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Drama as a discussion starter in research and education

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• Introduction

Throughout history, theatre has been used to entertain, to comment on existing situations, and to communicate cultural traditions and stories. Most people are familiar with drama through watching plays in a theatre, on television, in a community hall or in the playground. As with stories, plays which are well made can make us laugh, or be sad or angry, because we recognise ourselves and people we know. A play gives us a picture of a situation and the people in it. It shows their feelings and actions and how they interact with each other.

Drama is a well known instrument in education to explore behaviour, intentions and interactions between people, and is gaining importance in qualitative and participatory research. For example role-plays staged by traditional birth attendants (TBAs) have been used to document the practices of TBAs during deliveries. In health education and community development, short plays or skits are a well known medium to convey messages, to provide information, and to enable people to reflect on their own situation.

The combined effect of visual image, action and the acting out of feelings and intentions offers us a powerful opportunity to learn and explore our own and others' realities. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) involves the investigation of a situation and learning from this investigation to improve our lives. Drama has many potential uses as part of the PRA process. It can act as a trigger for discussion to enable people to reflect on and to investigate their own situation:

- it enables people to look critically at the world in which they live and the factors which influence the way they feel about themselves and how they live their lives;
- it gets groups actively involved;
- it raises self esteem and self confidence; and,
- it stimulates hope for change and breaks through apathy.

Drama offers an opportunity for integrating these elements into the educational activities of health educators, community development workers and trainers. It can encourage communities to explore their own situation, or workers to explore issues and problems in their work.

Preparing a play

In drama both the process and the product provide opportunities for exploring issues. The process includes identifying an issue to look at, experimenting with roles and stories, practising in front of others, and reaching a final product, the play. The process is a learning experience for all involved.

Identifying the issue

When using Freire's methods, the first step is to find out what the group feels strongly about from representatives of the group with which you work. What do people talk about? What makes them emotional? What worries them? Conversations with individuals, group discussions, walking around and listening to what people talk about in the shop or at the clinic are useful methods to find the important issues. Brainstorming can also generate important themes or problem areas. Choose one issue which seems to be of most importance to present in a play.

Often the work context will limit the issues that can be explored. You may have to work on a specific topic such as health, family planning, nutrition, or a subject area in the curriculum. But you can find out from the group which aspects of the topic are most important to them. For example, while exploring issues about family planning with young people in India, one of the first issues to arise was fear of infertility and concerns about irregular periods. Usually a play will change during the experimental period, or new issues and themes will emerge.

Developing a play

To make a role-play realistic, the players have to show the feelings and typical ways of behaving that have been identified as important. To help players use their body in an expressive and creative way, it is useful to start with some introductory exercises. In his book 'Games for Actors and Non-Actors' (1992), Augusto Boal gives a range of useful exercises. The first step in developing a play is to look at the situation you want to discuss. With the group, identify the issues that you will include.

Here are some guidelines which may help you to develop a play:

1. What is happening? Develop a storyline based on a real story which shows the theme and issue to be discussed. Then change the story until everybody feels that this is the best way to trigger the discussion.
2. Pay attention to feelings and the interactions between the players. The best way to do this is to start experimenting and try out any new ideas in the play. There should be a facilitator, whose role is to make sure that all that happens has meaning, and to clarify the ideas people come up with by asking questions. What goes into the play and how it is presented is decided by the representatives of the group who are going to discuss the play.

A play becomes more interesting if the heart of the play produces excitement, such as a conflict, a sad moment, a

moment of great turmoil. If a problem is presented, never include suggestions for a solution. The play should help people to analyse the situation in the play, relate it to their own situation and come up with suggestions for change themselves.

3. What is the setting for the play? It may be in a classroom, a house, at the market or a clinic. It is useful to actually create a space where the play is set using whatever materials are available. Make sure that everything in the scene has a function or meaning.

For example, an empty chair can mean that somebody is absent but expected. This might trigger a discussion about who the expected person is and why they are absent. It may be that a meal is ready, the children are crying and a mother is getting more and more frantic. This might lead to a discussion about why the father is late, what it means to the family and the position of the man in the family.

4. Who are the people involved in the play? Include only the roles which have meaning for the discussion. For example, the role of the cleaner can be important to trigger a discussion about the hierarchy and relationships between people in the workplace. Why do the players act as they do? What is their motivation? People's lives are never simple and straightforward, but include contradictory thoughts and feelings. To make a play interesting and realistic, it is important to include these contradictions.

For example, in a play made with a group of young people in Papua New Guinea (see Box 1), a wife was opposing her husband. Her feelings were a mixture of anger, fear and wanting to show him she disagreed. All three aspects needed to be expressed. This was important to trigger a discussion about the position of wives in the family. The play reflected how the women felt about disagreeing with their husbands. They discussed why the woman felt fear, and why she still went into conflict.

BOX 1

AN EXAMPLE FROM PAPUA NEW GUINEA

A group of young men and women were coming to a nutrition and community development centre for literacy classes. They would often talk about things like the changing society they lived in and conflicts with their parents. They wanted to explore their own situation further and to learn how to act and make theatre plays. They were asked to exchange stories and choose one which dealt with the most important things in their lives. The men and the women had to choose their own stories, and use each other to make a play from it. One of the plays they made shows a wife asking her husband for some money to buy food. The husband holds the cash earned from selling coffee, but refuses to give her any because it is her task to produce the food. When she in turn refuses to cook for him, her husband beats her.

The facilitator started to ask the young women in the group how they felt about the play. At this stage it became clear that the women felt very uncomfortable discussing this issue with the young men. They then decided to come together in a separate group. The women used the play to analyse their situation. They were able to discuss together many of the issues which were most important in their lives. These included the relationships between men and women, what was expected of women in marriage, and customs and practices to do with childbirth and women's work. The women decided to discuss these issues with the young men in the group. They also talked to their parents about some of the issues to do with marriage. They decided to continue meeting together as a women's group. The play also provided an excellent insight in the young women's and men's feelings about marriage, traditional practices, perceptions of adolescents about relationships, gender roles and identified entry point for change which was implemented by the young people themselves.

How to facilitate the discussion

The play should not be longer than five, or at the very most, ten minutes. The group should be small, with around ten to fifteen participants. Make sure that the audience can see all the players clearly during the play. After the play, the players stay in their last position to keep a visual picture during the first phase of the analysis. They do not get involved in the discussion at this stage. A volunteer takes notes of the session to record what was discussed or a tape recorder is used to transcribe the discussion verbatim. The facilitator should encourage the whole group to take part. The facilitator might ask these questions:

- Describe the play
- What did you see happening?
- What happened in the beginning?
- What happened then?
- Who was involved?
- How did the play end?
- Analyse the play
- What were the different people in the play feeling?
- Why did they feel this way?

- What were they doing?
- Why did they do that?
- Relate the play to real life
- Do you recognise this situation?
- Have you been in similar situations?
- What are the similarities?
- How did you feel?
- What did you do?

Now ask the players to join the discussion. Ask them how they felt in their role. What happened to them? If this input is given too early, the players might impose the meaning they wanted to give to the play on the group of viewers. Ask the players to get out of their role. Sometimes players get totally involved in the role they play and keep emotions from the play with them. Players may actually need to say out loud: 'I have stopped being as in the play. I am', and give their own name. This also signals back to the group the difference between the actor and the real person.

Further probing can explore the following:

- Place the play in the broader context
- Does this situation happen in other areas of our life?
- How are they similar?

- Analyse causes
- Why is this happening?
- What can we do to change this situation?

Making the play is an enormous learning experience for the players. The situation needs to be analysed in detail. Players need to explore the feelings and attitudes they will portray, the reasons for them, and how they will express them in action. This helps them to understand the position and feelings of others and themselves. It is not always necessary for the players to perform the play they have created to others outside the group. The group will benefit from going through the process of preparing and developing the play, even if they do not perform it for others.

• **Drama and participation**

The audience may just watch the play, or they may discuss it; they may start acting to change the play and/or be involved in producing it. When a play is made just to pass on a message, the content is mostly decided by professionals. They want to make people aware of a problem or new technologies and to advise them about how they can prevent the problem and use new ideas. The audience is seen as a group that needs to be informed of an issue that is seen as important by the makers.

The drama is presented but there is no chance to reflect on it or act to change the presented situation. For example, a play might make people aware that a new disease such as AIDS is around and that they can be at risk of getting it. They might be asked to discuss, for example, the feasibility of using condoms, what they like and dislike about it, where condoms are available etc. However, the choice of situation and topics of discussion might differ very much from the questions viewers have, or the situation they experience. When drama, as with pictures or other media is

used in this way, the audience is seen by the makers as passive receivers of the message.

Involving people actively in the sharing of knowledge, analysis of their own situation and decision making about what should change and how, demands a different style of working. In this approach, drama is used to start a discussion, enabling people to reflect on a situation which is important to them.

Whatever the situation, facilitators need to be aware of the powerful ability of drama to recreate strong emotions of past experiences. It is therefore important to ensure that players do not act out their own experience and that support is provided when strong emotions emerge.

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NOTES

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FURTHER READING

Theatre for development: a guide to training (1985) by Martin L Byram, Center for International Education, Publications Officer, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, USA.

Activities to explore: using drama in AIDS and family planning work (1991) by E Lynch and G Gordon, AIDS Prevention Unit, International Planned Parenthood Federation, PO Box 759, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LQ, UK.

Games for actors and non-actors (1992) by Augusto Boal (translated from the French by Adrian Jackson), Routledge, 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE, UK.