

A View on Theatre in Education

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Author Note

As of 2015, Yong Xiang Kho was a student in Singapore Polytechnic's Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology.

This research paper was part of an assignment for the module titled, Introduction to Applied Drama. Yong Xiang decided to explore the applied drama form of Theatre in Education.

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Abstract

This research paper examines the potential of Theatre in Education (TiE) through the examination of some established programs. Personal interests and the characteristics of this applied Drama art form are also put forth. Finally, the place of TiE in Singapore is discussed in terms of its possible impacts and why it is suitable.

Keywords: TiE, characteristics, Singapore, personal interests, potential, suitable

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Theatre in Education (TiE) is an applied Drama form which uses of a theatre performance as well as the participant's involvement through discussions to make aware or educate the participants about an issue.

Potential of TiE

TiE has been used in schools to engage students in the exploration of pertinent issues in varying degrees. The Drug Education: Theatre in Education Project by Winston (2001) addresses the rising problem of drug abuse in youths in the UK. In this program, Year 10 students were assigned to design TiE pieces to better engage and present relevant information about drugs to Year 6 students. This promoted informed decisions not just in Year 6 students but for the Year 10 students as well. Pertinent issues may also be school-based. In Korea, increasing number of schools incorporated "inclusive classrooms" consisting of both mainstream and special-needs students. A Big Blue Whale's Dream was carried out to engage school children in discussions about their special-needs classmates (Kim, 2009). The discussion enabled students to be exposed to rationale behind differing viewpoints about special-needs children and in return have a greater appreciation for those not akin to their own. In both projects, it was seen that the TiE program became important as they targeted relevant issues that the students faced.

TiE may also be further streamlined to discuss specific issues in a particular community. Everyday Communities was a program run in New Zealand, aimed towards social change and community engagement to prevent child abuse, neglect and family violence. The double framed TiE safely brought the participants' experiences into discussions. If not, students were, in the least, equipped with knowledge to deal with these issues should it arise (O'Connor, O'Connor and Welsh-Morris (2006)). As seen in this example, TiE has the potential to provide support and security to those who are in need within the community.

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However, the question beckons – why does TiE have the potential to engage the community? Therein lies my preference for this applied Drama art form.

Preference for TiE

One of the main reasons why TiE has been used actively over the years is because of the safety it brings. The TiE program encapsulates students into an environment that promotes discussion. The characters in the Theatre piece become representations of their own experiences and thus, they may safely and confidently share their viewpoints on a particular character without disclosing too sensitive experiences of their lives. Examples of this effect TiE has on students could be seen in the article by O'Connor et al. (2006) where a participant commented that it was “not about me, but it is.” This shows the extent of safety the TiE environment provided – something that could not be done in a relatively more intimate Drama program focusing on their personal experience.

Another important aspect of TiE is its discussion. Students were actively engaged in discussions – two-way discussions that were lacking when teachers explicitly taught morals in the classroom or during a visit by authorities. In addition, the fact that these discussions were non-didactic made it attractive. As seen in the TiE program in Korea (Kim, 2009), it was because of this feature of TiE that students were able to voice their, otherwise “unfavourable” opinion and justify the rationale behind their stand. Students were keenly aware of this. This was also observed from the Year 10 students who “strove to present underlying social or moral messages whilst avoiding an overtly didactic manner” (Winston, 2001) in their TiE pieces.

So, why does the potential or the characteristics of TiE interest me? My interest stems from the mind-set Singaporeans hold and how TiE could play a part in Singapore’s society.

Singapore is known as a conservative country with many unspoken social taboos. This leaves many issues, STDs for example, unaddressed. As the younger generations are exposed to more influences, it is not possible to continue living in ignorance. Basic education

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to make Singaporeans aware and make informed decisions is required. TiE's non-didactic and safe nature may satisfy these needs of Singapore.

Furthermore, Singapore's education system has recently been in the spotlight as one that is flawed – a system that fails to focus on more than examinable subjects. I think that TiE could also serve as a form of holistic education to not only promote values but also present a cultural exposure. The educational aspect of TiE would help to ease this art form into a society that has been plagued with the thought that art has no value. It is with this potential of TiE's role in Singapore that makes me interested in it.

TiE in Singapore

Contrary to what my writing alludes, there are TiE programs in Singapore. I have sat through two of them: Agent Penny and Will Power, a piece to promote financial literacy and Future Perfect, a piece discussing Bioethics through three different storylines, in 2005 and 2012 respectively. What struck me in hindsight upon knowing that they were TiE pieces was that I only remembered the central theme of what the stories were about. I did not remember any involvement into both programs. I did not remember taking anything away from the programs other than: a pamphlet for the Future Perfect piece and a comic book with more stories for the Agent Penny and Will Power piece. Isn't that the failure of these programs in itself? Shouldn't a participant take more than just entertainment?

Though it is comforting to know that TiE has a foot in Singapore, more can be done to fully explore the potential of TiE in schools. The focus should be weighed equally on the engagement as well as the education of perhaps more pertinent issues faced by Singaporean students. I do hope that the place TiE has in Singapore would continue to grow and become an integral part of education, fulfilling its potential to educate, support and engage Singaporeans in active discussions.

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