

Exploring action methods for personal and professional development

Sue Orton



Introduction

I enrolled on the Certificate Course in Psychodrama at the London Centre for Psychodrama in September 2009. My participation was motivated by my desire to restore and revive myself both personally and professionally. Now, after the course I am happier, and most of the time I am standing on firmer ground professionally too. I have experienced significant changes in my embodiment of and in my practice as an educator. This essay discusses some of my learning this year in particular relation to my professional role as a humanistic education developer and consultant.

Psychodrama

Conceived by J.L. Moreno in the 1940s, psychodrama was developed in all its complexity as an action based response to psychoanalysis, bringing the whole of life, images, dreams, fantasy and ideas that until then had remained dormant and imagined on the therapeutic couch, to life through action on a stage. The psychodrama stage, where role development and exploration takes place, was a big vision:

Moreno developed psychodrama along with sociometry, sociodrama and group psychotherapy as ways of addressing the social issues of the time....when Vienna was buzzing with the revolutionary ideas of Freud and Marx.... to tackle the problems of the world, of society and of human interactions, rather than just the individual. He started with a hope for the world and went to each individual reality. (Karp et al: 16)

The depth and breadth of psychodrama swept over the psychotherapy and group work landscape of the 20th century like a huge sea eagle; sometimes feared, sometimes nearly extinct but wonderfully powerful. Born out of universal god like aspirations with existential sensibilities these methods and approaches have influenced most therapeutic schools and, used in action, by experienced hands, have the power to plunge into and revive every part of our being. The inspiring heart and intention of this method is in the rekindling and reviving of the sometimes buried and dormant spontaneity and creativity that we were born with:

The objective of psychodrama was, from its inception, to construct a therapeutic setting which uses life as a model, to integrate into it all the modalities of living, beginning with the universals - time, space, reality and cosmos - down to all the details and nuances of life. (Fox: 3)

Techniques

There are five main tools or techniques that distinguish the methods of psychodrama and sociodrama from other group methods. These are the stage, the subject or protagonist, the audience, auxiliaries, and the director. Moreno explains them here:

The stage provides the actor with a living space which is multi-dimensional and flexible to the maximum; the subject or actor is asked to be himself on the stage, to portray his own private life; the audience is a sounding board of public opinion as well as the subject itself - it becomes healed by taking part; the auxiliary egos have a double significance, they are extensions of the subject, portraying the actual or imagined. The director has three functions: producer, counsellor and analyst. (Moreno, 1953: 81)

Action Methods

Two key theories or concepts inform both psychodrama and sociodrama and provide the framework for what is called action methods. These are role theory, exploring the source and complexity of the numerous roles we play in our lives, and 'encounter', working in the 'here and now' in which we can 'concretize' or make visible and reverse roles with aspects of ourselves, significant people in our lives and our imaginations and fantasies. Jonathan Fox explains the importance and extent of role theory:

We consider roles and the relationship between roles as the most significant development within any specific culture. ... Role theory cuts across all the sciences and binds them together on a new plane. It embraces all the dimensions of life from the start of life. This includes pre-language psychosomatic roles expressed in the physical dimension including the role of eater and the sexual role, social roles expressing the social dimension and psychodramatic roles expressing the psychological dimensions. (Fox: 62)

These techniques are also used to explore theory and complex situations not easily 'seen',

including organisations, families and systems including team dynamics. There is a difference in the working contexts of the two 'dramas'. Psychodrama works predominantly within the regulated psychotherapeutic world, 'going deep' into personal history to heal into the present. Sociodrama works predominately outside a regulated

framework 'going wide' into group, community and organizational systems to illuminate and revive in the present. Both encouraging authentic, healthy spontaneity and creativity at the heart of their use of these approaches and methodologies. As Blatner writes: 'Learning how to optimize vitality and spontaneity may well be one of the greatest challenges in our culture' (Blatner: 43).

Educator not Psychotherapist

Exploring the use of role theory in practice and working in the here and now through encounter have emerged as the most useful aspects for me to explore in relation to educational development. Unlike most members of my cohort at the London Centre I was not setting out to train as a psychotherapist but to gather experience for my practice as an educator. This differing focus was to be both helpful and challenging for me during the year. I have appreciated and benefitted from the depth and complexity of these methods in the context of psychodrama as a protagonist and in learning techniques and to play roles for colleagues. And I have discovered also that the width and breadth of sociodrama is more applicable in professional practice than some of the detailed role analysis required for classical psychodrama. I am now continuing training in sociodrama.

*It feels important to swim deep to be able to swim with confidence on the surface.
(Journal May 2010)*

Warming up

Spontaneity is most likely to develop and flourish in a safe environment. It can be hard to do new things in the moment, if you feel unsure or vulnerable. Blatner reminds us that 'without an effective warm-up many a role play or psychodramatic enactment fails'.

Trust is a vital ingredient here; between protagonist and director and with colleagues within the group. Moreno had a term for the quality of interpersonal relationships: he called it 'tele'. In the broad context of human relationships and networks Moreno was interested in describing and exploring the spontaneous natural exchange between people separate from the psychoanalytic phenomenon of transference. In every encounter there is tele. Fox describes it further:

The fundamental process of tele is reciprocity - reciprocity of attraction, reciprocity of rejection, reciprocity of excitation, reciprocity of inhibition, reciprocity of indifference, reciprocity of distortion. (Fox: 4)

Fox also quotes a poem in which Moreno describes tele and encounter:

A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.
When you are near I will tear your eyes out
and will place them instead of mine,
and you will tear my eyes out
and place them instead of yours,
then I will look at you with your eyes
and you will look at me with mine.¹

The intention of warm up is to help group members be more comfortable with each other, to get to a place in the group process when the anxiety levels are low enough for some people to be willing and ready to step up to encounter. For me as a humanistic educator, relearning the importance of warming up has been really important. I have always practiced and advocated spending time at the beginning of an education course or lesson both to allow students to explore what they know about the subject already and to encourage students to get to know and trust one another so that they can learn from each other; and be spontaneous and creative in their learning. I think I have been a little anxious about encounter and working in the here-and-now because of a lack of warm up. Warming-up psychodrama-style has been so helpful, giving me a firm footing in theory and practice for my work as an educator. Adam Blatner reinforces this:

The principles of warming-up apply not only to therapy or psychodrama but also to everyday life. Learning how to optimize vitality and spontaneity may well be one of the greatest challenges in our culture. (Blatner: 43)

Blatner also offers the conditions that help to foster spontaneity; a sense of trust and safety, an openness to intuitions, images, feeling and other non-rational mental processes, a bit of playfulness - so getting everything right isn't vital - and a willingness to move towards risk taking and exploration into novelty. Everyone involved in the process needs to warm up, including of course the director who needs to apply the principles and conditions to herself, to endeavour to model spontaneity in the warm up process.

Into action

Psychodrama starting with a warm up for action, can take you on a roller coaster ride through scenes triggering every possible emotion, bringing you back, exhausted to conclusion, prompting you then to pause, to put on the kettle and to realise

¹ See *Einladung zu einer Begegnung* (1914). Translated and reprinted in *Psychodrama*, Vol 1, frontispiece

that the story you just watched and participated in, was your story too. I can't step into action here, but instead endeavour to paint pictures with words which may stir your imagination sufficiently. I am not alone in struggling with writing about psychodrama without action:

Whilst practising and teaching psychodrama, I have found difficulties in communicating the method in ways other than the active experiential way. The best way to learn psychodrama is by doing it, in the roles of protagonist, director, auxiliary ego and group member. (Bustos, in Holmes et al: 65)

A journal entry shows that a warm up can take several days. For me a Friday evening to Sunday:

The use of the door to enter the course was powerful and helpful for me, I surprised myself with owning my skills and experience and found myself using the application form for the course to help me with my words, although it was not rehearsed. I was sad at the lack of connection people had with me. I hold my feelings way down and didn't reveal much. (I wonder if it informed my work on Sunday being in my head through the door?) (Personal Journal Entry 18th Sept 2010)

My warm up begun on the Friday evening, developed as I was invited to explore issues and influences in my life with my new colleagues on Saturday. On Sunday we warmed up some more and I was chosen as protagonist. I was chosen to explore: "Why do I follow my head not my heart in times of stress?". I had identified a powerful quite recent example of this response, namely that on receiving a call from my sister that my mother had nearly died, I stayed at home to complete a job application (my head response) rather than travel immediately to visit my mother in hospital (my heart response).

Contract

This question is referred to as a contract, it's the finalizing of the question I am going to explore and concretise through action, with the director and the 'audience' of colleagues. By exploring this question in action the hope is that I might find the source of this non-emotional response and through cathartic release and cognitive understanding I might revisit the example and be more spontaneous. Williams explains what happens when we concretise events outside ourselves and explore in action:

As soon as the self, or part of the self, becomes 'outside' in an object or other person, ... when it is concretised, the quality of the relationship with self must change as the person is required to enter a dramatic dialogue. (Williams: 17)

The contract is really important. Not only for a psychodrama but for education too.

Every piece of professional work I do requires a contract. The quality of the process of developing and identifying a contract is the key to any effective piece of work. A contract comes out of the warm up and sets the tone for everything that follows, it provides the ground, the map but not the route; the route is decided in action. The intention now, through role analysis, is to 'search' for the beginnings of this behaviour. Moreno talked about beginnings of 'things', about the philosophy of the moment and suggests that there are three factors that represent views of one process or 'thing'. He uses the terms locus, status nascendi and matrix; and suggests that these three are inextricably linked together and can also be applied to any human organism or idea:

There is no 'thing' without its locus, no locus without its status nascendi, no status nascendi without its matrix..... The locus of a flower is the bed where it grows, the matrix the fertilised seed and its status nascendi the growing thing that springs from the seed. Every human act or performance has a primary action-pattern, a status nascendi. (Moreno, adapted and cited in Holmes et al: 63)

Each of these three elements is present in each birthed moment, each idea and experience and all three will impact on our responses to a moment. In training I found the analysis and identification or 'unpacking' of these three concepts difficult. In my journal I explore these three for myself:

Matrix from the latin meaning mother is a fertilized egg. It's me at the time of my conception with all the unique complexity of my cells and chromosomes dividing, which will grow into a woman with blue eyes, blond hair, lungs, heart, brain, ears, eventually 5'2" and size 5 shoes, me unique in all my natural complexity. Status nascendi is the time of my conception: that's my father and mother making love and conceiving me, probably in August 1952 on Hayling Island, Hampshire, while staying with my maternal grandmother on holiday. Locus then is the placenta: my growing journey with my mother from August to May receiving nourishment, messages, senses and sounds on the way.

Back then to my psychodrama. The director is seeking to track back with me to the time, to the moment that I may have started or birthed the notion and behaviour that I had to follow head not heart. We do this with the help of all the other participants, who are able to play auxiliary roles, suggest or double dialogue and contribute to the building of an accurate re-enactment for me of my perception of each scene. It's important too to know that I have been chosen, by majority vote in the assembled company, to explore my question because it has energy and resonance for them also.

So on stage now, I explore in action with the help of minimal props, with colleagues invited on to play auxiliary roles as my sister, my heart, my head and even my school. The director takes me on a journey concretizing the presenting scene first, then other scenes in which I remembered the same response, until finally we recreate a locus scene, the source of my decision to trust my head not my heart. I revisit this place and in the process feel and experience deeply the emotion of my decision of ignoring my heart and following my head. From there I returned to the presenting scene with my sister and mother and experienced it again, this time, more readily trusting my heart. It is a wonderful, very complicated and complex process. It's the therapeutic psychodrama format.

Applying techniques

In action I confronted and embodied many roles this year, some mine in my own scenes and some played for colleagues as auxiliary roles in theirs. Some were played with, talked to, brought out of the shadows of my unconscious, some were reclaimed, explored and raged at or cried with or hated or danced with. A later reflective journal entry illustrates the power of some of the techniques of the method and how a part of myself, that I was until then unaware of, emerged:

It's amazing how fast my emotions were triggered when I was asked where my heart was as I answered the phone with my sister. I knew physically exactly where it was, down at my feet, pushed down away from me. Changing roles with it; I cried immediately. It was as if as soon as I was my heart I knew what to do.

Role playing is prior to the emergence of the self. Roles do not emerge from the self but the self may emerge from roles. (Moreno, 1946: 157)

The person who 'played' my heart was taking the role of auxiliary ego, it is a key role. During the course my learning, the purpose and embodiment of auxiliary roles was very important. Role reversal is about sensing, embodying and replaying as accurately as you can the crucial element for the protagonist to facilitate and to enable them to re-experience their perception of the situation accurately. As Holmes put it, 'the auxiliary ego is a role 'taken', 'held' or 'played' by another member of the group ... is an externalization of aspects or roles in the protagonist's own inner world or psyche' (Holmes in Karp et al: 130)

Again my journal illustrates my learning in this area:

Auxiliary Ego: I was chosen to play x's boyfriend today he was driving a car with x in it. He was portrayed by x in role reversal as cold and uncaring stopping the

car to let x out without looking at x at all. Playing the boyfriend I smiled and was caring, instead of staying in role representing the coldness that was essential for x to experience the essence of the relationship.

Without realising it I had responded 'as I would have' with kindness rather than as the role required me to take, which was to replicate the hard, uncaring reaction for the protagonist; their remembered experience of this person. By providing this remembered experience reflected back, the intention is to provide 'as if it were that time again' so to re-stimulate the original response. My learning here was also important because it enabled me throughout the year to put my self conscious role down and concentrate on embodying the essence of the auxiliary role for the protagonists. As Holmes again reminds us:

The best way to learn psychodrama is by doing it, in the roles of protagonist, director, auxiliary ego and group member. The emotionality is the guiding star. ... When submerged in the dark, psychodramatists and sociodramatists feel their way. (Holmes et al: 65)

Experiencing the power of playing and using auxiliary roles and the technique of concretization with role reversal has been amongst the most powerful and the most useful aspect of psychodrama for me. Although there were only a small group of students on my training course, I met and encountered a cast of thousands. Each encounter was rich and inhabited by the complex worlds and imaginations of many peoples' experiences and fantasies. Each was driven by the intention to embrace authentic living and well-being through fostering spontaneity and creativity. The concept of role theory has been central in enabling me to explore the impact of this training on the professional roles I play as an educator of educators. My personal development has benefitted from the power and depth of classical psychodrama and in experiencing the techniques I feel more able to use some of them in education and consulting.

Blatner suggests:

Classical psychodrama would rarely be appropriate for most work situations, for the same reason that one would not use psychodrama in the classroom. ... Limited applications of psychodramatic methods such as the use of role playing and action techniques are widely used in industrial psychological consulting. (Blatner: 131)

So, it was so helpful for me to see these techniques used in the context of theory understanding and exploration throughout the year:

Our tutor asked us if we remembered ego, id and super ego, and without a pause put three cushions on the floor and then stood on each and spoke from each. Really

easy and very powerful. I am going to explore using this with learning styles, with JOHARI. Great. (Personal journal: October 2010)

I went on to try it at work. My journal provides an example of my experiments of using concretisation and role reversal to understand and explore the use of technology:

In Sussex today I explored using role reversal to try and sort out with Andy and Darren the relationships between the content on the website, the printed materials and information inside the Pebble Pad system. We put three tables out in a spread triangle to represent each. First I asked Darren and then Andy to 'be' each place and to tell me what they thought they should contain, this produced expected answers. I then asked about the relationship each might have with the other two places and that was exciting. We discovered clarity of relationship that we had never imagined, it was really helpful. I decided to leave the results and invite other members of the careers centre to come in and contribute too. (March 2010)

Professional development

I have been working as a humanistic educator and educational developer for more than 30 years; I encourage educators and subject specialists to deliver education that promotes deep learning i.e. student centred learning that provides challenging, empowering and lasting experiences of learning, teaching and assessment. Looking back on my life, I realise that the seeds and essence or intrinsic motivation to be humanistic were perhaps within me from very early on:

When I was 13, I was asked to be the captain of my school rounders team in the inter-house tournament. My house had never won the cup. I decided then to get together all the girls who wanted to join the team. I intuitively understood that I needed to make all of them feel valued, to build up their self-esteem and to be confident in their own abilities. So I set about pairing up skilled and confident with less skilled and confident to learn and practise how to throw and catch and to increase the distance and accuracy; confidence grew. I realised that the usual practice of putting the good players who could throw as bowler, backstop and bases and the girls who could not throw out in the deep was a nonsense; one good hit from our opposition and the ball never came back! I sensed that we needed to work as a team and that everyone needed to feel and experience success to flourish. So I worked at building short throw and catching accuracy, I gave long throwers the task of over view in the deep and the less confident the short positions close to the action. We won the cup. But more important, I also feel that this was the first time I remember facilitating humanistic student centred learning!

I tell you this story because in the last few years, I have found it more and more difficult to step back into this creative facilitator role I knew so well as a 13 year old. My efforts to hold onto her, and her 'person centred approach' had been wrung out of me. My own formal education left me with feelings of inadequacy and dis-empowerment around learning. I do not learn easily from the traditional cognitive knowledge accumulation and 'exam regurgitation' methodology with which I was faced during my adolescence and early adulthood. I learn best combining both cognitive, affective, intuitive and physical aspects of myself for learning. I know that this 'whole person' learning suits many other people too, yet still, traditional western education values cognitive learning above all others. Traditional learning and education practices are based upon an expert teacher or subject specialist who has more knowledge and understanding of the subject matter 'telling' students what they need to know. The cultural conserve that is education has remained rooted to a traditional approach. As Moreno puts it, 'The books in the libraries ... become the idols around which everyone was to revolve' (Moreno, 1946: 32).

Education has long been inextricably linked to power and politics, it has never been without an agenda:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Jane L. Thompson, drawing on Paulo Freire)

The role I take in this picture of a political power struggle to liberate the oppressed students from a huge and powerful hand has, until recently, been a combative one. I'm not

big enough or strong enough, but it has not stopped me trying and getting exhausted in the process. Bustos offers me some comfort as an educator of educators too, faced as I often am with endless ranks of learned professors holding their knowledge safe behind closed study doors with big name plates. He describes his first encounter with Moreno at a Psychotherapy Congress in 1964:

... where an aloof Anna Freud was the brilliant star. Mysterious and brilliant she was the symbol of the unconscious kingdom.... Imagine my shock on finding that Moreno was not aloof at all, but stood with his arms open to plethoric emotion. I turned to my friend and whispered 'I wouldn't like to be treated by this clown'.

I have sometimes described myself as an educational jester but rarely [until now] have I been brave enough to shed my anxieties and dare to be visible as such.

*I have stopped struggling, I have stopped struggling
struggling to prove myself, struggling into armor
struggling to be better
to be brighter, to be stronger
to know everything, to be perfect
to expect too much
from myself, from my child
from my hesitant self, from my brain
from my body
in my time
in this moment
I have stopped struggling.
(Sue Orton September 2010)*

Psychodrama training has helped me relax and to explore new roles. I am more and more aware of a change in my roles as an educational professional. I can best describe it as easing out of an active, flying picket role doing battle with education professionals to standing proud in the role of a wise woman, maybe spider, sometimes jester, happily visible, waiting, watching and confident. These roles I have identified have always been present for me and they are both useful, but it is in the emphasis and embodiment of the wise woman role that I am finding clarity, creativity and spontaneity in my education practice.

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