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Engaging critical awareness through narrative and the body: Using Playback Theatre in a research project with interdisciplinary healthcare teams

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Work in a university learning development centre alerted the author to the unprecedented diversity of students presenting as they begin their higher education studies. The cultural aspects of this diversity have seemed to be intractable, in many cases, with notably inequitable patterns of success and retention. Action methods have proved helpful in assisting students from a wide variety of backgrounds to engage more fully in their learning and this led to a research enquiry, looking at how a specific action approach, Playback Theatre, might assist interdisciplinary healthcare teams to communicate and discuss issues and events with each other. This enquiry is described and its findings around play, humour, emotion and perturbation are shared. Finally, action methods are proposed as an elegant and effective way of engaging groups in cooperative learning situations, both within higher education institutions and with community contexts.

Keywords: action methods, creativity, communication

Introduction

For over 15 years, the author has been practising as an educator in a university learning development centre, working with a very wide range of students as they improve their academic practice. Up until 30 years ago, relatively small numbers of any generation (in most countries of the world) expected to have a tertiary education. In the twenty-first century, however, this has changed as technology has caused a major transformation of work and therefore of the skills required of workers: for example, where once tasks such as nursing and building demanded little in the way of complex written skills, and many large organizations had specific groups of people whose job was to write, type and format documents, in the present environment workers in almost every occupation need the information and communication skills to deal with such things as organizing reports, writing and reading a variety of documents. My work in learning development has led to my witnessing some of the pressure points caused by this change. Many current students come from groups who have had little tradition of tertiary study in the western higher education system – and they may therefore be intimidated by the institutions in which they find themselves. This intimidation has usually started many years earlier. Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes how this may be experienced by indigenous students:

> *when some Māori students start asking 'why' in school, they start getting into trouble. They are often never taught to ask, why? The ones who challenge*

are actually the ones who, in the end, get through with better grades because, in their challenging they're actually engaging in arguments and they're learning the content of the course.' (Hawke and Morrison 1994, pp. 24 – 26)

Feelings of not belonging close down people's learning capacities and make their beginning at the institution harder than it needs to be.

Over these years, I have found that action methods, which involve people moving themselves physically in space to both demonstrate and experience different facets of their history or feelings and thoughts, can be used to "warm up" students to themselves, each other and the new setting in which they find themselves (Harrison-Pepper 1999), so that they can undertake writing tasks (Doherty 1996) and also to help them reflect critically on quite complex topics, such as academic theory. In action methods, students move, talk, engage with each other, draw on their own experiences and enter into a world of narrative and symbol rather than a world of abstract conceptualising. When students interact like this, several things happen. Hannah Arendt powerfully describes what happens when one acts in the world:

In acting and speaking men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is - his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings ... is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can literally be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary. I*t is more than likely that the "who" which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person themselves, like the daimon in Greek religion, which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over their shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. (Arendt 1958, pp. 179 – 180)*

Taking Arendt's ideas of action and disclosure of being, it is very interesting in terms of this idea of action and disclosure of being to look at what happens in higher education lecture theatres. In many cases students are required to remain in a state of *complete silence and perfect passivity*... which is, in Arendt's terms, almost as if their teachers wanted to see the *what* but not the *who* of the individuals in front of them. On the other hand, both the *who* and the *what* of the lecturer is fully visible to the class. To counteract this passivity which, in these earliest moments of being in the university has the potential to cut down on the learning which can occur, when I encounter students who have come to gain academic skills to help them survive, I have found that using action exercises helps them to become more fully present, more refreshed and more engaged in the learning process.

Living Atlas

One such exercise I ask students to engage in is called "Living Atlas" - it is a kind of enactment of one aspect of the students' histories: I sketch an atlas in the lecture theatre and then ask the students to move to the part of the world that they see themselves as *coming from*. It is up to them how they interpret coming from: whether it means their current home or some kind of ancestral or personal connection to an important place. Once there, I request them to introduce themselves to two other people who are standing nearby and to share names, programmes of study and anything else that they want to. After they have talked together for a few minutes, I facilitate someone from each part of the world to speak to the whole class about who they are, where they are from and what they are studying.

Incidentally, I tend to start with Aotearoa/New Zealand and place the northernmost part of Aotearoa/New Zealand at one side of the “stage” area of the lecture theatre, and to work across to the other side to show the southernmost part, Stewart Island. The Pacific, I locate in the middle front part of the lecture theatre. In the left aisle are Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Africa, further to the left back are South East Asia, China, Korea and Japan while over in the right aisle are North and South America, The United Kingdom and Europe. The hope is that this grouping enables the Māori and Pasifika students present in the group to be acknowledged in an unobtrusive way. This also redraws the atlas and varies the placing of which countries are identified as central and which marginal.

This personal connection is only one of several things that happen when the students place themselves in the classroom space in this way. Another is that it becomes very clear to everyone present, including the teacher, what a wide variety of cultural backgrounds we have represented in the group which assists all to be aware of each other and in particular the better prepared students to tolerate a higher level of help to other students than they otherwise might. In addition, as the teacher observes the class members interacting, she is able to see the extroverts, the introverts, and make a beginning social analysis of the group, which allows for teaching plans to be adapted and amended as appropriate. Also, of course, the students have had a chance to talk and to interact both in dyads and with the group as a whole and the teacher is indicating that they can be seen to have something valuable to offer each other.

Throughout this exercise, the students are given permission to be visible and audible - often I have to break into their animated conversations when I think enough time has been given to their social connections. Action methods, by giving students a chance to move out of passivity into action, with its Arendtian qualities of beginning and revelation, offer an opportunity for students and teachers alike to experience *communitas*, the name Victor Turner gives to the "modality of human interrelatedness" which can " 'play' across all structural systems....Thus, in the workshop, village, office, lecture-room, theatre, almost anywhere people can be subverted ... into an atmosphere of communitas." (Turner 1982, p.45) Turner describes communitas as “ essentially 'an unmediated relationship between historic, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals....*communitas* preserves individual distinctiveness...' "(Turner 1982 p. 45) Using action methods to allow students to reveal to each other their *individual distinctiveness* is one way, I would suggest, for

educators to retain in large group teaching the kind of informality and personal supportiveness which is the hallmark of one to one and small group tuition.

Requiring physical movement and interrupting the expectations of students within a lecture environment by inviting them to take part in action methods thus has a great variety of effects. I have only talked of some of them here: how action reveals the "who" rather than the "what" of students; the way that in action the people's personalities and cultural roles will show themselves, thus assisting the teacher to have some idea of what the learning needs of the individuals and sub-groups within the class may be; and the possible achievement of community through allowing individuals to be visible and breaking the anticipated structure. These positive effects have made the effort of training in and learning these methods eminently worthwhile for me as an educator. They have also meant that I have sought data to show the value of such methods in the higher education setting, but have found much discussion around action methods to be centred around their therapeutic rather than educational uses.

During the years 2002 – 2005, I therefore extended my use of these methods into my work as a researcher: I undertook a study of Playback Theatre which is a form of action method, in which audiences share facilitated narratives about their lives which are spontaneously formed into creative presentations by trained professional actors and musicians. Commonly, a trained facilitator speaks with the whole group, having ascertained ahead of time what themes and issues may be usefully addressed in the session. The performance begins with short, concise snapshots of audience experiences and develops through several stages which usually include a musical interlude, to more extended narratives, in the playing back of which roles are allocated and a sequence of scenes developed. The narratives work with a collage effect, addressing themes and concerns of the group in a sometimes oblique and cryptic way. Having worked as a performer, facilitator and teacher in this modality for over 15 years, I embraced the chance to explore it as a tool for group communication and decision-making in interdisciplinary community healthcare teams. The context for this project was firmly rooted in Aotearoa/New Zealand where over many years I have been challenged, coached and encouraged in both creative and educational contexts, by indigenous colleagues, teachers and students, to engage with indigenous communities and models of learning and living. Creative practice in such a setting – a society in which there is a dynamic mix of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial practices coexisting in motion and rhetoric – cannot be neutral.

I use pre-colonial here to refer to the whole system of thinking which is now encapsulated in Mātauranga Māori, and which Pihama (2001, p.83) suggests “provides a distinct Māori epistemology and ways of knowing and draws upon a range of both verbal and non-verbal forms for its expression.” This unbroken tradition has existed for over 1,000 years in Aotearoa/New Zealand and continues to exist in some communities. Colonial refers to a way of thinking and doing which implies that there is a centre, whether it be in London, New York, Beijing or Sydney, in relation to which Aotearoa/New Zealand will always, inevitably, be on the margins. Post-colonial is used as in Spoonley (1995, cited in Pihama 2001, p.73), “to mark a critical engagement with colonialism, not claim that colonialism has been overturned...post-colonialism is used

here to signal a project by those who want to critique and replace the institutions and practices of colonialism."

One of the potential strengths of Playback Theatre and one reason for my continued commitment to use and develop it as a creative practice, is its possibility of creating syncretic theatre, which combines indigenous creative forms with the techniques and exercises which constitute the Playback Theatre modality. Thus this project was conceived and executed with a focus on engagement with Māori people, issues, creative practice and research. The project was situated in the complex multi-ethnic employment and service context of the New Zealand primary healthcare sector, and was participated in by a diverse multidisciplinary group of health care workers and Playback Theatre performers. Of 20 interviewees, 12 of whom were interviewed twice, four were Māori, two Pasifika, three Asian and 11 Pākehā/European. Of the 13 members of the performing group, which drew on two Playback Theatre companies, five were Māori, one Asian, one Pasifika and six Pākehā/European, in varying teams of between five and eight per performance.

During the research project, Playback Theatre sessions were given and data was gathered – three performances were videotaped (performers only being filmed), one in each healthcare organisation. These Playback sessions were designed to explore team building, power differentials, experiences of hierarchies, staff and patient vulnerability, ideally in a way that would allow for improvements in staff and patient experiences. Additional themes to be explored in the sessions had been elicited ahead of time by the facilitator, from meetings with stakeholders in the service (as is standard practice for Playback Theatre commissions).

Most importantly, there was a chance to engage more deeply with the audience in semi-structured individual interviews which were conducted soon after the action methods sessions with team members, to gain insight into things such as how they described their internal processes at different points of the session; what insights they gained with regard to themselves and other people; the memories of their own lives that the performance had elicited; and what their reflections were about the underlying themes of the session. Follow up individual interviews with the same team members were carried out six months to a year later to gain additional reflections and insights into possible longer term effects of the sessions.

Critical evaluation and analysis of the data took place using conceptual analysis and hermeneutic approaches. This was continuous during all phases of data gathering so that each phase informed the emergent questions and question themes used during subsequent individual and group interviews. Presentation of draft analysis and gathering of feedback on the draft occurred in March 2007 at an action session to which staff and families were invited.

Domesticating the chaos

Playback Theatre is a narrative form in which audience members contribute accounts of personal experience which is then embodied by actors and musicians in a crafted piece of

theatre. Ben Okri suggests that "when we have made an experience or a chaos into a story, we have transformed it, made sense of it, transmuted experience, domesticated the chaos" (Okri 1997, p.113), while Hannah Arendt cites Isak Dinesen: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (Arendt 1958, p.175). Sugiyama (2001), in discussing the ubiquity of narrative, suggests that the ability to narrate may have been positively selected in human evolution because those who told stories enabled their descendants to live more skilfully:

> *more than any other ancient cultural practice…narrative appears well designed for comprehensive simulation of the human habitat – that is for the creation of a 'diegetic world' made up of the salient constraints on human fitness: people, events and phenomena, time, topographical and/or architectural space, and the animate or inanimate objects that occupy it. (p.239)*

In Playback Theatre this diegetic world is strongly present, as Rea Dennis suggests:

> *a consistently surprising experience for audience members has been the transformation of the verbal narrative to dramatic form. After storytellers recount their personal tales, the conductor invokes the ritual phrase 'Let's watch.' This phrase, when delivered, signals to the audience that a heightened state of theatrical performance will follow and covertly requests that audience members suspend reality and join the actors in creating theatre. (2004, p.205)*

During the years of my Playback Theatre practice, which had coincided with my work in tertiary learning support, I wondered about how to theorise this activity, without misrepresenting its complexity by concretizing it into misleading categories. I found a perspective from which to tackle the description and analysis of both the creative work and this research enquiry, in critical hermeneutics as outlined by John Caputo in his 1987 book *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project.* In this book, Caputo suggests that radical hermeneutics means a constant questioning even of the words that we use to express the interpretations that we make. In questioning our words and concepts, we expose ourselves to "the ruptures and gaps…the textuality and difference, which inhabits everything we think, and do, and hope for." (1987, p. 6).

Play, humour and emotion

One of the features of Playback Theatre most noted in the research interviews was the playful and humorous atmosphere: "I loved the humour because I think that's so essential in probably any workplace really … I mean it releases good chemicals in the body, and you can feel better…" Brian Boyd describes how human development depends on emotional and communicative turn-taking, in terms that theorists of attachment (eg. Bowlby 1982) and philosophy of mind (eg. Melser 2004) also emphasize:

> *For the first six months, infants have a love affair with human faces, voices, and touch. By about eight months, parent-infant "protoconversations" set the scene for the special nature of human sociality and for art: multimedia*

performances using eyes and faces, hands and feet, voice and movement, in rhythmic finely-attuned turntaking and mutual imitation, involving elaboration, exaggeration, repetition and surprise…(Boyd 2005, pp.8-9)

The ways in which play, performance, humour, emotion and dialogic learning are integrally related are highlighted in this description. Yet, even though "emotions are an integral and inseparable part of …organisational life" (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995, p.98) and are beginning to be more systematically explored (Ashkanasy, Hartel & Zerbe 2000; Brown 2002), the emotional dimensions of people in the workplace are sometimes seen as problematic "emotion's location indeed [being] the liminal space that ancient Greek philosophy strove to negate through the separation of soul and body" (Deslandes 2004, p.339). This becomes even more important in emotion-laden organizations (like higher education institutions?) which Boyle and Healey (2003) describe:

Defining characteristics of emotion-laden organizations includes [sic] the centrality of emotional labor, whether or not an organization is awash with emotion on a daily basis, and the degree to which service delivery is about dealing with or processing life-changing events such as birth, death or divorce. (p.355)

Such an emphasis on the value of individuals becomes even more important as work and community environments become more saturated with electronic media: "The changing nature of work presents employees in contemporary organizations with unique health challenges such as burnout, workaholism, stress, telecommuting, and the emotions that surround these issues" (Farrell & Geist-Martin 2005, p.554). However, work places and organizations do not have to accept this level of distress: and the expression of emotionality, humour and play can assist in relieving tensions and allowing seemingly intractable problems, to be safely broached. Raimundo suggests that through "experiential and ludic methods the mind can develop healthier and more appropriate reparatory mechanisms to compensate … incomplete or damaged structures" (Raimundo 2002, p.50).

Playback Theatre makes space for emotion to be present in ways which help participants to make meaning of what is being communicated. One interviewee at Ngākau said: "I saw another view another way of explaining how people are feeling about their work. Rather than just hearing it yeah so it was there actually played out in front of your eyes."

In one performance in my research project, a receptionist told a family story of reconnection, tenderness and the love between parent and child: one doctor told how

(the storyteller) often doesn't enjoy her work here and …what's nice is you know just really in that Playback just experiencing her really being where she wants to be which is like in the heart of her family, her biological family…

Another staff member, Nina, had her own tentative suggestion about how this story might relate to the work group as a whole: "I think, I don't know, …(the storyteller) was … feel like she's not being part of the staff or part of the group." When asked where in her body she felt this story, Nina tapped her heart. Ancona, Malone Orlikowski and Senge talk

about the importance of people in organizations being able to genuinely listen to one another:

> *Inquiring means listening with the intention of genuinely understanding the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. Here, the listener suspends judgment and tries to comprehend how and why the speaker has moved from the data of his or her experiences to particular interpretations and conclusions. (2007, p.96)*

Perturbation

Some audience members may be less able to enter into play or may be hurt by it: humour and emotion can be both constructive and unsettling (Tracy, Myers & Scott 2006; Holmes & Hay 1997). Sometimes mistakes will be made in interpretation and *perturbation* must be faced:

> *As arts educators [and practitioners], it is our responsibility to inquire into and become familiar with the dynamics of the creative process (whilst remaining naïve, in many ways, to the variety of its manifestations). For this reason, perturbation - uncertainty, vulnerability, unpredictability, trepidation, concern - must be admitted as dynamics within any arts-based inquiry. Among the most powerful of perturbations are emotion and feeling. (Wright 2005, p.4)*

The very elements of Playback Theatre that make it an asset to the learning and enhanced functioning of a group, also make it a risky example of Bakhtin's carnival which, while rooted in political realities (Brandist 1996), includes "exaggeration and excess…In particular carnival exaggerates the body, both its functions and its visual presence" (Janack 2006, p.202).

Refreshment

Notwithstanding the possibility of misinterpretation, the overwhelming finding from this research project was how refreshing the interviewees had found the performances, coming as they did in the middle of the work day. Many interviewees said things like this one from Oranga:

> *I think I think in our work in our line of work and I think in most people's work environments there's not enough emphasis on just sort of de-stressing, relaxation and having a bit of humour and and something camaraderie injected … if you look at the number of hours people do a year … you know for all that time maybe you'd be lucky to get maybe a couple of hours worth of actual time to decide to just sort of … [do] something different.*

This opportunity to research and work creatively with communities of healthcare workers and creative performers, demonstrated the power of action methods to engage diverse populations and assist people at various positions within hierarchies of power, to express themselves and deliver complex messages in extremely economical time frames and

using rich narrative forms. They thus present not only great potential as adjunct teaching methods but also a rich avenue for engaging in cooperative enquiry both within higher education institutions and also with some of our community contexts.

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