

Psycho-physical theatre practice as embodied learning for young people with learning disabilities

Abstract

In a dominant Western tradition that reveres cerebral learning, embodied learning approaches have received limited research attention – and less in education than other disciplines. This paper draws on previously reported empirical data from a five-year Creative Partnerships study to argue that psycho-physical theatre practice can promote embodied cognition, has particular value for young people with learning disabilities in special schools and has potential for inclusive education in mainstream schools. The paper describes a psycho-physical actor training process developed with, and for, actors with learning disabilities. Its application within special educational contexts, which we call ‘mimetics’, has focused more keenly upon physicalised interaction as the core communication. In this form of communication, reading, interpreting and responding to the individuality of others happen through the development of non-verbal dialogue. This focus has illuminated the importance of an intuited or ‘felt’ understanding which is generated by and recognises such communications. In special education settings, being different is inherent, and physicalised interaction more routine, so ways of working different from the mainstream are required. The paper suggests that such settings are rich sites for research to develop, value and recognise the significance of embodied cognition and realise its potential for special and inclusive education.