perspective and find middle ground.

FINDINGS

- Intervention was useful to participants

- Students found strategies helpful and practical

- Very impressed with the intervention - participants had no previous drama experience

- Students expressed increased:

    - Confidence

    - Empathy

    - Empowerment (students realised their role in the group, became aware that they have a part to play - had felt powerless but now more proactive in shaping the dynamic of the group)

    - Understanding of how to negotiate and communicate

STUDENT RESPONSES TO DRAMA

'The drama workshops gave me the chance to understand how to communicate with partners and how to find our own part in group work.'

'It benefited me even more than a group assignment, it let me know how to interact with people.'

'It made me relax. I can participate in my group easily.'

'One person's efforts can make a difference.'

'This drama technique is completely different from any other workshop – it's very interesting and useful for me.'

'I have the confidence to face group work after participating in this project.'

LIMITATIONS

- Intervention limited in this case

- Low participation despite direct feedback to students from various discipline specific lecturers that problems relating to teamwork are impacting negatively on assessment

  - Lack of self-awareness or resistance?

- Most of the students who participated were positive and enthusiastic towards learning about group work (i.e. Didn't reach the target group)

IMPLICATIONS

How to make it work?

- Drama workshops need to be culturally, linguistically and motivationally diverse

- Intervention more likely to be effective if entire student cohort participated

- Voluntary basis not enough - need to integrate it with foundation programme (as part of a module)

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