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YOUTH THEATRE AND LEARNING

Theatre-making is a site where, by necessity, learning takes place, attitudes are questioned and values are critiqued. The state of adolescence is one of routine surprise where engaging with the unexpected is a way of being. Theatre-making matches this state perfectly, supplying the young person with a set of tools that thrives on curiosity and that can build meaning from the surprising. Education (with the possible exception of the sciences) generally does the opposite, calming young people down and quenching curiosity with liberal dosings of routine, predictable and confining orthodoxy that replaces defiance with compliance. For many of our young people being in a youth theatre is the only space they have left at 15 or 16 years of age where every question is not answered before they ask it. As a theatre-maker, I find that

young people's surprise generally invigorates my own tired perspectives and I relish the freshness with which we, together, explore the world. We learn in theatre mainly through a process called devising. (For more information on this see the Introduction to the section about Devising).

If the capacity for a group to devise is to be developed then certain conditions need to be in place. First among these is the establishment of a learning group who are comfortable enough with each other to share what they consider to be, as Maxine Greene puts it, 'what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real' (1995). In theatre-making this learning group is called an ensemble.

The ensemble

The ensemble's first task is to spend some time learning about itself. This takes the form of developing an ethos, and a set of norms that are unique to this particular group of learners. There may be two ensembles working in the same youth theatre, for example, but each has a different way of working. One might like to discuss, reflect and process a lot; and the other might like to act, move and test a lot.

The work of the drama facilitator is essentially the same as that of the youth worker in the early stages of group formation. The drama facilitator here has the role of proposing ways of working that are tested by the group and accepted or rejected. The drama facilitator also makes space for the group members to propose their own ways of working. Time is given in an ensemble to build relationships between the members and between the group and the drama facilitator that will result in effective communication, open more possibilities for experimentation, and create conditions for trust, sharing and collaboration. Finally, the drama facilitator develops the groups' skills to research, using whatever means they find most useful. This process might take only two or three sessions, or it could take months.

Once the ensemble is established the group focuses on what it wants to learn about. The facilitator here proposes structures (or forms) and strategies that he or she has used in the past, and which the ensemble tests and rejects, applies or adapts to its own needs. For example, a facilitator might show a method of creating a scene that uses rotating characters and asks the group to make a short piece using this method. The theme they choose to explore, the dialogue, the characters and the situation are all left up to the group to devise.

In addition to being experienced in using many different structures, and being clear and supportive in explaining these structures to the group, the facilitator needs to be open to the possibility that these structures will change due to the way the ensemble uses them. In fact, this for me is one of the most enjoyable aspects of drama facilitation. I am regularly surprised by what a group does to a tired old structure: this inspires me to re-create it for another group, which they in turn may adapt, and so the process continues.

Unexpected Learning

In this pedagogical process the participants do not know what or how they will learn until they have embarked upon the activity and reflected on it. The curriculum emerges from the learning the ensemble does about itself.



In the context of devising a new performance the curriculum is the material the ensemble generates that will be shaped into the performance. A performance might be likened to an exam or assessment or end-of-programme display of what has been learned. All the participants and the facilitator must actively embrace this concept of learning unexpectedly otherwise there will be no performance. Not only should they discover the theme of the work as they develop, but also the tools of teaching, or the methods of facilitation, should be based on this principle.

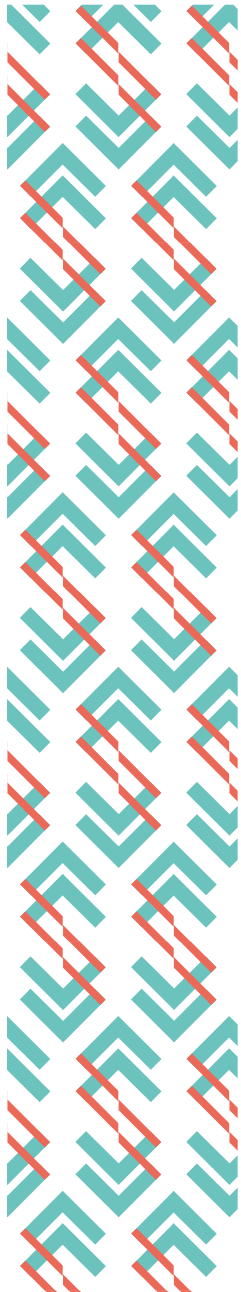
In collaborative learning environments of this kind games, tasks and exercises are used to stimulate imagination, and reflection about the activity is used to stimulate critical thinking. The reflection follows the action immediately and it is the place where the surprise is processed and the learning generated. It is central to this method of teaching because without it a teacher is simply pandering to the desire for novelty and distraction by providing fun game after fun game until the fun runs empty. Moreover, the reflection about the activity must connect the unplanned, subjective experience of the student to the world outside of the activity. This is where the unexpected learning for both teacher and student really occurs

Theatre-making and Good Mental Health

In Crooked House we have found that this type of drama practice combats depression particularly well. It also assists hugely in alleviating feelings of isolation and estrangement, and it builds high self esteem. In our practice over the past 15 years we have discovered that it also effectively acts as a measure for suicide prevention. It does this by developing key skills and aptitudes in the participants that contribute to positive mental well-being. Some of these skills and abilities are regarded as key deficiencies in young people with suicidal tendencies. The particular ones developed by collaborative theatre-making are:

- ◆ The ability to *channel impulsive behaviour*. Many attempts at self-harm result from, among other factors, a strong impulsive action taken by the young person often under the influence of drink or drugs. These impulsive actions regularly come about because feelings have been bottled up or repressed for years. In our drama practice we encourage the expression and channeling of impulsive reactions and behaviour. We show how to harness and use spontaneity and instant expression. Young people are encouraged to use their feelings and impulses to create improvised and devised performances in safe and encouraging surroundings. They become accustomed to channeling sudden feelings, strong reactions, responses to external stimuli, etc in a way that is healthy and non-aggressive.

In addition, they learn about being appropriate. They can assess an impulse to do something or say something in public and think better of it perhaps. They learn that not everything needs to be commented on. They figure out that certain reactions and responses are too dramatic, or the opposite – they lack conviction. Working out how to manage impulse in social setting sometimes take a long time. Those young people on the autism spectrum sometimes find it more difficult, but it can be reassuring to them to know that everybody – to some degree or other – must learn to channel impulse appropriately.



- ◆ - Taking *control over ones' life*. Our research has shown that young people today generally don't feel that they have a lot of control over their daily routines and lives (they are collected and dropped off by parents, school is very structured, their evenings are set and established etc). In theatre they must make their own characters, performances, and expressions – and often they must make these from no script or ready-made source material. They must be in control of the process themselves. For many this is difficult – they will constantly ask “What do you want me to do?” or they will regularly seek permission to do some action or reaction on stage. Eventually they learn to be independent and to gain control and ownership over the process of making something. This sense of control spills over into their lives and assists them in taking charge of other processes like career choice, life choices and emotional responses.
- ◆ *Collaboration and teamwork*. Young people learn almost immediately how to give and take, collaborate, compromise and grow, and work together. Often it is in the drama workshop environment that they first encounter this life-skill, since much of their unregulated time is spent alone with video games, in their bedroom, or silently receptive to TV and cinema. The collaboration in youth theatre builds very strong friendships and opportunities for engagement with others.
- ◆ *Creating, not consuming*. The key skill in process drama is teaching young people how to be active creators (of meaning, of identity, and of viewpoint) as opposed to being passive consumers of opinion, of culture and of commodities. Instead of listening to and absorbing the opinions of others (in the media, in the schoolbooks, in the video games) they have to create meaning from a blank canvas – there are no models to follow, no guidelines other than you must get up and create a situation, a character, an opinion, a point-of-view. The dramas we create are all expressions of their concerns, their attitudes, and their points-of-view. This facility helps them have a critical engagement with the world around them; to name their concerns, joys and interests; and to formulate their own opinions.
- ◆ *Active Citizenship*. This drama encourages the young people to look twice at everything. They need to be sharp and observant when creating realistic scenarios and realistic character types. This stimulates an interest in their surroundings, which is then channeled into making a drama about their concerns and issues. Many young people then go on to become involved in organisations and work that help create a more just and equal society. Their political engagement is stronger and they take a very active interest in political issues.
- ◆ *Accessing the Imagination*. Theatre is an excellent resource for opening up people's imagination. It is the principal quality of drama. Young people are natural creators – but they need a safe and stimulating environment in which to be imaginative. We help them use their imaginations to solve problems, to imagine different sides to a complex argument, to imagine alternatives to set ideologies. An imaginative young person is usually someone who will not become trapped in a problem or find something too heavy a burden to bear.



- ◆ *Using information.* The drama we practice with young people helps them to access and use information – as opposed to simply ignoring it, or being , overwhelmed by it. Many young people ask for permission to do something rather than find out for themselves if it would be a good or bad thing to do. Process drama requires them to gather all kinds of information in every moment, and to act on the information they gathered. The information is usually about the other person acting with them, the environment they are in, the context of their situation and scenario, the likely outcomes of saying or doing something. This is an essential skill in problem solving, and in dealing with unwelcome situations in life.

Conclusion

There are many other qualities in process drama that assist in suicide prevention (eg leadership skills, having fun and being stimulated etc). In recent years research has begun to focus on how collaborative theatre-making works, and how it is essential for human growth.

Youth workers have always known this about drama. In our experience they are always the first to try new methods and ways of working with their groups. They, like drama facilitators, have the wellbeing and happiness of their young people at the centre of everything they do.

Digital Drama Workshops is a small attempt to help cultural youth workers find new and creative ways to continue doing what they do. We hope that you will find the resources useful. And we hope too, that you will send us stories and comments about how you used these activities. We look forward to reading about your adventures in drama.

