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Theatre and video for development

Frances Harding

• Introduction

Within development, there is increasing recognition of the need to hear the opinion of the people who are most affected by development. One response to this is 'Theatre for Development' which is a technique of performance and drama-building. It rests on an interaction between people who are in the flight path of development projects and those agencies who initiate them.

Theatre for development as a tool

Theatre for Development aims to provide a means of articulating and analysing issues of concern to specific communities by:

- setting up safe parameters for the discussion of local issues;
- interacting with the community in ways which they identify as their primary forms of private and public communication. This includes: talking, song, dance, storytelling, and dramatising; and,
- developing this interaction and the forms discussed or displayed to create a dialogue drama.

Thus, Theatre for Development is a practice which enables communities, as stake holders in development, to participate by outlining their fears, needs and aspirations. The process defines a new system in which the voices of development beneficiaries speak. This is important as there is increasing awareness of the need to hear the voices of those whom development affects and to listen to their fears and hopes.

However, traditionally trained development practitioners face a number of dilemmas in turning this awareness into action. Where should such activities take place and how? The 'where' should be the community's own space and not that of the authority. The 'how' should be the community's own forms of articulation that are used in everyday communication. It should be those that they use and choose for themselves. Theatre for Development attempts to integrate both the 'where' and 'how' for effective communication and exchange.

Logistics and methods

Theatre for Development workshops are set up in co-operation with local government agencies, international aid or development agencies and last between 8 and 14 days, or as required. The duration, cost and 'follow-up' are important concerns in practice. Having already established a base within a community, through a local agency, Theatre for Development operates through a series of six simple principles.

1. Recognising people's existing skills in performance, analysis and articulation

This first stage is the start of a process of building up respect and confidence between the in-comers and the local community. For example, young girls in one community did a dance-song-game for which the lyrics were: 'if you have a headache, you need to gather x leaves; if you have stomach ache, you need to take y leaves' and so on. The dance-song-game was a learned, and learning, articulation of local herbal medical practice. This provided an opportunity to discuss the content of performance and to focus the topic of the

workshop. In this instance, the workshop was focused on increasing desertification in the area and its effects on the health of women and children.

2. Enabling a storyline to be created from within the local community

The storyline comes from the experiences of the people within the community where it is being created. It usually focuses on a specific area of daily life, such as water supplies, an aspect of health, pollution etc.. At this stage, respect for, and interest in, the concerns of the community are paramount. Integrity is essential if an honest relationship is to develop which will be useful to the host community.

3. Fictionalise an issue

At this stage, the characters are introduced. The fictionalisation ensures that no-one is compromised by being personally named or identified. The move from discussion to dramatisation takes place in a number of ways and depends on how the specific community engages with the techniques of representation. Comedy or a comic style is often the catalyst in representational forms.

4. Identify performers from within the community

People volunteer to play parts. People generally volunteer very readily and then develop a more complex character and storyline. Exactly who the performers are depends on local factors, such as the theme of the workshop, and the content of the drama.

For example young men may play important roles in a drama about migration and women may be key in a play about childbirth. The intended audience, such as men, women, local authorities, elders or aid agencies, will influence the production (see below). Competitive approaches, such as an established reputation as a performer, or a deep-felt conviction about the issue under discussion are amongst the stimuli which prompt people to perform.

Techniques can be used which enable more than one plot to develop or more than one

'ending' to be envisaged. This stimulates the appearance of more relevant information and a deeper analysis of the real-life situation.

5. The audience is defined by the community

The makers of the drama must define and know for whom they will play. The aim is not a finished product, but a dramatic and dramatised account locally recognisable issues, such that community can act upon them.

6. The drama should not propose ways of resolving a crisis, rather the crisis in the drama interacts directly with the community

The rationale for Theatre for Development is that the community perceives the dilemma in the drama, recognises its familiarity in real life and then identifies the difficulties of, and possibilities for, resolution. This open-ended aspect of the drama, relating it to real life, is a vital part of the process. Recently, Hajiya Miriam Musa, an extension worker was asked if drama worked because it showed a fictional situation. She replied that, on the contrary, it was effective because it 'showed reality'.

• **Reflections on using video in theatre for development work**

Video recording is familiar to many people, even those in rural areas, and is often associated with prestige. Women - and men - usually feel happy to use video in recording the proceedings throughout a workshop and share in the task of videoing.

What are the advantages to the community of using video? There is a great deal of opportunity for development of this field. The ability to transfer information into a visual, moving image means that those who never venture out into villages can be brought face-to-face with realities they might otherwise choose not to confront.

However, the use of video raises some ethical issues. For example, should the video be shown to anyone other than the community

themselves? One response is that the video must be owned by those who are in the image, not the 'holder' of the camera.

- **Conclusion**

Theatre for Development shows 'reality' within a safe environment that appears to be 'fictional'. At the same time, it offers an opportunity to 'rehearse' means of resolving real difficulties. This 'fictionalised reality' makes Theatre for Development a unique method of interactive development.

- **Frances Harding**, Lecturer in African Drama, Department of African Languages and Cultures, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK.