This Teaching Cycle of the PGCTHE portfolio has been submitted to CADAIR with the permission of the author detailed above. It is to be used as a resource for future PGCTHE candidates and other staff as part of their professional development at Aberystwyth University. If you wish to cite this work, please contact the author. Contact details can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/directory/.
Teaching Cycle 2:

'Laboratory workshops'

and framing concepts

Module overview and account of issue

This intervention focused on the workshop element of the module TP21420 Applied Theatre, outlined in greater detail above. Briefly, the second-year 20-credit module offers an introduction to the practical and theoretical discourse of applied theatre practice, and is assessed through combination of formal written work (an essay of 2500 words) and a practical presentation (a 15 minute 'fragment' of a possible applied theatre project).

Though my first teaching cycle had focused primarily on the restructured lecture material, I had become conscious - primarily through informal feedback from students at the end of the module – that the relationship between the practical and theory elements of the module was unclear. Though the practical workshops were seen as enjoyable and provided useful skills training, the link to the theoretical and philosophical material contained within lectures did not seem immediately apparent.

My concerns were, accordingly:

- that the perceived division between practical and theoretical work might reflect a wider challenge within the discourse of theatre and performance studies: the difficulties of combining critical reflective understanding with 'professional craft knowledge (Maxwell2001, 104).

- that the lack of a clear or useful relationship between theoretical and practical elements of the module might lead to students 'partitioning' their knowledge when faced with the assessment tasks - that is, applying lecture material to the essay task,
and reserving embodied knowledge gleaned from the practical workshops for the fragment presentation (and vice versa).

- that it was particularly important that the students engaged with the question of ethics in applied theatre practice (which often works with marginalized groups, or seeks to make direct interventions within communities) even if, for practical/legal/ethical reasons, they could not at this level directly engage with, for example, young adults within the justice system.

- that, although the module would later be revised to allow for more contact hours, I was still restricted to one hour of practical work each week.

A plan highlighting proposed teaching practice, intended outcomes and methods of evaluation

Informed by the notion that ‘learners tend to discover that what is not clear initially often becomes clear over time’ (Land et al, 2006, p. 59), I sought to reinforce that pattern of awareness by structuring the workshop element of the module in a way in which consciously recognized an initial uncertainty - and characterized following sessions as the means through which we – instructor and students - might together seek possible answers.

As such, the teaching intervention was also intended to guide students towards their own active analytical practice, derived from both their own independent reading and their practical experiences within the workshop. In doing so, the intervention sought to develop a student-centred understanding of the issues and concepts at stake within the course material which might also avoid some of the more common pitfalls of group work identified by Race (2001, p. 163-66) - notably that a facilitator might become too controlling or didactic. Accordingly, this interventions emphasis on process over fixed outcome was intended to create opportunities in which group members might learn from their own experiences, and develop awareness of their own understanding and opinion of the issues at stake (as opposed to merely repeating the ‘received’ opinions provided through textual sources and professional practitioners introduced on the module).
Accordingly, I identified three key questions which would be presented to the students as focal points of query for practical 'laboratory' explorations. These questions would be explored over six weeks, with each question providing the conceptual frame for two weeks of activity. In turn, these questions were explicitly linked to the overarching theoretical concerns of the lecture material in that period.

The process would primarily be evaluated through a questionnaire circulated after the initial six-week cycle (see appendix D).

**Practice and interim modification**

In practice, this intervention involved the following:

- the workshops were introduced from the outset of the module as exploratory 'theatre lab' sessions in which we would *explore and then discuss* various key concepts through games, and exercises derived from the work of different practitioners on the module

- the relevant question was outlined at the beginning of each session, reminding students of the work undertaken in previous sessions, and any discussions we had had during lectures

- at the end of each two week cycle, the students were split into small groups to discuss possible responses to the question, before feeding back into a general session

The three questions posed were:

1. If applied theatre wants to 'work some change in the world', what responsibility - if any - do we have to the material and people we address?

2. What does participation look like?

3. How do we make decisions as groups?

During the course of the workshops, I became sharply conscious that the particular selection (and design) of games and exercises were key to the success of this process. A particular
effort was made to locate the students’ own experiences and responses within the exercises chosen. For example:

- a character-creation exercise in week one informed by Angelo and Cross’ discussion of ‘everyday ethical dilemmas’ as a means to encourage students to ‘identify, clarify and connect their [own] values’ (1993, p. 271). This exercise made use of a story from a local newspaper of alleged sexual discrimination in the workplace asked students to draw on their own experience of employment: had they been treated differently because they were young, or students, or because of their gender or race?

- a warm-up exercise focusing on memory and story-telling in week two led into an exercise which explored the use of personal memory in performance: how do we feel about other people (re)telling our stories? What care would we want others to extend to our own stories?

- an exploration of Boal’s image theatre techniques (see Boal, 1992) was used in weeks three and four to address the particular competencies which might be required of a participant: what abilities, both physical and mental, are required to collaborate in the production of even very simple stage tableau?

**Relevant data and feedback**

From a cohort of 56 students, 40 questionnaires were returned.

Asked if the role or purpose of the framing questions was clearly explained (i.e. as part of an exploratory ‘theatre lab’ or discussion space), 28 students respond ‘very clearly’. 12 students responded ‘reasonably clearly,’ and no responses were recorded for ‘no, I didn’t understand.’

Asked if the return to the framing questions was useful in developing an understanding of the concepts and issues involved, 25 students responded ‘yes, very useful’, with the remainder responding ‘reasonably useful.’

Asked if the workshop discussions were useful in supporting preparation for the assessment tasks, 22 students responded that the workshops had been ‘very useful’; 17 students responded that the workshops were ‘reasonably useful’ and one student responded that the workshops had not helped.
While the feedback from the direct question element of the questionnaire suggests a generally positive response, I would - on later reflection - recognize a certain bias within the survey design, in that two of the three tick-box options were couched to produce positive (very useful/reasonably useful) responses. However, the open questions at the end of the survey produced a more usefully critical student perspective, discussed below.

Evaluation of student learning experience

When asked to suggest improvements to the workshops, a significant number of students (8 of the 16 who offered suggestions) asked for 'longer workshops' and 'more practical time'. Though several students asked for 'more discussion', a larger number suggested less 'seminar activity', 'less talking and more putting ideas into action' and more 'practical theatre-making exercises.' Though the students appeared to find the use of theatre/laboratory-style workshops useful in supporting their grasp of the issues and concepts as stake (as well as generally supportive in developing assessment submissions) it was clear that there was the perception that discussion activities based on practice were - for a significant number of students - taking valuable time away from purely practical activity.

It also appeared that that the use of 'framing concepts' may require further explanation. One student, who had not found the workshops useful in preparing for the assessments, noted that I should

continue with the framing but just make references back to the assessment as I was unclear whether you were looking for examples of these - I'm unclear on what the criteria is.

Similarly, a student who had found the framing questions very useful nonetheless commented that I could improve the workshops by

highlight[ing] the fact you are using the questions as I didn't realize and also highlight your reasons for doing so.

However, two students gave the opinion that the framing questions were useful in addressing the density of the module, suggesting

I feel we learn the most that we can in such a short time
and

the framing questions really helped because it is a lot of information in such short spaces of time.

Observationally, I would note that the discussion sessions at the end of each two-week cycle appeared to engage a high proportion of students - and produced responses from students who had previously been unwilling or unable to speak in group situations.

**Implications for development of teaching practice**

1. Though the framing devices did support the link between practical and theoretical discourses within the module, a number of students felt that the discussion element was an unwelcome replacement for 'pure' practical activity. Part of this response, I feel, was due to the constraint of time on the sessions: as a group, we were always conscious that we had very little time to work with. In other words, the attempt to strengthen the links between practical and theoretical elements of a module might produce some resistance - precisely because, as suggested at the outset of this chapter in reference to Maxwell (2001), of a student perception of the 'natural' or even necessary divide between those discourses. On a related note, I am happy to report that in the year following this intervention - and as part of a department-wide review of provision - the practical time on the module was extended to two hours per week.

2. The use of framing devices presents particular demands for the design and leadership of workshops: though the presence of an explicit overarching structure of linked workshops might encourage students to 'gaze back across thresholds' to draw on previous experiences, it might also constrain instructors in their choice of activities. In my own practice, I felt slightly less able to deviate from lesson plans in order to respond to discoveries which arose in the workshop. In other works, structure brought with it a certain rigidity.

3. The use of discussion following practical exercises may yet prove useful in supporting students' attempts to synthesise knowledge from experience. To that end, it may be particularly important for workshop leaders to cultivate 'a third ear that listens not for what a student knows... but for the terms that shape a student's knowledge' (Land et al., 2006, p.200).