



PTAS Project Report (for SMALL PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title:

Theory on stage – exploring the potential of theatrical dialogue for teaching social and cultural thought

Principal Investigator : Isabelle Darmon
School / Department : Sociology

Team members : Hugo Gorringer, Alexandra Smith

For further information, please contact: I Darmon

Grant recipients are expected to submit a brief report at the conclusion of their project which outlines briefly the following : nature of work completed; outcomes; benefits to student learning/student experience; dissemination activity (where relevant – actual and planned) and how the activity could inform future work or be transferred to other subject areas in the University. The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Brief Report (maximum 500 words)

What did you do?

This project explored the potential of theatrical dialogue for renewing the teaching of social and cultural theory and making it alive for students. It built on an international conference organised by the PI in December 2015, which had staged imagined dialogues between Max Weber and Georg Simmel, two major social theorists, written and performed by pairs of academics. The PTAS pilot project allowed us to turn the filmed dialogues into a vehicle for learning, in connection with the key texts used as a basis for each of the dialogues. The films are now available [here](#) (Click Weber/Simmel antagonisms – staged dialogues in the left column).

We organised two half-day workshops in semester 1 of 2016-17 with a small group of 2nd year Sociology 2A students and a Theatre studies postgraduate student. In the first workshop, students viewed the dialogues and assessed them, reflecting on the theatricality of the two social theorists. At the end of that half-day, the students decided to move directly to dialogue writing, instead of assessing dialogues written and performed by others. We knew that this would require more resources, as we needed more coaching from the Theatre studies PhD student involved in the project, and therefore the PI required and obtained additional funding from the Sociology department. The 2nd workshop was followed by 7 meetings in 2017.

The students developed a short play, of such good quality that they were able to invite students in English Literature (Bedlam actors) to perform it in front of their peers (Sociology 2nd year students, in the last class of the core course, on 30 March). The play will be performed for a lay audience at the Bedlam theatre in October.

What did you find out?



The students involved totally understood the rationale for the project and took it further, reshaping the project. The joint writing of a play, the mentoring by someone felt to be a peer (PhD student in Theatre studies), the joint enterprise with two student-actors were crucial in ensuring continuing drive and mutual stimulation and support.

The students were really keen to produce a play for a lay, non-academic audience, and this desire to make a contribution for the wider community was a key stimulation throughout.

Nevertheless numbers were low. Though in two cases the project helped students who found social theory very hard going, we also realised that theatre can build another barrier for students lacking prior experience of it. Future projects should make it very clear to students that there is professional coaching in both theatre and sociology involved.

How did you disseminate your findings?

Through a presentation at the Sociology 'work in practice' series in May; an article for *Bricolage* for the next issue (September). The PI will present a communication at a European sociological conference in August 2017 and a journal article on the same topic (the premises for this are included in the introduction to a special issue for the *Journal of Classical Sociology*, about to be published – May 2017. The introduction was written whilst this PTAS project was being implemented and was strongly influenced by this experiment).

What have been the benefits to student learning?

The 2nd year Sociology students have changed their own views on social theory, improved their understanding of the 2 theorists, whilst the Theatre studies PhD student and the two student actors have realised the potential of social theory as material for theatre. There was a lot of mutual mentoring involved in the project, as well as creative learning on all parts. This has been a truly enthralling experience, both for the students involved and for staff.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The project has led to a strengthened cooperation between Theatre studies and Sociology, to be materialised in further teaching cooperation projects. More generally the use of theatrical dialogue for teaching theory should be of interest to SPS staff teaching Political theorists, and beyond the School, in Philosophy and Law. A way to encourage this would be to invite targeted staff to attend the work in progress seminar; as well as the Bedlam performance in October 2017.

Who can be contacted for further details?

Isabelle Darmon

Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:

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