

2

Popular theatre through video in Costa Rica: an idea for non-formal appraisal

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Development practitioners arriving in a new locality may use a variety of information gathering techniques that could be called RRAs. Most appraisal techniques, combined with the fact that they are employed by a new arrival, encounter barriers to learning how local people feel about sensitive cultural and social issues. An appraisal I did last year in Costa Rica suggests that by promoting or organising local theatre development workers foreign to an area can learn much about local attitudes that may be essential to the future of a project.

First, it should be clarified that theatre is not a particularly rapid technique. In this article I suggest that outsiders can either work through local contacts or slowly build up confidence with locals to organise popular theatre. I loosely define popular or folk theatre as informal public entertainment in which the performers have no script, very little rehearsal or costumes, but act roles which are familiar to them.

I stayed for three months in the small town of La Suiza, in the Cartago central region of Costa Rica. My project was to experiment with video as a means for farmers to share their knowledge and strategies of natural resources conservation with others farmers living in the area. Including theatre in the video occurred to me because video and television are for most people primarily an entertainment medium, and people tend to turn off very quickly from uninteresting programmes. In fact, in La Suiza many locals had previous exposure to 'boring' technical videos and 'manipulative' commercial videos.

I also know that popular theatre campaigns and workshops such as the 1983 African Workshop for Theatre for Development in Murewa, Zimbabwe, or Caesar Chavez's 'El Teatro Campesino' organising migrant labourers in California, have been engaged in creative and successful ways of addressing development issues.

My contact with local people was greatly facilitated and accelerated by the extension personnel of the Center for Tropical Agricultural Research and Training (CATIE) in Turrialba. The area's extension agent introduced me to many families and patiently explained what he saw as the area's problems and opportunities. He thought it was not a good idea to use theatre in the video, as there was no theatre tradition in the area. Through CATIE I was also able to arrange lodging in La Suiza. Living in the community was the key to meeting and interacting with people daily, and in so doing establishing a working relationship which led to organisation of the theatre.

Bolivar, Mario and Edwin were landless workers who worked on CATIE's land behind my house. I would often invite them in for a beer after work. Several times we discussed their future financial security and chances to acquire land. This was not a favourite subject, partly because it is depressing, and partly because they did not know what God had planned for them; so I usually ended up doing most of the talking.

One afternoon after work when the workers visited I suggested we videotape a drama on a theme which they could choose, though I wanted it to be related to their daily lives.

Since all their lives they had worked for different landlords, they decided to act out a situation in which a worker approached the landlord to suggest ways in which the farm could be better managed. They said they wanted the drama to illustrate that many farm workers know farming better than the landlord, who often lives off the farm for most of the year. Spontaneously, the worker who acted the role of landlord was polite but uncooperative, arguing that for economic reasons the existing farming system could not be much altered. After we watched the drama later on the television we discussed what feelings underlay the formal relationship between landlord and workers. They said that usually they were not treated badly, but that landlords for whom they had worked were not generally personable, required too much work and most paid only enough for them to live very simply and save very little.

The workers acted out a second drama in which one of them went to the bank to ask for a loan to buy land. Mario, who played the banker, was not certain, but thought that a worker must have land as collateral for the loan. The worker was emotionally involved in his role, and pleaded for the future security of his family. He spontaneously suggested a new idea: that the bank considers his work history and consult his present employer as witness to his industriousness. The banker shuffled papers and gave him a very definite 'maybe'.

The effect of the video theatre when shown to community groups was interesting when contrasted with the farmer interviews I showed first. Whereas people quietly watched the interviews, occasionally verbally agreeing or disagreeing, during the drama people talked, shouted jokes, and children laughed. The workers had said that perhaps people would not take their drama seriously. But the fact was that it stimulated people's interest and comments both during and after the showing.

This is a simple example of theatre, and was easy to carry out because it was for video and not directly in front of an audience. But whether one uses this particular video theatre method or organises public performances, the feasibility and lessons learned from theatre indicate a great potential for non-formal appraisal techniques. The main benefit I see in

this technique is that the appraisal is participatory and benefits all involved, because all involved are appraisers and learners. I found that the acting itself allowed people a much more graphic and creative exploration of issues and possible action than interviews and conversation. The process of selecting themes, acting, and later connecting what is acted to the real situation requires and generates group cooperation.

Popular theatre is 'people's theatre', by and for the community. By involving themselves in theatre, appraisers can begin to understand local culture and at the same time give people a forum in which to learn more about themselves.

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