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Review

The DICE Consortium (2010), The DICE has been cast

Research findings and recommendations on educational theatre and drama (Vol. 1); Making a World of Difference. A DICE resource for practitioners on educational theatre and drama (Vol. 2). Belgrade et al.: European Commission [also @ <http://www.dramanetwork.eu>]

Almut Küppers

“Alea iacta est” is attributed to Julius Caesar and his decision to lead his army across the river Rubicon and by so doing engage in a long civil war against Pompey. “The dice is cast” the old-fashioned English version of the famous Latin saying means that a point of no return has been passed and something inevitable might happen soon. This is the figurative allusion the DICE Consortium has chosen for the presentation of their research results on educational drama and theatre and the question is whether or not the metaphor is really holding water. Is that the empirical breakthrough we have been waiting for to justify the work with creative drama and theatre in (foreign language) teaching in times of high-speed education in the wake of PISA and Co.? Before having a look at what and who is behind the acronym DICE, let’s open the floor to the big news first!

1 The DICE findings

Students who regularly participate in educational theatre and drama activities (as opposed to peers who had not been participating in any educational theatre and drama programmes)

- ... “are assessed more highly by their teachers in all aspects,
- feel more confident in reading and understanding tasks,
- feel more confident to communicate, (...)
- are better at problem solving,
- are better at coping with stress,
- are more tolerant towards both minorities and foreigners,

- are more active citizens,
- show more interest in voting at any level,
- show more interest in participating in public issues,
- are more empathetic: they have concerns for others,
- are more able to change perspectives,
- are more innovative and entrepreneurial,
- show more dedication towards their future and have more plans,
- are much more willing to participate in any genre of arts and culture (. . .),
- are more likely to be a central character in class,
- have a better sense of humour,
- feel better at home”. (DICE 2010/1: 6-7)

“This is too good to be true” was the comment of one of the European officials in the opening keynote in Brussels in October 2010 where the DICE-Consortium presented their findings¹. Later on he added “for once, this is good value for money” and in Europe-speak this can truly be interpreted as a mammoth compliment for an EU-funded project which will hopefully strongly influence educational policies and stakeholders in all fields of education in the near future. In that respect, the title of the publication “The DICE has been cast” reflects the great expectations the DICE-Consortium has attached to the consequences their research findings might and hopefully will have.

2 What is DICE?

The acronym DICE stands for *Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education*, an international Comenius project in the Lifelong Learning Programme which conducted research in twelve partner countries. The DICE Consortium (led by Adam Cziboly from the Káva Theatre in Education Company in Hungary) brought together universities from Poland (Gdansk), Czech Republic (Prague), Norway (Bergen), Portugal (TU Lisbon) and Theatre Companies from the Netherlands, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, Palestine and Serbia as well as a Culture and Arts Centre in Romania and a Centre for Children and Youth in Sweden to explore the effects of educational drama and theatre. In the first

¹ cf. Jan Truszczyński, the Director-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission, on Oct 25, 2010 in Brussels (http://www.dramanetwork.eu/jan_truszczy_ski.html)

volume of the twin publication, “The DICE has been cast”, a first summary of the findings of the large-scale investigation is presented along with an introductory chapter on the relevance of the project, its rationale, ethos, and hypothesis followed by a chapter of recommendations for policy makers and stakeholders and a last chapter with a collection of resources, namely a profile list of the project partners, a collection of further references like homepages related either to educational and cultural policy & advocacy or related to educational theatre and drama links. The first volume also contains a valuable list of “previous research studies in the field of educational theatre and drama” (p. 123) and will be very helpful for everybody who would like to dig deeper. The second DICE volume features the “World of Difference” and yet again, the chosen title cunningly mirrors its content: A diversity of a dozen educational theatre and drama projects from the research body is being presented as documented practice, two for each of the five (plus one) Lisbon key competences under investigation in this study. Whereas volume 1 of the DICE publication deals with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the project and presents the research findings, volume 2 is casting light on the research process, illuminates the teaching contexts and, thus, is an invitation to critically examine what was being done, why and to what avail. Volume 2 can, thus, also be regarded as a methodological answer to the blind spots of international assessment studies like PISA etc. which are entirely product-oriented with a focus on research outcome only.

3 What were the DICE objectives?

According to the official DICE website (www.dramanetwork.eu <<http://www.dramanetwork.eu>>) and with an explicit reference to PISA, TIMSS and other large-scale competence assessment programmes with a focus on literacy, science and numeracy, DICE measured competences rarely measured before such as communication in the mother tongue, civic competence, or social, intercultural and interpersonal competences. Moreover, learning to learn, cultural expression and entrepreneurship have been in the focus of the DICE research – all of these identified as so called “Lisbon Key Competences”:

“Key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation. Because they should be acquired by everyone, this Recommendation proposes a reference tool for the Member States to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning.”²

² The „Lisbon Key Competences“ refer to the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe on key competences for lifelong learning, published in 2006, cf. DICE (2010), vol. 1, p. 17-18

Among other aims, the DICE-Consortium set off to demonstrate with research embedded in a cross-cultural quantitative and qualitative design that educational theatre and drama is a powerful tool to improve these key competences (cf. DICE 2010/1: 5). Another DICE objective has been to “publish a Policy Paper, based on the research, and disseminate it among educational and cultural stakeholders at European, national, and local levels worldwide” (DICE 2010/1: 5). Moreover, a precious Education Resource has been created for schools, teachers, teacher trainers, educators, arts practitioners and researchers which is now freely accessible through the DICE homepage (www.dramanetwork.eu <<http://www.dramanetwork.eu>>). DICE has also compared theatre and drama activities in education in different countries and has helped to transfer know-how between drama cultures with the mobility of experts and expertise.

4 How was the DICE thrown?

Teachers and educators who have experienced the empowerment of educational theatre and drama know how sustainable this way of learning is; an abundance of documented practice attests to its efficacy. However, large-scale scientific evidence is scarce. Therefore, DICE is likely to be considered an empirical turning point as “several dozens of educational theatre and drama practitioners from 12 countries, with the widest theoretical and professional background, have allied forces with academics (...) to measure the impact of educational theatre and drama” (DICE 2010/1: 12): Data from 4,475 students aged 13-16 years were collected in 111 different theatre or drama projects. Moreover, data from the teachers, the theatre and drama programme leaders, independent observers of the drama process, external assessors and key theatre and drama experts was included. In the field of research in educational drama and theatre this is probably the most ambitious and complex study being conducted so far, as there are only very few quantitative studies and there has never been such a large sample before. Some of the research tools have been especially developed for DICE as e.g. the structured observation form which was used to generate data from the drama / theatre process. All participant countries had developed and written-up an individual theatre and drama programme. These programmes were assessed and pre-classified before the projects were taught by two independent and internationally renowned professionals, namely Cecily O'Neill from Britain and Gretta Berghammer from the USA. Both of them were asked to assess all 111 projects against the five Lisbon key competences and estimate their efficacy on a scale of 1-10 (cf. DICE 2010/1: 70 ff.). Questionnaires about each student to be filled in by the teachers before and after the project were developed. The core research tool can be seen in a 14-page-long questionnaire about the key competences and background variables filled in by the students who participated in the drama projects and by the students who belonged to the control groups (from the same school). In the wake of the flood of 4,833,000 cells of unique data and against the 1,23 GB

statistical output file the two volumes of the DICE report seem almost slim and can only be regarded as a starting point for a long line of publications to come.

5 DICE relevance for Foreign and Second Language Teaching

Creative theatre and drama has just started to have an impact in foreign language education fuelled by discussions in related disciplines such as Cultural Studies or Pedagogy and revolving around the term ‘performativity’. DICE has now clearly confirmed what we know from research in the field of cooperative learning: Educational theatre and drama is a collaborative way of working and, thus, a powerful method to develop intercultural competencies (cf. DICE 2010/1: 43ff.), one of the core objectives in foreign language teaching. Moreover and unsurprisingly, it also enhances communicative skills, and Cecily O’Neill remarks that it is almost inevitable that social competences will be promoted through this kind of work as well as civic competences, “as participants are likely to be involved in critical and creative reflections on such issues as tolerance, diversity and democracy, and decision-making is encouraged” (DICE 2010/1: 72). However, DICE has more than this merit as it evaluates competences that have not yet or hardly been subjected to foreign language research, namely entrepreneurship, cultural expression and learning to learn – all of which can be seen as a valuable enrichment of foreign language teaching, especially in an English as a Global Language or Lingua Franca setting. In addition, DICE has generated data about the educational theatre and drama teachers and has provided empirical evidence for what is generally accepted as a commonplace: “Practitioners with long experience and clear goals in mind are more likely to achieve better results” (DICE 2010/1: 75). Moreover, the teacher’s attitude is of utmost importance for the success of the theatre or drama process; this result sounds almost trivial, too, yet was deduced from the realization that some theatre and drama programmes had a strong impact on the students, most of the programmes had a small but significant effect and some even had a negative impact (DICE 2010/1: 74). This puts the teacher into the spotlight of the teaching process with full responsibility - although at times it looks as if s/he is just the guide at the side. These DICE findings clearly support the call for a “performative turn” in foreign language education and especially FL teacher training with far reaching consequences for curricula development and training programmes. “Anyone can teach drama” is obviously a misconception as we learn from DICE that the good drama teacher is an experienced and well trained drama practitioner. In that respect, it would be very helpful if in one of the future DICE publications the generated data would also be analyzed with a focus on failure, negative effect and bad practice in order to learn more about the successful drama teacher.

6 The DICE must roll on

DICE seems like a treasure box. Heaps of data are waiting to be interpreted. The second DICE proposal is in the pipeline in Brussels and will be decided upon soon. DICE has the potential to inspire foreign language research with new ideas and questions, and will hopefully lead to more, bigger and interdisciplinary research initiatives with a focus on educational theatre and drama. Both DICE publications are freely downloadable from the DICE website which is another must-go-to for the theatre and drama expert and novice alike. However, in order to increase the impact of DICE on future research activities, it would be helpful to provide access to the DICE research instruments on the website.

Both DICE texts are written in English and despite the quantitative research approach, are easily digestible - although oversimplification seems to be the price for readability.³ Moreover, the authors struck just the right note with view to the Europe-speak in Brussels and one can only hope that the DICE policy paper and the DICE recommendations will be read by many educational policy advocates and stakeholders: DICE claims that educational drama and theatre supports the targets of the most relevant EU level documents, such as ‘Europe 2020: A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ as this way of working at school would result in: “rise in the employment rate; reduction in the numbers of early school leavers; raising the overall quality of all levels of education and training; stronger synergy between culture and education; more active citizens; citizens being more sympathetic towards cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; and more innovative, creative and competitive citizens” (DICE 2010/1: 97). DICE has also shown that the general climate in education as well as school reality look different and that in many countries educational theatre and drama plays a minor or no role in educational policies, has low funding or status, and does (often) not have a place in the national curriculum and tertiary education system. Against all odds, whether or not DICE will get the ball rolling remains to be seen.

³ The authors, however, are well aware of the risk of simplification, especially with view to the discussion of quantitative data, as the real nature and often magic effect of educational drama and theatre can surely not be quantified and put into hard data (p. 20 and p. 75). More specific and differentiated analyses and DICE papers will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals (p. 26).