Neither the Australians nor the internationals were used to attending drama workshops, so it was to be a new experience for both groups. What happens when you engage fifteen international students with fifteen local students in an intercultural theatre workshop? Magic! ROSEMARY DANSICK describes a wonderful example of the sensitivity and enthusiasm of young people who are able to embrace the challenge of communicating across a cultural divide.

I have been teaching drama to international students at the University of Melbourne since 1990, when we first established the Foundation Studies Program at Trinity College. As an orientation and bridging year between secondary and tertiary education for non-native speakers of English, we provide opportunities for our students to be successful in an education system and culture vastly different from their own.

A concern across faculties is the lack of significant interaction between local and international students. In the wake of 11 September and the plight of refugees worldwide, it seemed to me that our students would benefit from an exchange of ideas with similar ages, different backgrounds. In the exchange we wanted to explore:

• mixing local and international students of similar ages, different backgrounds
• local students accessing Melbourne University for the first time
• internationals meeting an average 'Australian' student
• allowing young people to meet each other and confront the cultural differences head-on.

References


The drama workshop is ideal for such an exploration, for in it you have permission to be and explore something else. Neither the Australians nor the internationals were used to attending drama workshops, so it was to be a new experience for both groups.

We asked all the students to think about the workshop’s purpose beforehand, by getting them to fill out a brief questionnaire. The students unanimously thought the workshop was an important opportunity.

I would like to gain a greater learning experience in drama and hopefully improve in my understanding between cultures in order to work towards peace and mutual friendship.

Having fun, laughter and getting to know each other were also considered important.

The workshop was seen as a vehicle to enable good things to happen, but there were fears about the communication. Paradoxically, I designed a workshop that largely focussed on the body mime/movement, in order to guarantee good communication. Putting the focus on non-verbal communication meant that all students would be equal. The international students and non-native speakers of English were anxious about having their English put to the test, and about being unable to understand or be understood.

Spoken English happened ‘off-stage’ as the students planned and worked out their mime ideas for presentation to the whole group. This meant that both groups had to be understood in order to get their ideas across. The workshop gave them a chance to get on with each other, because the focus was outside of each individual and lent itself to humour and touching, gestures and movements, in order to solve the problems and be ready for performance.

I did not anticipate the high-pitched level of interaction that did occur in the small groups. Both locals and internationals offered ideas and the sound of excited discussion rang across the room. It did not take long for the groups to forget about cultural differences and instead to just get on with the task and to have fun together.

After the initial warm-up, which focussed on relaxation and energy, I divided them into smaller groups consisting of at least two locals and two internationals. Each activity was a design challenge involving problemsolving techniques. I gave them a series of structures that had to be designed by, and composed of, the group members—for example, a kitchen appliance. How do five people become a kitchen appliance? Easy. A couple become the container, someone in the middle is the heater, someone else the switch.

I interwove whole-group and small-group activities to facilitate interactions. Changing the group dynamics kept things fluent, increased intercultural contact and heightened the fun. Whole-group designs included the human digestive system, a clothing shop and a headache. Small-group topics included table and chairs, a yacht, and a structure that consisted of four legs, three hands and a bottom (on the floor) connected into a balanced, strong, aesthetically pleasing structure.

The highlight of the workshop was ‘Surreal stories’, where the physical and visual imagery is more important than the dialogue. Ideally, students express ideas from a surreal perspective.

The climax was the topic ‘Bridging the cultural divide’, where the students’ ideas came together. One group had the four students in pairs, sitting with backs facing each other and the width of the stage between them. Each individual was typing on an imaginary keyboard and reading an imaginary computer screen. After a few seconds of typing, a student asks: ‘Where are you from?’ A reply from the opposite side: ‘Hong Kong. Where are you from?’ Then, simply, both sets of students slowly edge nearer to each other while continuing to type. This continues until eventually the four students are sitting back-to-back, touching and confidently communicating. It was a clever idea to use the chatroom format to bridge the cultural divide. Both groups of this generation understand this communication.

The questionnaire demonstrated the students’ excitement and happiness that they all did manage to communicate and have fun.

It felt great to know there was no sort of ‘friction’ between us and we worked together. I feel great. It’s an experience I’ll be able to share with friends and family.

The locals were just as nervous as we were to meet them. I found this similarity comforting.

We all walked in without a clue as to what was going to happen, yet, as equals, worked together and crossed the cultural divide to complete the task or solve the problem. The best thing about the workshop, in my opinion, was that there was no weirdness between us. We got along with each other as soon as we met.

I was very impressed with the young people and their readiness to embrace the challenges of the workshop. Initially the students clearly wanted to know that they could get on with each other. Once empathy was established, there was an explosion of relief and subsequent enjoyment. These students were very sensitive to differences and to the fact that this can create problems. Their youthfulness and enthusiasm is still intact, so they were able to make short work of the ‘problem’ and then to get on with the fun.