EAR – Erasmus Socratic and Dialectical Methodology

By Wendy Frost



Project Leaders:

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'The EAR project has been an uplifting experience. It was so encouraging to witness the potential of the methodology and underpinning rationale realised when placed into the hands of practitioners. The combination of tried and tested Drama techniques, the rigour and structure of the dialectic when combined with the enthusiasm and creativity of teachers to make challenging issues accessible to students results in high quality lessons and most importantly genuine learning and engagement of the students.'
(Lisa Bradbury)

Partners of This Project:

- Action Synergy, Greece (project lead)
- Centre of Higher Education in Theatre Studies, Greece
- University of Florence, Italy
- Mentortec, Portugal
- World University Service of the Mediterranean (WUSMED), Spain

The Aims and Objectives:

- Improving the teaching of social issues at school
- Linking everyday life with broader concepts (such as freedom, justice, respect, etc.) that promote active participation in a democratic society
- Introducing a method of teaching social issues that combines the mind and the heart

On Wednesday 15th September 2021 the PGCE Drama (Secondary) cohort at Wolverhampton University participated in a training workshop which focused on the Socratic and Dialectical Methodology, and how this can be utilised in the Drama classroom. This project has previously been co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Union, and even though this funding has expired, the leaders are passionate about developing future collaborations with schools, as well as continuing the research into the effectiveness of this project and the impact that it has on young people.

This project originated from the ideology that citizenship and democracy are the way to combat discrimination and develop a society where young people are active citizens who are critical thinkers, gaining agency over their lives and future. The key topics are explored through Drama pedagogies including Forum Theatre, Documentary Theatre or Participatory Theatre. This all takes place within a safe space to question, challenge, develop listening and reasoning skills, as well as cultivate respect and empathy for each other.

The dialectical method consists of four parts and generally requires the following:

1. **Participation and the appearance of equal status among those involved;**
2. **Starting the dialogue with commonly held views and ideas;**
3. **Dialogue that leads to critical reflection amongst the participants;**
4. **A connection of ideas brought up in discussion.**

This dialectical process hinges on the methodologies of Forum Theatre and the pedagogy of Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed. This process of

dialectics is the antipode of the teaching methodology that Freire refers to as 'banking' where the teacher deposits knowledge. Instead, participants are encouraged to question and challenge thinking and opinions (Freire 2005) and develop their sense of agency.

> *This project promotes the ideas that by not examining* ***commonly held truths and opinions****, people are like prisoners trying to escape a prison without consideration for the steel bars and barbed-wire fences that hinder their liberation. If this dialectical approach is to have an* ***emancipatory effect on our minds****, then questioning dominant ideas that oppress people must be the starting point for liberation.*
>
> *Another dimension of the dialectic is the need for* ***discussion to reach a point of critical reflection in the participants****. Critical reflection refers to the ability to consider, fairly equally, challenges or questions raised regarding a particular issue in order to achieve a better understanding.*
>
> (European Commission 2021)

What Does it Look Like in Practice?

The dialectical method consists of choosing a concept relevant to a social problem, identifying key individuals who are involved, their worldviews, and conflicts between these worldviews. An opinion is expressed (thesis) and a counter opinion (antithesis) is created, and a system based on these opinions is developed. These opinions are then presented to the groups who engage in a dialogue which leads to the development of a synthesised collective opinion. The process is repeated until all conflicts are resolved, or resources are exhausted, and a final opinion is produced (European Commission 2021).

During this day the PGCE Drama cohort practically explored how to utilise the project pedagogy to focus on fostering critical thinking within young people. This was framed through a variety of topics including 'fake news' and 'cancel culture', where questions were posed to the group who then displayed polarising opinions that needed further discussion and debate to investigate the wider context. We also discussed

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how this could relate to key texts and character decisions that would be relevant in a dramatic context; 'Lady Macbeth is the cause of the downfall of Macbeth!' Or 'Friar Lawrence is to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet!' A provocative statement can be introduced as the thesis which can be debated and explored. A line of continuum allows for polarisation that promotes movement, reflection, and debate. This allows students the space to listen and grants them permission to change opinions and beliefs based on the dialectics. This also further promotes a progression along the scale of competencies which could also be used or adapted for assessment purposes.

The Competencies

The project promotes a range of competencies which allow us to become active citizens. The basic levels include:

1. Constructive Interaction
2. Critical Thinking
3. Democratic Action
4. Socially Responsible Action

An example of some of the competencies:

	1	2	3	4
Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law	given a description of governance in two or more countries can order them as more or less democratic	can name the elements of democratic culture in any given country	can explain the difference for the individual between living in a functioning democracy and a state where democracy and rule of law are limited	can explain why democracy and the rule of law are important, and the challenges of maintaining them

	1	2	3	4
Respect	recognises examples of respect and disrespect	can describe examples of respect and disrespect	can describe examples of respect and disrespect	can explain why it is important to respect others' beliefs, way of life etc

	1	2	3	4
Civic-mindedness	can recognise examples of when someone is acting in the interest of the wider community and when not	can give examples of when someone is acting in the interest of the wider community and when not	can analyse the reasons why some people act in the interest of the wider community and others do not, and make suggestions for how to engage the disengaged	can explain why it is important for the individual and wider society to engage in community life and take responsibility

	1	2	3	4
Empathy	recognises examples of where another individual share their beliefs etc, and where they differ	can describe different beliefs, and explain which ones belong to them and why, and which ones belong to others and why	can provide concrete examples of cognitive perspective-taking, affective perspective-taking, and sympathy	can explain why it is important to develop empathy as a competence, and describe ways in which empathy can be promoted

Education for the Future

Projects of this kind, which integrate a variety of subject pedagogical contexts, are crucial at a time dominated by social media influences on young people, coupled with the examination driven pressurised culture dominating the school curriculum aimed only at 'teaching to the test' (Ball 2013: 28). This ability to question and critique the current state of the world is developing a new approach to learning and a new purpose of schooling,

[the] education of democratic citizens requires critical and political literacies, not just functional skills training that leads to technical literacy. Schools must be centrally concerned with literacies for active local and global citizenship, including a critical view of the world of work. (Ball 2013: 26)

Developing young humans who have the ability to critique, and debate, is central to the philosophical ideologies of Freire, and the theological understanding of the unfinishedness of the human condition, whereby we are seekers, on a journey of improvement and change (Webb, 2010). Education is not just a political and sociological rite of passage, it should be to promote a sense of hope for the future, for ourselves and others, a better world for all,

Thus 'the dream of a new society' is the dream of a society that is less ugly, less perverse, less evil, less discriminatory, less racist, less machista; a society without inhumanity, wickedness, alienation and degradation (Webb 2010: 331)

This world is not passive and accepting; but it is filled with love, trust and serenity. The world that Freire strived for also embraces outrage, indignation, and restlessness. This is the 'discourse of those who refuse to settle' (Freire, 2007, p. 26), whereby the human condition is progressive, reflective, active, and reactive. It promotes a hopeful world; optimistic, in spite of the reality in which it sits. This dialectical approach advocates for a powerful future filled with young people who are creative and empathetic, with voices for change, and an understanding of justice and social responsibility in a complex and challenging world. It is a Drama classroom and space for the future. ■



Feedback from PGCE Drama Group Members:

Niamh Cooper: *'It was eye opening when incorporating English with Drama together and the useful exercises demonstrated... it gave me the opportunity to expand on Drama exercises and how to develop them.'*

Liam Cotterill: *'The skills and exercises they provided will be excellent to bear in mind when going into placements as a way to involve the group and become comfortable around the students.'*

Amy O'Leary: *'I am confident I will use the things I have learnt to discuss a range of subjects and give young adults a chance to voice their opinions. Dialectics are important to Drama, as they provide a safe space within the classroom and enable us to consider apposing ideas at length.'*

Jodie McGregor: *'We got into some interesting class discussions throughout the session which was prompted by questions and the exploration of certain topics within the practical work we were doing. This was cleverly woven through the session which meant the discussions came about very naturally and felt as if they were a by-product of the work rather than the sole focus.*

In Drama we are very used to working practically in the classroom but the EAR day highlighted to me how these techniques can be used across a whole plethora of topics and subjects to get students thinking and delving deeper into what they are learning. It was nice to explore the techniques for ourselves, by doing this we were able to understand why and how they work. I came away with a bundle of exercises that will help me incorporate dialectics and fun into my Drama teaching moving forward.'

Joe Logan: *'I found the session very informative; it has enabled me to confidently explore dialectics with my students in a creative way that inspires and motivates them.'*

References

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