Building Trust in a Collaborative Dramatic Study of Shakespeare - Year 9

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Introduction
My action research considered the influence that trust has in improving learning outcomes for teenage boys when they participate in collaborative learning groups.

Using the Whoosh technique (Teaching Shakespeare the RSC Way, 2008), I introduced the learning group to the study of Shakespeare, with an emphasis on physicalising the text and exploring the play.

John K. Butler, Jr. (1991) outlines ten conditions of trust and describes the building of trust as a circular, mutually reinforcing process. Harvey and Daniels (2013) make the case for the building of collaborative skills being a question of ethics.

The Research Question
How can building trust during a collaborative dramatic study of Shakespeare enhance engagement for Year 9 English students?

I wished to examine what assists the boys with their sense of engagement; their being united into a community; and their appreciation of the content and implications of the play.

Research Context and Participants
This action research project saw twenty-one, mixed ability Year Nine boys at The Hutchins School being introduced to Romeo and Juliet.

The Hutchins School is an Anglican, K-12 boys school in Hobart, Tasmania. While the school draws students from a range of socio-economic, religious and cultural circumstances, the majority of students are from advantaged backgrounds. Hutchins aims to build good men who act with kindness, integrity, compassion, humility and courage.

The Research Action

The students were given reflective journal questions on Romeo and Juliet as well as questions pertaining to trust, relationships and collaboration.

I spent three 100-minute lessons delivering the Whoosh. This involved using a large lower flat teaching space with a data projector and screen. It provided plenty of room for the class to undergo vigorous warm-ups and preparation; to improvise many key scenes of the play; to read selected quotes from the play on the screen; and to reproduce sword fights and meetings between the Capulets and the Montagues.

Data Collection and Analysis
To collect data, I used:
- pre-interviews and post-interviews
- reflective writing using open-ended questioning
- trust indicator table
- pre and post surveys

My questioning in a variety of forms and the use of reflective journals enabled the boys to share their ‘turning point experiences.’ While watching the videos I looked for themes I had noticed in other data analysis, and I also pulled out key statements and made some critical physical observations. I relied heavily on comments from the interviews and compared the responses to the trust indicator table at different times during the action.

Key Findings
- Collaboration fosters appreciation of Shakespeare
- Positive environment promotes productive collaboration
- Fairness and participation leads to trust
- Trust builds confidence
- Boys have different perceptions of their own development

Conclusions
As trust grew, doubts lessened and enjoyment and engagement greatly increased. Not only was the collaboration within the learning group more sustained, but the complexity of the work of interpreting, comprehending, and performing a Shakespearean play seemed to lessen, and the previously intimidating task became commonplace, as if this study was as normal as turning up to class.

‘It suits everyone, the normal way won’t suit everyone, this does!’

The boys matured and benefited from the positive effects of good collaboration.

Everyone was involved. You learnt how things were happening through physically doing it, not just standing there and having someone read out to you. Seeing other people doing the stuff as well, you think if other people can do it, I can do it as well.”

“I enjoyed it ... We each learnt a little bit of the play and we all recited that to make the scene happen. I felt accepted and confident to act out the play.”

“(Trust) can’t be asked for and received, it has to be built. If it’s strong there’s a bit of leeway, yeah. They can let you down and that’s still fine ‘cause that’s human I guess. You have to be able to forgive people.”

Key Readings