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Drama, PRA and the academic institution

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• Introduction

Over the last 5 years, we (the AERDD¹ at the University of Reading) have used Forum Theatre as a regular part of a 4-week masters module on participatory approaches to extension and rural development. The approach to learning is experiential with students spending around half of the course carrying out a short PRA exercise.

The strong focus on participatory development means that there is pressure on many people to gain the skills and techniques which PRA employs. But an essential part of participatory work is the change in attitude which is required of professionals in 'handing over the stick'. The difficulty for both education and training situations is to provide experience in being 'handed the stick' for those who are to practice it. It is in this context that we have used Forum Theatre.

What is forum theatre

Forum Theatre is part of the 'theatre of the oppressed' of Augusto Boal, developed as one of a series of tools or 'weapons' (Boal 1979 pp ix) for political empowerment. It is continually being developed and tried in different contexts. It is a theatrical activity in which anyone can take part. It takes the form of an open ended play constructed

around a clear cut issue. It does not attempt to represent a finished product or to incorporate messages. It engages people as actors, directors and critics and enables them to analyse the situation of the play and to try out

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alternatives to those presented (see Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, this issue). Its main aim is to change people from spectators (passive beings in the theatrical sense) into transformers of the dramatic action.

The theatre experience is grounded in the group as part of a process linking drama to critical discussion. Members of the audience can interrupt the drama and become actors themselves to change the direction of the drama as they analyse the situation unfolding before them. Through this process of changing and rechanging the drama, people can begin to see that reality can be changed and that action is possible.

Forum Theatre can be regarded as a theatrical game in which a protagonist is trying to win or succeed in a particular situation. The play is shown once and then it is shown a second time (usually slightly speeded up) and follows the same course until a member of the audience shouts 'stop', takes the place of the protagonist and tries to defeat the oppressor. Many different solutions may be enacted, resulting in a pooling of knowledge, tactics and experience and is also at the same time what Boal calls 'a rehearsal for reality' (Jackson in Boal, 1992, pp xxi). Like all games, it has rules which relate to the play itself and to the interaction between players and 'audience'.

Forum theatre in the Reading workshop

At Reading we use an adaptation of Forum Theatre designed by Rachel Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, who act as facilitators, to fit into one day (Forum theatre usually takes place over several days). Like all Forum Theatre workshops, it begins with a series of exercises and games. These are designed to 'warm people up, help them to shed their inhibitions

and establish a form of theatrical communication between them' (Boal,1992 pp1-2). They also take them through sharing experiences, story telling, and improvisation.

All this activity is leading towards the improvisation of a piece of theatre around an issue. This is done in small groups. The improvisation piece has to conform to certain 'rules' of the game and the facilitators have devised a set of questions embodying the rules to help people in the construction of their piece. The questions they use are given below:

- Is the story clear? It is useful if the story centres around one main character (the protagonist who is attempting to deal with a particular problem). The story should show an unsatisfactory solution to the problem.
- Are the characters clear and recognisable? Do they reflect an attitude or ideology which resonates with the audience?
- Is it clear who is oppressed in the story? It is likely that the protagonist will be the most oppressed character, but the play can also reveal complex systems of oppression. If there are no clear cut solutions, this is perfectly acceptable, that is often how we experience life: the point is that we try and make changes.
- Are there places for possible interventions? It is important that there are moments in the play where the protagonist could have chosen a different path or reacted in a different way.
- Do we recognise the situation in the story? If the story is too far removed from the lives of the audience, they may feel discouraged from actively intervening. The play is designed to tempt people to try to rectify it.

Students in the department come almost entirely from countries in the South and constitute a community within the University. They are diverse in culture, language, age, education, work experience, financial resources etc., but they have one experience in common, that of being a foreign student in the UK. It is this experience which they usually focus on for their Forum Theatre and it has proved to be rich in stories.

In the afternoon each group has the opportunity to present its play in the forum and to be the audience for other plays and thus to be the interventionist. Once again there are rules for how this is done:

- The play is shown to the audience. The facilitator may fill in any necessary additional information between scenes (e.g. 'ten years later').
- The play is then performed for the second time. The facilitator explains to the audience that if at any point anyone wishes to intervene by replacing the protagonist they must shout 'stop' and raise their hand.
- The person who has made the intervention takes on the role of the protagonist (the original protagonist stands to one side of the action) and the scene is replaced according to how the interventionist sees it.
- It is helpful if the original protagonist can have an object or item of clothing (e.g. scarf, hat, bag) which can be handed to the spectator who has made the intervention.
- After an intervention, the facilitator may ask the interventionist the following questions: What were you trying to do? How do you think you did? Was it easy/hard? The audience may also have comments to make on the extent to which the interventionist was 'winning' or not. The member of the audience making the intervention can bring the intervention to a close whenever they wish. They may only have one line they wish to try out, or one physical action they wish to attempt. When the intervention is over, the interventionist leaves the playing area and the original actors resume from the moment of the intervention. This gives others the opportunity to intervene at the same point if they wish.
- An interventionist can stay on and try to change the original play if they are able.
- Interventions are accepted by the audience as possible or probable alternatives. If an intervention is highly unlikely e.g. the protagonist suddenly finds UK£1000 on the street, it can be treated as magic and therefore dismissed. But the interventionist is never-the-less acknowledged.

- There is no judgement by the facilitator or the audience as to whether interventions are good or bad. All are accepted and then debated.
- The other actors must resist all possible interventions within the limits of the character and situation. They must not make it easy for the interventionist.
- If necessary other scenes can be created through an intervention. A sudden crowd, for example, can be created with members of the audience.
- The play is not necessarily an attempt to change the world- rather it gives people an opportunity to debate and rehearse alternative approaches to dealing with a given situation.

Reflections

The workshop fulfils several purposes. It helps group formation and engenders trust. It enables students to see very quickly that a common experience can lead to very different points of view and it enables them to see that they can trust each other to come up with solutions to problems. They also recognise that

there is always more than one way to solve a problem.

We have found Forum Theatre an extremely powerful tool. It assumes equality amongst the participants and all have equal access to the 'stage'. It provides a safe, structured, sequential, experience. Everyone is involved in the same enterprise and this facilitates the generation of serious and fruitful discussion. Feedback over the years has shown that people find it an intense and liberating experience.

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REFERENCES

- Boal A. (1979) (Trans. C. & m Leal McBride) Theatre of the Oppressed, London: Pluto Press.
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