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The Challenges and Prospects of Teaching and Learning Dramatic Arts in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Dramatic education is an all-inclusive academic discipline which uses as tools branches of learning that bear upon the dramatic impulse. It utilizes eclectically each and every single discipline into one unified body of knowledge, so that it can help man to comprehend the nature of experience. Educational drama or Dramatic education is as old as education itself. In the course of history, both have been periodically reviewed, refined and ultimately codified into a set of principles for use in formal learning environments. However, education is yet to tap the full resources that drama is capable of providing because of some lapses inherent in the teaching and learning Dramatic Arts. Hence, this research investigates the challenges and prospects of teaching and learning of Dramatic Arts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It identifies such problems as apathy, lack of basic instructional and infrastructural facilities, inadequate funding by the government and non-inclusion of drama in the curricula of primary and post-primary schools, as the major challenges impeding the effective teaching and learning of the course. It was discovered however, that

graduates of the course have a very bright prospect in the labour market after leaving school, aside the fact that dramatic education can help inculcate moral discipline and confidence in the entire society. The paper therefore concludes by recommending that government and all stake-holders in the educational sector should improve upon the funding of Dramatic Arts in our tertiary institutions so as to provide the necessary instructional and infrastructural facilities needed for the effective teaching and learning of the course. Primary and post-primary schools' curricula should also be reviewed and expanded to include the teaching of drama, if the dream of the much-sought golden educational future must be realized.

Key words: Dramatic Arts, Learning, Teaching, Theatre and Tertiary, Institution

Introduction

Dramatic Arts is the interpretation of inner emotions, ideas and understanding of the environment, which are later translated into actions on the stage, in front of a viewing audience (Akinola, 2004, p. 16). Morgan and Saxton (2006, p. 58) also describe it as a process of "recreating oneself". This is applicable to the individual's perception of himself and that of his society, which is reflected in art -form, either written as a play-text or performed on the stage in the presence of a live audience. Simply put, Dramatic Arts is the mirror of the society.

Dramatic Arts makes its appeal on two levels; the aesthetic and the intellectual. On the aesthetic level, it is likened to painting or dancing and it makes its contribution to the emotional needs of man and his hunger for the beautiful, while on the intellectual level, a vast proportion of the greatest ideas ever conceived by man have been expressed in a dramatic form.

Dramatic Arts can also be described as a process and a product a process in the sense that; it involves the manipulation of materials such as the play-text, lighting equipments, costumes, musical instruments, stage properties and manipulation of human resources to produce the end-results which are called by various names such as a play, performance or entertainment. These end-results can be called the products, which are physically and abstractly felt through the audience's emotions and reactions.

The main focus of Dramatic Arts is communication; it tends to reflect the society by passing comments on its social ills either in an emotion-laden way of tragedy or the trivial way of comedy and satire. It trains the students in the manipulation of ideas through the mind, body, action and voice. This is why the training of the mind, body and voice through physical exercise is always stressed. The idea to be expressed in the script and performance is abstractly conceived in the mind, into action through written and psychomotor process. Derivatively, Dramatic Arts develops the students both physically and intellectually. Confidence and moral

discernment are but two of the many sterling virtues which correct and prolonged drama training is capable of inculcating in young people. This same point is upheld by Gerard Gould (2000) as follows:

In a school where drama plays a serious educational function, it is noticeable that the pupils become more tolerant of and towards one another, less inhibited in their attitudes, more communicative and more articulate. That surely is sufficient justification for its existence in the curriculum (p. xvi).

Since these claims are mostly founded on actual observation and experience, he therefore argues a positive case for the introduction of dramatic education at all levels of learning. This is now largely the case in most parts of Europe, with drama being taught, not only at the tertiary levels, but at the pre-tertiary levels as well. However, this is not the case in Nigeria where after close to One and a half Centuries of the founding of the first Secondary School - the C.M.S Grammar School, Bariga, Lagos in 1859, the country's educational system is yet to witness a dramatic revolution. This situation falls short of the global vision for drama in education.

Educational philosophy has undergone vast conceptual changes over the years, but even in its simplest form, educational development is best described as an internal process, a subtle progression within the individual child. The ultimate goal of the teacher is thus to achieve a blend between self-awareness and social integration; between self-discovery and the practical knowledge of life (Umukoro, 2002). In fulfilment of these objectives, drama has a unique role to play.

As a mode of communication, drama is possibly the oldest of the human arts. Its alliance with education involves collaboration between two ancient human pre-occupations governed by similar principles and objectives. Drama is concerned with acting, doing and seeing while teaching is nothing, if not a process of action and communication.

True education is invariably synonymous with total education. By 'total education', one means the discovery and fostering of the child's natural talents and skills, with the ultimate objective of cultivating the full personality. A lopsided educational policy that feeds the mind at the expense of the body or vice-versa can only result in stunted physical growth, or retarded psychological development. Total education entails the development of all the human senses of; sight, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling, in addition to the faculties of perception and imagination. An essential factor in any educational policy is the development of the child in relation to his immediate environment.

All too often, we are quick to write off a particular child who displays absolute lack of competence in a specific discipline when he/she is a genius waiting

to be discovered in another. This process of exploration (which is best carried out through drama and theatre) must always continue unabated in order to discover all such hidden talents and nurture them to the fullest extent possible. This, in actual fact, is the ultimate objective of education. For in the final analysis, education relates to that process by which the individual comes to terms with both the self and the larger human society in which he/she operates. In essence, drama at its best is one of the most salutary pastimes for continuous education and development, apart from being a useful source of diversion and entertainment.

Conceptual Clarifications

1. The Concept of Teaching

Fafunwa (1974) defines ‘teaching’ as “the action of someone who is trying to assist others to reach their fullest potentials in all aspects of development” (p. 28). However, teaching according to Peters (2003) can be “a way of sharing power or convincing people to value what you value, or explore the world with you or through you” (p. 15). This is an all-encompassing definition and can be analyzed as “sharing”, which connotes two people-dividing phenomenon, which in this case, may be knowledge. This means that the teacher and learners (students) are contributors to the ability of knowing things, which Peter refers to as “power”.

Another point that can be deduced from this definition is “conviction”. Here, a teacher’s thought or belief is being impacted through persuasion or imposition because the teacher wants to ‘sell’ his values to the learners. This is more or less related to science where teachers and students explore the world through laboratory experiments. This is also applicable to Dramatic Arts where creativity can be explored by the students through the teacher or by collaborative efforts of both the teacher and the students. Beck (1999) corroborates this postulation by saying that in teaching drama, teachers and students are engaged in collective enquiry and exploration.

2. The Concept of Learning

Learning, according to Farrants (2004) is “the process where an activity originates or is changed through training procedure (whether in the laboratory or in the natural environment) as distinguished from change by factors not attributed to training” (p. 52). He links learning to a variety of activities such as swimming, dancing, driving a car, reading and writing as well as the more complex process of learning to adapt to the society.

On the other hand, Fafunwa (1974) defines ‘learning’ as the “process by which we acquire and retain attitude, knowledge, understanding, skills and capacity that cannot be attributed to inherited behavioural patterns or physical growth” (p. 32).

Peters (2003) also defines 'learning' as "an activity which is deliberately pursued for the purpose of obtaining information, acquiring greater understanding or improving a skill" (p.20). This definition suggests that learning must be engaged consciously and therefore, it entails personal effort or will-power. It also implies that such an activity could be misused or used properly. When learning is properly utilized, it enables the learners to discover basic ideals in the study and the learning materials. This is why Peters (2003) advocates for the need to direct learning properly in order to be beneficial. He emphasizes this need by putting forth his concept of "supervised and guided learning" which he describes as:

That plan of school procedure whereby each pupil is so adequately instructed and directed in method of learning and thinking, that is daily done and prepared in a progressive way under condition most favourable to a hygienic, economic and self-reliant career of intellectual endeavour (p. 25).

This definition presupposes that learning does not seek to just prepare pupils for graduation in colleges or tertiary institutions, but to help them cope efficiently with problems in this world of intense competition. In such a situation, superior achievement depends on initiating clear thoughts and confidence in one's ability to organize experience for new adjustments. This kind of learning aims at producing an individual who is trained to attack problems and to organize his experience into a large controlling concept which will endow him to initiate ideas or to serve or work without or little supervision. Derivatively, this suggests learning as ability, which needs proper direction and which is engaged in consciously in order to develop one's thinking and initiative.

At times, learning can also be something we come about unawares, since the process of learning begins from the birth of a child and continues throughout his/her life time. Hence, learning occurs when a sort of observable behavioural changes have taken place in the life of such an individual.

3. Theatre

Theatre is one of the oldest of the arts. It began as non-verbal re-enactments of human beings struggling against their environment, such as in a hunt for prey or a battle. However, theatre is more specific than non-verbal art; it is one of the unlimited forms of art, it is all encompassing.

Theatre Artists explore and through their arts, they present a wide range of thoughts and feelings. Theatre is a vehicle of learning for both artist and audience-it can broaden cultural and humanistic horizons. It can give us confidence by showing us that we are like others and it can help us explore our individual selves (Cassady 1997, p.7).

4. Drama

Brockett and Ball (2004) describe drama “as an art-form, in which a series of events, usually a written play is acted out by performers who impersonate characters and which takes place in an auditorium before an audience” (p. 1).

Drama and theatre are synonymous; they are two sides of the same coin. Though drama can mean written plays, theatre can equally mean written plays but beyond that, it takes into consideration play performances and play productions, just like drama. Hence, in our discussion in this study, ‘drama’ and ‘theatre’ will be used interchangeably.

Problems of Learning and Teaching Dramatic Arts in Nigerian Schools

There are many problems/challenges being faced by students and teachers in the teaching and learning of Dramatic Arts in Nigerian tertiary institutions. One of such problems is apathy. Many students are apathetic about studying Dramatic Arts because people believe, erroneously though, that drama/theatre is for the never-do-well people or vagabonds in the society. This has been the fate of the profession, right from the ancient Greek days. So, parents would do everything possible to discourage their children and wards from choosing Dramatic Art as a course of study.

Even people in academia do not help matters. Most academics believe that Dramatic Arts is all about dancing, singing and acting. The people in charge of admissions prefer to throw all the dregs in their admission list to Theatre or Dramatic Arts department because according to them, one does not need to be a genius before he/she can study the course and so, one finds half-baked prospective students being thrust into the department.

Ironically, Theatre/Dramatic Arts is a very broad and challenging course. It is the meeting-point of all the other courses. The course is divided into many specializations such as; Directing, Stage-management, Theatre Management, acting, Play-writing, Costume and Make-up, and Technical Theatre which is further compartmentalized into Carpentry, Stage design, Lighting, Painting etc. These are called the ‘Arts of the Theatre’ thus making the course, a conglomerate of other courses. Cases abound of students changing to other courses or even ultimate withdrawal from the department, when they could not cope with the myriad practical and theoretical challenges of the course.

Another problem being encountered in the teaching of the course is lack of professional teachers in the area. No effective implementation of any educational policy can be possible without the right kind of teachers to carry it through. Thus, there is the need to intensify the training programme for teachers of drama and theatre, which effectively began as far back as 1963 with the creation of the School of

Drama at the University of Ibadan and its transformation into a full-fledge department in 1970. Today, no less than a dozen allied Departments of Theatre Arts have been established in Nigerian Universities, under a variety of nomenclatures-Theatre Arts, Dramatic Arts, Creative Arts, Performing Arts and so on. These have continued to turn out graduates who invariably settle into professional practice or disappear into other productive sectors of the economy. When institutions demand for them, teachers of drama are always in short supply. This is because the institutions will have to compete with the professional sectors, which offer higher financial inducements for the qualified professionals.

The teaching service has also proved to be grossly incapable of competing favourably with the professional sector. One of the problems being faced in the provision of teachers for drama is the fundamental prejudice against the teaching profession itself at all levels of learning. It is sadly ironical that teaching, one of the oldest of human professions, still lack sufficient glamour and attractions particularly in a developing country like Nigeria. The teacher-image is still sadly that of a disgruntled, lower middle-class, semi-trained or untrained bird- of- passage, working perfunctorily in a lifeless classroom, with one eye outside the window. For this reason, the profession continues to be treated as a very busy corridor leading to real or imagined prosperity elsewhere.

It is a somber irony that our policy makers who are themselves products of teachers and who have been shown the secret power of knowledge on which all greatness lies, subsequently turn a contemptuous glance at their humble teachers by whose grace they have risen. This is a fundamental educational problem that equally calls for fundamental solution in the interest of the entire future of the nation.

One of the practical problems of teaching and learning Dramatic Arts in schools is the glaring absence of drama studios in Nigerian tertiary institutions, in addition to lack of purpose-built performance halls. A drama studio or a studio theatre, equipped with necessary gadgets will obviously make for a more effective communication between the teacher and the students. The conventional theatre complex, designed for formal performances, may not always fulfill the need for flexible pedagogical explorations. Thus, at all levels of education, from the primary to the tertiary, there is the need for an appropriate drama studio to enhance the process of teaching and learning.

The case for drama studio is premised on the fact that Drama or Theatre is a scientific discipline with a practical orientation. Hence, like all other scientific or practical disciplines, it will always require a separate purpose-built space for effective pedagogical activities.

Another major problem of teaching and learning Dramatic Arts in schools is the non-inclusion of drama in primary and post-primary schools' curricula in Nigeria. Students who would want to take up teaching as a career find it difficult locating the subject to teach at the pre-tertiary levels. Drama is still treated in most of our schools as a sporadic activity, a rare-event often arranged to mark a great upheaval in the life of the school. Events such as Speech Day, Founder's Day, Literary Week or the Send Forth of an outgoing staff member, usually give rise to some forms of dramatic activities. In most schools, drama is often employed as an extra-curricular activity, mere recreation, designed to break the monotony of conventional classroom teaching. Opposition to drama as a school subject in our schools can be found both within and without. Non-drama teachers tend to treat the subject with contempt arising from a combination of prejudice and ignorance. Such a negative attitude becomes an impediment to the curricular progress of drama in formal education in Nigeria.

The basic misconception about drama as a subject stems from sheer ignorance of its curricular content. If a subject must have pedagogical potential, then it must have adequate topics worthy of intellectual attention but, drama has always been seen as a method; as a means to an academic end, rather than an end in itself. However, drama is not just another subject but one with adequate inter-disciplinary capacity. This is why it is called a 'Composite Art'.

Prospects of Learning and Teaching Dramatic Arts

It is easy to prognosticate into the future of drama and theatre in Nigerian schools, in the light of the existing realities. Drama is both natural and indestructible. It is a pristine art that will continue to manifest itself under the most difficult conditions, while being regularly deployed for various ends, ranging from sheer entertainment to political or religious propaganda.

In essence, one of the vital prospects for students of Dramatic Arts in the labour market is self-reliance, which, in fact, is the whole essence of the course. Any student who is worth his/her onions has nothing to fear in the labour market because he/she would have been well-equipped to face the challenges of unemployment which is prevalent in the country. As earlier mentioned, Dramatic Arts is divided into many specializations, such as Acting, Directing, Choreography, Costuming/Sewing, Play-writing, Media Arts, Public Relations and Advertising, Theatre Management etc. Each of these areas is designed to make the students self-reliant in their chosen fields. It is believed that no one is completely useless in the Theatre. Everybody has one potential or another waiting to be explored. If any student is not good theoretically, he/she can explore his or innate potentials practically, which will earn him his daily living afterwards.

Apart from taking teaching as a career, graduates of Dramatic Arts can pursue careers such as programme Producers or Directors or Presenters in Media Houses. They can also work as Public Relations or Advertising Practitioners. They can fit into Carpentry or Painting works. They can also fit perfectly well into the Film industry which is fast booming in the country now. They can become Dancers and Choreographers (in fact, there is a great dearth of these Specialists in the country now). They can even be Drummers or Creative Artists, designing posters, banners and bill boards. What is more, the world of journalism is filled with notable Theatre Artists. Products of Theatre/Dramatic Arts have therefore been trained to pursue careers in a wide variety of different endeavours. Recent development in theatre forms and practices have also been discovered to have potent weapons for national development.

Although drama can be a particularly noisy and boisterous activity, capable of alienating all but those directly involved in it, or who expect to benefit from its outcome, it is still the most discipline-oriented of all academic endeavours. It combines the discipline of the head with that of the heart and hands, that is; mental, psychological and physical disciplines. Above all, there is also the discipline of time; the discipline of punctuality and corporate responsibility. A single minute's lateness to a performance by an individual is capable of wrecking months of hard work and intense preparations of the entire group. Hence, the obnoxious concept of 'African time' has no place in theatre practice. This is a virtue that must permeate the entire school life, so as to impact positively on the society as a whole.

Apart from this all round training, confidence and moral discernment are two of the many sterling other virtues which correct and prolonged drama training is capable of inculcating in the lives of young people. It is believed that in a school where drama plays a serious educational function, the pupils become more tolerant of and towards one another; less inhibited in their attitudes, more communicative and more articulate (Gerard, 2000).

The learning of Dramatic Arts also has the capability of enhancing students' speech arts. Drama as a course has a mandatory speech components that can effectively take care of the needs of Oral English, capable of reforming the deteriorating standard of oral communication in our schools. At present, the English Language, at both oral and written levels, is in a decadent state, resulting in a dangerous trend of mutual unintelligibility. The validity of local colour and peculiarities in any foreign language does not include grammatical infelicities or phonological inaccuracies. A conscientious programme of dramatic education can effectively reverse this ugly trend in our schools in less than a decade, thus improving communication at the wider social level.

The value of dramatic education lies essentially in the extent to which it brings its stamp to bear on the entire school curriculum. Therefore, all other teachers must be made to realize how their respective disciplines fit into the overall scheme of educational drama and what their own students stand to gain from participating in it.

Conclusion

Drama and education are possibly the oldest phenomena in the history of mankind. In its purest and most natural sense, drama is an integral aspect of individual's self expression and social communication, while education is a life-long process of attempting to come to terms with the realities of human society. Thus, drama and education are two sides of a communication coin which exemplifies the intriguing concept of uniqueness in oneness.

Dramatic Arts is a meeting-point of all the other arts. Therefore, the effective teaching and learning of the course will undoubtedly provide trained teachers for Creative Arts at both primary and post-primary levels, as well as creative minds in the society in general. Recent development in drama forms and practices have also been discovered to have potent weapons for national development.

Recommendations

Education in Nigeria is yet to tap the full resources that drama is capable of providing. If the dream of this golden educational future must be realized, a number of factors have to be put in place:

- Government at all levels must divest itself of its unfounded prejudices against drama and theatre, and wake up to its educational responsibilities. The greatest social service of any government is the provision of quality education for its people. In recognition of its strategic role in the educational process, drama must instantly be upgraded into a full curricular discipline, accorded its due intellectual recognition and provided with all the needed facilities for effective functioning because drama is the synthesis of all subjects and the very basis of a comprehensive education.

Therefore, curriculum planners should look into ways of using drama in enhancing the teaching and learning of other subjects in primary and post-primary school levels. Role playing and improvisation have a strong way of enhancing learning among pupils because they tend to believe and remember better what they see than what they hear. Hence, modalities should be put in place on how to incorporate drama in the syllabi of primary and post-primary schools.

- Relevant authorities like the Nigerian University Commission (N.U.C) and the National Commission for Certificate in Education (N.C.E.), should also integrate

the Industrial Training (I.T.) programme into the curriculum of Theatre/Dramatic Arts, so as to give the students ample firsthand practical experience about the working environment of radio, television, cultural centres and other theatre-related fields.

- Teachers (particularly, teachers of drama) must be convinced that drama has a justifiable place in the school curriculum, and that, it is not simply to break the educational boredom, but to fulfil specific educational objectives. For, if the drama-teacher is himself neither fully clear nor convinced about the desirability of the subject, he stands little chance of gaining the sympathy and cooperation of the rest of the staff and the society in general.
- Parents and prospective students of Dramatic Arts should be enlightened, convinced and encouraged about the desirability of the course, judging from the numerous potentials and prospects which the course carries, especially in the labour market. Most parents' apathy stems out of sheer ignorance and prejudice. If they are well enlightened on the prospects of the course, it is believed that they will make better choices.
- The value of dramatic education lies in the extent to which it brings its stamp to bear on the entire school curriculum. Teachers must be made to realize how their respective disciplines fit into the overall scheme of educational drama, and what their own students stand to gain from participating in it.
- Drama as a course has a mandatory speech components that can effectively take care of the needs of Oral English, capable of reforming the deteriorating standard of oral communication in our schools and colleges, thus improving communication at the wider social level.
- Lastly, government and school administrators should make adequate funds available for the provision of instructional and infrastructural facilities in order to facilitate the effective teaching and learning of the course.

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