

There's more than one art to creative PRA

Helen Gould

• Introduction

Think of participatory development, for one moment, as an orchestra. It would be inconceivable to use just one instrument. With PRA, as with orchestras, you need a balance of skills, a range of instruments and players, performing in concert. This analogy fits in well with the historical development of PRA as a family of tools which complement each other.

More recently, creative activities are being included in the tool kit of PRA. This is an exciting development but one worrying aspect is the increasing dominance of theatre within this group of creative tools. Creativity is a core language of human expression in participatory development, but just as the orchestra, there is a variety of instruments which help a community verbalise their needs and solutions creatively. It would be a dull world indeed if acting was our only form of self-expression. What, then, of our poets, painters and craft makers, our musicians and dancers?

Art in development

When I researched the role of art in development during 1995, (*The Art of Survival*, published by Comedia in 1996) I found that a wide range of art forms were used across a broad spectrum of projects, from structural development programmes to health awareness and post-emergency situations. They included: circus on the Bosnian front line, puppetry in mines awareness, dance with youths in a disadvantaged area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, visual arts and creative writing in refugee camps, craft-making for income generation with homeless people in

Los Angeles. Furthermore, drama, music and a whole clutch of media tools - video, radio, television, film and photography were used.

As part of this research exercise, Oxfam kindly let me explore its database. Over a period of the previous three years, it had funded some 74 development projects with creative elements (that we could trace) to the tune of at least £600,000. These broke down into the following categories: projects using drama (45%), visual arts (22%), music (12%), pottery (6%), textiles (6%), and dance (5%). As a general observation, it seemed that performing and visual arts were used for education and communication, while crafts and textiles were useful for skills training and income generation. It was interesting to note that in the majority of development situations, the art forms used evolved by accident rather than design. These art forms were not needs-driven, but used primarily because the facilitators were most skilled in them.

This need not always be the case. Consider the following examples: a gender law and rights programme which resulted in a folk song book about women's rights; media training to enable a community to produce a newsletter to spread good practice among farmers; street performance being used to spread the message to street kids about AIDS and HIV. Clearly these are cases in which the forms used were highly appropriate, driven by needs and not whims.

The limitations of drama and role-play

In a community where drama and role-play are part of the language of self- or community expression (and, admittedly, there are very few where it does not), then participatory theatre is entirely appropriate. However, in instances

where the capacity for role-play is limited, where one might be dealing with a group of individuals who are uncomfortable with, or incapable of, performing, other forms of self-expression may be more appropriate.

One example of this comes from the work of two British arts therapists and development workers, Debra Kalmanowitz and Olivia Lloyd. They have spent time working with Bosnian children in refugee camps in Slovenia and Croatia. Primarily they have worked through the medium of visual arts. A painting by a child who has witnessed so much in his/her short life can probably paint a thousand words of drama: roofs of neat, naively drawn houses are pierced by mortar shells while matchstick men lie bleeding. But Lloyd and Kalmanowitz have not just focused on a child's visual capacities. Their sessions can often include play - building houses or community dens - and creative writing.

One work, which I treasure for inspiration, was written by a Bosnian teenager, Lucija Tokmic, in one such session in a camp in Hrastnik, Slovenia, (see Box 1). All credit should go to the Bosnia Support Group for publishing it.

BOX 1

'Happiness is may be blue,
Happiness is may be green.
But happiness is always big,
Even when it is small.
Happiness is having eyes
Because eyes can see - woods, sky and
clouds
And the road you are travelling.
Happiness is having ears
Because ears hear everything - whispers,
rustling
The river flowing, silence and thunder,
Happiness is having hands.
With hands you embrace,
With hands you love,
And you go to a far away world.
Happiness may be blue,
Happiness may be green,
But it is always big, even when it is small.'

I doubt that any theatre practitioner could have got either of these young people to verbalise both their anguish and serenity in any other way. Painting and creative writing was the perfect instrument of their expression.

Learning through creativity

One example of a project which has these values close at heart is Katha, a literacy development project. This works with some 10,000 families in one of the largest slums in New Delhi, India.

Katha was set up by author Geeta Dharmarajan in 1988, initially as a health and environmental education project. It is now an integrated development project, which specialises in teaching LIFE skills (literacy and lifelong learning, income generation skills, family well-being and empowerment). It uses an enormous range of activities to spread the joys of books and reading, to empower women and children, break down gender and social barriers, and to encourage learning through creativity.

The Indian literacy tradition spans a continuum from the spoken word - storytelling and performance - to written texts. Thus, as part of this legacy, Katha uses all the creative tools at its disposal - theatre, storytelling, writing and film, cartoons and magazine publishing - to 'make an impact, ...to motivate and excite many, many people in a myriad of ways'.

In Zimbabwe's Masvingo province, drought forced farming communities off the land and into other forms of employment. Many fell back on traditional craft skills, such as crochet work, basketry, wood and stone carving to earn their living. Some 41 groups applied for assistance to market their new craft businesses in this area in 1992 alone.

Traditional creative skills, this time, local song and dance, were used in the southern area of the Punjab in Pakistan to prepare and mitigate against floods in riverside communities.

In Santiago, Chile, a project with the migrant Mapuche people delved back into its culture, history and language in a programme of cultural training courses and events designed to help strengthen and empower these fractured communities.

Another example is Raw Material, a music and multi-media development project, based in Kings Cross in the heart of London. It uses

video, dance and street music; - the language of urban youth - to get its participants to express their needs, to discuss and debate drug culture, violence, HIV and other important youth issues. It works, and young people flock to this hive of creative self-expression, because it uses their language.

• Conclusion

We can all easily grasp the lessons from these examples. If the true values of participation are carried through into the creative areas of development, then the democratic process should allow participants to choose the form of expression with which they feel most comfortable. It follows, therefore, that one either uses multi-skilled specialists to facilitate these participatory processes, or a range of specialists working in concert - much like that orchestra analogy described earlier.

Perhaps there has been some tendency for arts development practitioners to lead the donors through the nose. In the absence of any real expertise in the cultural field, the donors have listened to the experts. If the experts use theatre, then theatre it is.

But given the rapid evolution of this field, there is now an argument for a more inquisitive attitude. The question most donors should be prepared to ask is why one art form

before another? What is the cultural justification? And where is the need?

A conductor may not be an expert in every instrument, but s/he must be able to conduct players and instruments in concert and harmony. Similarly, a PRA facilitator should be prepared to mix and match a range of tools to suit the development environment and objectives. S/he should have the capacity to use the right creative tools for the right cultural environment and objectives.

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NOTES

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