

## 18

## The act of participation: a context for linking drama and PRA

Rachel Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish

### • Introduction

Theatre is recognised in most cultures and communities as a form of cultural expression and communication. Although forms vary (for example, puppetry, mime, song), theatre is about the act of representation through live performance. Existing cultural forms become the medium through which people directly share and comment on their own lives. As such, theatre has a great deal to offer to dynamise some of the techniques of PRA and in the process, open channels for further insight, information sharing and learning.

In this article, we draw on our experience of experimenting with some ideas in workshops on theatre and PRA to explore the potential for overlap between theatre and PRA and to ask what shape or form these drama-based approaches might take.

### Performers and performances

‘Theatre’ and ‘drama’ mean different things to different people. Academic debates on the distinction between these two terms are less at issue in the work we do than the uses to which dramatic and theatrical processes can be put. In our work we use the terms ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ interchangeably, placing an emphasis on techniques and processes which are neither based on written scripts nor dependent on an external audience beyond the group themselves.

Although groups often include those who are natural ‘performers’, the workshops do not concentrate on formal acting techniques nor

on creating quality performances. Rather, the emphasis is on the issues being debated and on the dramatic techniques that can be used to explore these issues further. It is, therefore, of little concern to participants whether they are engaged in ‘theatre’ or ‘drama’. What becomes significant to them is that they are representing and analysing ideas through techniques that enable them to enact what they think, know or dream. They are *doing* rather than talking about doing.

### Playing with ideas: dramatising PRA

PRA uses visual as well as verbal stimuli. To date, these have been two dimensional objects or symbols: beans, diagrams, maps. Drama can offer a three dimensional perspective, giving people the option of not only representing events, relationships, organisations etc., but also of actually dynamising them by bringing them to life. Participants are given the opportunity to play with and be inside some of their ideas, rather than just to objectify, rationalise or intellectualise them. And through the playing and interacting, further ideas and insights frequently come to light.

The process of drama can therefore offer a group a further form through which to communicate their knowledge, opinions and thoughts.

### Communication using images

Communication through theatre is both verbal and non-verbal. This characteristic has great potential for PRA work. For example, PRA practitioners might use ranking and seasonality diagramming to ask about the health of a village at certain times of year. As well as, or instead of, diagramming, a group can be asked

to create together a still image of the health of the village, using their own bodies. There are many ways to facilitate this:

- ask one member of the group to 'sculpt' an image by giving verbal or non-verbal instructions to other group members or all group members to take on the role of sculptor in turn;
- ask one person to start the image by taking up a still position and invite others to place themselves in relation to it and so build up a collective image; and,
- count from 10 down to 1, during which time the group should have created an image collectively.

Working with small groups would generate a number of images. Each or any of the images can then be analysed by the group as a whole. Some options include:

- ask observers to describe what they actually see, without any interpretation;
- ask them to interpret the image, perhaps with a story about what it represents for them or how it makes them feel;
- ask the group to show us another image that represents the situation before or after this one; and,
- ask observers to replace original group members who can then reflect on the whole picture, as well as the picture from their original perspective.

### **Dynamising the image**

'Dynamising' an image that would remain static in PRA, by bringing it to life, is a starting point for further analysis.

- ask the characters in the image to say one sentence that represents what they are saying or thinking in the image;
- ask observers to suggest things that those in the image might say to each other or be thinking; and,
- asking individual characters to repeat a single sound and gesture appropriate to that character, to depict them in that 'frozen' moment.

Through integrating words, movement and sound, other levels of expression and communication come into play. In the process,

more is revealed or discovered about interpretations of the original image and the situation it represents.

### **Playing with plays**

Image work can be a useful basis from which to build scenes or plays to illustrate particular issues. In the PRA context the purpose of such dramas is to motivate group members to participate in the lives of the characters and the action of the play.

Asking participants to share stories of a common event or experience is a useful way of creating dramas. Plays are then improvised from this raw material. It is helpful to the process if the plays or scenes depict a clear story, with recognisable and believable characters. It is important, too, that there are places in which 'observers' can intervene. However, in order for 'observers' to be motivated to intervene, it is important that the situation of the play is recognisable to them: the content needs to relate to the lives of the whole group, not just those who devised the play.

### **Frameworks for Intervention**

Much can be learnt about situations and social relations by watching the resulting plays. However, by engaging 'observers' in the action of the play - akin to the effect of dynamising images - alternative opinions or ideas can be explored by:

- allying teams of 'observers' with particular characters. Their job is to offer advice to their character at any time; and,
- inviting 'observers' to replace particular characters when they would behave differently at a certain moment. Previous image work can have alerted 'observers' as much to what characters are doing (communicated via body language, gesture and movement) as what they are saying. Silent interventions - those that do not involve spoken words - can be very powerful.

Such activities provide a wealth of material and information about a situation, community or project and the often complex relationships that impact, influence or are affected by it.

## Questions of appropriateness

Playing and experimenting with such techniques raises the question of their 'appropriateness'. Certainly there is a role for drama within the context of training, but there is often caution about applying these techniques directly with a project or community.

Theatre can tap into levels of spontaneity that other research methods often do not excite in people. It invites both head and heart to be involved. Enacting a seasonal calendar will provide as much information about the feelings that various characters are experiencing as it will about the particular event, crop or institution under scrutiny. It is perhaps this that sometimes concerns those who have begun to explore these techniques in workshops: the fact that drama and theatre work at the level of our feelings as well as our thoughts. Worries arise like: 'but could this be too sensitive?' or 'but how do you use it with a community?'

Two dimensional techniques contain themselves within a written, symbolic or verbal form. Somehow this appears to be safer because participants are more likely to be 'reporting' events/opinions and their perspective may therefore be more detached. Also, more of the process of analysis and reflection may happen at a distance from a particular group or community. However, this idea of 'safety' may be somewhat superficial because it is based on the assumption that more 'cerebral' approaches are less inflammatory. In either the short term or the long term, how do we know this is the case? It's just that the tears, laughter or silence that a drama can create gives us a very immediate indication of what we are tapping into within a community.

## The challenges of using drama in development work

Trying to apply drama techniques within the PRA process challenges us to consider our roles as development practitioners. The danger (to some) and the excitement (to others) of these approaches is that dialogue and analysis is really handed over to the group. The group becomes its own subject matter. And when that happens the nature of the process and any product is unpredictable.

Certainly elements of risk are involved. Drama confronts people with themselves and their own lives in a very immediate and tangible way. Certainly one needs to carry the conscience of 'what have I started?' or 'what expectations have I raised?' and certainly using these methods is not to be done without careful thought and preparation. But are these not questions we should be asking ourselves when entering any community to do any work? Maybe drama approaches just make these questions more explicit and therefore maybe harder to answer?

- **Rachel Searle-Mbullu**, 15 Connaught Road, Norwich NR2 3BP and **Kate Norrish**, Flat 3, 59 Netherwood Road, London W14 0BP.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have been excited and influenced by the work of Augusto Boal, to whom we owe a debt. For further reference see:

- Boal, A. 1979. *The Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto.  
 Boal, A. 1995. *The Rainbow of Desire*. London: Routledge.