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"I notably watched and listened more" - enhancing lecturer effectiveness through drama-based techniques

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ABSTRACT

Improving student engagement in teaching settings is one of the biggest challenges in contemporary higher education. Drama is a powerful tool to engage audiences yet its use *by the lecturer* to potentially transform students' experience of HE teaching remains under-researched. This interpretive study used an action research strategy to explore whether applying three drama-based techniques (sketch, soliloquy and story) in teaching could positively impact lecturer effectiveness in support of student engagement. Five lecturers tested the drama-based techniques in the live teaching setting. Their performances were observed and teaching strategies from a framework for lecturer effectiveness were identified. We found that these drama-based tools contributed to lecturer effectiveness and enhanced student engagement. Drama interventions performed by the lecturer have the potential to add value to the student learning experience and benefit universities through boosting student engagement. We recommend adding drama-based techniques to the lecturer's pedagogical toolkit.

Introduction

According to Barrera et al. (2021), improving the effectiveness of student learning at all educational levels, is a key challenge for the 21st century. This is certainly the case in higher education (HE). Within the ever evolving and complex landscape of HE (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022), an increased focus on maximising the student experience seems evident. Universities in England are coming under greater scrutiny in terms of the teaching quality they provide as a result of the introduction of The Teaching Excellence Framework (Wilkinson, 2019), and HE providers are facing increasing pressure to address the student satisfaction agenda, specifically, enhancing students' engagement by providing enjoyable learning experiences (Whitton & Langan, 2019). This is supported by research studies on student expectations of the HE experience. For example, in one commissioned study on

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student expectations of the HE experience in the UK (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013), students expected their lecturers to be knowledgeable, but not to just read off the slides; they wanted to see passion and enthusiasm expressed. The challenges for educators to address teaching effectiveness have been compounded over recent years with the COVID-19 global pandemic adding an additional layer of disruption and uncertainty (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022). Various forms of online teaching have been 'centre-stage', and this has fostered debate over the relevance of traditional face-to-face lectures, although Nordmann et al. (2022) argue they still have a place when designed and executed effectively. Against this current backdrop, it seems clear that *lecturer effectiveness* is a key factor if learner engagement in the classroom is to be meaningfully supported. Although there is no universal agreement as to what makes teaching effective (Madriaga & Morley, 2016, Wood & Su, 2017), numerous research studies exist from both the lecturer and student perspectives. In his seminal work, Ramsden (1992) foregrounds a series of key principles, including stimulating interest, providing intellectual challenge, and facilitating active engagement with the topic content. From a lecturer-focused study, Kember and McNaught (2007) highlighted principles for effective teaching, including employing real-world examples to establish relevance, providing a variation of learning activities, and running teaching sessions that are interesting and delivered enthusiastically.

From the student perspective, some recurring themes across a number of studies are notable: seeing student engagement as important and being committed to it (Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019); effective presentation skills (Patrick & Smart, 1998, Jin, 2000); application of knowledge (Jin, 2000, Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2000, Heffernan et al., 2010, Bradley et al., 2015); employing humour (Jin, 2000, Heffernan et al., 2010, Bradley et al., 2015); building rapport (Heffernan et al., 2010, Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019), and strong communication skills (Young & Shaw, 1999, Jin, 2000, Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2000, Heffernan et al., 2010). Many of these components seem to relate to the *personal attributes* of the teacher. This was the focus of the study by Heffernan et al. (2010), where the researchers examined the personal attributes of lecturers which were identified as leading to lecturer effectiveness. Whilst acknowledging that 'the personal attributes of an effective lecturer is a complex phenomena' (p. 25), they recommend lecturers critically analyse their personal attributes against the constructs identified and take action to reduce weaknesses and further develop strengths. In view of the foregoing, it seems reasonable to suggest that lecturers should be prepared to explore innovative teaching approaches that may contribute to maximising teaching effectiveness in support of student engagement in the classroom.

This article foregrounds one such approach: the use, by the lecturer, of drama-based techniques as a pedagogical tool. The practical application of performance skills and acting tools in HE teaching remains an under-researched area (Hains-Wesson, 2011, Thom, 2019), and literature on acting in class *by the teacher* even more so, particularly in relation to research projects that have tested the approach in the live setting of an HE classroom. The research study in this article adds to the literature in this field. It is based on a published doctoral thesis (Robson, 2018) written by the corresponding author: Rob Robson. This work is being further developed in conjunction with the two co-authors: Ewa Krolikowska and Kevin Williams. We work collaboratively as 'Act1 Education', to actively

promote the use of drama-based techniques in HE teaching practice. To set context for the study, the following section highlights the salient points from some of the extant literature in this area.

The use of drama-based techniques as a pedagogical tool in HE

Drama has always been a powerful method for engaging an audience (Heyward, 2010, Shree, 2017). Indeed, the application of drama in the field of education can be traced back to ancient Greece, and, as a tool for teaching, its use remains evident today (Wasylko & Stickley, 2003, Winston, 2004). Student role-play is commonly applied in teaching and learning contexts (Mangan et al., 2016), and potentially, carries some benefits for learners; for example, authentic engagement on an emotional level (Heyward, 2010), creating dynamism (Stevens, 2015), and stimulating interest in the topic (Poitras et al., 2013). In terms of the lecturer as 'performer', there is recognition of a relationship between teaching and acting (Greenberg & Miller, 1991, Street, 2007, Thom, 2019). Tauber and Mester (2007) draw attention to some of the tools applied by both actors and teachers, for example, use of voice and body, entrances and exits, and utilisation of space. Teachers can also, like actors, use humour and props in their delivery. Street (2007) asserts that the application of performance skills in the classroom could lead to increased lecturer effectiveness. The study by Thom (2019) makes a notable contribution. She provided four workshops for HE academics centred on drama methods (voice training, applying dramaturgy in session design, stagecraft, and developing an academic persona). Participants then had the opportunity to apply what they had learned in their own teaching practice, and reflect on the impact. Baruch (2006) asserts that to stimulate student engagement, acting in the classroom can be particularly effective, and foregrounds the idea of role-playing *by the lecturer*. Similarly, Tauber and Mester (2007) advocate the concept of teacher role-playing, highlighting its power to make a subject come to life, to clarify meaning, and to hold students' attention.

The purpose and aims of the study

The purpose of this exploratory study, which took place in the Faculty of Business at a post-1992 university, was to examine the application of drama-based techniques in HE teaching practice, and assess their possible contribution to *teaching effectiveness* in support of *student engagement in the classroom*. The focus was not on creating 'drama-dominant' sessions, but on utilising these techniques as pedagogical tools, alongside other teaching tools within the lesson plan. The term 'drama-based techniques' was used because each of the featured techniques has a link to drama and the world of acting. Essentially, they constitute mini-dramatic performances. The specific aims of the study were (1) to explore the application of three drama-based techniques in the live teaching setting; the three techniques being *sketch* (lecturer-performed short skits), *soliloquy* (role-playing a character and speaking thoughts aloud); *dramatic storytelling* (stories – real-life or fictitious – related by the lecturer, employing theatrical skills), and (2) to determine if, and how, these drama techniques could positively impact teacher effectiveness in support of student engagement. These three techniques were selected for two principal

reasons. Firstly, each one showcases acting in the classroom; the lecturer delivers a mini-performance as a pedagogical tool. It allows the lecturer to move beyond simply applying performance skills in general teaching delivery, but to make acting much more explicit. Secondly, the lead researcher (Rob Robson) had previously applied these techniques extensively in his work as a corporate trainer, and discovered their potential to engage an audience and help convey learning content in a memorable way.

Theoretical framework

In line with the study's aims, a framework for evaluation needed to be established. As previously noted, there is no universal agreement regarding what effective teaching is, but various research studies exist which contribute to knowledge of teaching effectiveness (Ramsden, 1992, Kember & McNaught, 2007, Heffernan et al., 2010, Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). This study was informed by one of these: the work of Heffernan et al. (2010). Their student-centred study and supporting literature review focused on the *personal attributes* of lecturers, and four constructs were identified that can impact on lecturer effectiveness: communication effectiveness, rapport, dynamism and applied knowledge (Heffernan et al., 2010). They found that dynamism, followed by communication effectiveness, were the two most important variables to enhancing teaching effectiveness. Rapport and applied knowledge both had the 'the capacity to improve teaching effectiveness, this is via improved Communication' (Heffernan et al., 2010, p. 25). They recommended 18 practical teaching strategies for increasing effectiveness, utilising the four constructs identified. These strategies can be built into lesson design and delivery to improve effectiveness. The work of Heffernan et al. (2010) was chosen for our study because of its focus on the personal attributes of lecturers, and suggested teaching strategies for practical application. We used the framework to gauge to what extent and how these teaching strategies were in evidence during the performances, thereby generating initial insights into the potential value of drama-based techniques as a tool for enhancing teacher effectiveness. The Heffernan et al. (2010) study also found that *creativity* was a key factor in achieving dynamism. Therefore, this was added to the theoretical framework as an additional (19th) teaching strategy [see Table 1]. As the focus of our study was on teaching effectiveness in support of learner engagement, we drew on Axelson and Flick's (2010) definition of engagement to mean how interested and involved students appeared to be in their classroom learning experience.

Methodology

This interpretive study centred on a real-world teaching situation involving a group of lecturer practitioners. This would have suited either a case study or an action research strategy. However, 'Unlike action research, the case study researcher does not deliberately intervene in a situation but seeks, at least in the first instance, simply to describe it' (Myers, 2013, p. 76). Because the study required the lead researcher to intervene in the research process and develop a democratic partnership with the co-researchers (Gray, 2014), the research was designed around an action research framework. The cyclical nature of action research allows each cycle to build on the evaluations of the one before it (Saunders et al.,

Table 1. Strategies to enhance teaching effectiveness adapted from Heffernan et al., (2010, p. 25) table 4 by Robson (2018).

Construct	Teaching Strategies
Dynamic delivery	• Display a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for the subject • Use drama in your lectures. This can be as simple as the gestures made in class • Move around the room • Integrate humour or a sense of fun into your lectures • Mentally prepare yourself before the lecture to display a level of excitement in the topic you are presenting • **Be creative**
Clear communication	• Work on your diction and pronunciation • Repeat important or complex concepts • Vary the pitch, volume and tone of your presentation • Use pauses and silence during lectures to refocus students • Attempt to cater for all types of learning styles in your communication
Applied knowledge	• Integrate theory and practice by describing your **business** experiences or consultancies • Collect current and interesting commercial examples • Look for real world examples from associates in industry, trade publications and other mainstream press or case studies • Possess a strong knowledge of the course and be able to show how this fits within the wider business environment
Rapport	• Remind students regularly that they are welcome to see you if they have any questions • Be mindful of the non-verbal cues that indicate how approachable you are • Treat students with respect • Be friendly to students, without being their friends

Be creative was added to the strategies relating to Dynamic delivery.
Under Applied knowledge in the teaching strategy 'Integrate theory and practice', the word marketing was replaced by business to make it relevant to all the co-researchers/lecturers taking part in this study.

2009). This exploratory study comprised the first cycle only. It was an in-depth study designed to generate initial insights and to establish the platform for further research in this area. The aim was to inform wider audiences within the HE sector, by documenting the action research *process* (Cunningham, 2008), thus empowering other researchers to adopt a similar approach. A five-stage cyclical model was adopted. The stages were: *diagnosing*, *action planning*, *action taking*, *evaluating*, and *specifying learning* (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 588). The cycle was applied as follows:

Diagnosing

Through open discussion, five co-researchers from the Faculty of Business were identified, who were recent graduates of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Programme (PGCertHE). They were keen to improve their own teaching practice through new approaches that may enhance the student learning experience and agreed to test the application of the three drama-based techniques in the live teaching setting, and then to reflect on and evaluate the outcomes.

Action planning

The co-researchers agreed to design and deliver two undergraduate teaching sessions (one lecture and one tutorial), featuring the use of the three techniques (sketch, soliloquy, and dramatic story) in each i.e. a total of six interventions. The lead researcher was responsible for provision of the necessary resources and skill set (Gray, 2014). Firstly, a training workshop was provided (3.5 hours duration), which involved an open

discussion on lecturer effectiveness, including the research study by Heffernan et al. (2010), and how the techniques could potentially have a positive impact. Following this, live demonstrations of each of the techniques were provided by the lead researcher (drawing on his previous experience in this area). This was followed by open discussion on how to design and deliver the interventions. During delivery, the lecturer may apply a variety of performance skills; for example, animation in body and voice, using humour, utilising classroom space, employing props, dramatic entrance and exit, suspense and surprise. In this regard we drew on the work of Tauber and Mester (2007) who advocate the use of performance skills in teaching and provide a detailed description of these acting strategies and how to apply them. The co-researchers were then issued with a set of 'how-to' guidance notes for reference during the design phase. Secondly, the lead researcher provided one-to-one coaching and mentoring to each of the co-researchers during this period. Finally, arrangements were made to video-record each of the live teaching sessions.

Action taking

This stage involved each of the co-researchers delivering their teaching sessions (one lecture and one tutorial) featuring the pre-prepared drama-based interventions. All sessions were video recorded (in full) in preparation for the evaluation stage.

Evaluating

Post-delivery, the video recordings for both teaching sessions were given to the co-researchers, to evaluate their personal learning and the perceived effectiveness of the interventions, through reflective video diaries. In addition – and to provide a student-centred perspective – the video recordings from two of the teaching sessions were given to six student research participants. These students were undergraduates but had *not* been attendees at the sessions. They were asked to view (individually) the recordings and then evaluate (through the use of a questionnaire) the effectiveness of the sessions based on the four constructs identified in the Heffernan et al. (2010) study. Following this, the lead researcher chaired a student focus group to explicitly discuss the use of drama-based approaches in teaching, and garner thoughts on potential advantages and disadvantages. This session was video recorded. The lead researcher then conducted an in-depth analysis of all data sets.

Thematic analysis was employed – a suitable approach for pedagogical action research (Norton, 2009). Four data sets were created: 1. Video footage from the teaching sessions; 2. Co-researcher reflective video diaries; 3. Student evaluation questionnaires, and 4. The student focus group. The thematic analysis was based on the framework created by Braun and Clarke (2006). For all but one data set, an inductive approach was taken for the most part, as codes and themes emerged. For data set 1 (the video footage) a priori coding was applied based on the pre-determined lecturer effectiveness criteria; specifically, the 19 teaching strategies for enhancing lecturer effectiveness [see Table 1]. This enabled us to determine if any of these strategies had been applied during the drama-based performances.

Specifying learning

This final phase involved the specification of learning from the research (Susman and Evered, 1978), emerging from the analysis of each of the data sets. This is discussed in our Summary of Learning section.

Ethical considerations

Approval to proceed with the study was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee. Lecturer co-researchers and student participants were given a *participant information sheet* and *consent form*. No participant names or other identifiers were included in the study to maintain anonymity. In some of the live performances there was an element of *student involvement*. These students were asked to complete an information sheet/consent form. In each session, the lecturer explained that the session would be video recorded in its entirety. Although the recordings captured the performances only (no footage of the student attendees), explicit consent from all student attendees was obtained.

Results and discussion

The data sets yielded copious amounts of data. In this section we have featured some of the key findings from each data set relating to the impact on teaching effectiveness, in support of student engagement.

Data set 1 comprised the video footage from each of the live recorded sessions (25 were executed in total). The purpose of the analysis was to observe the performances, and to identify which teaching strategies were in evidence (Heffernan et al., 2010). 11 of the 19 teaching strategies, were clearly applied in a variety of ways [see Table 2], particularly in relation to *dynamism* and *communication effectiveness* – the two constructs identified in the Heffernan et al. (2010) study as having the greatest direct effect on teaching effectiveness. In addition, there were numerous instances of this application across the entire data set. Although it is not possible within the scope of this article to show the analysis of each of the 25 performances that supports this conclusion, one example is provided below.

Preparing to Fail (a soliloquy/sketch combination)

In this performance, the learning point was the need for focused exam revision and to avoid procrastination. The lecturer played the character role of a procrastinating student. The scenario is as follows: The 'student' should be on his laptop immersed in revision as an exam is fast approaching. Instead, he becomes continually distracted by other things (Facebook, an online game, text messaging photographs) as the time ebbs away. As an added distraction he begins to screw up pieces of paper and throw them across the room into a wastepaper basket. Only 10 minutes remains so he re-energises by 'hitting' the floor and doing some press-ups. He then races through the last few minutes of the available time. Following the performance, the lecturer draws out the learning application from the class.

Table 2. Results of the study (Robson, 2018) mapped against strategies to enhance teaching effectiveness (Heffernan et al. 2010).

Construct	Teaching Strategies
Dynamic delivery	• **Display a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for the subject** • **Use drama in your lectures. This can be as simple as the gestures made in class** • **Move around the room** • **Integrate humour or a sense of fun into your lectures** • Mentally prepare yourself before the lecture to display a level of excitement in the topic you are presenting • **Be creative**
Clear communication	• Work on your diction and pronunciation • **Repeat important or complex concepts** • **Vary the pitch, volume and tone of your presentation** • **Use pauses and silence during lectures to refocus students** • **Attempt to cater for all types of learning styles in your communication**
Applied knowledge	• Integrate theory and practice by describing your business experiences or consultancies • Collect current and interesting commercial examples • **Look for real world examples from associates in industry, trade publications and other mainstream press or case studies** • **Possess a strong knowledge of the course and be able to show how this fits within the wider business environment**
Rapport	• Remind students regularly that they are welcome to see you if they have any questions • Be mindful of the non-verbal cues that indicate how approachable you are • Treat students with respect • Be friendly to students, without being their friends

The teaching strategies **in bold** were found in Robson's (2018) study.

The analysis evidenced teaching strategies linked to the dynamism and communication effectiveness constructs. The key strategy employed was *use of humour*. The soliloquy/sketch was designed to be a humorous performance to foreground a perennial student-related problem area. This was a way of making learning fun (Bradley et al., 2015) and creating a platform for class discussion. Other strategies were also in evidence; for example, *Creativity* (delivery of the script and use of props), use of *classroom space*, use of *drama and gestures* (the performance itself, and the emphatic and descriptive gestures employed during delivery), *voice animation* (variation in pitch, tone and volume, use of silences and pausing), and *enthusiasm* (the passion displayed during delivery). The duration of the entire performance was only 3.43 minutes, illustrating how drama-based tools can be integrated into a lesson plan to create a platform for further topic development without being overtly dominant.

The co-researchers' reflective video diaries were analysed as **data set 2**. One of the key themes which emerged in the reflections was the impact on teaching effectiveness. Some of the positive reflections are included below:

> I think doing the role play and the sketch . . . for very theoretical subjects actually was a really refreshing way of approaching theory because I think theory can seem quite abstract and quite detached from the real world and by having a sketch . . . it definitely kind of brought the theories alive and made them more dimensional.

> I most definitely created very good rapport with the students . . . using the techniques it really worked because they probably felt like I was on the same level as them . . . I think that really did build rapport between us.

> With the animation of my body ... When I looked at the video, I was so surprised at the amount of arm movement I was using ... I was surprised at how much I used it ... I think using my body the way that I did ... made it more effective overall.

These comments are insightful with reference to the student-centred research studies. For example, bringing theories to life through a sketch may facilitate the *application of knowledge* in an engaging way (Jin, 2000, Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2000, Bradley et al., 2015). Also, the lecturer's palpable sense of *rapport building* is notable (Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). Interestingly, one of the teaching strategies linked to *dynamism* (Heffernan et al., 2010) is to use 'drama' more; specifically, the use of gestures. In the quotation above it appears that the lecturer was using gestures in some form, in this case as part of the dramatic performance to convey meaning. Tauber and Mester (2007) suggest that appropriate use of animation in body can enhance effectiveness due to increased student motivation and increased lecturer confidence. Notwithstanding these positive reflections, a number of concerns were expressed, specifically with regard to use of the soliloquy. The following quotation crystallises the issue:

> I prefer the story telling and the sketches over soliloquies because I think that they feel more natural and are probably a little bit easier for a person to engage in.

Perhaps this indicates that some techniques may be more obvious and/or intuitive to lecturers, with different lecturers preferring different techniques. HE practitioners interested in applying this action research model, should address this issue very explicitly in the training workshop and provide focused support in the 1–1 coaching sessions, particularly with regard to the use of the soliloquy. The co-researchers also expressed the view that it was not necessary for all three techniques to be used in one session but to have them as part of the teaching toolkit that could be applied as and when required. In terms of maximising student engagement and showing a commitment to this (Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019), the following reflections highlight the potential of drama-based approaches:

> It captured student attention ... if they're strategically deployed at the start, middle and end of the session they can ... reinvigorate their attention at all three critical points within a given lecture or ... tutorial.

> ... we all have a range of techniques ... but this is a very powerful, additional tool ... I realise that I've become quite dependent on my asking students a lot of questions ... but it makes it richer having this more theatrical vein that can also be part of the session.

> I think that the sketches worked well ... students' attention was really high ... also during the stories I think I definitely saw them like much more engaged and paying much more attention than what they would normally do.

The co-researchers clearly perceived positive student engagement during delivery. Balwant (2018) links the extent of 'students' activation and pleasure' (p.389) with engagement and disengagement, so the comment on using drama tools strategically to engage and re-engage during the lesson seems on-point; indeed, Tauber and Mester (2007) suggest that well-organised and well-prepared role-playing by the lecturer can add an 'enlivening tool' (p.91) to the teaching repertoire.

In **data set 3**, the student participants were analysing the two video teaching sessions and looking for the aspects which they felt contributed to lecturer effectiveness. Some of their reflections are shown below:

> The creativity, use of humour, and charisma were most apparently on display during the two skits … these skits are an innovative and dynamic manner of engaging students using a combination of humorous entertainment and the personification of business problems.
>
> This role-playing exercise … helped me to grasp the subject much more easily compared to the tutor just standing and rambling away at the front. I would therefore value more exercises like this in more tutorials.
>
> … the effort put in was clearly visible by the use of skits and other performances during the lecture. This in my opinion shows that he values the time he has with the students, helping me to respect the lecturer more which leads to me really paying attention throughout … the work put in … helps to build a rapport between me and the lecturer.
>
> My interest was notably heightened with the role plays … I notably watched and listened more to these scenes and the information which followed more than the other information which was given on the video. This heightened my interest in the topic and allowed me to feel more engaged.

The student reflections appear to dovetail with the elements of lecturer effectiveness identified in the student-focused research studies; for example, establishing rapport (Bradley et al., 2015, Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). Also, the integration of humour (Heffernan et al., 2010, Bradley et al., 2015), and knowledge transfer other than through didactic means (Jin, 2000, Bradley et al., 2015). Nordmann et al. (2022) suggest that lectures can still be effective vehicles for teaching if carried out well, and the potential of drama to make a difference here is a thought-provoking take-away. In the last quotation, the student contrasts the information conveyed during the performances (and that which directly followed on) with the information given elsewhere in the lecture/tutorial delivery. It is not clear whether the latter was viewed as 'not-engaging' or simply 'less-engaging' but perhaps underscores the value of applying performance skills in general delivery (Street, 2007, Tauber & Mester, 2007, Thom, 2019). The second quotation suggests that drama interventions may have the potential to add value to the learning experience in the eyes of students. The third quotation highlights an interesting area to explore further: the possible link between students' perception of effort expended by the lecturer in delivering the performances and the building of rapport; and the possible link between rapport and greater student attention and engagement.

In **data set 4**, the students were explicitly discussing the possible contribution to effectiveness through the application of the techniques. The following comments are noteworthy:

> Students can be brought in to contribute to Drama Based Techniques either beforehand or even in live time. For example, during a skit, a student could stop a skit and ask a question related to the subject. It would be up to the actors to, in live time, engineer the scenario so that the subject of the question is addressed within the skit. An interactive approach to DBTs can provide personalised learning and can engage students at a deeper level.
>
> I think that it would a great idea to at least have one DBT per class if the topic is appropriate.

> Teachers should be aware of the over-use of DBTs so they do not become perceived as mundane, stale and irrelevant.

Although the students did express reservations about *all* lecturers being able to embrace the techniques, the insights above perhaps support the idea of the techniques forming part of an overall teaching toolkit alongside other pedagogical tools. In the first quotation, the student seems to be suggesting an approach based on forum theatre whereby students would have some influence over the direction of the portrayed scenario (Boal, 1979). This emphasises the co-creational nature of drama-based techniques (Bovill, 2020, Powell et al., 2020) and highlights additional options open to lecturers as they build confidence in applying the techniques.

Summary of learning

Our study showed that many of the practical teaching strategies to enhance lecturer effectiveness proposed by Heffernan et al. (2010), were in evidence across the entire set of 25 performances, particularly in relation to the *dynamism* and *communication effectiveness* constructs. Teaching strategies related to the *applied knowledge* and *rapport* constructs were less obvious from observation but may have been applied indirectly. *Key learning point*: Drama interventions have the potential to add value to the student learning experience and can be added to the lecturer's toolkit and applied at appropriate points during the lesson, without skewing the overall balance of the lesson plan. The shortest performance was 50 seconds and the longest 7:16 minutes, although the majority were between one to five minutes in duration. Our data revealed positive reactions to the co-researchers' lived experiences in applying the techniques, including the ability to make theories come alive, building rapport, and holding students' attention. They are seen as a useful additional tool to enhance teaching effectiveness and stimulate engagement and re-engagement, although they should be used judiciously within the overall lesson plan. *Key learning point*: Lecturers should be open to proactively exploring the use of drama-based techniques in their own teaching practice. The feedback from the student participants indicates positive support for the use of drama-based techniques by the lecturer in the classroom with one caveat: avoid overuse. Making the subject learning points easier to grasp and maximising attention and engagement were cited as benefits of the approach. *Key learning point*: Students may be receptive to and benefit from the use of drama-based techniques in the classroom. This reinforces the benefit of lecturers adding these tools to their teaching repertoire.

Our recommendations:

- *Provide opportunities*. Universities need to provide opportunities for lecturers to experiment with drama-based teaching tools and other innovative approaches in a sustained way. Drama training sessions for lecturers can be useful, but there needs to be follow-up and support. We currently run continuous professional development (CPD) workshops as part of the PGCertHE programme in our host university, including the offer of personalised coaching.
- *Identify champions*. Identifying lecturers that have a passion for and some experience in this area who are prepared to devote the time to kick-start the process is a pre-

requisite. Champions can design and execute action research projects, including the provision of training material, and provide appropriate support.

- *Establish communities of practice*. Communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are invaluable in securing sustainability over the long term. Practitioners can openly discuss ideas, share resources and personal experiences, provide peer support, create solutions to overcome barriers and challenges, and establish collaborative research projects.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has foregrounded the use of three drama-based techniques with the view of contributing to lecturer effectiveness in HE teaching and has explored the concept through a series of live trials as part of an action research project. Although this was a small-scale study, the investigations were in-depth, and the lived experiences of the co-researchers are well-documented with further insights having been provided by the interpretive analysis of each of the performances by the lead researcher, and the feedback from the student research participants.

Maximising the student learning experience will no doubt continue to remain high on the agenda for HE institutions. The research clearly shows that the use of drama-based techniques in HE teaching i.e. 'acting for the non-actor' can potentially contribute to teaching effectiveness in support of student engagement.

Limitations of the study and further research

The study involved one action research iteration only within the Faculty of Business at one university with five lecturer participants and six student participants. It was designed to generate initial insights only, thus paving the way for further research to generalise the findings. This is a live project and ongoing. We are currently working on further research which includes the use of drama to increase student engagement in the online environment and the barriers to lecturers adopting drama-based techniques in their teaching. We also propose that a longitudinal study would be beneficial to track over time the link between drama in teaching and student engagement.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Rob Robson is Associate Head of School (Student Success) in the Executive Business Centre at Greenwich Business School. He is also a training consultant in the field of corporate governance. Rob's research and writing interests are in innovative pedagogy in higher education and effective corporate governance.

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