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Exploring the impact of street play as a powerful pedagogical tool in public health programmes

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Abstract

This case study reports on the production, performance and evaluation of a public health street play by MSc Public Health students at York St John University (London Campus) in the United Kingdom. The street play was performed on World AIDS Day 2023. This paper focuses on the dynamic and interactive nature of street play as a pedagogical technique that aligns with constructivist principles, fostering meaningful learning experiences. Increased confidence, engagement and programme commitment were observed in students both in in-person and online sessions following the street play. While recognising these strengths, we discuss the need to address challenges, foster collaborations and implement continuous improvement strategies to make street play even more effective as a teaching method in the public health discipline.

Keywords: public health, teaching, pedagogy, teaching method, postgraduate education

Introduction

The arts are now widely accepted as one means of enhancing educational practices (Sullivan, 1993). Based on constructivist theory, arts-based pedagogy is characterised by active interaction with the world, experiential learning and social exchanges, as highlighted by Rieger *et al*. (2015).

Public health has been defined as the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities (Eltorai *et al*., 2023). Thus, public health education requires innovative approaches that can capture interest, foster dialogue, encourage participation and facilitate reflection in students and in the wider community. Consequently, 'street play' emerges as a potent way to involve students and community members in the process of raising awareness about and creating understanding of novel knowledge and ideas (Belliveau, 2006).

Literature review

Historically, the performance medium of street theatre has been employed to sensitise and educate communities. It is characterised by brief, public-venue performances in which the audience or bystanders are encouraged to be actively engaged (Mullany, 2024). During the 1960s, 'theatre in education' (TIE) built on progressive educational principles and new-wave theatre and drama philosophy (Wooster, 2016). TIE aims at encouraging students/learners to engage critically with their surroundings (Kaiafa *et al*., 2020). Despite its initial promise, however, this progressive educational approach has since faced marginalisation. Teaching professionals report that they struggle to find time for the research and rehearsals needed to develop facilitation skills and design "*authentic teaching*'' methods (Lee and Liu, 2022). However, TIE is an alternative to didactic teaching that nurtures students' critical thinking abilities and has a rich potential consistent with contemporary approaches to education.

Traditionally, street plays are informal conversations presented with minimal or no sets, props or costumes. In some cultures, they may take the form of music, dance and folk performance, often incorporating humour to appeal to and thus engage the audience. Street play performances may be spontaneous or announced in advance; performers may attract audiences by using audio-visual material or by singing or drumming at a specific location (Pehere and Yadavalli, 2021). The plays may feature familiar stories or real-life incidents to facilitate connection with their audiences; they are usually brief – often less than twenty minutes – and may encourage audience participation or interactive discussions. Because they resonate well with a wide public, street plays have promoted awareness about public health issues, including mental illness, oral health and women's health, communicable diseases – such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis – and vector-borne diseases – such as African trypanosomiasis ('sleeping sickness'), caused by the tsetse fly, and malaria, by the mosquito (Pelto and Singh, 2010).

Constructivist pedagogies emphasise the importance of learners' actively building their knowledge through experiences before reflecting upon it and integrating the new information with their prior knowledge (Simina, 2012). Knowledge is viewed as constructed within sociocultural contexts, through shared experiences and interactions with peers and teachers, making learning a collaborative process (Davis *et al*., 2017). In addition, as individuals contribute their existing knowledge to the learning environment, they influence collective learning (Hyslop-Margison and Strobel, 2007). Co-constructed learning prioritises meaning-making (Damşa, Nerland and Andreadakis, 2019) and sociocultural theory argues that knowledge development is a personalised, constructed process which incorporates the social and cultural milieu in which learning occurs (Vespone, 2023).

The use of street play for public health education aligns with these theoretical concepts: it creates a collaborative environment in which participants actively engage with health-related content to build their understanding. For instance, audience engagement with the different roles (*e.g*., health professionals) portrayed in street play can raise community awareness and sensitise the local population to serious health threats (*e.g*., HIV/AIDS). The immersive nature of street play thus fosters experiential learning, enabling individuals to construct meaning by participating in narratives.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an upsurge in the number of public health education programmes offered by universities across the world (Jacobsen and Waggett,

2022). Public health programmes prepare professionals to play a pivotal role in promoting well-being within communities. Within the realm of education and instructional methods, street play constitutes a distinctive and effective pedagogical technique for conveying crucial health information and it can serve as a valuable tool in public health education (Datoo and Chagani, 2011).

Teaching methods are usually considered in terms of their capacity to engage students with content: there is less focus on developing methods that foster self-confidence. However, Jenkins and Turick-Gibson (1999) found that role play was effective in building confidence and Intarti (2022) established that this was particularly true in the case of female students and some international students. Such confidence increases the likelihood of an individual's enthusiastic persistence in the face of failure; the ability to bounce back with renewed effort is vital to public health professionals (Intarti, 2022). Lee and Liu (2022) discovered significant benefits from incorporating role play – a learning experience with a real-life audience – into the second semester of a public health programme. Similarly, Dohaney *et al*. (2018) confirmed that participation in an authentic and immersive role-play activity led to significant improvements in students' communication, confidence and understanding of concepts. A strong rationale thus underpinned our inclusion of street play in our programme.

In designing our street play project, we drew upon Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which refers to the difference between what a learner can achieve alone and what may be accomplished with the support of a more knowledgeable other. Students were supported by: 1) more knowledgeable individuals with greater expertise than that of the learners (*viz*., the lecturers and students with prior experience in theatre/street plays); 2) social interactions affording the learners opportunities to observe and refine their skills (*viz*., the rehearsals prior to the main event; and 3) scaffolding activities (*viz*., supportive activities offered by more knowledgeable others), the number of which were then gradually reduced as the learners' ability to work independently grew (Simina, 2012).

Our street play

A few months ahead of World AIDS Day 2023 (1st December 2023), the Department of Public Health identified an opportunity for our current cohort of MSc Public Health students to plan and deliver a street play on the university's London campus. An expression of interest was floated via MS Forms across the current batch of MSc Public Health students. Twenty students (half of the cohort) expressed interest in participating in such a project, in which they would have the opportunity to take on a variety of roles, including script development, acting and creating information education communication (IEC) and behaviour change communication (BCC) materials and videos of the event.

MSc Public Health teaching staff wrote the first draft of the street play script and then handed this task to the students, who, on the basis of their views and preferences, collaborated to adapt, craft and revise the characters and scenes into the final version of the script. Key characters within the short play included someone living with HIV/AIDS, a passionate health professional, a community leader, a community activist and a narrator. The students were provided with time and space for three weekly rehearsals of thirty minutes, together with resources for creating and printing posters to advertise the performance and for preparing

IEC/BCC posters (to be used as a backdrop during the play) and a designated space on campus to store their street play-related materials.

At the performance itself, students were provided with microphones and speakers to facilitate audience engagement. Towards the end of the play, as a representation of unity, all characters gathered at the centre of the stage; they imparted the key message 'Let communities lead' – not just on World AIDS Day but every day, as we all strive to create a world where everyone is heard, valued and supported.

The street play was successfully executed as planned on World AIDS Day 2023; it was well attended and well received by the on-campus student community. Approximately 400 red ribbons were distributed to students who were present on campus at the time of the performance.

Photos and videos capturing the performance were recorded and stored in a MS Teams folder by those students who took charge of photos and videography, so enabling the MSc Public Health team to release, in the evening, an edited video on LinkedIn and other social media platforms. Afterwards, the IEC/BCC material was appropriately displayed in one of the common areas. Certificates of appreciation were awarded to students who participated in the development and performance of the street play.

Analysis

Following the play, we observed substantial improvements in student engagement in both in-person and online sessions. Students said, in informal feedback, that they felt more confident and more dedicated to the programme.

To enable a more structured evaluation of the street play project, we mapped the activities that the project involved to the core competencies for public health professionals as revised and adopted by the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice. This is shown in table 1. Competencies are organised into eight domains, namely: Data Analytics and Assessment Skills, Policy Development and Programme Planning Skills, Communication Skills, Health Equity Skills, Community Partnership Skills, Public Health Sciences Skills, Management and Finance Skills and Leadership and Systems Thinking Skills (Council on Linkages, 2021).

Though the street play itself lasted only thirty minutes, the activities that led up to it and followed it provided many rich opportunities for students to develop competencies across the eight domains.

Table 1. Street play activities mapped against the public health competencies

Competency domain	Street play activities
Data analytics and assessment skills	While preparing the IEC/BCC material, the students analysed the situation of HIV/AIDS and described factors that affected the health of the community.

Competency domain	Street play activities
Policy development and programme planning skills	The students discussed and explored the policies, programmes and services relating to the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Also, the street play facilitated community engagement for health improvement.
Communication skills	Students, through either written (IEC/BCC materials) or verbal (performance during street play) communication gained communication and public speaking skills in an audience/community context.
Health equity skills	The IEC/BCC materials and script of the street play were developed to recognise the diversity of individuals and populations (among the student community)
Community partnership skills	This event showcases community-academic partnership (from the students' side) as the street play was organised, with 500+ students receiving health education.
Public health sciences skills	The street play was based on evidence for improving the health of the student community by spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS.
Management and finance skills	Students managed the resources used (IEC/BCC material, time and space) and learned about budgeting. They managed their rehearsal and street play execution time, resources for posters, and campus storage for materials.
Leadership and systems thinking skills	The students created an opportunity for creativity and innovation and advocated for public health in the student community.
Additional opportunities that have emerged from the street play	
Collaboration	The students collaborated with peers in the creation and performance of the street play, so enhancing their teamwork skills.
Creativity	The students crafted characters, scenes and dialogues for the street play, which fostered their imaginative thinking and innovative approaches to storytelling.
Problem-solving	During the rehearsal and performance process, the students encountered certain challenges which required them to think critically and find solutions to overcome obstacles.
Cultural awareness	The students explored themes relevant to society and culture in the context of street play (among the on-campus student community) that deepened their understanding of social issues and cultural diversity.

Competency domain	Street play activities
Content curation	In future, students will be offered opportunities for growth by creating and editing social media content (if they are given charge of these activities).

In addition to the benefits for the cohort of public health students, there were implications for the wider student community. The street play not only imparted public health knowledge but also promoted community engagement and social learning: for example, as a result of the street play, over five hundred students received HIV/AIDS-related health education. By staging performances in public spaces through street play, we can provide communal experiences and encourage dialogue and shared understanding among community members (Umstattd *et al*., 2021). The collective nature of this learning experience enhances community engagement and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for public health.

Evaluation

While street play proves to be a potent pedagogical technique, certain challenges exist, suggesting that further refinement should be considered. More opportunities for student growth are possible within some of the competency domains: for example, students could develop communication skills, such as creating and editing social media content, if given more responsibility for these activities. This would require tutors to reflect on how and when to begin removing the scaffolding.

Another challenge is the need for sustained engagement with community through innovative strategies; street plays on a range of relevant health topics must be developed to maintain community interest over time. Additionally, when catering to a diverse community, cultural sensitivity and relevance are crucial to the success of street play as an educational tool (Thomas, 1997). Strategies for addressing these challenges will enhance the impact of street play in public health education.

In conclusion, we should like to propose an avenue for fostering collaborations and partnerships, which may help in further improvement of street play as a pedagogical technique. Engaging with local community organisations, health agencies and educational institutions may amplify the reach and impact of street play. Collaborative efforts, especially in community and public health programmes, can lead to the development of targeted and culturally sensitive performances that address specific health concerns within a community (Holston *et al*., 2020). This could also contribute to the development of competent future public health professionals and make them employment ready. By refining and expanding street play as a pedagogical approach in public health (and related) programmes, we can harness its potential to train future public health professionals and empower communities with the knowledge and skills necessary for a healthier future.

For an institution to adopt authentically a co-constructed learning approach, it must establish programmes aligned to a centralised mission, either institution-wide or at the programme level. Also, engaging in co-construction involves collaborating with students throughout the

educational process. To ensure the success of the programme, students should be taught using innovative pedagogy and receive adequate support (for creativity and innovation), including qualified faculty/staff, creation of safe space in which students can be given a voice, provision of audio-visual aids for enhancing learning opportunities for educators and their students, increasing the duration of student-faculty engagement to enrich on-campus interaction, experiential learning opportunities and a structured curriculum.

As next steps (in public health and global health programmes), it is advisable to organise and conduct these street plays within larger communities, such as local boroughs, markets or public parks (with proper authorisation from authorities). A well-organised and executed street play may well serve as an effective means to disseminate messages.

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