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Using Sociodrama for Radical Pedagogy: Methodology for Education and Change

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the use of sociodrama as a provocative and engaging methodology in training and education and discuss its usage in the classroom, training environment, and the community. The paper will also explore how this unique educational tool can facilitate personal growth, raise consciousness, and initiate behavioral change. The components of the techniques and examples of effective use will also be discussed.

Keywords: sociodrama, reflective team, facilitator, stepping in, stepping out, bubbling, and freezing.

Introduction

There is a wealth of literature addressing experiential learning and the efficacy of experience based education and training (Kolb, 1984; Jones, 1988; Lewis, 1986; Eble, 1988; Bertrand, 1995). Social workers and group facilitators agree that experiential exercises are invaluable in getting participants to relax and engage in the process of self-development (Dayton, 1990).

Educators and trainers confront the challenges of capturing and maintaining the attention of their students each time they enter the classroom. The education and training of students in the applied fields of criminal justice, social work, and the helping professions can present an even greater challenge. This paper explores the inner workings of an interactive and engaging educational methodology called sociodrama. Concrete examples and illustrations of the effective use of this medium in both a training environment as well in a traditional educational setting will also be presented.

O’Keefe (2004) describes the importance of utilizing sociodrama in teaching behavioral science to police recruits and that this methodology encourages learners to be active participants in the learning process. As the former Director of Training at the New York City Police Academy, O’Keefe (2004) describes how sensitive and complex topics are well suited for the use of sociodrama.

Sociodrama is effective in the traditional classroom as well. For example, an undergraduate student at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania remarked in student-teacher evaluations,
“As a student, I retain so much more when we use sociodrama than any power point presentation or lecture and I actually look forward to this class each week”. Educators and trainers alike are often seeking hands-on applications and are eager to explore innovative techniques in educational settings.

The “proof of the pudding is in the pie” and educators are interested in knowing how specifically and whether or not this non-traditional methodology is effective in achieving learning performance objectives. While empirical evidence suggests that an active learning activity makes a valuable contribution to learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge (Sivan, Wong Leung, Woon & Kember (2000), educators are interested in concrete outcomes.

Theorists argue that sociodrama can be an invaluable tool in raising social and political awareness, to address a critical issue with an audience, to understand theoretical foundations, to practice a skill, or to engage in a process of psychological or behavioral change (Cossa, Ember, Grover, & Hazelwood, 1996; Spolin, 1986; Boal, 1985; Ments, 1994). When participants are engaged in a reality based scenario where the characters remain in character and interact with audience members, there is an ability to move out of the cognitive realm into the emotional where attitudes and feelings can be tapped into and education and change can be stimulated (Cossa, Ember, Grover, & Hazelwood, 1996).

Boal (1985) speculates that theater techniques such as “Forum Theater” and “Invisible Theater” can be used as a tool for liberation from oppression and a way to induce social and political change. The use of these techniques in a small classroom setting as well as larger venues is limitless. Police recruits and social worker trainees particularly benefit from sociodrama where they are given the opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical principles and practical application. Police topics relating to proper procedures such as the handling of child abuse cases, crisis intervention with sexual assault victims, effective police response to people with mental illness, and proper handling of domestic violence incidents, are better understood when the theories, concepts, and procedures come alive and can be applied in a real life setting.

Sociodrama

The term “sociodrama” has been used to describe several theater techniques used in educational and training settings and can also be used as a form of therapy as well as political action, which is sometimes described as guerilla theater or invisible theater (Boal, 1985). By its very name, sociodrama implies the utilization of some form of theater or dramatic technique dealing with a social issue or topic that impacts society on some level. Sociodrama, a form of educational theater or audience interactive theater is issue based (Cossa, et.al, 1996). Topics can include; domestic violence, dating relationship violence, alcohol use and abuse, partner violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, sexual assault, date rape, bullying, and the like.

Sociodrama has four major components:

1. •Reality and Issue Based
2. •Improvisational
3. •Dialogue Between Character and Audience
4. Educational, Behavioral, and Psychological Objectives

Reality/Issue Based

Real-life situational scenes are developed by the students based on actual incidents, setting the “stage” for audience participants to identify and interact with the characters. An example of reality and issue based work can be seen in the practical application of social work foundations in a training environment. Theoretical principles at times can be difficult to explain and tend to be monotonous, particularly when traditional educational methodologies are employed. Characters are developed based on case studies where social workers can practice their skills with characters resembling real clients. Using this theater technique, social workers can practice and evaluate their performance in a safe environment on a myriad of issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, grief and loss, and others. The specific techniques that are employed with audience members will be examined later.

Sociodrama can also be used as a tool to raise awareness among social workers, police officers, health professionals, and other providers about sensitive issues such as racism, homophobia and other obstacles of prejudice that get in the way of effective practice. This educational medium works with many diverse audiences and populations and can be used by educators, trainers, and social workers to meet educational, behavioral, and psychological objectives.

A specific example of how reality and issue based sociodrama and can be used as an effective methodology in raising awareness is with the topic of sexual assault. This critical issue continues to be of critical concern in society for both women as well as men and for survivors as well as their perpetrators. The problem of sexual assault on college campuses is a growing problem for university administrators, faculty, campus counselors, and the survivors of these assaults who are directly and most critically impacted. Consciousness raising and education on this issue with student audiences remains difficult and challenging. Defensive posturing on the part of male students creates audience “shutdown” when traditional academic methodologies are employed.

Not unlike common societal attitudes toward sexual assault, audiences often demonstrate judgmental attitudes toward the victim while minimizing the responsibility of the perpetrator. Sociodrama can be used to air and address these belief systems head on in a safe environment by interacting directly with the “characters”. The technique then becomes an invaluable tool to raise awareness and perhaps help in inducing behavioral change.

The method encourages a safe dialogue between the audience and the “characters” who remain in character and is achieved through the guided discussion of the facilitator. Often emotional healing is a by-product of the educational and consciousness raising process. Because of the intensity of this work and the critical issues being examined, the challenge lies in soothing and addressing painful outcomes that may result during the actual dialogue. Later on in this paper, the importance of the facilitator’s responsibility to continuously monitor the “emotional temperature” of both the audience members as well as the actors who remain behind the character will be discussed.
Actors Improvising and Remaining in Character

Operationally, sociodrama requires the involvement of three critical roles; “actors”, “facilitator”, and the audience, referred to in this paper as the “reflective team”. Actors portray characters in reality based scenarios and remain in character for the duration of the sociodrama. This reality based character interacts with the audience by participating in an ongoing dialogue.

The situational scenes are developed by the actors and director of the group based on real life scenarios and experiences. Often, these scenes are developed from the actors own lived experiences. Since the scenes involve real life characters, developed and perfected by the actors, it is necessary for the director to be sensitive to emotions that may arise during development, rehearsal, and performance.

Audience Interaction and Reflective Team Response

Friere (1970) discusses the importance of dialogue between teacher and student and how it is in this communication that true education is achieved. When the communication between students and teacher or students and each other is limited, the teaching becomes a monologue rather than a dialogue. This sort of “banking education”, as Friere describes, keeps the critical thinking process dormant treating students as inferior.

The technique of sociodrama relies on the dialogue with the audience. It is the fertile ground for critical thinking, problem identification, and solution focused discussion. The interaction with audience members becomes critical to the success of the methodology and it is the role of the facilitator to insure that this objective process of dialogue occurs in a neutral and safe manner.

Reflective Team/Audience

In traditional theater settings the audience is usually passive. This may be the case even when the objective is to educate rather than entertain. The opportunity for audience members to interact with the characters on stage is rare. In educational theater, particularly in the technique of sociodrama, the dialogue between audience and characters is critical to the method. The objective is to educate, raise awareness, train, invoke change, or indirectly heal a painful area.

The audience has a critical role to reflect back to the characters how they can change or question why they are behaving in a certain way. The audience as the reflective team, identifies problems and offer solutions for change. Through the reflective team’s suggestions, thoughts, and “truths this unique process of dialogue becomes the fertile ground for education and consciousness-raising. The facilitator does not teach but rather steers the train of dialogue, where learning and change is the destination.

Facilitator /Director

In Boal’s (1985) work with forum theater, the facilitator is called “the joker”. The notion of facilitator as joker is interesting in that this role requires a neutral, problem posing, and sometimes provocative posture. The facilitator may also be the director of the theater group. This
is not always the case and members of the group can rotate the role of facilitator. Often the facilitator and the director may be the same individual. The use of sociodrama technique, however, does not require a formal theater group and the method can be utilized in any setting, with any group.

It is the responsibility of the facilitator to “freeze” the scene from time to time in order to guide the discussion between the audience and the characters. The objective of this frozen time is to allow the audience to reflect on the scene, identify positive behavior as well as problems that have been presented and offer solutions for change. This is accomplished through interaction with characters that always remain in character. The facilitator poses specific questions whose purpose is to illicit responses and may sometimes make provocative remarks to the audience hoping to spark emotion and participation. It is critical for the facilitator to be able to guide the dialogue between and with the audience members and the characters.

One technique is to ask the audience members to take on the role of the character and join the scene revealing “what they would do”. Facilitators can also place an invisible shield around the character so that only the facilitator and audience can hear what they are saying while their fellow characters can not. This tool is effective in revealing the “true feelings” of the characters and seeing the character behind the mask. Boal (1985) developed a technique called “cop in the head” where audience members come up and get inside the head of the character by voicing their true thoughts.

Some examples of the questions posed to characters and audience are listed here and are categorized accordingly. They will vary depending on issue, characters, scene, and objectives.

TO CHARACTER:

1. 1. How are you feeling right now?  
2. Why are you behaving this way? Why are you in this situation?  
3. What do you think would make your situation different?  
4. What would you like to see happen now?  
5. 
2. TO AUDIENCE/REFLECTIVE TEAM:  
1. What are the issues being presented here?  
2. Can you identify any problems here?  
3. What would you have done differently if you were the characters?  
4. What can you offer as solutions?  
5. What would you say to the character? Say it now.  
6. Why don’t you come up and join the scene?  
7. Can you come up and tell us the characters true feelings?

An additional responsibility of the facilitator is to brief the actors beforehand about their characters and scene. It is not until the sociodrama had ended and the facilitator asks the actors to come out of character that the actor will reveal their true feelings to the audience. Actors cannot
come in and out of character at will. Once the actor steps out of character they cannot go back in. At the end of the sociodrama, it is the integral role of the facilitator to de-brief the actors in front of the audience about their true feelings regarding the roles they have played. This gives the audience unique insight into the character and the difficulty in portraying this particular role. This de-briefing also gives the actor the opportunity to talk about how it felt to play the character and remind the actor that they are no longer in this role.

In sociodrama all of the actors are briefed and are “in on it” and are completely aware of their roles, character background, motivation, and expected behaviors in the scene. Sociodrama can involve the use of a “volunteer” chosen from the pool of participants who are being trained or evaluated and they are given a role to perform. Usually this “role” is one in which the participant is being trained and/or evaluated in.

An example of this is in training and evaluating medical students in the notification procedure to parents of their child’s terminal illness. The two actors playing the mother and father have been briefed by the facilitator/director on their specific role and character background. They have already been briefed on their specific behaviors and reactions. They know that they are going to be told about their child’s diagnosis and prognosis. The medical student who has “volunteered” to practice the notification procedure is thrown into the role of doctor. The student will be evaluated for ability and skill in notifying these parents. This technique allows the medical student to practice learned skills in a safe environment and to be evaluated by peers and trainers.

The facilitator can “freeze” the scene at critical points and reach out to the reflective team for suggestions and critique. The facilitator can have one of the reflective team members come up and try on the role of doctor by demonstrating “what they would do differently”.

Educational, Behavioral, and Psychological Objectives

Sociodrama can be used to achieve educational, behavioral, and psychological objectives. Although the technique of sociodrama is effective in achieving educational objectives with audience members, the developmental process of the sociodrama is a potent one for the actors involved in the project. Since the characters and scenes in the sociodrama are based on real life scenarios and lived experiences, the actors become immersed in their characters and in these issues, making their individual learning process heightened. In sum, this methodology can be effective with countless populations and can focus on a multitude of issues. It is an invaluable tool to elevate consciousness, evoke change, and even to facilitate psychological healing (Green, 2001).

Use of sociodrama and having “real-life” characters playing reality based situations is an extremely useful educational and training tool in police training, particularly in helping recruits to explore bias and prejudice (Solomon & Telesco, 2001; Nix, 1987; O’Keefe, 2004). Student police officers participate in sociodramas that are designed to emulate real life situations and interact with characters in which patrol officers are likely to respond. Additionally, sociodrama was used to raise consciousness and explore bias and attitudes in recruit officers. Stepping in and out techniques are used when student officers present alternatives to behaviors or actions being employed by volunteers playing “real cops”. Student officers report in evaluations that this
hands-on, practical application of theory and procedure allow the principles discussed in the classroom come alive.

The technique of freezing the scene allows the student to also get into the head of the character. Students have commented that it’s really an eye-opener to see how a mentally ill person, for example, may really feel or be thinking about (Solomon & Telesco, 2001).

Sociodrama Ensembles

While student audiences benefit greatly from sociodrama, it is the ensemble members who are directly impacted as they become immersed in the topic they are studying. The student actors must learn their character’s motivation and background and this enables the student to completely and personally understand the dynamics and characteristics of that character. For example, if a student actor were studying the character of an abusive husband who is battering his wife and children, the student would need to become familiar with the dynamics and characteristics of domestic violence. By interacting, as the character, the student actor would begin to understand the unique characteristics of battering as well as the factors that contribute to his wife remaining in this abusive relationship. While the audience is exposed to the same learning objectives, it is the student actor who has “become” the character who truly benefits from the lessons to be learned.

At a university in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, scores of students participated in a sociodrama entitled “What’s Eating Katie” where a character is tempted by her eating disorder demon called A/B (anorexia and bulimia) to binge and then intentionally throw up her food. The sociodrama was inspired by a mother of a young women who had recently died from the disorder. Many audience members left the auditorium remarking “how powerful and compelling the characters message was and how it really made them think about the issue and how it may apply to them” (Pocono Record, 2004).

In a recent South Florida university’s sociodrama program about relationship abuse, the community participants and college students were so engaged in the topic that had been portrayed by the characters that the interaction was electrifying. It’s interactive experiential, and igniting nature had audience participants out of their seats ardently raising their hands eager to participate in the dialogue. What appealed to participants was the interesting and novel technique of the characters staying in character throughout the dialogue and way after the “scenario” had ended. Audience members could not get their hands on the microphones fast enough to engage in ongoing dialogue with characters about their behavior, choices, attitudes, and beliefs. Andrea Bailey, CEO of Women in Distress, a domestic violence advocacy organization in South Florida says “the format is so valuable especially to young people to help them identify the distinction between abusive –possessive relationships and those based on love and respect”. (Bolivar, 2005).

When you are given the opportunity to see a situation played out in front of you and you are given a unique moment to get inside the character’s head it allows participants to recognize what is abusive in characters, perhaps identifying the behavior as inappropriate and making the connection to their own relationships and behavior (Roth, 2005). The sociodrama presentation Tough Love was so powerful that a student actor apologized from the stage to his wife who was
sitting in the audience for having spoken abusively to her in the past “I realize now through experiencing this sociodrama that I was being abusive in some of the ways I talk to you. I am sorry. I am going to change” (Nichols, 2006). Ensemble members say they think that educating through sociodrama is so effective “portraying a character who is abusive and then engaging in a dialogue with the audience as that character helps bring the issue alive, encouraging participants to analyze and explore real life issues in a laboratory like setting” (Roth, 2005).

This paper explored the use of sociodrama as an educational methodology in myriad critical social issues some of which include; sexual assault, eating disorders, anti-gay harassment, racism and hate crimes, gun violence in schools, and dating relationship violence. Sociodrama as a dynamic and interactive delivery medium can be the answer to the challenge of maintaining the attention of students and being able to truly bridge the gap between theory and the real world. Students appreciate the realism and practical application of sociodrama. “I don’t like it – I love it” an undergraduate student at a South Florida university reports. “It makes you feel like you’re really in the situation and then you are confronted with what you have learned in the textbook and heard in the classroom” (Nichols, 2006).

Use of sociodrama in the classroom, in law enforcement and social work training environments and in the community at large to educate and raise awareness about the critical social issues facing our society today may be a radical methodology that can transform both the student as well as the educator at the pedagogical and perhaps even at the behavioral level.

End Notes

1Dr. Grace Telesco is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at American InterContinental University in Weston Florida and Director of the University’s Sociodrama Ensemble and the Co-Founder of WolfBear Institute, a not for profit educational organization that specializes in sociodrama to raise consciousness about social issues. Dr. Telesco has developed various programs, courses, and projects using sociodrama and has presented educational theater performances on issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, gender conformity, sexual assault, and domestic violence. As a retired Lieutenant and former chairperson of the Behavioral Science Department at the New York City Police Academy, Dr. Telesco developed a groundbreaking and progressive police recruit curriculum grounded in social work foundations raising recruit officer’s consciousness about racism, homophobia, domestic violence, and sexual assault using sociodrama as a methodology. For more information contact GTelesco@aiufl.edu

References


