Balancing between the notions of quality and attraction in teaching arts management

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Abstract

Today’s reality around the system of Higher Education revolves around the discourse of instrumentalization of education, turning schools into entrepreneurial ventures (Dragićević Šešić and Jestrović, 2017), and a wider social context primarily influenced by capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009). This academic context positions a teacher/lecturer under more pressure than ever. McGregor’s Theory Y (1960) that is focusing on the trust in the dynamic student-teacher relationship becomes often substituted with the consumer-provider relationship. This article is discussing about the challenges the new context brings to the teaching of arts management on the undergraduate academic level. The author is presenting some of the pedagogical case studies from his “Sport Billy” teaching suitcase, discussing the use of different theatre practices, such as - site-specific theatre, radio drama and psychodrama as methods in teaching arts management. He is presenting three examples of different ways of constructing a space of understanding between students and teachers in the outcome-based teaching and learning environment, and tools that teachers can use to navigate through that environment.

Key words: higher education realm, arts management, Theory Y, student-teacher relationship

Introduction: Constructing the space of trust between the students and teachers

From the perspective of today’s reality around the system of Higher Education (HE) - the discourse of instrumentalization of education turning schools into entrepreneurial ventures (Dragićević Šešić and Jestrović, 2017: 69), difficult to avoid in wider social context primarily influenced by capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), being a teacher in HE seems like a position under more pressure than ever. First of all, because teaching is not intended to be the only role academics perform within the system.

An academic is evaluated on the basis of four major roles – teaching (in the UK context evaluated through the Teaching Excellence Framework – TEF and the membership status in the Higher Education Academy); research (evaluated through the Research
Excellence framework – REF); outreach and connection with the industry and the community (professional, consultancy and community engagement projects as well as the media exposure) and the “service to the University” – performance of various administrative tasks that the institution requires. In certain environments, because of the pressures of the evaluation criteria for academics (in the UK context, REF is perceived as more important than TEF), teaching slowly became a secondary to research and other grant-seeking activities such as consultancy and Research and Development contributions to the developments of entrepreneurial or business initiatives such as hubs and incubators within academia (Heinsius, 2018) 2. Paradoxically, looking at the revenue streams of UK Universities (Baker, 2017), with less public funding every year for the HE sector, for number of them more income still comes from the student fees than from the research grants, despite their research-centered culture.

If we actually do put the students and academics in the center of the processes within the academia (not only in theory but also in practice), and look at them through the lens of McGregor’s Theory Y, it is important that we insist on the positivist approach to the organizational climate students and teachers create. That would mean to stand behind of Theory Y (McGregor, 1960) and as a starting position have the trust in this dynamic student-teacher relationship, as well as belief that students are there because they want to learn something and teachers are there because they want to be part of this learning and teaching process. We should find a way to develop the space where both students and teachers would find useful to participate in it (Biggs and Tang, 2011). The anxiety that I felt at certain stages of my development as a teacher/lecturer were connected with the understanding of the process of construction of this space – which elements influence it, what can I do as an educator, which tools I can use, what can students do and which approaches can they have when engaging with this space. And in the center of this transformative reflection process for academics (Biggs and Tang, 2011: 45) is the realization that this space operates on mutual trust.

2 One of the examples is “i2 media research” Ltd. founded in 2002 as “the expert consumer insight and user experience research and strategy consultancy based at Goldsmiths University of London, delivering rigorous research and innovation to business” (www.i2mediaresearch.com). It is a spin off from the Goldsmiths’ Psychology Department, working with some of the most successful (new) media companies in the UK.
One of the aspects that adds pressure to this shared space, comes from the diversity of students, that is consequence of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Slaughter S. and Rhoades, 2009) and their different approaches to studying (Biggs and Tang, 2011: 5). This diversity, especially present in the so called “global cities” such as London, which was never before present on this scale, calls for multilayered methods of teaching within the framework of outcome-based teaching and learning (OBTL) (Biggs and Tang, 2011). This makes the organization of one teaching session, as well as a curation of a module outline a seriously complex task. This construction or curation process consists of number of segments that point to the primary and some secondary learning outcome(s), using diverse teaching methods. In the background of this whole process is the mutual understanding that both students and teachers are trying to shift from the quantitative approach to learning and teaching as the main focus (Cole, 1990).

Trying to go beyond the two “blame models” of teaching - blaming teachers or students (Biggs and Tang, 2011: 16), we need to do whatever is needed to get as many students as possible achieving the learning outcomes.

**Flexibility and diversity in teaching**

Although many teachers wish for an intrinsic motivation and enthusiastic approach from students from the very beginning of their joint work, that happens very rarely. Together with students, teachers/lecturers need to find ways to provide the spaces for that motivation to emerge, taking into consideration variety of stories that students are bringing with them. From the student perspective, finding their own value from the process of learning has number of obstacles. One of the first ones is the wider context of the education as an industry, or as Gerald Raunig calls it – “factories of knowledge” in the context of “industries of creativity” (Raunig, 2013), with the inevitable consequence of the consumer/provider relationship projected on students and teachers.

As one of the main preconditions for the construction of this joint space, a point needs to be reached where the energy between the student cohort and the teacher/lecturer

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3 This was one of the main underlining reasons for the largest strike in the UK HE system in the last few decades, in February 2018. What started the strike was the attempt to change the pensions scheme for the academics working in the UK HE system, but it was clear to both students and the lecturers that were supporting the strike, that this was part of a much larger issue of the extreme marketisation of HE.
passes that obstacle, focusing on the importance of the value of this process beyond the prevailing social context. Mark Fisher saw this context as a combination of “reflexive impotence”, a self-fulfilling prophecy, “where you know things are bad, but you also know you can’t do anything about it,” and ”depressive hedonia” – “an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure” (Fisher, 2009: 21). From there on, this learning and teaching journey towards the value creation can include some immediately applicable “how to” outcomes; mid-term outcomes that are not immediately reachable; and the long-term outcomes that call for the mutual trust in the process that has certain outcomes that will prove to be valuable at some point in the future. If all three types of outcomes are clearly communicated, according to the expectancy-value theory of motivation (Feather, 1982), the joint space that takes teacher/lecturer and students towards the learning outcomes becomes a reality.

When that space is constructed, teachers need to know how to navigate it. It takes some time and transformative reflection process to develop some kind of “teaching inventory” (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999), and in the further segment of this essay, I will be discussing some elements of the inventory I used in my own teaching practice as an arts management lecturer on the undergraduate level of studies. These tools were being developed in a constant cyclic process starting from the definition of an issue/problem, choice of a potentially adequate tool that can be used, application of that tool, evaluation of results and feedback, and then the redesign of the tool that is at the end of the process stored in the inventory.

“Sport Billy”: deconstructing one possible teaching inventory

In 1979, a company called “Filmation Associates” from California, developed an animated television cartoon called “Sport Billy”. It was a story about a young boy called Sport Billy from the planet Olympus, populated by athletic god-like beings. Billy’s power comes from his magic size-changing gym bag, that produces different tools that he needs along the way, while he battles the evil Queen Vanda and her henchman Sipe. Using action learning as an application of action research (Kember and Kelly, 1993), this symbol of the Sport Billy magic bag full of appropriate tools was a framework I decided to take for my own teaching inventory. This bag slowly started to get filled with tools that were not applied based only on some idea of comfort that as a teacher I
felt about them, but mostly based on how appropriate they were in the context of the learning outcomes and the group of students I worked with.

There are number of methods and approaches that are used in different art forms that have the potential to be tested and used as teaching methods. Since I am also educated in theatre studies and work as a theatre producer, the parallels between the theatre methods and pedagogy were inevitable. I will present here three “Sport Billy” cases that reflect this approach.

#SportBillyItem1: Reading in the Dark

This particular one is inspired by the culture of listening of radio dramas in the dark, creating an atmosphere where the sense of hearing is slowly being emphasized more than other senses, and the group gets united into a temporary community bonded through the identity of sound. I tested this method as a way of approaching the issue of motivation of students to read the required readings for the session, which in that context almost no one was reading.

The unexpected segment of the class, where I was reading in the dark a required text to students, connected most of us in that space to our first childhood reading experiences. To some of the students this was an explicit memory, while some had it as an implicit context for their overall reaction. It also confronted all of us, teacher/lecturer and students, with our own relationship with the notions of patience and focused attention. A short, effective and provocative event/experience was created, that was at the same time a rational and emotional statement. None of the students left from that short session without some relation to it, and it became an internal reference point in the space that we were creating together. Patience as a concept became a subversion in the times of instant gratification.

#SportBillyItem2: Building the Common Space Through Psychodrama

The reality of a significantly diverse student cohort often proves to be a challenge for the organization of the structure that will help most of them achieve the learning
outcomes. At the beginning of this journey, most of the students feel that their anxieties, confusions, insecurities, angers, fears are only their own, and they have difficulties opening up to the Others in this new space. The potential solution for this challenge is to work on the issues they share as members of different identity frameworks (i.e. generation, interests, experiences), questions they share as the members of this new community/cohoot, while respecting and nurturing the positive values of their differences.

Psychodrama was chosen as a potential opening up tool because of its proven transformative potentials and a democratic process connected with the techniques of participative theatre and psychotherapy methods (Carnabucci, 2014). Under the guidance of a licensed psychodramatist, and students split into smaller groups, teacher is an equal participant of the circle of trust. Prior to the sessions, together with the psychodramatist, I defined the main questions that will be important for the creation of the joint space with that particular cohort of students. Participants in the process are acting out the scenes connected with their lives, that are coming from the main questions we defined, such as – pressures and expectations from their family; insecurities around the artists with which they will be working with. Through this process that is happening in two sessions per week for every group, students explore and reflect on their problems in the group, where group members function as kind of therapeutic agents for one another.

The last stage of this process is happening after the return from the space of psychodrama process to the usual teaching space. It is important to connect the often deep and emotional, but most of the times empowering experience from the psychodrama sessions, with the space of learning and its learning outcomes.

#SportBillyItem3: Site Specific Theatre as a Method

One of the main aspects of the education in the field of arts management is connected with the project management as the underlining concept that the students will be applying in their professional practice. The first phase of the project management is research and exploration phase that needs to be done as a precondition for a good project
idea and later – the construction of the project. The issue here was that students found the conventional teaching on the research process not interesting, since they couldn’t understand the connection and usefulness of it. Potential answer was again found in the theatre practice - I was using this approach extensively from the beginning of my teaching career (Brkić, 2011) widening typical research horizons offered to students, helping them in developing self and peer-learning processes linked to context understanding and further socio-political reflection.

Site specific theatre is a theatre practice that connects in a deeper way with the place where it is performed – its memory, aesthetics, social construct, architecture, artefacts (Pearson, 2010). All of these aspects can be explored, and the performance itself can be a construct that comes out from the explorations of these dimensions of the space. Students are placed in a physical space (i.e. backyard of a building) in groups, and placed in the environment that they need to research, using certain methodologies given to them as options they could use. At the end of the research process, they have some time to construct an idea for a project based on the research findings from the space. After the presentation of their ideas, we all reflect on the process and how can this as a method be transferred in their professional practice as arts managers, when they end up in the situation of having to develop an arts project with a diverse group of people.

**Sustaining the focus**

What I tried to present in this reflective essay is the importance of the understanding of the wider context of the higher education system in a certain social environment, that as such prevents teachers to actively contribute to a critically engaged learning process: enabling students to actively participate in a learning process through research and specific classroom practices, not only would benefit students and teachers creating mutual trust relations, but also might help in bringing “cutting-edge ideas to academic discourse, that would endorse public debate and critical thinking by providing opportunities to remix the knowledge produced through different societal actors in the public sector and civil society” (Dragićević Sesić and Jestrović, 2017: 70).

At the same time, I have tried to show a few examples of different ways of constructing a space of understanding between students and teachers in the outcome-based teaching
and learning environment, and tools that teachers can use to navigate through that environment. I also gave three examples of tools that are responding to this context. As a final stage in this whole pedagogical process is a certain level of self-management – it is important to always have the learning objectives in focus, connecting them with the needs and ideas of understanding of the particular group of students.

References


Balansiranje između pojmova kvaliteta i atrakcije u nastavi menadžmenta u umetnosti

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Realnost današnje situacije u kojoj se nalazi system visokog obrazovanja vezana je za diskurs instrumentalizacije obrazovanja koji preobražava škole u preduzetničke poduhvate (Dragićević Šešić and Jestrović, 2017), kao i širi društveni kontekst koji je primarno pod uticajem kapitalističkog realizma (Fisher, 2009). Ovaj kontekst stavlja nastavnika/predavača u poziciju u kojoj se oseća pod pritiskom većim nego ikada ranije. McGregor se u svojoj Teoriji Y (1960) fokusira na poverenje u dinamičan odnos student-predavač, međutim u novom kontekstu ovaj odnos se najčešće menja odnosom konzument-producent. Ovaj članak bavi se izazovima koji novi kontekst donosi za nastavu menadžmenta u umetnosti na nivou osnovnih akademskih studija. Autor predstavlja nekoliko pedagoških studija slučaja iz njegove „Sport Bili“ predavačke torbe u nastavi menadžmenta u umetnosti, koje su vezane za korišćenje različitih pozorišnih praksi, kao što su sajt-specifik teatar, radio drama i psihodrama. Predstavljena su tri primera kroz koje se vidi kako se na različite načine može konstruisati prostor razumevanja između studenata i nastavnika/predavača u kontekstu sredine fokusirane na nastavu i učenje okrenuto rezultatima, a zanemarujući proces.

Ključne reči: oblast visokog obrazovanja, menadžment u umetnosti, Teorija Y, odnos studenta i predavača