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Evans, Sarah , Pacievich, Caroline, Donadel, Marcia and Sant Obiols, Edda  (2022) Voices : drama and the development of speaking and acting in public spaces. In: International Perspectives in Drama and Citizenship Education : Acting Globally. Routledge Research in Education . Routledge, pp. 141-150. ISBN 9780367524876 (hardback); 9781003058144 (ebook)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058144-14>

Publisher: Routledge

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in International Perspectives on Drama and Citizenship Education: Acting Globally on 5th November 2021, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9780367524876>

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Voices: drama and the development of speaking and acting in public spaces

Sarah Evans, Caroline Pacievich, Marcia Donadel, and Edda Sant

For decades, assumptions that children and young people are disengaged in politics have prompted governments worldwide to push the question of 'voice' to the core of their citizenship educational agendas (e.g. Batsleer, 2013; Fielding, 2007). Following advice from political scientists Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), policymakers and practitioners have attempted to create spaces where all citizens' voices could be "clear, loud and equal (...) so that the democratic ideal of equal responsiveness to the preferences and interests of all is not violated" (p. 509). Citizenship education practices have been orientated towards giving students opportunities to learn how to make their voices clear and loud, so that they are heard (Sloam, 2013). As such, voice has become synonymous with speaking and acting in public spaces in 'effective' ways.

Despite the practical success of 'voice' perspectives, many academics consider the question of voice to be highly problematic. 'Voice experiences' (such as youth, class, and student councils), have been seen as spaces of governability where children and young people learn how to self-regulate their messages and forms of participation (Raby, 2012). For instance, by participating in experiences where young people are expected to 'gain a voice', they learn that they do not yet have a voice, that there are 'right' and 'wrong' forms of participation/talking, and that participation/talking is an individualistic practice (Batsleer, 2013). Similarly, 'voices' have been seen as pedagogical tools through which power hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Capturing voices outside power – in other words, empowerment via voice – is just not possible and rather, what happens is that young people implicitly learn that some voices are more important than others.

This chapter revisits the question of voice, as an interface of speaking and acting in public spaces, whilst taking these critiques into account. We will ask: firstly, what is (and could be) the relationship between speaking/acting in public spaces or, more precisely, what is the relationship between speech and performance? And secondly, how can we build more inclusive conversations? Drawing on the seminal work of dramaturge and social activist, Augusto Boal in connection with the ideas of Arthur Lessac's voice pedagogy, the chapter will then engage with discussions on drama to reconceptualise 'voice' in terms of a physical and abstract presence within socio-political discourses. The chapter will conclude with an examination of how, through 'voice work', embodied social and ideological forces can be explored, identified, and contextualized.

Voice and performance

Critiques of voice pedagogies have very often assumed that, when young people act in certain ways, they interiorise certain voices. Participating, for instance in school or youth councils, is seen as a way for young people to become 'subjects' of the existing political regime or, as Foucault (1982) phrases it, "subject to someone else by control and dependence" (p. 781). In this account, when young people act in these spaces, they interiorise (embody) certain ways of acting/speaking (O'Loughlin, 2006). Their voice is no longer *their* voice: in their attempt to gain a clear and loud voice that makes them equal to others, they act on the voice of others and thus become subordinated to their powers. Learning how to make their voices clear and loud so they are heard, does not make young people more equal as Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) claim, but dependent on and controlled by the rules of the existing regime.

Tentatively, we question whether 'voice', as encountered in citizenship education, can be reconceptualised within the framework of performative drama. Existing critiques of voice pedagogies assume that voices will be raised/gained in a particular place, through a particular tone, and to a particular audience. This voice has a script that needs to be followed. In this respect, it is easy to see why academics have raised their concerns about the underlying message young people learn through this performative act. The fact that these acts are 'performances' are therefore a matter of concern, as it signals that someone else has written the script and young people are just 'acting' it.

However, our own research (Sant & Davies, 2018) points towards a more nuanced and ambivalent interpretation of the question of voice/performance. In our work with youth councils, we found that young people themselves felt that speaking-acts were performative practices and were consciously taking their 'acting' role. These performative practices, as Judith Butler (1997) has largely argued, operated in two different ways. On one hand, the young people could have interiorized the voices of powerful Others and become dependent on existing political regimes. But simultaneously, the young people were given opportunities to perform in scenarios where they could actually free themselves from existing regimes, and perform insurrectionary acts that could challenge such regimes.

In recent history, we have seen young people performing these insurrectionary performative acts on a number of occasions. A well-known example is "A Rapist in Your Path" – a Chilean feminist performance piece protesting violence against women created by the feminist collective *Las Tesis*. The piece, written against misogyny and rape perpetrated by Chilean police forces, rapidly became a feminist anthem sung by thousands of women in more than 40

countries. The piece escaped participatory scripts – its tone, scenery and audience were closer to performance and drama than to formal politics. And yet, *A Rapist in Your Path* was embodied by thousands of women whose voices unexpectedly entered the political arena, including the most formal Parliaments.

We wonder: if young people themselves are aware of the performative nature of voice pedagogies, could educators approach speaking/acting in public spaces as a performative practice? What can we learn from what *A Rapist in Your Path* tells us about the way we approach, and alternative ways we could approach, the education of active citizenship and citizenship overall? How can citizenship education embrace (rather than avoid/discard) its performative nature to facilitate young people's voices (regardless of clarity and loudness) being heard?

Inclusive conversations

Let us use another example to move to the second question we would like to pose to drama colleagues. In 2015 and 2016, thousands of high school students in Brazil occupied the buildings of their schools, fighting: against the precarious conditions of study, for improvements in teaching, and for freedom and autonomy in their educational trajectory, in addition to other specific demands. They recreated relationships and hierarchies, forging a milestone in the history of student activism in Brazil (Seffner, 2017).

These young people transformed schools into radicalized *Agoras*, or public spaces for democratic debate. They created an economy based on exchanges, solidarity, and equal distribution. They shared a deep feeling of being at the service of the common good, and showed the desire to understand democracy and its tensions between justice and dissent. Organized in circles and assemblies, they revolutionized the lessons taught by their school from a very young age: to respect others' opinions, to create consensus and follow it, to register agreements, to fight prejudice and discrimination, to select which elements of the adult world should be heard and which ones to reject, and to resist their opponents. Therefore, instead of just listening to classes on participation, citizenship, public policies and rights, young people had daily experiences of political action. For that, they consulted their closest teachers (or some adults they trusted) who showed solidarity and tried to learn from the experiences of previous student movements, such as the 2013 June protests in Brazil, or *los pingüinos*, in Chile.

A traditional perspective, but one still reproduced in the literature on political education, says that the role of education is to show young people that in the past people were agents of history and that change (for better or for worse) could happen through people's decisions and actions.

The, perhaps naive, belief was that “talking about” citizenship actions or demonstrating how people have been protagonists in history, previously would be enough for young people to become active and responsible citizens. However, perhaps this relationship is not so direct precisely because it is based on a one-way, transmissive path. Research illustrates that teachers who promote affectionate relationships with students, who are politically committed, and who offer rigorous and thought-provoking classes, are often recognized as references among young people and the community (Pacievitch, 2014; Altamirano & Pagès, 2018). Knowledge needs to work side by side with opportunities to exercise civic actions in a public space (Levy, 2018; Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). How can we learn from such experiences?

Paulo Freire may offer a clue, by valuing teachers and students talking to each other, which requires both the courage to raise one's voice whilst respectfully listening, especially in disagreement (Freire, 1996). This tension, sometimes silent, between listening and speaking is also essential to assert the Freirean idea that teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating conditions for it to be built, and for it to be emancipatory. Recent studies demonstrate the importance of the commitment from teachers to the political, citizen and civic education of students, due to the intimate relationship between democratic values and the selection of content (Coelho & Saldanha, 2019). The focus should be on diversity, cultural plurality (Souza, 2019), affections and sensitivities (Galzerani, 2012), tolerance and the possibilities for political action by young people from public schools (Amézola, 2018), and the teachers themselves (Pacievitch & Cerri, 2016). It is necessary to trouble and radicalise the legislation that requires education for ethnic-racial relations (Oliveira & Meinerz, 2019), and to criticise the Eurocentric and white view within literature on education for citizenship that erases perspectives of: indigenous peoples, traditional communities, black people, people with disabilities, and indeed of young people from public schools themselves (Menezes et al, 2019).

Thus, it is a pertinent matter of promoting meetings at the *Agora-school* that move away from traditional perspectives on citizenship and politics built on whiteness and colonialist patriarchy. Therefore, to discuss how drama education can help us reconstruct our dialogues, two movements are important. The first is to recognise that most models of civic participation we have are designed by and for white men (Johnson, 2019). Looking at political education through the whiteness bias highlights the different types of privileges, including symbolic ones, that white people enjoy, precisely because their standard is considered to be ‘normal’ and non-racialized, with the ‘other’ always taken as a subject of exception (Cardoso, 2010). The second is the listening position regarding social and youth activism that work to revolutionise public school. As in the occupation of high schools, more than determining paths, the intention is to

learn from social movements that fight all types of exploitation and injustice (Gomes, 2017; hooks, 2013). How can discussions about drama education help us build these dialogues?

A Dramaturgical Response on performance

Addressing the first proposition set out above: 'How can citizenship education embrace (rather than avoid/discard) its performative nature to facilitate young people's voices (regardless of clarity and loudness) being heard?', evokes Augusto Boal's practice of Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979): a theatrical tool wherein participants are presented with a scene of oppression or injustice that they stop and change. Boal explained this gives participants the power to say:

'OK, that's the way things are but not the way things should be, and now I'm going to create an image of how I want the world to be.' . . . This is empowering. We have changed the image in the fiction of a theatre but we are not fiction. *We are in rehearsal for the real world...* (Boal, 1996, 49, emphasis added)

Embracing performance-based practices such as Forum Theatre in citizenship education, the power to decide what is said, and by whom, is given over to young people in their roles as 'spec-actors' (Boal, 1979). In disregarding performance-based practices, citizenship education would deny possibilities in enabling young people to 'act out' their experiences and work through them by creative means. Additionally, we may begin to redress issues around hierarchical power structures and legitimacy of 'voice' in citizenship education if it is willing to embrace its performative nature through means such as this.

The power of dramatic improvisation within political engagement is in its ability to allow us to act and react to situations that demand a political response, challenging binary notions of 'right and wrong' voices in this context. This also widens the parameters for what we may consider 'improvisation' to be within this context of reaction. Working this way is not based on scripted, 'agreed upon' messages – it moves with the participants involved (such as seen in the spatio-temporal momentum of *A Rapist in Your Path*). Coupled with this, 'voice' is reconceptualised to open broadened possibilities. Moving away from traditional understandings of voice and improvisation allows new possibilities in how we can conceptualise each, and their alternative uses in citizenship education. 'Voice' can be conceptualised in diverse ways, not just in a literal vocalization. Participating may be considered as 'giving voice to', highlighting a material (i.e. non-discursive) component to the argument for dramatic improvisation as a tool for citizenship education; what performance can offer in terms of agency, is a 'making-up' of symbolic (and actual) representation and power of voice. By allowing for a material 'taking-up' of space and

time, young people can literally make their voices heard by being physically present and physically acting. This physical engagement gives rise to further powerful material elements – affective ones. Thus, this could be a response to the questions raised above around possibilities for educators to recognise the pedagogic properties of speaking/acting in public spaces, and how *A Rapist in Your Path* might help inform alternative approaches to active acts of citizenship.

The ontological concept of affect (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) also troubles unidirectional understandings of power that assume that speaking/acting in public is either empowering or disempowering. Affect is the constant process of affecting and being affected by others and our environment. As affect-driven performance is not a response that has been honed and curated with a specific intent, the power of it comes from its authenticity and potential to affect others. The example of *A Rapist in Your Path* provides a striking demonstration of how voices performing together can cause a global movement spurred by an affective response (as indeed many of the contributors and founders of the movement express feeling as they sing). In this example, participants took the song and moved it to different contexts – we might even say the song moved with them – where it became a collective and individual movement of political voice performance. What this suggests to citizenship educators, is that voice has the power to shift with individuals' need to confront issues in different contexts. In embracing this malleability, citizenship educators can teach young people how momentum gathers in a movement when voices are used in this way. Through this we may begin to resolve issues highlighted above around how young people encounter hierarchical power structures of 'voice' in citizenship education (i.e. whose is 'right' and whose is 'wrong'). If the performance moves with the participants affectively, then the problems of interiorization are redressed.

A possible response through body and voice work

The second question interrogates how drama education may help build inclusive dialogues, linking learning from social movements and anti-oppressive pedagogies. A point of view on this interaction emerges from the practice of body and voice pedagogic principles. Art-based and bodily pedagogies can facilitate that, in a world of colonialist patriarchy, all young people find their unique way of being and interacting with the world. Ideological forces manifest through bodily 'texts', which can be described as "how social identities are signalled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement" (Desmond, 1993, p. 34). They form discourses, embedded in each individual's bodily and vocal manifestation, since "individuals present and manage their bodies in accordance with shared vocabularies of body-idiom that are not individually controlled but hierarchically set and symbolically charged" (Coupland & Gwyn, 2003,

p. 2). Therefore, such symbolic discourses may either disguise or hide forms of oppression. In contrast, Boal (2006) describes the aesthetics of the oppressed as an Art, a 'project about helping the oppressed to discover Art *by discovering their art and, in the act, discovering themselves*; to discover the world, *by discovering their world and, in the act, discovering themselves*' (original emphasis, 39). Art is potentially free from such symbolic constraints. Art offers ways of avoiding the ideological script. Being capable of discovering the potency of one's own artistic expression potentially strengthens young peoples' voices, beginning from their own individual form of manifestation in the world, and later enabling social awareness and critical thinking in an aesthetic manner.

Boal further argues that, while exercising "activities which are usually denied them, thus expanding their expressive and perceptive possibilities" (Boal, 2006, p. 18), subjects may aggregate the *feel* and knowledge of the senses as part of the thinking process resonating in each individual's form of engaging in Art and understanding reality. Perception is considered as the source and enabler of both knowledge and questioning, integrating the "symbolic language of the word and the *signalétique* language of the senses" (Boal 2006, p. 36). This comprehends transitions from the concrete embodied knowledge to the abstract wider reality, as a pathway from the individual to a sense of the collective.

The link with the Lessac Kinesensic Training enables us to examine how, through voice work, embodied social and ideological forces can be explored, identified, and contextualized for young people's further reaction to oppression and encouragement to social engagement. The Lessac Work (Lessac, 1990, 1997), grounded on principles that dialogue with the *signalétique* and symbolic thinking integration detailed by Boal, may be a channel for exposing underlying bodily discourses of oppression. The Lessac Kinesensic Training is "an intrinsic sensing process where energy qualities are physically felt and perceived, then tuned and used for creative expression" (Lessac, 1997, p. 3). Its purpose is founded on embodied experience as a way of knowing, and links it to the field of somatics, which considers the body or "soma as [the] centre of knowledge production, recognized as integrated and dynamic" (Hanna, 1976, p. 31). The sensory information expands the capacity to know and interfere. Only through conscious interrelation of these modes of knowing may a broader awareness of reality take place. The Lessac Work is an embodied pedagogy that deeply explores sensory knowledge from the individual's own internal environment. It embraces interculturality and allows diverse bodies to find personal artistic expression and awareness of their own functioning in creative processes.

Boal (2006) argues that aesthetic manipulation by dominant ideologies happens constantly and in different ways. While the coexistence of numerous aesthetics of equal value are a reality, they must become visible to gain force. This intertwined approach may enable young people to discover expressiveness considering the singularities of each aesthetic structure, while creating a broader awareness that includes transforming it into social acts. This reveals and contextualizes the speeches that are manifested in the body and allows dominant discourses to be identified, since it puts the learner in touch with his or her underlying bodily discourse expressed through usually ignored or 'normalized' dominant ideologies, oppressing them and undermining expressiveness. This is a systematic experience of political action and starts by the listening of their own bodily discourse to guide and interfere in the individual's social participation. It is a possibility of aesthetic action that may transform channels of oppression.

Conclusion

Citizenship education embracing its performative nature in the ways explored above may enable alternatives for 'voice' and 'act' within a pedagogy for active citizenship. Working through affective, performance-based pedagogic methods enables a constant relationship between what happens and exploring why. Re/acting in these ways lessens issues of interiorization, as affective dramatic improvisation is truer to individuals' experiences. Meanwhile, bodily pedagogies offer conditions to recreate situations which attempt to escape symbolic regimes of oppression. By practising how to listen to their own bodies, students can learn to recognise their own voice; and by publically performing those voices, citizenship education can help to destabilise oppressive hierarchies and their aesthetic expressions.

Essentially, we are suggesting that citizenship educators can continue to facilitate young people accessing public spaces where they can explore embodiments of powerful voice acts. From this perspective, the performative nature of voice pedagogies and other acts of public citizenship will not constrain students' subjectivities. Rather, events may arise unpredictably, in responsive ways, and may not be restricted to traditional notions of 'performance' or 'voice'. The impetus here being for educators to foster events in these spaces as they happen to encourage future expressions, without imparting their own authority to these spaces. Though performances may be created with an educator, the voices heard are those of the students, who bring their own experiences and understandings to be explored through performance. Citizenship educators can then help students to revise and reflect how they experienced interaction with the public. Our suggestion is for citizenship educators to create generative, performance-based, sites for active citizenship that allow young people to develop authentic responses to events outside of the

classroom. Linking back to the work of Boal, this is how performance in citizenship education could be a working-through of issues as 'a rehearsal for the real world'.

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4,341 words