

Dramatic inspiration

by Zoe Phillips

It was with huge pleasure and delight that I attended the VALBEC workshop led by Jodie Whitehurst: Teaching EAL to Adults Through Drama (17/9/2019). What a breath of fresh air and a wonderful surprise that this was offered: to be able to do something that pertained to the real part of my job: the teaching. The workshop offered new and effective ways to teach, thereby enhancing the experience of both teacher and students. There is sadly too little of this type of professional development – due, I believe, to the bureaucratic requirements of our teaching life.

The energy and enjoyment of teaching that Jodie presented to us from the very first moment was so affirming. Suddenly I was in a place where everyone was positive, open, excited and stimulated (something that is very rarely felt these days in EAL). Immediately we were drawn into her classroom and enthusiasm and reminded of why we teach. We were given a chance to think about our practice, not our paperwork, to explore and try new things that, dare I say, might even take us away from compliance for a while and give us a space just to contemplate our practice. It gave us a much-needed chance for renewal.

Jodie had prepared a very busy morning for us, demonstrating ways in which drama could be used in a non-threatening, inclusive way. All participants took to the activities with such openness and enjoyment. By the end of the workshop everyone had improvised, played a role and collaborated creatively. What Jodie offered us was not intimidating and completely accessible to those with no drama experience.

Besides a great sharing of short activities that could be used as warm-ups, Jodie also led us through the application of a story and images that incorporated some fabulous methods of encouraging and developing language between participants. She made it clear where the explicit English learning was, acknowledging that this is a very important part of engaging the student: 'Like many adult EAL/ESL learners, most of my students, when starting English classes in Australia, are familiar with more traditional teacher-centred class activities. Thus it takes careful planning and consideration to ensure that when using drama-based tasks in language classes, the students are made aware of exactly how the activities will help them acquire language skills.' (Whitehurst, 2019, para.4)

At present, EAL feels like a sector in such decline. It is being constantly subsumed by more and more compliance and box ticking, almost to an absurd level. Teachers are required to attend professional development (PD) events that never look at how they teach, never look at the experience of the classroom; our teaching practice and the student experiences are hardly ever touched upon.

Auditors come to the workplace to view paperwork. Auditors never come to the classroom, never talk to the students about their learning experience: Our teaching practice and its effectiveness and creativity appears to be of no interest, and therefore presumably of no importance to the powers that be.

The end of many a PD is greeted with a huge sigh of resignation; a heavy feeling, devoid of creativity and sapping enthusiasm for our profession. It is not uncommon to come away feeling so disenchanted, so drained, so negated, leaving teachers with a growing cynicism and a huge feeling of not being valued. Yet, dutifully we attend the required PD just to remain compliant and employed.

I left Jodie's workshop with new ideas and excitement about putting them into action. I have already planned a drama activity from Jodie's workshop to develop students writing of descriptive texts. I left feeling re-energised. As teachers we need the input of new ideas, methods and activities and we need it even more than ever in EAL teaching in Victoria.

Upcoming workshops are publicised on the VALBEC website: <https://valbec.org.au/>. To ensure you are always kept informed of upcoming events, subscribe to eVALBEC. Email info@valbec.org.au to subscribe.

Reference

Whitehurst, J. (2019, January 27). The Language of Drama by Jodie Whitehurst [blogpost]. Retrieved from <https://valbec.org.au/2019/08/15/teaching-eal-to-adults-through-drama/>

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