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RECEIVED 27 February 2024

ACCEPTED 30 April 2025

PUBLISHED 01 October 2025

CITATION

Lyngstad MB (2025) Using drama in café dialogue as an alternative approach in multicultural educational processes.
Front. Educ. 10:1392678.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1392678

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Using drama in café dialogue as an alternative approach in multicultural educational processes

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Introduction: This article discusses the use of drama and storytelling in café dialogue at an adult education centre (AEC). I will present three drama workshops that were implemented as part of café dialogue and that explore the same topics as in traditional café dialogue at an AEC. Participants from different countries came together for exploration in the drama workshop, whereas the group participants in café dialogue came mostly from the same country in order to facilitate the organisation of a language host. I will also analyse and discuss the data material from the interviews as this relates to the research questions. The overall goal of this article is to explore the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue.

Methods: Our research methods are observations, logs, and interviews. Data were collected through participant and non-participant observation of three drama workshops in which several drama conventions were used. Two teachers at an AEC with a drama background led the first workshop while I observed, and I led the second workshop while one of the teachers with a drama background actively participated and wrote a log afterwards. The third workshop was led by both a teacher with a drama background and myself. After the workshops, a colleague from HVL and I conducted individual interviews with the two teachers with drama experience, a language host, and a participant in the drama workshops. In this article I analyse the interviews to gain more insight into the teachers' and students' experience of drama as part of café dialogue.

Results: The students actively participated in collective creative processes and gave different topics an aesthetic form. They generated much joy and laughter in the classroom. Drama opened the way for both nonverbal and verbal communication across age and culture. Several students were reluctant at first but became more active over time thanks to the creation of a safe atmosphere and the voluntary nature of participation. The article includes many examples of drama conventions fit for use in this work, which the teacher introduces and which allow participants to take the initiative in the processes. In the drama workshops, the teachers and participants created a safe space together in which they could explore artistic expressions collectively. According to the teachers with drama experience, they too needed to be more active in these workshops. By bringing drama into café dialogue, the participants had an embodied experience and emotive fictional engagement. It seems easier to explore and play out others' stories than one's own. The participants experienced a sense of mastery because drama offers several possibilities they could play with and an expanded form of communication. One of the teachers found that whereas the café dialogue was structured and organised, the drama workshops were more open and made the participants more active in many ways.

Discussion: In this article, I discuss the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue. I will interpret the drama workshop and interview material in light of theory.

KEYWORDS

drama, improvisation, creating, café dialogue, joy

Introduction and background to the study

“Breathe calmly, breathe, breathe.” A participant is bending over the “birthing” woman and assists in the birth. Suddenly, a participant who is hidden behind them leaps forward as the newborn baby. Laughter spreads through the room. (Observations from a drama workshop in café dialogue).

In this article, I will present and discuss a research project from an adult education centre (AEC) where we explored drama in the classroom.

In Norway, newly arrived immigrant adults can participate in introductory or welcome classes at an AEC in a number of subjects in order to learn Norwegian. The classes follow the principles of the National Centre for Education (NAFO), which state that students should “receive intensive instruction in Norwegian and other school subjects. The length of time a student attends an introductory class varies, but instruction in introductory programmes must be temporary and may last for up to 2 years” (NAFO, n.d.). One such AEC, located on the west coast of Norway, has approximately 40 students, most of whom speak Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Swahili, or Tigrinya. The majority of the students have no primary school experience from their home country.

The AEC had indicated having challenges with students in the form of microaggressions, bullying, and the social controlling of each other. Therefore, they wanted to explore café dialogue as a way of building bridges between students. To avoid further issues, they invited the collaboration of Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) to explore methods and investigate whether the situation could be rectified (Ravneberg et al., 2021). The teachers at the AEC and the researchers wanted to explore new learning methods in these settings. We three researchers from HVL followed the employees’ process of implementing café dialogue in adult education as an alternative approach in multicultural educational processes.

Café dialogue is an educational form for learning (Elvekrok and Smith, 2013) that emphasises dialogue on various topics for the purpose of training participants to both listen to each other and share thoughts with each other. Together, they reflect on several topics and train themselves to be part of a community of disagreement (Iversen, 2014). The participants are placed around café tables, and a café host leads the dialogue. The topics are planned beforehand, and participants are informed about these in advance. The café host is located at the same table the whole time and the participants move from one table to another. The topics for the café dialogue that we observed were care, joyfulness, and dreams.

As a professor of drama and applied theatre with a background in drama in intercultural work (Lyngstad, 2016, 2017; Lyngstad and

Solbue, 2021), I found the assignment from the learning centre particularly interesting. However, my prejudices were that café dialogue could become too rigid and sedentary, and that drama might add more active forms of learning to this work. I have a twofold aim for this article: to describe some of the drama work we did as part of café dialogue, to explore the potential and the limitations of including drama and theatre in café dialogue.

The episode outlined in the introduction is taken from the first drama workshop at the learning centre, where I observed the two teachers leading the drama workshop with students representing a range of ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds. Both participants and teachers were active in the creative processes. The exercises in which the participants took part were physical, with non-verbal communication being more important than verbal communication. The topic of the day was joyfulness. They explored the theme, demonstrated it through practical action, obtained new experience together, and showed a lot of joy through their action. My research question is:

What are the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue in an adult education centre?

Earlier research on café dialogue

According to Hvatum et al. (2021), “well-organised café dialogue engages and activates. The students learn by collaborating, participating, and listening” (my translation). According to these researchers, the prerequisite for successful café dialogue is that both teachers and students are well-prepared and have prior knowledge of the topic they are going to talk about. There should also be a menu with a few questions. Among other things, the students in their study pointed out that it is important how café dialogue offers a variation from other learning activities, that it is interesting to discuss topics without definitive answers, that you get to know people in the class, and that you learn a lot from listening to other people’s points of view. Their research on café dialogue refers only to activity through oral verbal dialogue and not through non-verbal or physical activity.

Elvekrok and Smith (2013) studied café dialogue as a pedagogical tool in very large classes. They found more engaged students with a better understanding of the problems. Their participants found café dialogue to be a good supplement to traditional teaching methods. They enjoyed communicating with other students and learning by listening to each other. But they also practised by putting their own thoughts into words and discussing problems that are related more to real-life situations. The participants also networked with each other and were inspired to continue studying further. However, the students needed to have knowledge about the subject they were discussing: “Only then is it possible to reflect on one’s own values, and this is where the dialogue has its strength” (Elvekrok and Smith, 2013, p. 35).

The researchers claim that the dialogue facilitates a process-oriented development of knowledge that is based on reflection and interpretation combined with creativity (Elvekrok and Smith, 2013, p. 29). While I was analysing the data material from the drama workshop, my research colleague Ravneberg (2024) conducted an analysis of our café dialogue observations, interviews, and focus groups. She noted that professional discretion combined with co-creation and co-production [were] organisational prerequisites for a positive change within the learning environment. The leaders at the AEC conducted professional discretion by employing bilingual immigrants as assistants there (Ravneberg, 2024).

Understanding yourself and others through storytelling and drama

“Drama is a way to learn. Through the students’ active identification with fictitious roles and situations, they learn to research and investigate topics, events and relationships between people” (O’Neill, 1982, p. 15).

In drama, we change our perspective by stepping into different roles and situations, and we must express our thoughts and feelings through an aesthetic form. Participants have to relate in different ways to form the basic elements of drama, which are figure, story, space, and time. Sometimes, all the basic elements are central, while at other times, only some of them are explored more closely, such as by delving more deeply into a place, time, or character. Regardless of the focus chosen, the basic story itself will be different and it will be developed further through collective creative processes along the way.

The collective creative processes in drama and theatre are decisive for the result. In the encounter between two actors in a play, something known as aesthetic doubling occurs (Szatkowski, 1985, p. 143 and 163), as figure A plays the role A* and figure B plays the role B*, which teaches those involved something about themselves, their own role, the other, and the other’s role. In the interaction that is highlighted in the aesthetic process, new relationships can arise, as can a sense of community and solidarity. The Norwegian Education Act highlights this as being vital for schools:

Common reference frameworks are important for each person’s sense of belonging in society. This creates solidarity and connects each individual’s identity to the greater community and to a historical context. A common framework gives and shall give room for diversity, and the pupils must be given insight into how we live together with different perspectives, attitudes and views of life. The experiences the pupils gain in the encounter with different cultural expressions and traditions help them to form their identity. A good society is founded on the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5).

In drama processes, emphasis is placed on various artistic inputs and cultural expressions. A drama process may, for example, start with a piece of art, a photograph, a piece of music, an object, a story, a character, an item of clothing, or something similar (Heggstad and Heggstad, 2022), but it can also start with an exercise, a game, music, a question, a concept, or a theme.

The reason fiction is so central to drama work is that it offers a level of protection so that the actor can delve into new ideas through a fictional world outside of themselves. Similarly, participants can delve deeper into a topic by taking in the fictional world outside of themselves. The fictional world can be categorised according to three levels of fiction: one can pretend to be somewhere else, one can pretend to be in a different time, or one can pretend to be a different person. These levels of fiction can be explored separately or simultaneously. Heathcote emphasises that “dramatic activity is the direct result of the ability to role-play — to want to know how it feels to be in someone else’s shoes” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 49). This includes practising seeing situations from perspectives other than one’s own. This may also highlight non-verbal and bodily cognition, which are missed here:

The teaching and training shall ensure that the pupils are confident in their language proficiency, that they develop their language identity and that they are able to use language to think, create meaning, communicate and connect with others. Language gives us a sense of belonging and cultural awareness. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5).

With regard to being part of a community, language is presented as central to feeling a sense of belonging. However, it is not clear whether this applies to both verbal and non-verbal communication. In drama and theatre, the body and voice are a person’s most important means of expression, and one is therefore concerned with developing these in tandem. A way of working actively with language is through storytelling (Bakke and Lindstøl, 2023). By exploring, telling, and listening to personal stories, participants get to know themselves and each other better (Lyngstad, 2016, 2017; Lyngstad and Solbue, 2021). But stories can be shared in many ways, including non-verbally. Examples of this are provided later in the chapter.

According to Horsdal (1999), meaning is created not in isolation but in encounters with others. She contends that people must know who they are in order to know what to do and where to go. One way to find out is by focusing on creating and sharing personal stories. Horsdal sees “personal identity as a narrative construct based on experiences and memories” (Horsdal, 1999, p. 11).

In my earlier research on storytelling workshops with immigrants (Lyngstad, 2016, 2017), participants worked with personal stories in pairs, in smaller groups, or in group sessions. It was crucial to start with something all participants knew and would think acceptable to share, such as the story of their name, their favourite food, a place where they liked to play when they were little, a person they cared about, and so on. I have found that it is important to focus on positive stories, as this creates a greater sense of safety and joy for both the storyteller and the listener. In the encounter between the narrator and the listener, a space of opportunity arises (Lyngstad, 2017) where the stories of both the narrator and the listener meet. Since people are reflected in each other’s stories (Lyngstad, 2017), their stories allow them to form new relationships and build bridges between people and cultures, and people can find resonances with their own stories in those of others. As Dahlsveen’s research shows, community and aesthetics lift the memory (Dahlsveen, 2014).

In the planning and implementation of these storytelling methods, it is important to choose tasks that captivate the participants and challenge them to share personal, but not private, stories (Lyngstad, 2017). The choice of storytelling tasks and the way the stories are told are also decisive for whether a storytelling space is opened up between the storyteller and the listener, and whether the latter is reflected in the story being told.

Bakke and Lindstøl (2023, p. 65) highlight the importance of learning through the body:

The body is connected to the experience of space, and the body is linked to the senses and imagination. We experience and understand what is said and done in teaching, through the body, both linguistically, emotionally and physically. When we are present and thinking, experiencing senses. Experiencing and acting, it happens with and in the body, and therefore the body can be the starting point for creating and making meaning in a dramaturgical context.

Methods

My research methods were observations, logs, and interviews. Observations and logs were used to describe the workshops and helped me prepare the interviews and better understand the interview objects. The data material from the interviews was thematic analysed.

At the AEC where we performed our research, teaching must follow and comply with the Norwegian Education Act and the core curriculum of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, which states that “school shall allow the pupils to experience the joy of creating, engagement and the urge to explore, and allow them to experience seeing opportunities and transforming ideas into practical actions” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 8).

This principle also applies to Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, forming a central part of my preconception about the school’s responsibilities. It guides both my teaching and my observations of teaching. By engaging with what I observe and analysing the interview material, my understanding changed as a result of the intervention and findings.

Observation

Data were collected through participant and non-participant observation: participant observation when I was leading the drama workshop myself and taking part in the practice, and non-participant observation when I was observing the two teachers leading the drama workshop. It was important to combine these two forms of observation, as there are advantages and disadvantages to both. A teacher may get closer to the participants and the exploration of the material by leading the drama workshop and actively participating. However, it can be challenging to manage the role of teacher and observer at the same time. Alternatively, as a non-participating observer, it is possible to concentrate on the observer role, but then it may be not as easy to get so close to the situations.

Observers take notes in different ways. Ours were mixed, in key word form and more detailed word-by-word form. As a storyteller, narrative researcher, and professor of drama and applied drama, I have

long experience of studying student activities in fiction and I am trained to present my observations in narratives. Our observation was important for a better understanding of the interview material.

Interviews

To obtain a better understanding of the outcome of the café dialogue in the main research project, Ravneberg, Solbue, and I conducted interviews with people in different positions, such as the café host, the R&D leaders, and a language host (Ravneberg et al., 2021). The interviews were conducted mainly at the AEC immediately after the workshops, but in some cases they were carried out later by telephone.

Interview guides were created before all of the interviews with the people attending the café-dialogue. Although we mainly adhered to the interview guides, new questions arose in response to interview feedback.

There were always two researchers attending the interview, with one concentrating on leading the interview while the other took notes. Ravneberg and I collected the data material together from the interviews with the people attending the ordinary café dialogue and the people attending the drama workshop as part of the café dialogue. But while Ravneberg was analysing the data material from the interviews about the ordinary café dialogue in her article (2024), this article is based on my analysis of the interviews about the drama workshop. Observation notes and logs helped me to get a better understanding of the situations in the classroom and prepared me for the interview process.

The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) approved the procedures for data handling and storage. We ensured compliance with ethical guidelines such as anonymity in all of the studies.

I analysed the interviews about the drama workshop as part of the café dialogue with two teachers, one of the students who participated in all three drama workshops and one language host who attended the drama workshop.

Analysis

My research question relating to drama in café dialogue formed the basis for the analysis of the data material: *What are the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue in an adult education centre?*

I conducted thematic interviews in the tradition of Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis “offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 77). I familiarised myself with the data by reading and re-reading my data material several times while trying to “identify, analys(e) and report pattern (themes) within (the) data” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 79). I attempted to collate codes into themes and checking the themes against this research question: *How and why to implement drama in café dialogue?*

I attempted several ways into the data material. I hoped to experience the thematic analysis as “a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 78). In my first attempt I started

with the data material from the interview with the teachers with a drama background and then with the material from the interview with the students. I used different colours to find the patterns. I then found that the teachers' use of drama language was similar to mine, and the students' voices became too silent. Then I tried turning it around and started over again with the data material from the student. Then I found another pattern. I also compared the findings from the various interviews and thematised the findings.

I have developed an understanding through a continuous process where the interpretation of the parts and the whole takes place in dynamic interaction. This process, where I moved back and forth between the parts and the whole, meant that my interpretation developed and became increasingly nuanced over time. In this way I gained a more in-depth understanding of the material.

Ethical considerations

In this research project, I was concerned about making ethical choices, such as anonymising the informants and being aware of my role as a professional.

I would prefer to have obtained interview material from more than one of the students that took part in the drama workshop so as to get a more nuanced picture, but the one student voice I obtained is important even so. In the context of the interview with this student, it was important for me to be aware of the skewed power relationship, both to create security within the situation and to keep it in mind when interpreting the answers.

In some of this research I have been researching my own practices, since some of the drama workshops were led by me. The first workshop was led by two learning centre teachers with a drama background while I observed. These two teachers were experienced in conducting drama with students but not in connection with café dialogue. The other two workshops were led by myself, with one teacher with a drama background as a co-teacher. However, I was glad that two of the teachers knew the drama field, the class, and café dialogue; they were active in their own workshop, and one of them was active in the workshop that I led and co-led the last workshop with me.

On the one hand, the teachers' drama background may have influenced the research results because the teachers are so positive about the use of drama at the learning centre. On the other hand, it may have made the teachers more capable of expressing their opinions about the results of drama in the classroom.

In the thematic analysis, I may have overlooked some significant patterns or themes while focus overly on the research question.

An introduction to the drama workshops in the café dialogue

Presented here are the drama workshops in the café dialogue, supplemented with comments from the log and the interviews about the workshops. The three drama workshops are presented and discussed to determine whether this is a suitable way of using drama in café dialogue.

In the drama workshop with the intercultural group, it was not possible to have an interpreter for each language represented.

We therefore wished to focus mainly on non-verbal communication and embodied experiences (Freebody and Finneran, 2021), such as presenting one's interest not through words but through action: dancing, swimming, cooking, walking, playing videogames, relaxing, and so on. Rather than just listening to one another's stories, participants played them out by stepping into someone else's shoes (Heathcote, 1984, p. 49) or through creating and exploring new stories together. Through this form of activity, we hoped the participants would obtain new understandings, inspire each other, and also perhaps repeat one another's movements to acquire an embodied experience of each other's interests. Director, theatre practitioner, activist, and author Boal, the founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, is critical about what verbal communication alone can accomplish in a situation. His advice is to show what you mean rather than to tell what you mean. He constructed forum theatre (Boal, 2002), a theatre form where participants create a play with several situations in which the protagonist is oppressed. The audience is then invited to change these situations by taking the oppressed person's place in the play and exploring different options for action. The distinctions between the actor and spectator have been erased, and Boal therefore created the word "spectactor" (Boal, 2002).

Using drama to explore topics together

In these drama workshops the participants explored different entrances into fictional work. We used drama conventions that complement each other by activating the participants in different ways, such as through fabulating, improvising, creating different still images, assuming different roles, and acting out different scenes.

Workshop 1

The topic of the first drama workshop was care. The two teachers with a drama background led the workshop, and the participants were of different ages and came from different countries. They prepared the room together. The students were not accustomed to coming to a classroom without any desks—this seemed to surprise them—but they seemed to handle the situation well. The two teachers gathered the students in a circle so that everyone could see each other.

Name and a movement

The first thing everyone did in the circle was to say their name and make a movement. Then the rest of the class repeated their own names and made a movement straight afterwards. This may be like a ritual where everyone collaborates to create a common rhythm where everyone practises being looked at. It was interesting to observe how active they were, and they inspired each other.

Later, when all the students were walking around in the room to different types of music, it was up to the students to choose who they dared to look in the eye. After a while, the teachers split the class in two and gave them different tasks: half of the class was allowed to look each other in the eye, and the rest were not. After a while they did the

opposite. This made changes in the group; you could see how those who were allowed to look others in the eye were more open and relaxed.

The students were also invited to stand in two lines opposite each other, forming an alley, before the students, one at the time, went through the alley while being applauded by the class. When I first observed the teacher introducing this exercise so early in the workshop, I became sceptical. I considered it daring to introduce this exercise so early, but surprisingly it seemed to bring a lot of them out of their shells and led to a lot of laughter in the group. There was a lot of energy, sound, and laughter, and the whole class was supportive when individual students had to face the room alone.

Mirror

All the students were challenged to work in pairs and mirror each other's movement. Some people feel safer working in small groups, while some may feel it is too close. They were encouraged to work on different levels and change between small and big movements. Theatre director Boal (2002) highlights this exercise because it trains people to look at each other and lead each other. They practise giving up control.

Mime

The whole class gathered and started to mime what makes them feel joyful. This challenged them to share something personal. One after the other, they had to show the others their mime. Here they had to improvise, but those who showed their mime last had more time to decide what to show. After this, the students were miming together and miming "how do we look when we are happy?" Here they were able to see the differences in the class.

Pictures of care

The subject for exploration was joyfulness. The teachers shared many pictures of people gathered together. The students had to choose the picture they liked best and then share their reason for choosing that picture.

Then, in smaller groups, they chose a picture they wanted to work with more closely, and together they made a still image (a tableau) inspired by this picture. In this kind of work, students can work non-verbally by just studying the picture and creating it together by placing themselves one after the other into the picture. What we saw here was that the group worked very well together across age and cultural background.

A way to get deeper into the situation and develop and expand stories based on the picture is to ask the students several questions connected to the picture: if one person left the situation in the picture, who left and why? What did the people in the picture see from their position? They could also make a series of tableaux telling a story. How would the movement change from one tableau to the next? And they could even make small movements. The short example at the beginning of this article came from this exercise. The students started to play and create from these pictures, such as what happened before

or after this situation. It was a strong and beautiful little scenario that brought out a lot of fun.

The students were all active and seemed to understand the task the teachers gave them. Beforehand, the teachers had some worries:

We want to get the students to make a small dramatisation of a situation that may not initially be so pleasurable, but which turns to joy. It could perhaps be a picture of a woman or a man who looks sad, what is missing in life, and what it took in this person's life to make them happy.

The challenge will be to get them to understand the instructions, or what they are going to do, but it will be as it is. It is not certain that it will be as we had planned, but it can be good anyway. The goal is for them to gain an understanding of the issue of images, and that we can use [them] when we work with poetry, and that they are able to step into a different role, take someone else's perspective. (Teacher 1)

Workshop 2

In the second workshop, we made statues individually and a still image (tableau) together. According to Neelands and Goode (2015), the drama convention of *stills* (tableaux) can provide a unique opportunity to explore the meanings of different words and also expand participants' way of expressing themselves. Still images are:

A very economical and controlled form of expression as well as a sign to be interpreted or read by observers; groups are able to represent more than they would be able to communicate through words alone; a useful way of representing 'tricky' content such as fights; simplifies complex content into easily managed and understandable form; requires reflection and analysis in the making and observing of images (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p. 28).

When participants are given the task of creating still images of a topic, the person leading the class must be careful about the words they choose. Do the words highlight community or do they do the opposite? Is it possible to find words that allow for dialogue and exploration rather than creating conflict? In verbal language, a greater sense of difference can be created between participants. The purpose of creating still images for various themes is to seek a concrete understanding of the words or concepts. Participants should show this through action, not hide it through words (Boal, 2002). For the participants, this opened the way for new ways of expressing themselves, regardless of their competence in the Norwegian language.

By making still images with the whole group, participants experienced creating and improvising together without words. They decided when and how to join the pictures. First, they were encouraged to make the still image, then the movement, and then the sounds. A three-step journey may make it feel safer to follow the process. Boal (2002) emphasises the importance of introductory exercises to warm up the body and be able to understand and follow the process. Here they trained to accept each other's ideas. In smaller groups, participants were challenged to explore certain themes and moments by creating still images in

layers and studying these more closely. I proceeded to challenge the participants to bring the still images to life by, for example, reinforcing the image by adding a movement and repeating it, or by those standing in the tableau saying out loud *the thoughts* of their character or their character's *line*. Participants also lined up behind the figures in the tableau to say a thought or line they thought those figures might have said. In addition, they *interviewed* some of the figures in the tableau and they answer in role. The students took also used the “hot seat” method, where one student was placed in the “hot seat” and tasked with answering questions the other students came up with, responding to challenges or solving problems under pressure.

In the second workshop, we worked collectively with creating stories. We started by choosing one picture from many to look into more closely. The students chose a picture of a woman with long blonde hair standing on the beach, scowling and looking out to sea. Together we created this woman: we built up the character, who she was, her age, her thoughts, her dreams, her life situation, etc. We also made up a story about who she was, what she was thinking about, waiting for, and longing for. The participants quickly came up with the idea that she had a heartbreak. We created the home she had left and composed a letter that had been delivered to her. Furthermore, we created scenes from her life, including an encounter with a man in a café. The participants created the café and took on different roles at the café, and a man and a woman from different countries played a couple. More of the participants moved into the café scene and start acting and improvising as other café guests. This scene led to a lot of laughs and built bridges between people of different cultures and ages.

We also made a space for this woman's home and made scenes outside her door. As a teacher, I tried to introduce some conflict—her boyfriend delivered a letter to her door, what did he write? We created his letter together.

By bringing in the convention of the “thoughts tunnel” (Heggstad and Heggstad, 2022), the students stood opposite each other in two lines with a space between the two lines as in a tunnel. Then I as “teacher-in-role” of the young girl went between the two lines of participants and, as I passed them, they constructed the thoughts of this character and spoke them out loud. I repeated their thoughts so that everyone could hear them. I walked through the tunnel again, assuming the role of this young woman, and the students gave advice to the young woman as I passed by.

A day in the life of a person of special interest

The convention “a day in life” provided us with the opportunity to study a person over time. After the participants had worked in groups with different images, I chose one of the images to proceed with. This involved splitting everyone into new groups and giving them a time of day for that person and creating a play for that time, in order to explore the person further. Here, the participants were challenged to add elements of excitement and turning points to the play: “drawing attention to the influences and exposing the forces that drive a character to a moment of conflict or decision: emphasising how inner conflicts and tensions shape the events and circumstances of the narrative” (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p. 37).

Workshop 3

The third drama workshop was led by one of the teachers with a drama background and myself. The group composition changed a bit but still included many of those from the first drama workshop.

Hi, Ha, Ho

We started by gathering the participants in a circle. The first exercise was the game *Hi, Ha, Ho*, where participants begin by saying *Hi* and reaching both hands towards the person they choose to look at in the circle, who reciprocates by raising both hands and answering *Ha*, while the people beside this person are moving their own hands towards the person while saying ‘*Ho*’. In this exercise, participants need to concentrate, look at each other, and train themselves to be seen. The words they say do not mean anything and they are easily mixed up, so this creates a lot of laughter. The game starts at a slow tempo and accelerates as soon as they are more trained and the rhythm and movement start to settle.

Game with name and interest

Because there were some new participants, we had a game where everyone shared their name while dramatising the things they like to do. This was meant as a way for participants to get to know each other better and help them to memorise some facts about each other.

Mime words

The teacher says some words that they will make individual statues of. The words used were “baby,” “old,” “mum,” “father,” “youth,” “teacher,” “travel,” and “pupil.”

This exercise was intended to warm up the body and let the participants get an understanding of their own body language and study each other (Boal, 2002). It was also a way to get a better understanding of words.

Storytelling

As the students' Norwegian language skills varied, we did a lot of work non-verbally to give them embodied experience (Freebody and Finneran, 2021). Instead of choosing personal stories in the beginning, we chose to create a fictional story together, and we chose an activity that everyone felt they could be a part of. In this common fiction-making, we improvised together, and it became everyone's story.

As soon as we had an overview of the students' language skills, we were able to introduce some storytelling activities, such as storytelling workshops (Lyngstad, 2017; Lyngstad and Solbue, 2021). The participants worked with personal stories in pairs, in small groups, or in plenum sessions. It was crucial to start with something they all knew and would find acceptable to share, such as the story about their own name, their favourite food, a place they liked to play when they were children, a person they cared about, and so on. In this work I found it important to focus on the positive stories, as this

creates a greater sense of safety and joy for both the storyteller and the listener. In the encounter between the narrator and the listener, a space of opportunity arises (Lyngstad, 2017), where the stories of both the narrator and the listener meet. Since people are reflected in each other's stories (Lyngstad, 2017), the stories can enable them to form new relationships and build bridges between people and cultures.

When planning and implementing drama and storytelling work, it was important to choose tasks that captivate the participants, as highlighted in previous café dialogue research (Elvekrok and Smith, 2013; Hvatum et al., 2021). In the drama workshop, we encouraged the participants to share stories that were personal but not private. The choice of storytelling tasks and the way the stories are told are also decisive for whether a storytelling space is opened up between the storyteller and the listener, and whether the latter is reflected in the story being told.

Creating fictional stories

I covered the floor with several pictures. Each of the participants was given the task of choosing one of the pictures and trying to create a story about the people in the picture. Who are they, what do they think, what do they say, what put them in this situation, what happened just before the picture was taken or straight after, who else is around them that the camera cannot see? The participants individually made statues or mimed some part of their picture. After their individual work, they made tableaux together inspired by some of the pictures.

We wanted to listen to music that the participants liked but found this difficult because we received no response to the question about what music they liked. When we put some music on—"Jeruselema"—something happened. As the teacher wrote in her log:

It turned out that the music is from South Africa and one student knew a dance that was linked to the music. Thus, she instructed us in the dance. Some of the students opted out. It was a well-known situation and is probably due to the fact that there were both men and women in the same class. Too bad, as this could have been a real "icebreaker" (Teacher 1).

Active assessment choices

An alternative to fiction work that is often used in drama workshops is active assessment choices where the teacher makes statements that the participants must make decisions about. The purpose of this exercise is to activate and engage the participants and make them aware of their own and others' attitudes. One of the exercises we worked on was a four-corner exercise on the theme of friendship. Here, the teacher presented a statement and gave four possible answers. The students positioned themselves in one of four corners, each indicating one of the four possible answers. For example, the hardest thing about friendship is: being a good friend (corner 1); making new friends in Norway (corner 2); keeping friendships (corner 3); none of these—you have a different idea (corner 4). The fourth corner is always open—it is where you stand if none of the other corners fits and you have another idea.

A fellow drama teacher and I designed some games at the learning centre that we played with the participants. Afterwards, the participants were able to make games on a theme of their choice. In the subsequent discussion with the participants, the teachers' involvement and presence were highlighted as particularly important.

Forum theatre as a dress rehearsal for reality

In the last part of this workshop, we were working with forum theatre, a theatrical form founded by Boal (2002). According to Boal anyone can do theatre, even actors. And theatre can be done everywhere, even in theatre (Boal, 2002).

Forum theatre is a part of the Theatre of the Oppressed: "The Theatre of the Oppressed is a system of physical exercises, aesthetic games, pictorial drawings and special improvisations whose aim is to protect, develop, and transform the human vocation by transforming the practice of the theatre into an effective tool for the understanding of social and personal problems and the effort to find a solution to them" (Boal, 2000, p. 28) (my translation).

Participants create forum play with situations where the protagonist are oppressed and play it out for people who are given the opportunity to try out and explore these situations and change the outcome. It is crucial that the topic be something that matters to the participants, so forum theatre can be a way to look at ourselves and each other to get a better understanding of life.

A forum play has a protagonist and there may be many antagonists that oppress the protagonist. After the forum play has been played out once for the spectators, and before the joker, who leads the process, asks the actors to play it over again, the joker challenges the spectators to take responsibility for changing the situation. This means that a new role is constructed in the forum theatre, in which the spectator becomes the "spectator" (Boal, 2002).

The forum play we constructed was about two sisters who were living together, but only one of them took responsibility and did the housework. The other sister did nothing except make disorder in the house and oppress her sister. The participants liked to see their teachers in role, and they laughed a lot, but it took a while for them to take the responsibility of coming on stage and trying out the situation.

After this, the students were asked to think about a situation in their life where they have been oppressed. The teacher wrote in her log that "they gave no response to this, and they did not understand the task." But might it also have been that they did not dare to tell? We chose to change the task and instead study the pictures again to see if there were any oppressed people. The participants chose a picture of a couple by a table where the man was only looking at his mobile phone. They created the same picture live, and the students went into the situation and replaced the oppressed protagonist and tried to get in contact with the man and stopped and changed the situation where the woman was being ignored. The teacher commented on this in her log:

This is a pretty cautious group and I experienced them as quite slow in the beginning. They were probably a little unsure if they were doing it right. There were still soft smiles and laughter, and after a quarter of an hour most of the students thawed out. Several of the students participated voluntarily in the improvisation. Because of the low language level, we had to make the tasks easy.

Dealing with oppression in our own lives was too difficult to understand. I still think that this can be a good task when they start to get used to the way of working (Teacher 1).

She commented on one student in particular:

A student who is reluctant to engage in activities with others was initially sceptical but thawed out afterwards. The boy participated several times in role-playing and improvisations. He was one of those who expressed afterwards that he wished we did this more often (Teacher 1)

According to the teacher, the feedback from the class was unanimous:

They want to do this more often. A student thought we could do this once a week. They thought this was a good way to learn Norwegian. They felt safe and happy. One student stated that she was a rather shy person, but that she was surprised at herself—that she participated as actively as she did (Teacher 1).

In all three workshops, the participants took part in several collective creative processes. Through various artistic approaches to the creative processes, they explored themes in teams both verbally and non-verbally. The participants worked across ages and cultural backgrounds and there was a lot of laughter and joy in the room. Some activities seemed to be more difficult than others, particularly if they needed to share personal stories or opinions.

Results and discussion

While processing the interview material, I attempted to identify meanings in the data by creating patterns in the opinions that could be linked to the research question: *What are the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue in an adult education centre?*

In this article, I discuss the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue as an alternative methodology in multicultural educational processes. Here are some of the themes that came up in the thematic analysis and observation that I would like to discuss.

The learning potential of drama

A language host mentioned the drama classes, stating, “They get more out of it, especially now that we have drama as well, and that you can bring out new sides through it.” Here we see that this fits under the theme *Changes*. The language host did not mention what kind of changes, but his statement that through drama it is possible to bring out new sides is in agreement with O’Neill’s (1982) comments that in drama they learn to “research and investigate topics, events and relationships between people” (p. 15). This is further supported by one of the teachers, who stated that the participants understood concepts better after exploring them in drama classes.

From the comments to the language host it seems that drama allows participants to explore new viewpoints, although it is not stated how or why. Is it because with fictional work, as with drama as highlighted by

Heathcote, you can learn through another perspective by being in someone else’s shoes (Heathcote, 1984, 49)? According to one of the workshop teachers, it seems that the participants found it easier to create stories and action in fiction together. Might this have felt safer than dealing with each other’s personal stories? Several participants entered fictional situations in which they were acting. The potential of aesthetic doubling may have been realised (Szatkowski, 1985). In forum theatre it also seems easier to enter others’ stories than to share one’s own. While Horsdal (1999) states that meaning is created not in isolation but in encounters with others, the meaning the participants created for roles in a fictional world may influence their own life.

The joy of the activity

The language host stated that it was fun because they laughed and smiled. They worked across cultural borders, and they seem to get to know each other better. They found a connection not only with the theme *changes* but also with the theme *emotions*. The language host felt that the participants became better acquainted because they worked across the board. This could apply to their age, cultural background, or gender. In the ordinary café dialogue group they did not work across cultural backgrounds as they had to have a language host in the groups. The participant we interviewed also emphasised that drama was very fun, and when asked why it was fun, he replied: “Because what happened, how we went through all the tasks we were given, we were happy.” According to the teacher, they observed happiness in the creating. And so did I. This also accords with the core curriculum of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, which states that “Schools shall enable pupils to experience the joy of creating, engagement, and the urge to explore, and enable them to see opportunities and translate ideas into actions” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 7 (own translation)).

Exploring practical action through bodily experience

In the drama workshop, the language host took part in the creative processes on an equal footing with the others. He pointed out that it was scary at first, but that it was fine after a while. He highlighted that drama offers new opportunities in café dialogue. In particular, he highlighted that drama may provide a different understanding of things, stating that “they do not understand what the Norwegian word *omsorg* (care) is, but through drama they can understand it.” This probably came about as a result of the first workshop, where participants were asked to show care through the use of tableaux, as discussed in more detail above. One of the co-investigators who observed the first drama session described it as follows:

The concept of care was brought up [...] and they were very good at coming up with ideas, braiding each other’s hair and they were from, I don’t remember exactly which countries, but they were incredibly corporeal, alive... (Observer).

The observer highlights that they were active, corporeal, and alive. This may connect to Bakke and Lindstøl’s (2023) focus on bodily learning that makes participants more engaged. It is also close to Boal

(2002), since he prefers for people to show rather than tell what they mean or how they understand a situation (Boal, 2002).

Another drew a link between understanding and liking: “Thank you so much, that was really nice. They understand, they liked it” (Language Host).

Experiencing a new way of learning

According to the student, the drama workshops provided a new way of learning: “There was change, we had different ways of answering and different questions. We have different levels in the class and learn from the others’ questions” (Student). He sees the drama workshop as a new way of learning language and links it to his experience of being in this situation. “I was completely free; I was not afraid to talk and ask questions” (Student).

Both of the teachers with a drama background highlighted the opportunity for the students to show other sides of themselves, where creativity is central, and how this can give them a new sense of mastery:

He’s so very creative and it’s nice when he gets to express himself like that, because he’s more creative than theoretical so to speak, I don’t know if you can say that sort of thing, but at least he was, and it’s so nice that he can show off that side of himself, the man who used to jump out the window (Teacher 1).

Creativity is also highlighted in school curricula and is often linked to the urge to create:

It is thanks to the interaction between creative people with the urge to create that the world has been able to make material and cultural progress. This recognition also lays the foundation for the Government’s approach to current and future challenges (Meld. St 20 (2002–2003), p. 7).

Drama seemed not only to spark creativity and creative learning processes in café dialogue but also a greater satisfaction among the teachers with a drama background, with one saying she loved the café host role: “I think it’s incredibly fun to work with drama, that’s where I’m at my best, more than the normal café dialogue” (Teacher 1). She went on to say a bit more about what she likes about this setting: “I think this type of interaction is really nice, there’s kind of more interaction, I think maybe—that I kind of get them [better].” The other teacher’s commentary reflected something similar:

When someone surprised me, it wasn’t because I had a negative perception of them, but I knew the participants and saw how some guys, including the younger ones, dived into fiction. Most people surprised me. Strange. I thought this session worked out really well (Teacher 2).

The teacher connected her surprise at the students to fictional work, and that they dived into it. They were active and led themselves into the fictional plot. Heathcote highlights different sides of role-taking: “either to understand a social situation more thoroughly or to experience imaginatively via identification in social situations

(Heathcote, 1984, p. 49). Not everyone went into a protagonist role, but they were somehow active within the group’s fictional work.

The teachers mentioned changes in the class, which became more active after a while. This seems to connect with the theory highlighting that a safe space is needed in order to show new sides of yourself and to open up (Lyngstad, 2017). Based on the comments from the observer and the teachers, it can be said that the students became more confident through this process.

Experiencing more comfortable participants

The teachers experienced a *change* in the students’ engagement and urge to express themselves:

Last time, he (the student) was very closed off and he looked so upset, maybe because he thought it was so awkward and felt so uncomfortable. But then he became warmed up and got into everything at the end. I think that was great to see (Teacher 1).

The student emphasised the dialogue in drama rather than the café dialogue: “I think the drama dialogue was better than the other because it gives an opportunity for talking to be completely free” (student). He also commented that this was totally different: “I felt very free, completely different from before. I was in theatre. Drama. The teacher and you. It gives us the opportunity to be free” (Student). When the students use the word free, it can connect to an emotion.

It is noteworthy that the student felt so safe, despite the fact that several participants did not know each other very well. “It was different with drama, only two from the same country. We were all in drama. Yes, we became friends with those who were in drama” (Student). This seems to have been an important *change* from the traditional use of café dialogue. In the café dialogue, they mostly gathered around the table with people from the same country because of the interpreting challenges, which was not an issue in the drama workshops. This is evident in the student’s statements:

Those café dialogues around the table were good. Questions in drama are better, give the opportunity for everyone to speak, feel safe, from different countries and cultures, to learn from the others. At the table in (café dialogue), same language same country. In drama, no coercion, now it’s your turn, decide for yourself when to join in and share/do something/say something (Student).

Even if the drama workshops were part of the café dialogue in our research project, it seems from the comments by one of the teachers that it is something besides the traditional café dialogue, and her wish is to include it more.

A place to explore difficult situations

The participants explored several topics through drama. They collaborated across age and cultural background. They made tableaux, dramatised, or participated in forum theatre, which inspired them to change their position from spectator to “*spectator*” (Boal, 2002). They

were not afraid to tackle difficult subjects. One of the teachers with a drama background commented on the changes through these processes:

The focus was on cultural diversity, identity, equality, creativity, engagement, and the urge to explore. The reason for this was that we wanted to raise awareness of the mindset and perhaps influence social control. In the beginning, it was a bit of trial and error, and we found that the students felt that we had an agenda. Then they started to see it as a positive breath of fresh air and we focused on diversity and stories that tie us together. The themes after that became more harmless. What we saw in the drama part of the classes, however, was that the students brought up situations that involved social control of their own accord (Teacher 1).

The student also agreed to explore topics in drama and theatre, and that gave him the opportunity to be freer. The language host suggested other topics to work with, such as “How can we solve misunderstandings at school?” or “What offends you?”

Mastery of non-verbal language

One of the teachers highlighted the participants’ extended opportunity to express themselves:

I think maybe everyone experiences mastery because they all use language in a different way for verbal or bodily communication, but at least it is communication. I think they experience mastery and because they can actually communicate without necessarily being that good at Norwegian (Teacher 1).

The other teacher also highlights body language and also links the activity to the community:

Working using the body: good for language learning and the environment in general. You get to practise standing in front of a group. Use every aspect of yourself and your emotions. That brings a lot of joy. The experience of community. Do something about the class environment. Promote inclusion (Teacher 2).

The community seems to foster new understandings:

The camaraderie and energy that arose in the room provided a lot of energy. We had zero idea of how it might go. When you get to use your body language and senses like that, that’s different. It was magical. The dialogue and cooperation that can occur when you have drama was good. The shared experience, to get to know each other. There are many side effects of drama. Self-esteem, self-confidence. You are seen, it can be experienced as both positive and negative (Teacher 2).

The teacher emphasised the importance of the framework around the work: “It requires a good framework but must be flexible. Have a dialogue with them. Do not ridicule.” She believes that more people can participate in these groups: “It’s for everyone in the long run. You have to be a little bit playful at the start.” She also highlights the

importance of spontaneity: “There were several of us in the room playing off each other.”

One teacher points out that the energy takes on a different form in the unfamiliar:

Something happens to the energy when you step out of your habits. Work with community and values in other ways. Create dialogue. Come forward. You can become more comfortable when you are in a different role. Open doors [for] lots of people in relation to language learning in café dialogue or otherwise. [...] The right hemisphere of the brain is engaged. Taking in more unconsciously. Has lowered his shoulders. One is more relaxed (Teacher 2).

One of the teachers with a drama background wanted to integrate drama with café dialogue, not beside it. The reason she gave is that, as a supplement, “it creates interaction and multiple ways of communicating.”

In the drama workshop, the participants had the opportunity to use several of their languages in their communication, and the use of their body language linked them together. According to the teacher, they learned the Norwegian language in other ways in these workshops, and several of the students gained a sense of mastery from communicating through their body language regardless of their Norwegian level.

The teachers highlighted the drama workshop as a place to express oneself in a better way, and as a place to inspire each other:

Although some of the students were quiet and cautious at first, according to the teacher, their faces were alive, and gradually they became more active. The pupils as a whole became more relaxed, and the teacher believes the drama session had an impact on the classroom environment in retrospect as well. The teacher observed that people who otherwise did not talk to each other started communicating with each other during these lessons. Several of the students later said they wanted more drama in class.

The data were analysed and then compared to shed light on common features and differences in the data material. As a result, I created some patterns from the data material and these helped me to identify topics of importance for the research questions: *What are the potential and the limitations of using drama and theatre as part of café dialogue in an adult education centre?*

In the analysis of the interview with the participant, three main themes emerged after the coding and influence the potential of drama as part of café dialogue: emotions, actions, and changes. We can place these in a model:

Model 1: A triangle of learning points

I placed these themes in relation to each other and gave them subcategories. The theme of emotions was given subcategories in the form of words that the student helped to highlight when he said that in drama classes they were not afraid to talk or ask questions but happy and free. It was a new way of learning languages. Under action, we find subcategories that highlight activity where they used their body to describe. This helped to create a change. “I felt very free, completely different from before. I was in theatre and in drama” (Participant).

On the one hand, this can be a limitation for those that do not value being so active. On the other hand, they may learn by observing those who are active, even the protagonist. The participant emphasises that there are different levels in the class, but that they learned from listening to each other's questions. Moreover, they may learn by being so active in the drama dialogue.

The student also highlights that the drama workshops stood out in that “we were all in drama.” In these workshops, more countries were represented, and they worked more across countries: “We became friends with those who were in drama” (Participant). Can a limitation of this be that someone may find it even harder to handle the situation if they see all the others fitting in? Although there were several who did not speak the same language in the drama workshops, they were able to communicate with body language.

The teachers with a drama background highlighted several of the same things about the drama workshops. One experienced a change in the students who were quiet at first and became more active. The teacher is highlighting a change here. The teacher pointed out that, despite the fact that she liked the drama workshops best, she still dreaded them the most. The reason she liked the drama workshops best is that she felt that they were freer, and that she was freer. So even though she thought they were scarier, they were nice anyway. It may appear that the teacher also experienced more active students: “I think it's very nice—with this interaction, there is in a way more interaction, I think maybe that's it—that I kind of get them with me” (Teacher 1). She believes that everyone experiences mastery, because they use the language in a different way and they communicate. This according to her certainly helped to affect the class environment.

Ending

In this article, I have explored the potential and the limitations of bringing drama to café dialogue. By presenting and discussing the outcome of the drama workshops and by analysing and discussing the data material from the interviews, I can see that both the teacher and the participants find that drama brings new learning forms to café dialogue, creating a good group environment with positive, engaged students. Together, they create a safe space across age and cultural background in which to explore, and they create joy through the exploration of fictional work and the creation of embodied experience (Bakke and Lindstøl, 2023). Making use of all drama conventions, the participants in café dialogue had to collaborate and create stories together. They had to actively explore themes, words, and situations through their active identification with fictitious roles and situations (O'Neill, 1982; Heathcote, 1984) and by being in someone else's shoes (Heathcote, 1984) and being a part of aesthetic doubling (Szatkowski, 1985). Non-verbal language with a focus on showing and not telling (Boal, 2002) helped to expand their aesthetic formation. The teachers and participant highlighted how much fun the participants had and how they found new ways of expressing themselves.

The participant in particular observed that in drama one becomes freer and better acquainted with others, that one dares to be active, and that it was a lot of fun to work with drama and in multicultural groups.

The teachers suggested that drama should be integrated into café dialogue as a supplement. The drama work should be span ages and cultures and should also be voluntary. The storytelling

workshop should, if working with personal stories, focus on positive experiences (Lyngstad, 2017), but if one wants participants to get a deeper understanding of a theme or a dress rehearsal for life (Boal, 2002; Lyngstad, 2015), they can explore fictional stories—that is, not their own stories but stories close to their reality. However, drama workshops depend on dedicated teachers who can actively use their body language and inspire the participants. Based on the experience gained in this project, the teachers experienced being very active. The teachers liked having two teachers in the drama workshop so that they could play off of each other (Lyngstad and Solbue, 2021). This allows for bigger groups with participants of different ages and from different countries, with drama serving as a bridge-builder between people and culture.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The dataset used in this study was already approved and used in publication (Ravneberg, 2024). Studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because oral informed consent was collected during the interview.

Author contributions

MBL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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