Arts Based Training in Management Development; The use of Improvisational Theatre

Abstract

This paper describes and critically evaluates the use of Arts Based Training (ABT) by exploring

a case involving the use of improvisational theatre techniques as an element of management

development. Claims that these techniques can be an effective means of achieving management

development, as they succeed involving managers in exploring problems and developing

solutions to them at a deep rather than superficial level, while also motivating managers to 'sort

out' problems following development experiences, are investigated using a case study. The

validity of improvisational theatre techniques, as an example of ABT in practice, needs to be

balanced with a more critical appreciation of the limitations of such approaches.

Introduction;

The performing arts, most notable to date music, have been used as a means of providing what has been called Arts Based Training (ABT). The popularity of the use of these methods has been accounted for by highlighting that they provide effective learning through engaging participants in 'infotainment' (Pollock 2000, Pickard 2000). That is they provide a synthesis of information and entertainment. This is a mix which is motivating and helpful in different aspects of management development. It may be helpful where subjects are dull and need spicing up, like communication skills. It may help where subjects involve 'soft skills', interpersonal relations, where conventional methods of instructional learning are problematic for adult learners. However, a greater role and importance can also be claimed. This is that in the context of changing systems and circumstances of organisations and management (Brown & Duguid 2000**)** as a whole organisation can be understood using drama as a metaphor (Grieves 2003) and methods of management development improvisation are essential and central (Strait et al 2002, Montouri 2003). These together suggest that there is more to the uptake of ABT than being a spice for dull fare (see Figure 1). Evaluating this stronger claim for the use of arts based training is done here, based on how one specific performing art, the theatre, has been used for management development. This first requires come descriptive context setting, about the theatre and improvisation, before the specific case is evaluated.

Insert Figure 1 here

Theatre and the Improvisational Tradition

How theatre is to be conceptualised and defined precisely can vary, with different philosophical, artistic and cultural traditions. For the purposes of this paper theatre will be defined (see Box 1) as the use of actors acting, portraying conflicts, to an audience (Hartnoll 1998). The origins of theatre in this sense are perceived to have been in an evolution from community rites and rituals, where the differentiation between actors and audience was absent. There was no appreciation of 'theatre' as entertainment, rather it was integral to the 'magical' thinking and practices with which communities sought to make sense of and influence their environment. Refinement of the discrete experience of staged dramas, in the cradles of western civilisation, produced the first true theatre; the Greek tragedies and comedies which have provided much inspiration for artists down the ages, as well as social scientists, most famous Freud. These dramas represented archetypal situations and characters, and their elements were well known; the audiences expected to view standard treatments of the deeds and destinies of a few key antagonists and protagonists.

Insert Box 1 Here

The subsequent metamorphosis of theatre through the ages has been a complex and many faceted one; too much so to be dealt with here in any detail. What is important to note is that within this change and development there appear two major traditions of dramatic practice; the scripted tradition and the improvisational tradition (see Box1). The scripted tradition requires actors to

reproduce the words composed by the playwright, for a passive audience. The alternative is that actors make it up as they go along, being creative; requiring only an audience they can interact with rather than a script. It is this improvisation tradition, and its dynamics, which will be explored here.

The potential uses of improvisational theatre in the corporate training and development context are argued by some to be many and varied. One set are to do with providing alternatives to conventional classroom based training, in order to enable and enhance learning. The use of the performing arts, including music and theatre, offers a contemporary example of this in practice alongside action learning, e-learning, experiential learning in the outdoors, and so on. In addition to this though the actual capabilities involved in being improvisational, which can clearly be developed by practicing improvisational theatre techniques and games, can also be seen to be of value in themselves. These capabilities may be defined in many ways, but one set suggested (Koppet 2002) is;

- High Trust
- Spontaneity and Creativity
- Collaboration
- Listening and awareness
- Communication
- Effective Interaction

In other words the expectation of the use of this form of ABT is that its effect and impact is more than infotainment. ABT can provide a stimulus for development which supports change; in the corporate context this is typically a concern in areas like communication skills, team working and equal opportunity policy implementation. The expectation is that ABT can be used to engage

people in ways that other methods cannot. It can, consequently, contribute to helping 'sort out' substantial problems within an organisation, not just helping to develop or enhance capabilities in managers.

A Specific Approach to ABT; Forum Theatre

The focus of research here is specific, within the broad area of performing arts, the narrower domain of theatre and the specific tradition of improvisational theatre, on one particular approach to the use of improvisation. This is the use of 'forum theatre' (Hague 2002), which is derived from the ideas and practise of Boal (1995, 2000). In forum theatre the actors and audience are all involved in 'making it up', making the drama up, as they go along, in the improvisational tradition. The distinctiveness of the forum theatre approach to improvisation is its political element. The interest in a political element emerged most explicitly with the theatre of ideas which became prominent in the late 19th and early 20th Centur, and then 'Agit Prop' theatre. The evolution of the theatre of ideas was in part a reflection of a reaction against the 'triviality' of the merely entertaining and witty dramas, in either high or low culture forms which existed. This development is most associated with the scripted tradition, and key plays and playwrights; Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw and later Brecht. But it was also an adaptation of an art form to an age of social protest and criticism. The theatrical form had its place among all the others as groups sought through propaganda to subvert the dominant order. 'Agit prop', more in the improvisational tradition, was explicitly developed in a specific context, early 20th Century Russian communist practices. It is more generally a term associated with a theatre that aspired to be both 'of' and 'for' the oppressed. This ranged from theatre that sought to realistically portray

and dramatise overtly political party lines and visions, to the enactment of more surreal performances and spectacles intended to upset and siubvert. In essence Agit Prop dramas were performed to develop social and political awareness, by dramatising situations of class and other forms of conflict among and for oppressed people. The use of theatre was an effective medium for communicating with such groups as they were often developed for audiences who were not literate. Later Moreno and others discussed and developed sociodrama in the 1950's (Moreno 1953), building on the improvisational tradition but with a psychodynamic and healing intent rather than political aims.

With Boal there is a conscious evolution, from the staging of a theatre of ideas in forms of 'agit prop' drama to stimulating and animating people to change their thinking and behaviour. A theatre for this needed to be based on different principles (Smith 2001). Boal proposed a 'theatre of the oppressed', maintaining the intentions of conventional agit prop theatre, but overcoming the major weaknesses and flaws with the methods being used. These centred on the problem that the 'oppressed' were seen as passive, as a group to be instructed rather than people who could discover their own solutions to the problems they faced. Agit Prop was too concerned with telling people what to think, feel or believe. Instead, for people to learn and change, they needed to be more than passive observers. They needed to be 'spect-actors' themselves.

Forum theatre thus requires participants to be active in exploring problems and developing solutions to them. Forum theatre techniques to do this were evolved and widely applied in various cultural situations. In the developed West this was most often in educational work with young people, often with specific social groups experiencing problems where the intention to

change mental models and behaviour was a key concern; for example very young women and girls who had become single parents in circumstances of poverty, or drug addicts with criminal convictions.

When, during the 1990's, organisations sought to find ways of engaging their staff in evolving new organisational cultures and commitments, rather than ' instructing' them in what to think, feel and believe, forum theatre practitioners were seen to offer one method for pursuing this. Forum theatre proponents were interested in the prospect of corporate work, and ready to adapt their skills to that environment. Forum theatre proponents still argue that the method induces dissatisfaction. There is, or should not be, as a result of experiencing forum theatre a return to a status quo containing oppression; rather the audience should be motivated to 'sort out' problems of oppression following the forum theatre experience. The stimulus of forum theatre is then to upset and disturb without providing catharsis or the re-establishment of an equilibrium.

Proponents and advocates would then claim that forum theatre can be used where organisations are seeking in some way to create disequilibrium in order to initiate change, a situation which is often integral to investing in management development initiatives. In this context the use and impact of forum theatre raises the following expectations of observable effects and impact on management development

1. The use of forum theatre can be an effective means of achieving management development

2 Forum theatre will succeed involving managers in exploring problems and developing solutions to them

3. Forum theatre will induce dissatisfaction rather than catharsis as a means of

motivating managers to 'sort out' problems following the training

Method; A Case Study

These three statements about the effects and impact of forum theatre on management

development may be investigated many different ways. In this study the method chosen was to

observe an example of the use of forum theatre in practice. A training group using forum theatre

techniques was contacted, and attendance at a training session they were to provide was

arranged. In advance of this the members of the training group were interviewed to explore their

use of the forum theatre method, and discuss their working practices. One example of their work

was observed on an occasion when they demonstrated their technique to a group of Human

Resource professionals. From that experience an understanding of their basic procedures was

gained. The organisation which was to use the forum theatre training group gave permission for

me to attend the management development event.

The event that was observed was provided for a University[1], as part of their training for Heads of

Department (HoD). The training was on management in general and, on the day forum theatre

was used, Equal Opportunity Policies specifically. The training was being provided for a group

of nine HoD, attending a one day course on Equal Opportunities as part of their training in

leadership. Prior to the forum theatre experience they had just completed a morning session on

policies, guidelines and obligations for Equal Opportunities. The afternoon was given over to the

forum theatre training group. This involved introducing two characters, both academics, one

male and one female based at a fictional university. The scenario was that they were jointy

supervising a female PhD student. The drama unfolds as the female supervisor discovers that the

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[1] Not the author's own institution.

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male supervisor has had an affair with the student, as the student is contemplating leaving. The action evolves, in front of and along with the contributions of the participants as spect-actors, through various confrontations to raise many issues about the dramatic situation and the spect-actors reactions to what they hear and feel.

I was present throughout the training session, taking notes and making observations as the session unfolded. I was also able to interview the training group prior to the session, at an interval, and following the session. After writing up my notes on the event I circulated them to members of the training group for their comments and observations. Their comments and observations about what had worked and not worked on this occasion confirmed the main elements of my analysis; and they found the analysis illuminating and useful for their own professional practice.

There are two main issues arising. First, as a single case study the main limitation encountered is that of generalizability. This case study does not claim to validate the three claims for forum theatre outlined above, or provide unambiguous evidence for the efficacy of ABT. The study is, rather, an apt illustration, enabling some mapping out the issues which further research on these kinds of methods could involve. Second is the issue of accessing the participants' perceptions. As the effects of forum theatre are associated with changing the extent to which participants were animated, stimulated, and subject to feeling a disequilbrium which motivated them to 'sort things out', participants subjective perceptions of these matters could have been considered. However, my interest on this occasion was the impact of the training as it happened; and to map out issues about that. The intention was to observe and evaluate what happened in the session, as

an example of an innovative method in use, not to evaluate its effectiveness in the broader context of leadership development or change in equal opportunities matters in the organisation. This division of analysing the session from analysing its impact in context is the price to be paid for focussing in depth on what happened in the session.

Finally, it has to be acknowledged and stressed that the event I observed was not necessarily a good example of the use of improvisational drama in action. As is emphasised below, and as the training group confirmed when reviewing my analysis, not all that should have gone right did go right on the day. The extent to which this was an effect caused by the researcher's presence is open to question. However, as one noted dramatist has observed "failures tend to examine their suppositions about life; the successful are more likely to celebrate themselves as good examples" (Miller, 2003). The case is all the better for analysis and critique because elements of it are about failure requiring examination, rather than because it exemplifies success and unambiguously validates the use of such techniques in learning and development.

The Case Study Findings

Finding are discussed in relation to the three issues outlined above; was the method effective, did it help participants investigate problems and produce solutions, and to what extent did it motivate managers to further work on issues beyond the development experience. First, was the use of forum theatre an effective means of achieving management development ? In all a number of features of the event were done well and worked, confirming the positive expectations of effect and impact. The group were initially stimulated, and they remained engaged and involved in

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learning throughout the whole afternoon. This was no 'boring' session at which peoples' minds wandered and they switched off. A wide range of issues in the organisation, and among this group, were indeed being exposed by the use of forum theatre on this subject. Participants had the opportunity to reflect on the problems of ways of behaving in difficult situations with no clear right and wrong options. Participants had the opportunity to discuss, with their peers, the realities of equal opportunities in the organisation. Indeed those realities were being made manifest and expressed in these discussions. For example one issue was raised early on that women tended to hide their feelings; throughout the session it was evident that some women were apparently, barely, suppressing anger at some men making 'cold jokes' about them. 'Cold jokes' are those made at the expense of an outgroup with the intent, subtle or otherwise of undermining them. Some have argued (Lennox, Terrion & Ashforth 2002) that such joking and put downs can help establish trust and solidarity in temporary groups, such as formed during training. On this occasion that was not evident. In the context of this session the cold joking provided an opportunity to review and reflect on the realities of equal opportunities, but it was not an opportunity taken. People could, privately or publicly, develop ideas of their own about how their behaviour might be changed to avoid the problems witnessed in the improvised drama. And, even bearing in mind the problems with timing, there appeared to be elements of catharsis pre-empted; of having surfaced real difficulties that stressed people but things not ending up 'alright', and of dis-equilibrium being created.

Second, was forum theatre successful in involving managers in exploring problems and developing solutions to them ? There are grounds for doubts about the overall impact of the forum theatre method. It was at points too stimulating, but not to any identifiable set of outcomes

which enables an evaluation of learning. This was partly attributable to the management of the event itself, where no set outcomes existed. But it is also partly attributable to the method itself. It was not clear to some participants how they should be learning, and what their role was. For some participants the environment shifted from being engaging to being threatening. Issues that could have been explored, for example the powers that heads of department do or do not have, were raised but not investigated. The problem of dealing with a 'bad culture' was raised, but was not explored. There was incomplete attention given to tasks that were meant to be done in small groups.

In this example the use of improvisational drama in organisations did energise people in a context where change was sought. This seemed to be because the improvised drama emerged from, and was defined as being about, protagonists and antagonists in conflict. It was not the degree of naturalism or realism with which actors can replicate and play out lifelike situations and characters which mattered, but the extent to which participants in training can identify with and learn from exploring the conflicts involved. This justified the forum theatre format; improvisation was appropriate as no writer could script and rehearse a perfect drama of basic conflict that this unique group of participants would engage with; every training group is different.

Finally , did forum theatre motivate managers, by inducing dissatisfaction rather than catharsis, to 'sort out' problems following the training ? The improvisation as it unfolded, under the influence and guidance of the group in training, allowed them to become better able to 'see themselves', to realise the kinds of assumptions and values they are projecting onto the dramatic conflict. That these were partial and biased, and mistaken or inadequate, then became evident.

The drama and the characters then provide a kind of mirror in which the managers were able to see themselves in new ways. The ability to accept what this mirror reveals, and to reflect on these reflections can provide some of the strongest learning possible, and motivate people to take that learning and use it in the workplace. The facilitator felt hostility from the group, but could not confront that, and what it meant, and how it might be turned around to helping the participants learn. And in relation to managing the end of the event there was not enough time to review at the end what this all meant for people as managers in practice. Whether this was to be done with a view to either enabling some catharsis or sustaining disequilibrium it was not well managed. It fizzled out.

The constant problem faced is that the dramatic experience allows for a catharsis, for an experience of purging bad feelings there and then, leaving the person or group essentially unchanged. The characters in the drama are providing proxies for aspects of the spectators, the 'censored' aspects of themselves that get angry, have 'bad' desires, and so on. In this case the aspects of the male or female characters which lead them to be poor team members or inadequate and collude in discriminatory behaviours. The audience can detach themselves from self conscious and censorious judgements about these 'bad' bits, their own emotions and desires, and watch 'those characters over there' enact what happens when such anger or desires are loosed. They observe and reflect, and see in the end what works or fails; vicariously, from 'behind half averted eyes'. As they identify with, or recognise, or see resonance with the characters and what is happening to them and between them they experience enough disequilibrium to be open to learning; 'I have to admit I am/can be like that'.

The point is that either the participants are then to be brought 'back to reality', once the drama is ended, wiser and more secure to the reality of their own 'good' selves; or they should be left upset, and therefore motivated to take things further after the theatre experience. Proponents of forum theatre refer explicitly to the disequilibrium option as the desirable state, though acknowledging that changes through provoking such states are 'unquantifiable'. They would hope that the result of their training is clarity about the existence of oppression and conflict in the context of the workplace. This creates as an outcome a determination to sort things out. This outcome of dissatisfaction is only the beginning, not the end. The curtain does not fall across the stage; rather the veils fall from participant s eyes.

Conclusion

Actors improvising with participants in training can provide 'learning moments' for that particular group. This is what making it up as they go along means. But 'making it up' as we go along also has another connotation; the sense of resolving problems and conciliating after crisis and conflict. This involves creating, containing and, to some degree, resolving tensions. Criticism based on this problem influence how the three issues raised are evaluated.

First, the use of forum theatre was both effective and ineffective as a means of achieving management development . Second, it did succeed in involving managers in exploring problems and developing solutions to them , but there were substantial gaps and complication. Finally, it did create both dissatisfaction and catharsis , motivating managers to 'sort out' problems

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following the training but also providing some closure which enabled the managers to leave feeling that it was all over; the training was done.

To conclude fro this case that this is a valid method of management development, and that improvisational theatre has an effect and impact would be wrong. Even for those who conceptualise learning as an activity where, for people to change and develop, they need to encounter real problems which they seek to resolve for themselves, this case presents mixed evidence. With improvisational theatre the desire and the intention is to actually change how people think and feel, so that they will behave differently This is contrasted with the standard instructional conceptualisation of such learning; where a trainer is responsible for initiating, directing and controlling learning and development. More often than not the result is, if anything, just compliance. This is the same old problem that experiential, facilitation based methods for learning have sought to overcome, resulting in initiatives from problem based learning in schools and colleges to 'action learning' in advanced management development. And evidence for those is still lacking after many years of practise.

Yet in some respects it did have a learning effect, enabling the group to identify and explore tensions about equal opportunities in their roles as managers. It had moments where people were able to see and identify behaviours, individually and collectively, as the issue, and options for challenging those. It also had an ideological impact, creating some personal and group disequilibrium, and sparks of a desire to sort things out rather than leave the training room and forget all about it. The event raised these issues; but they were not really dealt with.

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Inappropriate attitudes were seen but not confronted. There was insufficient guided closure and direction at the end of the event.

It is to be acknowledged and emphasised that no single intervention can transform people in and of itself. Some of the failures of this technique are associated with expecting too much of the event in its own right, as a one off training intervention. Preparation for and follow up on all these kinds of intervention are essential. And organisations need to use these kinds of methods in a broader change management strategy rather than hoping to resolve ingrained problems, such as discriminatory behaviour, or poor teams, through management development. In this specific case the quality of event design and the quality of facilitation needed to contain what is being animated can be seen as weak, but such methods will always be risky even with ideal facilitation. And there are paradoxes, at least, if not obvious contradictions, in this adaptation of the 'theatre of the oppressed' to the corporate and management development context.

If ABT methods such as the use of forum theatre are to be used more frequently then their developers and users need to give some more thought to several issues. First is addressing the basics of needs analysis and demonstrating the learning and business benefits of the training. The temptation of buying in some infotainment, without a clear focus, is ever-present for those charged with finding training solutions. Second is the need for more careful thought to be given to the design and delivery of the event. Often providers of ABT imagine they can transfer techniques that have worked in education, often with children and young people, to the adult and corporate environment. This is not so. Finally, both providers and users need to think innovatively about the form of partnership possible between an ABT organisation and the users

host organisation. Involving them over time in a process of change is the obvious rout to explore, rather than having isolated and one off events.

On the research side it is to be expected that more apt illustrations will emerge as the use of ABT increases. As this case shows by omission there are participant perception and organisational impact factors which need to be investigated, as well as describing and critically evaluating the theory behind and practise of a particular form of ABT. Just as providers and users face challenges, so do researchers, in accessing, tracking, evaluating and disseminating knowledge about the use of ABT.

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Old Management Norms   **New Management Forms**

Specifying the way tasks are organised   Exploring the way tasks can be done
Establishing routine   Being spontaneous
Orchestrating work   Improvising at work
Assuming a predictable environment   Responding to a changing environment
Relying on explicit knowledge   Driven by tacit knowledge
Making knowledge as structured and linear   Seeing knowledge as web-like
Top down control of learning   Bottom up generation of learning
Imposing systems   Responding to invention

Figure 1; Old norms and new forms for management (Brown & Duguid 2000)

Primary Elements of Theatre	Forms of Non-improvisational Drama	Forms of Improvisational Drama
Actors	Reproductive	Creative
Conflict	Scripted	Emergent
Audience	Spectate	Interact

Figure 2; Theatre and the two traditions