



# Drama as an opportunity for learning and development

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**Keywords** *Learning, Management development, Women, Role play*

**Abstract** *This article evaluates the role of drama in management education and development programmes. The drama workshops utilise the methodology developed by Augusto Boal and focus on the issue of empowerment. Participants are engaged in the dramatic process through a series of exercises and role plays. The workshops have been incorporated into three very different programmes: a masters in human resource strategies, a management certificate and a management development programme for women academics. The impact on each of these programmes is described and evaluated and the outcomes of this type of learning experience for management education and development programmes are discussed.*

## Introduction

This paper considers the role that drama can play as a learning tool in management education and development programmes. The paper begins by discussing some of the issues surrounding management development and the use of drama as a tool in such programmes. The impact on three very different programmes is then described. Finally, the outcome of this type of learning experience for management education and development programmes is discussed.

## Perspectives on management development

There is no single, generally accepted definition of management development. The concept has been defined in numerous ways and these definitions have also changed over time (see, for example, Margerison, 1991; Mumford, 1989; Burgoyne, 1988). Woodhall and Winstanley (1998, p. 5) point out that some authors define the term in relation to its purpose or aims while others concentrate on its processes and how it is done. They themselves use a broad definition (p. 9):

Management development . . . is used . . . to encapsulate all types of learning which enable an individual to develop their skills and understanding to meet current and future organisational needs.

The last number of years have seen a substantial increase in the volume of management training and development. At the same time there have been many criticisms of the way in which it has been structured, particularly where it has concentrated on a competency approach (e.g. Willmott, 1994; Clarke, 1999). These criticisms also raise issues about how management development may link into organisational development. Organisations are experiencing very rapid change but top-down programmes have proved unsuccessful (e.g. Beer *et al.*, 1990). Many writers are now proposing that a more effective approach lies

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in the creation of “pockets of good practice” (Beer *et al.*, 1990; Butcher *et al.*, 1997; Hendry, 1996; Senge *et al.*, 1999) or in the promotion of change through individuals (Frohman, 1997; Butcher *et al.*, 1997). Clarke (1999, p. 46) suggests that the ability of managers to create organisational change from within requires:

... considerable reflective thinking, self-knowledge and personal influence, requiring us to move far beyond a restrictive and simplistic competency framework (Antonacopoulou and Fitzgerald, 1996) to develop managers as whole human beings acting in a socially complex and ever-changing environment.

One of the ways in which these abilities might be enhanced is through a focus on “meta-abilities” (Butcher *et al.*, 1997) or “meta-qualities” (Pedler *et al.*, 1994). These are the “personal, acquired abilities which underpin and determine how and when knowledge and skills will be used” (Butcher *et al.*, 1997, p. 11) and the “situation-specific skills needed in particular circumstances” (Pedler *et al.*, 1994, p. 24).

### **Drama as a learning and development tool**

Traditional forms of management development concentrated on the formal training course where managers were expected to learn new techniques. Many organisations are now turning their backs on traditional forms and are experimenting with new approaches. The reasons for this shift in thinking are many. Arkin (1998, p. 32), for example, suggests that “businesses ... have become more like the performing arts, often requiring people to work in ensemble-like project teams and to think creatively as well as analytically”. As a result, organisations are turning to the arts world and are utilising a range of techniques including improvisation in both jazz and drama. Improvisation is seen as having a variety of values ranging from “the potential link between the need to plan for the predictable and the ability to respond simultaneously to the unpredictable” (Crossan *et al.*, 1996, p. 23). However, the use of the term “improvisation” may give the mistaken impression that it is a random activity. Instead, as Crossan *et al.* point out, it is a “disciplined craft”, but because it is a team based rather than an individually based technique, it offers a different approach to solving problems. It is the spontaneity involved in improvisation that may offer the opportunity to explore an issue and act accordingly (Spolin, 1990). In addition, within improvisation the notion of leadership takes on new meanings with the concept of the “servant leader” which has been mooted in management circles (Senge, 1990). Improvisation also relies on individuals intensely communicating with each other in real time although relying on a few, very specific rules (Eisenhardt, 1997). Eisenhardt suggests that the same type of adaptive yet efficient performance is critical for effective strategic decision making. The techniques are also seen as suitable for the development of leadership skills, communications, confidence, team-building, listening skills and trust, and for exploring new and unfamiliar feelings in a safe environment (Harrison, cited in Spence, 1999).

Within the broad area of drama, many techniques may be used. Arkin (1998) lists a variety of very different approaches which are being used in the UK. For example, the Globe theatre runs leadership workshops, which are based on Shakespeare's *Henry V*, while ethical issues are explored in *The Merchant of Venice* and managing change in *A Winter's Tale*. Another company, the Trestle theatre company, runs workshops that focus on body language. Other approaches involve actors in some or all of the role playing in "living" case studies based on research in client organisations (Arkin, 1998). In addition, some theatre companies offer one-to-one role plays for coaching or assessment, or "forum workshops" where there is no script and the actors improvise short scenes with audience direction. There is also "forum theatre" where the audiences are larger and where a single theme gives delegates the opportunity to work through an issue in more detail (Pickard, 2000). Each approach requires a specific methodology and appropriate techniques if it is to work successfully and it will also have to fit with the training or developmental aims of the programme and the needs of the participants.

### **The drama workshops**

To date, drama workshops have been tried in three programmes. These include a Master's in HR Strategies degree programme, a one year certificate in management and a two day management development programme for university academics. The courses were very different in both academic content and the profile of their participants with two of the programmes attended solely by women while the master's comprised a mix of men and women. However, while the programmes differed, there was a common philosophy underpinning their design which centred, following Pedler *et al.* (1994) and Butcher *et al.* (1997), on self-knowledge and individual development as key components of successful management development. In addition, there was a willingness by the course directors of these programmes to experiment with new approaches to learning, particularly where these could engender changes in attitudes and behaviour among participants.

### **The methodology of Augusto Boal**

The workshops were designed and led by a drama consultant who was interested in working with the ideas of empowerment that were considered crucial to self-development. Her approach was based on the methodology of Augusto Boal. Boal is perhaps best known for his work *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). While there are three main categories within this work: image theatre, invisible theatre and forum theatre, there is overlap and interplay between them. Boal's view is that theatre can be placed at the service of the oppressed so that "they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language they can also discover new concepts" (Boal, 1979, p. 121). In the "poetics of the oppressed" the focus is on the action itself:

the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short trains himself for real action (p. 122).

This transformation from spectator to actor takes place in four stages:

- (1) *Knowing the body*: a series of exercises by which one gets to know one's body, its limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation.
- (2) *Making the body expressive*: a series of games by which one begins to express one's self through the body, abandoning other, more common and habitual forms of expression.
- (3) *The theatre as language*: one begins to practice theatre as a language that is living and present, not as a finished product displaying images from the past.
  - first degree: simultaneous dramaturgy: the spectators “write” simultaneously with the acting of actors;
  - second degree: image theatre: the spectators intervene directly, “speaking” through images made with the actors' bodies;
  - third degree: forum theatre: the spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action and act.
- (4) *The theatre as discourse*: simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates “spectacles” according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain actions (Boal, 1979, p. 126).

Most workshops are designed to reach the end of the third stage as the fourth would require the group to come together over several weeks.

Boal insists that “it is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path” (Boal, 1985, p. 141 cited in Auslander, 1997, p. 104); it is a “laboratory for social experimentation, not a means of arriving at genuinely political solutions’ and a “way of exploring options which must then be tested in life” (Auslander, 1997, pp. 104-5). In the various exercises undertaken, what Boal refers to as the “spect-actors” can step aside from their own bodies and try on others for size. This is not, as Auslander points out, “necessarily with the intention of adopting them, but as a means of exploring other configurations . . . The social relations they embody are not reified as solutions, or even steps towards solutions, but only explored as possibilities” (p. 104).

### **The workshops**

The workshop had three aims: to build a team in order to conduct the workshop; to develop vocal and physical self-awareness and discipline in order to maximise the group's expressive range; and to use drama as a problem-solving methodology in order to examine concrete social and work-based situations. In examining the problems, and by giving priority to demonstration over discussion, the aim was to create a positive attitude towards problem

solving by focusing on individual agency in these situations and to focus on self-empowerment. This follows Boal's view that there can be no "magic solutions", i.e. institutional led solutions, for those who are oppressed. Rather the solution lies with individual agency. It is the victim who has to look at how he or she interacts with the institution.

The workshop began with exercises (Table I) that had a variety of aims and which follow the various stages of transformation from spectator to actor already outlined (Boal, 1992). The first stage exercises are disinhibitors: they are used to make the body more flexible, they are new ways of using the body and of preparing the body to become more expressive. They are used to build a team, to break down inhibitions and to develop trust. Boal's view is that our bodies are moulded by our occupations and the games are an attempt to bring us back to neutral in order that we might perform new tasks. The second stage focuses on developing the potential of the group. The individuals begin to think communally about a problem and realise that they are not working on their own. The third stage creates an awareness of the performance of power and also shows the performance of power. Individuals are examining the manifestations of power in a physical way in terms, for example, of how we use our voices, how we speak (phrase things) or how we dress. One exercise is named "status walks". In this exercise all participants are asked to stand on one side of the room and to focus on a point on the other side. They are given a scale of perceived self-status (1 = low to 10 = high). They are asked to walk across the room as a group and to use body language appropriate to their status. Discussion of this exercise revealed that the walk became more stereotypically masculine as the status level increased. This provided the opportunity to examine how men and women use their bodies to inhabit space.

### Structuring of the workshops

The three workshops differed in terms of the allocation of time, the specific location and the stage they reached in Boal's methodology. These factors were later considered to have a major impact on the outcomes of the workshops. In addition, as we learnt from each of the workshops, elements such as timing and location were altered. Given the differences, the outcomes of each of the workshops are dealt with separately.

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Stage	Type of activity
Stage 1	Warm-ups: to establish the actor's full potential
Stage 2	Partner work (to develop the potential of the group)
Stage 3	Power work (to create an awareness of the performance of power) Image theatre (to show the performance of power)

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**Table I.**  
Exercises

## **Outcomes of the workshop**

### *Group 1: the Master's programme*

The first workshop, given to the Master's programme, took place during a two hour slot normally devoted to a class and in the normal classroom space, a large flat room. Participants were attending their weekly lectures and the workshop was simply slotted into an available time space. Participants were asked to wear loose fitting clothes for the event. This type of arrangement did not work satisfactorily for several reasons. These included the fact that not all participants remembered to wear appropriate casual clothing as they were coming to class straight from work; some participants were late for the class and it had started before they arrived; the time was too short and left no time for the discussion and debriefing that form part of the workshop; the group was still in academic mode as they were still occupying the same physical space as they did when attending a normal class. This group reached the second degree of the third stage in Boal's method: image theatre. Here they portrayed in images, but did not enact verbally, the issue of sexual harassment.

This group was very mixed in its reactions to and views on the workshop. These ranged from very hostile to very positive with the workshop considered "a waste of time" and "irrelevant" by some while others considered it "a valuable learning experience". There was a distinct gender division to the feedback with all the negative comments coming from men while the women were generally positive about the experience, although identifying weaknesses in its timing. The workshop facilitator had identified problems with the participation of men and these included a discomfort with the physical contact required as part of the workshop and inhibitions in performing the exercises. Many of these difficulties undoubtedly stemmed from the inappropriate timing and location of the workshop. The participants themselves commented that this type of experiential exercise is best undertaken as part of a weekend away where participants are more relaxed and more willing to engage. Interestingly, in the learning logs that are written by the class as part of one of their modules, several of the participants commented favourably on the workshop although their initial reactions had been hostile. A process of reflection had caused them to rethink the value of the learning to be gained from the exercise. Those that did comment on the workshop also commented on the very powerful feelings and emotions that can arise in these situations.

### *Group 2: the certificate programme*

This is a one year certificate in management programme that was designed to accompany and enhance an organisation's change strategy. It comprised 21 women from one large organisation. In order to avoid the problems encountered in the first workshop, a whole morning was allocated to this workshop (9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.). The fact that it took place in the morning, before any classes, meant that participants were not involved in switching roles from students to participants. In addition, the workshop did not take place in a

classroom setting but in a sports hall. This proved to be a successful venue although there were some problems with noise levels.

The reaction of participants to the workshop was very positive. The length of time provided for the workshop enabled them to reach the final stage of forum theatre. In contrast, the other two groups were prevented from completing all stages of Boal's process due to pressures of time. The women enacted power situations within their workplaces. The only brief that they had been given was that they had to choose a situation in which someone or something was a victim of circumstances. The situations were chosen by them and they improvised the various roles in the situation. They were divided into four groups and they portrayed different situations. For example, one situation was that of a female manager who was trying to negotiate with a large meeting who would not listen to her; another was where a woman was bullied when she asked her manager for time off work in order to attend her certificate programme.

*Group 3: the management development programme*

This workshop was situated at the end of a two day programme for women academics and proved to be a very successful conclusion. All participants commented positively on its value as a learning tool. Its value stemmed in part from the physical nature of the activity: while the group had discussed many ideas over the two days, the workshop was an opportunity to enact and practise these concepts. The only criticism to emerge was that the workshop was too short and participants would have liked to devote a larger amount of time to it. Again the mistake was made of trying to complete the workshop in a short space of time.

Participants on this course were interviewed three months after the workshop and comments from three of them give an indication of the very varied impact that the workshop had on each of them as individuals:

The course brought home to me the importance of body and movement and physicality in our lives. The academic environment is so lacking in the body. The body is made invisible in the work we do yet it is so central in what we are. In academic work, the presence of self is so important but the presence of self is about denial of the body. We are only employed for our minds and our bodies are to be controlled. Yet there is a need for a holistic approach to being, a need to connect the mind, body and emotions. In the workshop the environment is relaxed and trusting and this breaks down the barriers that are normally there. In this atmosphere we are more open to communication and interaction. It [the drama workshop] worked very well. It provides bonding in the group as something that is play/fun. The voice exercise was empowering. The chanting provided a sense of ritual bonding. But the problem is that while it works as an exercise in the course, can this be integrated into the culture of work generally? In the public sphere women are not given the freedom of bodily expression – men sprawl on chairs and take up space. Women have to constrain their bodies (participant 1).

As academics we are always analysing, thinking and being intellectual. Drama moves you away from the thinking to the doing and so feelings and ideas emerge. The workshop was really good for crystallising the ideas that came out of the course (participant 2).

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The drama workshop had been really useful in understanding more about meetings and groups and the ways in which these take place. The whole issue of where you sit and watching who sits where is really important as is the issue of how men and women occupy space (participant 3).

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One of the participants raised issues which go much deeper than those that can be tackled in a two day programme: what is the role of the body in academic life and is it used to maintain the hierarchical systems which have reigned for so long in universities? This raised the issue of whether there is a need to reconsider the mind-body relationship more fully in attempts that are made to reconfigure traditional roles in academia. On a more practical level, participants mentioned the impact that the workshop had made on their daily lives. They had become more aware of the physical nature of power arrangements in, for example, the positioning of seating at meetings.

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### **Discussion**

The running of the three workshops has provided valuable insights into how drama might be used as a learning and development tool. First, it is critical to identify the appropriate methodological approach to fit the aims of the workshop. The workshops described all used the methodology of Augusto Boal. Boal focuses on the concept of empowerment and this fitted with the focus on individual development that underpinned each of the three programmes. Second, it is necessary to devote sufficient time to the workshop. At least three and a half hours must be allocated in order to enable participants to engage in the various exercises and then to discuss their reactions to the workshop. The workshops are a powerful learning tool that may result in strong feelings about and reactions to issues on the part of participants. These feelings need to be understood and contextualised and this can only be accomplished if there is sufficient time for discussion and debriefing. Third, the right type of environment must be provided. A large floor space is required and this should be located away from the normal classroom setting. For the second workshop a room in the sports complex was hired while a nursing practice room was used for the final one. These proved much more suitable types of accommodation than the classroom setting of the first workshop. Fourth, a substantial amount of pre-course preparation needs to go into the delivery of a workshop to a mixed gender group. The group needs to be informed of the types of exercises that are required and of the level of physical contact involved. For a mixed gender group, the workshop may be better situated in a residential weekend rather than in a normal academic timetable. Fifth, a trained facilitator needs to be employed. As previously stated, the workshops can raise strong feelings about issues. These must be handled carefully by someone who is specifically trained in the appropriate methodology.

Finally, the workshops raise interesting issues about their role in women-only training and development programmes. There has been a great deal of debate about the value or otherwise of women-only training and development. Those debating this issue fall into two broad camps. There are those who see

value to be gained from women being able to explore issues particularly relevant to women in an atmosphere more conducive to learning (Willis and Daisley, 1997; Knight and Pritchard, 1994; Brown, 1996). In contrast, others have criticised the content of such courses on the grounds that they simply assist women in adapting to and coping with the structures of power and culture that are present in work situations, without any attempt to challenge the assumptions underlying the design of jobs and organisations (Bhavnani, 1997; Gray, 1994). However, the inclusion of a workshop that is designed to empower provides the dynamic which critics of these programmes have seen as lacking in traditional women-only programmes.

### Conclusions

It is the intention to continue to run the drama workshops in both the certificate and the management development programme. However, it is not intended to run the workshop in the Masters programme unless it can be incorporated into a residential weekend. Drama is a very powerful learning tool but the right type of conditions have to be provided if it is to work successfully.

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