THE ART OF MIME IN EDUCATION: A RICH LEARNING TOOL

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Abstract

Latest work within the Learning Through the Arts field included a variety of visual and performing arts activities such as drama, music, dance, film, etc. Rarely do studies focus on mime as a teaching and learning tool. In this paper, the art of mime is explored through a hands-on workshop whereby participants go through the various steps of a mime activity. As such, they work in small groups to design, perform, and finally reflect on meaning and meaning production. The activity is then videotaped and features of the use of the digital camera are highlighted. Thus, the paper explicates the salient features of the mime and the use of the digital camera as educational tools.

Key words Mime, miming, arts, education, learning, digital camera, videotaping.

1. Introduction

According to Wikipedia, the word ‘mime’ has a Greek origin; it is derived from the Greek word "μίμος"—mimos, which means "imitator, actor". The online encyclopedia Britanica.com defines mime as...the art of portraying a character or a story solely by means of body movement (as by realistic and symbolic gestures). It is therefore a way of communication whereby the verbal word is replaced by the non-verbal, gestural act.1 While we all resort to non-verbal language in so many various contexts either to replace the spoken word or to support it (i.e., calling someone, signaling the end of some event, etc.), the art of ‘mime’ evolved to becoming an integral part of the industry of entertainment (Gittens, 2007; McGee, 2011; among several others) and lately as part of the growing field of edutainment (Feder, 1992; Maley & Duff, 2005; Farmer, 2009; Sur, 2010; Jones, Curtis & Allen 2012; etc.).

Incorporating the art of miming in teaching and learning is of major salience to the field of education. In 1992, for example, Feder published a highly informative book titled ‘Mime Time’ and includes forty-five mime activities especially designed to be used in classrooms of various young and older learners. Along the same line, Farmer (2009) publishes a book titled ‘101 Drama Games and Activities: Theatre Games for Children and Adults Including Warm-ups, Improvisation, Mime and Movement’. The book, highly grounded in research, provides teachers and educators with a large array of educational activities including mime, storytelling, and improvisation. Most importantly is the shrewd highlight of mime skills through educational and enjoyable activities.

1 See Lust (2000: 19-30) for a highly informative chapter about the history and value of mime.
This paper promotes the very field of mime in education for it presents a well structured mime activity, composed of four sections, presented and performed at the European Teacher Education Network (ETEN) 2013 within the Arts Education TIG session. Most importantly has been the use of the digital camera to film all parts of the mimes. The use of such powerful tool in promoting learning exhibits major educational implications. In other words, building on recent research in the field of the use of the digital camera in education (Theosodakis, 2009; Bahloul & Graham, 2012; among several others.), the paper shows a second and novice dimension to the use of miming in education in which much more learning takes place after the activity itself. Thus, the miming activity is filmed and the production is used as a new resource for writing activities, interpretation, and classroom discussion. In addition, such production tends to enhance participants’ motivation, a necessary ingredient for successful learning.\(^2\)

The workshop involved the participants in four distinct but inter-related activities: (i) storyboarding, (ii) miming, (iii) writing, and (iv) reflecting. While the first and second activities relate to the participants’ own work, the third and the fourth relate to their peers’. In other words, each participant had to storyboard and mime, then to write and reflect on their peers’ mimes.

2. Storyboarding

The workshop participants were divided into groups of two and were requested to make use of the storyboarding template, shown in figure 2.1 below, to sketch a short mime with six events including a beginning and an end. While such sketching activity may focus on a specific theme or topic depending on the educational context, participants here did not have any particular restriction.

![Figure 2.1 Storyboarding Handout](image)

The eight participants were given 10 minutes to brainstorm mimes’ topics, settle on a particular six-event mime, sketch it and write a few lines if need be. The grouping and group work are shown in Figure 2.2 below. They are numbered one to four for convenience and ease of reference.

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\(^2\) See section 5 for a much more elaborate description of other educational features of the digital camera.
It is worth stressing here that the sketching exercise is quite complex for it involves a cluster of visual and cognitive skills. In other words, each group is called to choose a topic, ponder a short story, visualize its events, and mime sketch it. In doing so, highly demanding cognitive processes are called upon. Maley and Duff’s (2005) observations are quite revealing. They write: “Mime activities can provide a real stimulus to the imagination. From visual clues alone we have to construct a message.” (p. 50) They also add: “This is a powerful process both for those carrying out the mime, who have to project themselves through movement and gesture only, and for those who try to interpret it.” (p. 50). Within a short and limited time frame which did not exceed ten minutes, the four groups were ready to move to the second stage of the workshop, that is rehearsing their respective mimes. This is attainable given the fact that all participants exhibit various degrees of visual and performing arts skills. For this reason, most groups have finished their sketches before the ten-minute time limit, then started rehearsing their respective mimes.

**Rehearsing the Mime**

Groups are given up to ten minutes to rehearse their respective mimes taking into consideration a number of simple miming principles.\(^3\) This activity is meant to maximize chances of a much clearer and coherent performance. The groups are thus invited to make use of all the different spaces available in the location should they desire to remain rather discrete. During the rehearsing process, characters experiment with the best ways to mime a particular event, revise certain events, and fine-tune their performances. In addition, groups are not invited to mingle and ‘spy’ on each others’ mimes since the elements of originality and suspense ought to be maximized.

**Miming the Sketch**

It is quite revealing that two out of the four mimes deal with human relationships. While the first group, for example, addresses the issue of ‘dominance’ in human relationships, the fourth group elected for ‘break-ups’. The other two groups, that is Group 2 and Group 3, focused on ‘human success’ and ‘conference attendees’ routine’ respectively.

4.1. **Mime One: Relationships and Dominance**

The first group chose to sketch a story of two people with different authority statuses, one dominant and one reticent. The two characters are sitting next to each other separated by a suitcase on top of which sat a box of candy. The mime focuses on the

\(^3\) See (Kipnis 1988) in particular for simple and easy exposition of mimes and miming principles.
growing tension between the characters over candy to end with a gentle resolution whereby each one of them helps themselves to the candy and the reticent one grabbing the entire box. Figure 4.1.1 below explicates the various stills of the mime.

As can be seen through the above stills, the two characters went through some conflict. The first still presents the context of the mime. It shows two ladies, one younger than the other, sitting next to each other with a box of candy sitting in front of both of them. The younger one appears to be busy with the mobile phone, and peeking at the other who appears to be reading and not paying much attention to her. The second event shows the younger lady trying to grab some candy hoping the other one does not see her. The third event shows the older lady quite concerned with the behavior of the young lady, even quite shocked. The fourth event shows the older lady trying herself a candy from the same box and showing satisfaction. The fifth event shows the older lady handing the box of candy to the younger lady. The final scene shows the younger lady grabbing the box and turning all the way around to hide it.

4.1.2 Interpreting the Mime
This is a salient step within the miming workshop, a third phase whereby the participants get involved in critical thinking activities through both written and oral reflections. As such, each participant draws on their background, activates their semiotic and pragmatic filters, and produces meaning to a mime they have never seen before. One such interpretation reads as follows:

“The mime was about two people sitting in a train and looking at their mobile phones. One would like to take some sweets without the other noticing it. Even though she knows it is not allowed, she insists on having some sweets. The other person is watching over her and hoping she does not take the sweets. Then the other person agrees and invites her to have some sweets; finally the other person displays a primitive hungry feeling and grabs the box of sweets.”

While most members of the audience showed agreement with the overall interpretation of the mime, an interesting discussion evolved around the location of the event (i.e., a bus, a train, at home) and the relationship between and the nature of the two characters (i.e., mother and daughter, two people: one comfortable and one poor and scared, one
dominant and one very shy). An interesting discussion was raised after the characters replied that they had not thought of any particular place and neither did they decide about who is involved in such dominant relationship. The audience felt that the fact that the box of candy was put on top of a suitcase suggested that they are traveling, hence the train and bus interpretations. What is of paramount importance is the amount of symbolism in the mime which resulted in a variety of interpretations. The apparent conflict and its resolution via the consent to the eating of candy, for instance, is of major symbolic nature and could be a topic of debate involving the nature of hierarchical human relationships within a language, social studies, psychology, and/or philosophy course.

4.2. Mime Two: Achieving One’s Dreams
The second mime we will examine involves a human dream of success. The two characters started the mime with a gesture of dream and ended it with a gesture of championing success. In-between, the characters were involved in a highly competitive triathlon involving swimming, cycling, and running. Figure 4.2.1 shows the various stills of the mime:

As can be seen above, the mime starts with a gesture of dream with both hands moving from top to bottom with a sober facial expression and ends with an opposite celebrating movement whereby hands move upward with a cheerful face. In-between, the characters performed a triathlon, namely swimming, cycling, and running. While the first two activities appeared to be performed in the same place, the last one involved putting shoes on, as seen in still 4.

4.2.2 Interpreting the Mime
The audience’s interpretations varied from fine-tuning one’s body to accomplishing championship dreams. The characters wanted to stress the initial championship dream through the downward hand movements, a dream gesture which they found to be quite challenging to mime. The triathlon activities were performed with high speech to stress the hard work, and the final cheerful face with the raising of both hands was to show the
successful end. In other words, the mime clearly shows hard work and perseverance, and alludes to achieving one’s dreams. However, some interpretations did not include the ‘dream’, an important aspect of the mime which the characters wanted to stress. However, all participants could see the triathlon activities, the hard work and the end result. In an era where so many people exhibit very high dreams but found themselves in challenging job markets, for instance, the issue of achieving one's dreams is highly relevant and worth pursuing.

4.3. Mime Three: Conference’s Daily Routine
The third mime tells the story of the conference participants with such daily routine activities as (i) attending lectures, (ii) visiting museums, (iii) coffee breaks, (iv) and going back to hotels. While the characters had a clear vision of the mime, the audience was rather challenged. The various mime stills are shown in Graph 4.3.1 below:

4.3.2 Interpreting the mime
“It could be a father and a son, two neighbors, or two friends, or a teacher and a tired and not motivated student, then they drink something, I don’t know what? There is may be something in the drink, and then the teacher can work better. Then there are something with teeth, I don’t know what…”

It is quite clear that the above interpretation exhibits a high level of challenge as to the exact focus of the mime! This is expressed by the multiple occurrence of the ‘I don’t know what’ expression, the conjunction ‘or’, and the modal ‘may be’. It is worth noting that the interpretation contains a few revealing items. First, the relationship between the two characters (i.e., kinship, neighbors, friends) was not clear and therefore puzzled the interpreter. Second, noticing that the characters were much more active after having a drink suggested that there is something in the drink, alluding therefore to the use of some sort of stimulating drug. Thus, an unclear relationship added to an unclear drink content render the entire mime highly ambiguous and shows the extent to which
individual filters play salient roles in interpretation. This is further supported by the following interpretation:

“I thought it is about starting the day and ending the day; it is a lovely day; they started to have a breakfast together; then they go to work and some one is showing something to someone else; then the day is over and then they drive home.”

Despite the clarity of the interpretation, it remains quite puzzling how the weather information got in? One possible answer may relate to the current weather conditions which inspired the interpretation. In fact, the conference was taking place in Hasselt, Belgium during he month of April; the weather was changing: raining and cloudy at times, sunny and warm at other times. It is probably what the interpreter was wishing for that found its way through the initial events of the mime. In other words, the interpretation of the mime does not seem to be based on the mime itself, but on the background of the interpreter, hence an active participation in meaning production. This is further illustrated by another instance where the interpreter qualifies the drink as ‘beer’ in still 4. It is the interpreter’s culture that is giving meaning to the content of the mime, and this is very likely to be NON controversial. We tend to see events on the basis of our own experiences and cultural backgrounds. In short, this mime was quite ambiguous. As such, every interpretation exhibited a number of features reminiscent of one’s culture, background, and state of mind. The interpretation below is another illustration of this conclusion:

“I saw an educational situation involving two people: one is hierarchically dominant and the other has to listen; and it changes from a position to another; than at the end they drive a tandem, they become a tandem.”

The use of a ‘tandem’ bicycle does not clearly show in the mime. In fact, some have mentioned the bus and others the car. The use of ‘tandem’, as a means of transportation, clearly relates to the culture and experience of the interpreter. While tandem bicycles are commonly used in some parts of Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries, they are rarely used in other parts of Europe such as France, Italy, and Spain, for instance. This prediction is born out since the interpreter comes from a Scandinavian country. Finally, having been confronted with a variety of interpretations, the two characters realized that their mime was indeed hard: “it is funny if you combine all interpretations and all comments, that is actually what we did, but we have not been very clear; that is obvious because it took a while to know what we exactly did” (emphasis is ours), replies one of them. The other simply reminded the audience of the mime events: “After the presentation of our colleague, we went to a museum where there was a guide and one has to listen, then we had lunch, then we listened to the different presentations, and at the end of the day we went back to the hotel by bus.”

4.4. Mime Four: Relationships and Breaking-Up
The fourth and last mime was quite straightforward. It tells a story of two people trying to get back to each other but fail to do so in the end. The various stills shown in Figure 4.4.1 below illustrate the mime events.
As the mime stills show, the characters divided their respective roles: one comes to inform the other one of a breaking-up decision, and the second warmly welcomes her and tries to negotiate a come back; however, the efforts fail and the split had to take place despite all initiatives.

4.4.2 Interpreting the Mime
The workshop participants were asked to provide a title to each mime. While it was quite challenging to come up with a straightforward title for the first three mimes, it was rather simple for this one. One member of the audience said: "I have a title: Broken Hearts". A second says: "I thought it was very difficult to split-up; should we do it? Yes, No, Ya, Ok...". A third one summed up the mime as follows: "I also thought that this mime is about breaking-up, and the first person felt sorry for it or he was not happy that he has to do it and the woman was waiting and dreaming, and then ..well...the breaking-up happened, and then both were not very happy with this, but the breaking-up had to happen...bye bye...". Despite the straightforward nature of the interpretations, we note here the reaction of the characters, especially when one of them says: “I think every thing you have said and your interpretation is what we wanted to convey through this mime, but I was very very touched when I heard your interpretations; it was very nice; you added feelings in your interpretations.” (emphasis is ours) Such reaction adds a new dynamic and interpersonal dimension to the mime; not only does the audience tell a story, they also feel what characters feel which creates in turn a sense of solidarity between the characters and members of the audience.

5. The use of the digital camera
During the workshop, the conductor used the camera to film most parts of the activity. In fact, all stills shown above are a result of the filming; hadn't the workshop been filmed, we would not have had access to such stills. In addition, the mimes will be

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available through a Learning Through The Arts web site (www.lt-ta.org) should some researchers opt to make use of the mimes for similar or other educational purposes. In fact, the videotaped mimes constitute a resource which may be used in a variety of educational contexts. In a language learning class, for instance, mimes may be shown and students could be asked to write out their respective interpretations after which a number of discussions about their different readings could take place. A second activity with language learners could involve their writing skills, that is writing the short dialogue between the two characters of the mime, which in turn may be placed on the audio track and played as a voice-over. Such voice-over activity will involve learners’ writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills. In short, using the camera to film such an activity helps reflecting much more closely on the mime and proves highly useful in generating new appealing content along the lines of Burnard (2012) whereby a positive learning environment is created “in which both teachers and students can take risks and engage in imaginative activity, and do things differently” (p. 167).

6. Concluding Remarks

The ‘ Mime in Education’ workshop presents a number of features that are quite unique for they combine myriad skills in such a short time. Workshop participants quickly created and improvised scenes; they also used storyboards to sketch and write mimes. In addition, working in groups assists in improving learners’ social bonding skills which, in turn, develops group awareness and trust through such group dynamic activities. In his 2008 article, Baldacchino explicates the relationship between art on the one hand, and learning, education and schooling on the other. Baldacchino’s conclusions appear to be echoed in various aspects of the Mime activity. Most importantly in miming is the exploration of physical theatre as the participants embrace different characters and act out their respective scenes. This effort recalls the use of story-telling in education, a tool that is highly innovative, learner-focused, and quite entertaining. Finally, the ‘Mime in Education’ workshop engages learners in meaning production through fun and enjoyable activities which empowers them and boosts their sense of confidence. In short, the mime activity puts the learner at the forefront of learning for it promotes their own voice and change them from mere consumers of meaning to full fledged producers. Hill (2002) comments on the use of mime in the foreign language classroom: “With the right group, this can produce some amusing and enjoyable moments, while still providing an effective learning experience.” (p. 104).
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References


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