

## Performance and Participation

### An overview

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- **Performance and participatory development**

Drama, stories and song have long been used in development. Most commonly, performances used for and by development agencies feature pre-scripted plays and catchy tunes that entertain and engage as a way of getting messages across. Like advertising jingles, such performances seek to 'sell' particular ways of doing things by offering new and different practices which they show to be more desirable. Laughter and action draw the crowds to see characters facing the problems and practising the solutions that development practitioners regard as the most pressing or appropriate. Audiences come away having seen characters with which they can identify washing their hands, planting trees or refusing to have sex without a condom.

All too often, these audiences remain passive spectators and play little to no part in selecting the themes, shaping the action or defining their own solutions. Lipservice may be paid to 'participation' in order to enhance effectiveness. Surveys may be carried out to get the messages right, local actors or tunes may be used to make the performance more authentic. But control over the messages and over the medium remains in the hands of outsiders. From AIDS plays to fertiliser songs, these top-down interventions give local people little scope to explore their own realities for themselves.

Participatory uses of the arts in development break away from the 'we know best' approach. The Freirean approach to education begins from what people know and works with them as subjects, rather than objects who are simply fed information. Similarly, participatory performance work emphasises the importance of working with and from people's own realities and using their own modes of expression. Local people replace outsider scripters, illustrators, editors, directors and actors and become active participants in creating and exploring solutions to real-life dilemmas.

By engaging the creativity, as well as the analytic capabilities, of local people, the use of participatory theatre, video and other art forms can stimulate and sustain community participation in the development process. By giving people a voice, participatory media can nurture the confidence to speak out on issues that might otherwise remain unaddressed. This provides a valuable means of communication within and beyond the community that is in itself empowering.

- **Using the creative potential of the arts**

In this issue, contributors explore the ways in which the creative potential of the arts can be used as part of a participatory process and, in particular, how PRA practitioners might benefit from integrating performative and artistic media into the PRA process. Contributors explore:

- the use of participatory theatre to articulate and express the issues that affect people and to work towards solutions (see Harding, Jackson, Mbowa, de Koning, this issue);
- the use of the language of theatre in participatory monitoring and evaluation (Mavrocordatos, this issue);
- using 'legislative theatre' for policy research (Jackson, this issue);
- using theatre in a participatory educational process (see Ogolla, Norris, this issue);
- the use of other creative media in participatory work, including the use of visual and verbal art and video (see Gould, van der Wijk, Lloyd Laney, Johannson, Smithies, this issue);
- intersections between theatre and PRA, in community-based analysis and in workshops (see Smith et al., Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, van der Wijk, Gould, Gordon, this issue); and,
- using drama in PRA training (Neefjes, Pat Norrish, Gelpke in Tips for Trainers, this issue).

These articles offer food for thought, raising a number of interesting questions about the possibilities that performative media offer PRA practitioners.

### • **Creativity and empowerment**

One of the most powerful contributions that arts can make to the development process is to unleash - and provide fora for the expression of - creativity. By representing and owning their own dilemmas, participants engage with the process of finding solutions not only on an abstract level through discussions and analysis, but also by immersing themselves in the emotions and real-life reactions that these dilemmas provoke. This process can empower those whose views and experiences often remain unsolicited and unheard (see Mbowa and van der Wijk).

Theatre provides the most immediate forum for this kind of involvement. But other art forms can equally - and in some contexts or for some people, more appropriately - stimulate engagement and reflection (see Gould)

PRA is generally regarded as a means to achieving particular ends: as a way of stimulating community involvement, enabling community people to do their own research, creating partnerships and so on. It is less often talked about as a *creative* process. Whether they are sketches hastily drawn in the sand or elaborately constructed models, the process of creating a visual representation draws on the creativity of those who make it. The PRA process harnesses this creativity to create visual outputs which then become the objects of discussion: moving from an *expressive* to an *analytic* mode.

As Gould notes, in many development situations art forms evolve by accident rather than design. While the use of art forms may be intended as functional, to regard their creation as merely the production of practical outputs would miss important dimensions of the process. Outputs from PRA activities can equally be regarded as works of art. And while the finished product is fixed in time, the process through which it is created is like a performance - a dynamic interaction between people that flows from one act to the next. Captured on video and played back, this process can form the basis for further analysis with the community; used as part of participatory video activities the recording and re-presenting of PRA activities can enhance the depth of analysis (Su Braden, pers. comm.).

Where PRA, as an analytic activity, is allied with the use of techniques that expand its expressive and creative potential, the process can generate further insights and possibilities. It can also serve as a mode of self-expression that can increase participants' confidence (see Smith et al., Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, Gordon and van der Wijk).

### • **Rehearsing for action**

Performing and visual arts can serve as a therapeutic medium, providing a way of releasing and exploring feelings. Plays, for example, can be a vehicle for people to vent their frustrations; poems and drawings can enable people to express their feelings in ways that they might not be able to in everyday communication (see van der Wijk, de Koning and Gould).

While there is undoubtedly an important role for activities such as these, they may not help people to move beyond current realities and to imagine new possibilities. By engaging people's imaginations and harnessing their creativity in a process that moves away from a description of how things are to an analysis of that situation and of possibilities for change, the arts can also be used as medium for exploring solutions and rehearsing for action (see Jackson, Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, and Mbowa).

As used in participatory development work, the creation of performative or visual images is a starting point rather than a finished product. It serves as a basis from which to begin to unravel and analyse the underlying issues and to work together to find solutions. Getting communities to make up plays or draw pictures is not enough. As Zakes Mda (1993) argues, community members may participate fully in creating and performing a play, but this is not to say that they become critically aware as part of the process. Without intervention by a skilled facilitator, plays - like the visual representations of PRA - can merely confirm, rather than challenge or offer alternatives to, current realities.

Here, the dilemma arises as to *whose* artistic forms are used in this process. Verbal art, plays and songs are often part of the rich cultural life of communities: in rites and rituals, or in other forms of traditional ceremony or celebration. These 'indigenous cultural forms' offer, it would seem, an appropriate cultural medium for participatory activities (see Mavrocordatos and Harding). Yet it needs to be remembered that in some contexts traditional stories and songs serve to reinforce the existing order. Playing with these forms might not only rob them of their cultural meaning, but may also be counter-productive.

Introducing new and different forms departs from the familiar and may seem artificial. There is also a danger that introduced formulas become mechanical and unrelated to how people in that community express themselves. PRA practitioners have seen how easily this happens. New forms may, however, offer a more neutral framework for expression and analysis. Appropriateness is a matter of

context: what works in one settings might not automatically work in another.

## • Performance and PRA

If the use of performative media in a participatory process is to sustain local rehearsals for action and lead to actual change taking place, it needs to be rooted in local realities and not merely imposed in one-off, outsider-driven exercises. This is a challenge that PRA practitioners face and one in which the use of performative media familiar to communities may prove useful.

## Theatre for development

Like PRA, Theatre for Development (TfD) has its roots in the philosophy of empowerment. Like PRA, TfD uses local materials and enables local analysts to make use of the tools it offers to make sense of, and change, their realities. However, while PRA tends to focus on the material aspects of people's lives and limits social analysis to exploring institutions or differentiation, TfD provides a means of exploring - and addressing - dynamic relations between people. So while PRA visualisation starts with *what* exists to focus discussions of what needs to change, TfD offers a means of visualising *why* and *how* changes might be necessary and might come about.

As with PRA, the practice of TfD depends on the skill and motivation of the facilitator(s). Just as PRA can be used as part of top-down development projects to achieve notional 'community participation', TfD can be used in message-oriented theatre that seeks to 'facipulate' (Jenks Okwerri, pers. comm.) rather than to genuinely empower people.

Understandings of what TfD is about, or for, vary widely. Among practitioners, there is a continuum from those who focus on using community-based research to create fairly polished performances to be staged by experienced actors and used as a basis for discussions, through to those who focus more on the process of theatre-making in the enactment of everyday dilemmas and solutions to them by those who experience them (see, for example, Harding, Mbowa Ogolla and Mavrocordatos).

TfD has a range of possible applications. How theatre is used depends on the context. Within a workshop and in initial work with communities, acting skills are almost irrelevant: what matters is the process. Simple techniques (see, for example, Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, Pat Norrish, de Koning, Neefjes) can be used by facilitators with no previous experience in theatre work. But once process begins to move towards the creation of a product, either as part of ongoing theatre work in one community (see Mavrocordatos) or where community groups perform for others, the quality of performances begins to matter more and the kind of facilitation needed also changes.

A number of models of TfD practice currently exist. Two examples are detailed in Boxes 1 and 2.

Like PRA, how and for what (as well as by whom) these approaches are used depends on the agenda(s) of the facilitators. And like PRA methods, such models offer frameworks for theatre-making within the context of participatory learning and action. Often, these frameworks are used to explore specific *issues*, in contrast to a more open-ended approach in which the community establish their own performative language through which to communicate unsolicited concerns (Mavrocordatos, pers. comm.).

BOX 1

**PARTICIPATORY EDUCATIONAL THEATRE  
(PET)**

PET is a participatory educational theatre methodology. It aims to develop an understanding of the inter-connected nature of social problems through interactive drama. Participatory techniques are used to create short problem-posing scenes and to enable the audience to probe, reflect on and respond to issues of concern to them provoked by the drama. This approach poses questions and problems, rather than supplying answers and solutions, in order to bring about change in the community's perception of the world and themselves as individuals within it: allowing the community to examine their attitudes towards the unresolved dilemmas presented in the drama that reflects their lives.

PET performances consist of a series of free-standing scenes, each of which makes sense in its own right. A question is chosen for each section that provokes discussion. A theme and a question relating to each scene are visually displayed using a symbolic design on a storyboard. After the first scene is performed, the audience chooses from the storyboard which scene should come next. At the end of each scene, the audience can ask the central character(s) questions which they answer in role, or come forward to take up the part of a character to try out solutions. The facilitator thus encourages the audience to participate to help solve the dilemmas presented in each scene (see Ogolla).

*Adapted from: Chamberlain, Chillery, Ogolla and Wandera (1995)*

BOX 2

**AUGUSTO BOAL'S  
THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED**

Augusto Boal talks of his Theatre of the Oppressed as a 'rehearsal for action' and argues that theatre is a weapon that people can use to empower themselves to take action (Boal, 1979 and 1992). More recently, Boal has developed the use of participatory theatre to enable ordinary people in low-income neighbourhoods to engage in the process of making the rules and regulations that govern their lives in what he calls 'legislative theatre' (see Jackson). Boal's methods include:

- *Invisible Theatre*: This theatrical form is a variant of guerilla theatre and agit-prop street theatre. In an everyday context like a market, a restaurant or a bus stop, 'invisible' actors act out a controversial situation to stimulate reflection and discussion, and participation, among people in that situation - without letting people realise that they are actors (see Norris);
- *Image Theatre*: Actors use their bodies to portray - as snapshots or freeze-frames - images of situations, concepts or experiences, participants generate images that are used in a number of ways for analysis. These images can be 'dynamised' - brought to life - and developed into scenarios for further analysis (see Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish);
- *Forum Theatre*. A short skit is used to generate interventions from an audience whose role changes from passive spectators to active 'spect-actors' (Boal, 1979). The skit is performed, then replayed and the audience are offered opportunities to intervene to change the action (see Jackson, Norris and Pat Norrish)

### Participatory video and PRA

Video is increasingly being used to document the PRA process and as a tool for advocacy. In this sense, the use of video is no different than in conventional documentary film-making, just on less grand a scale. The possibilities that video offers when used as part of a

participatory process are more in tune with the principles of PRA: local people choose their own 'shots', edit them together with a skilled technician and have a voice in deciding to whom and where the finished product should be shown.

As Johansson and de Waal's article illustrates, participatory video making can have powerful results. Transferring what has become an increasingly simple technology into the hands of communities offers enormous potential for advocacy, participatory policy research, communication between communities, conflict resolution and community-based planning (see also Lloyd Laney and Smithies).

Usually the outputs from PRA exercises need to be translated into the kind of prose that decision-makers are more familiar with. Videos made with communities, which may feature PRA exercises in context, are a much more powerful and immediate medium for communication. Documenting PRA exercises on video is just the start. The clips can be replayed to different groups within the community and used as the basis for planning further video filming or for analysis and discussion. The emphasis throughout is on the process, rather than on the product.

Video also offers a valuable resource for training PRA facilitators. Showbacks can underline the importance of behaviour and attitudes in fieldwork. Capturing revealing incidents from fieldwork can serve more forcefully than any spoken feedback to remind trainees of the need to reflect on and modify their behaviour (Mallika Samaranayake, pers. comm.). Similarly, by capturing the context in which PRA work takes place, video can provide a record for more detailed process analysis (Carolyn Jones and Nicola Frost, pers. comm.).

### Complementarities and possibilities

TfD gives participants a chance to try things out before doing them for real and a language through which to express their concerns. As such, TfD not only complements PRA but extends its possibilities. Participatory video offers participants opportunities for communication that may ordinarily be denied to them, as well as a medium that can be used

to reflect on the process as well as the products of PRA. Verbal art, song, dance and other artistic and expressive forms in communities can serve to provide a cultural context for further activities, one that builds on existing cultural resources.

There are many further possibilities for drawing on the strengths of performative work as part of the PRA process, as for using PRA in TfD and participatory arts work. For example:

- virtually any PRA diagramming method can be used as a starting point for group analysis of issues, which are then turned into story-lines that reflect real-life experiences and made into skits or role-plays (see Mbowa and Smith et al.); these can be videoed and played back, or played to different groups to stimulate discussion and analysis (see Smithies);
- short plays based on events in communities can be used to generate suggestions from the audience as to how things might have happened differently, where members of the audience take on roles in the drama and act out solutions (see Gordon). These solutions can then be ranked, using matrix ranking or scoring, to explore their pros and cons and to analyse the criteria that matter to community people; solutions might be videoed and played back to the group to reflect on or used as the basis for further skit-making and interventions;
- 'group mapping' (see Mavrocordatos) can be used as a physical version of the more static visual PRA techniques of network or social mapping. These help us to explore how people perceive their relationships with each other and, by dynamising and changing the representation, how they might change; video can be used to capture these movements and as a tool to deepen analysis;
- diagramming exercises, such as flow charts or impact diagrams, can be brought to life with the acting out of scenes arising at each stage, which in turn can prompt further diagramming (see Gordon); and,
- Venn diagrams of institutional relationships can be facilitated before, or after, exercises where people act out these relationships or create silent images of

them, which are brought to life (see Smith et al.). Moving from what exists now and how things might be, both these mini-scenarios and Venn diagrams can be used to improvise changes that might be desired or needed.

## • Conclusion

Performance is and always has been part of participatory work, but is not often celebrated as such. Recognising the performative potential of PRA and bringing into our practice some of the tools that the performative and visual arts have to offer can enrich the quality of what we do as PRA practitioners - livening up a dull discussion, bringing to life dry diagramming exercises and offering the opportunity for participants to express themselves in their own ways and to have fun in the process. We hope that you enjoy this special issue and look forward to hearing from you about your experiences.

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