

# Active methods and playback theatre: coherent interweaving between theory and method

*An experience for elaborating tools focused on teaching and training for disadvantaged groups*

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## ■ Abstract

The following article presents theoretical and methodological criteria which founded training intervention made by Italian Playback Theatre School staff in occasion of Grundtvig project "Supporting Potential Development". It refers in particular to integrated use of active Morenian methods and playback theatre techniques. The course was presented as complement to CTSC, Theatre Course for Community Development, in the Italian Playback Theatre School located in Milan and Turin. The main aim of this training intervention was to offer to the students the tools focused on teaching and training for disadvantaged groups, in particular for unemployed attending retraining courses. Moreno's role theory contribution helped to understand the right behaviour to be adopted with disadvantaged groups, in particular to lead active listening process. Playback theatre conduction experience and the teamwork playing the actor role permitted to train directly these skills. The effectiveness of the methods used was supported by the results of scientific research carried out by the University of Padua (Italy).

■ **Key words:** *playback theatre, active methods, lifelong learning, good practices, European exchange.*

## Metodi attivi e playback theatre: intrecci coerenti tra teoria e metodo

*Un'esperienza di elaborazione di strumenti per l'insegnamento e la formazione destinati a categorie svantaggiate*

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## ■ Sommario

Il seguente articolo presenta i criteri teorici e metodologici che sono stati alla base dell'intervento formativo da parte dello staff italiano della Scuola di Playback Theatre in occasione del progetto Grundtvig "Supporting Potential Development". In particolare si riferisce ad un uso integrato di metodi attivi di matrice moreniana e tecniche di playback theatre. Il corso è stato realizzato nell'ambito del Corso di Teatro per lo Sviluppo di Comunità nelle sedi di Milano e Torino. Lo scopo principale dell'intervento formativo è costituito dal fornire ai partecipanti gli strumenti specificatamente centrati sul lavoro di insegnamento e formazione per categorie svantaggiate, in particolare disoccupati impegnati in percorsi di riqualificazione professionale. Il contributo della teoria del ruolo di J.L. Moreno ha offerto la chiave di lettura con cui agire il proprio ruolo di formatore per categorie svantaggiate e in particolare per guidare il processo di ascolto attivo. L'esperienza di conduzione del playback theatre, nonché il lavoro di équipe svolto nel ruolo di attore, hanno permesso di addestrare queste competenze direttamente. L'efficacia dei metodi utilizzati è stata suffragata dai risultati della ricerca scientifica portata avanti dall'Università di Padova (Italia).

■ **Parole chiave:** *playback theatre, metodi attivi, formazione permanente, buone prassi, scambi europei.*

During “Supporting Potential Development” Grundtvig project offered to 30 CTSC students the opportunity to take part to 10 training modules focused on teaching and training for disadvantaged groups, in particular for unemployed attending retraining courses.

Expected targets were: good practices exchange between teacher colleagues; the opportunity for learners to meet international trainers and colleagues; the opportunity for trainers to develop skills to support disadvantaged groups they are working or will work with; to develop individual and professional empowerment, drawing from personal creative and knowledge potential, developing personal resources.

Humus Association had the specific objective to realize, coherently with the European partners’ project, a path integrating Morenian theory and playback theatre methodology. Learners did not have the target to become teachers of the method, but to be able to use theory and techniques as support to specific retraining courses. Theories become then also cognitive understanding tools and specific techniques become practice.

### **Active methods and playback theatre**

Active methods, arising from Morenian classic psychodrama (Moreno, 1985, 1987) are exploratory approaches and expressive languages favouring action rather than words, encouraging the spontaneous and creative emerging of themselves, bringing into play body and emotions. Active methods are particularly suitable in groups’ management; active methods adopted during the training were sociometry, role playing and sociodrama.

The playback theatre, founded by Jonathan Fox (Fox, 1994; Salas, 1996) recalls Moreno’s Spontaneity Theatre even if it has developed specific guidelines which makes it differing to psychodrama by several aspects. It is a theatrical form – also adopted with therapeutic or educational aims – in which an actor team stages instantly the stories narrated by the public who may reflect in them.

It is possible to realize playback performances in theatres or in communities (schools, social-educational institutions) in order to involve participants into theatrical activity starting from a theme or their specific situation. The performance can also inspired by socio-cultural themes, this helps a deeper understanding of individual and group declinations about common problem or theme (diversity, sexuality, drug addiction, parenting, etc.). Playback theatre is adopted also without a team as training laboratory; it is a versatile tool in working with children, teenagers, and adults, to facilitate spontaneity, expressiveness, communicative ability and body use, in a listening and respectful context (Dotti, 2006).

### **Multi-dimensional path**

Consequently to internal and European planning stage, the Italian Playback Theatre School is dedicated to realize a project mix of Morenian theory and playback theatre techniques. The training team was composed by school teachers divided in three main categories: experts in playback theatre, experts in active Morenian methods or experts in both them. In particular,

the working group created to realize the project was composed by: Paolo Lanciani, Davide Motta and Chiara Baratti - reference trainers; Giacomo Volpengo and Marco Finetti - project coordinators; Marilena Aimo and Gigi Dotti - scientific research responsible respectively for Turin and Milan; Nadia Lotti, Humus Association President - project supervisor responsible. All people involved in the group are Italian Playback Theatre School founders and acted as trainers and trainer teachers.

The ten project modules were organized within activities promoted by Italian Playback Theatre School. Themes developed in the 10 modules are: individual and group Empowerment, individual and group Self-efficacy, individual and group Self-handicapping, individual and group Learned helplessness, individual and group Resilience. Each theme was divided in two different parts, articulated as following.

*1° Part*

- revision starting phase of specific theme active work;
- theoretical part;
- process analysis.

*2° Part*

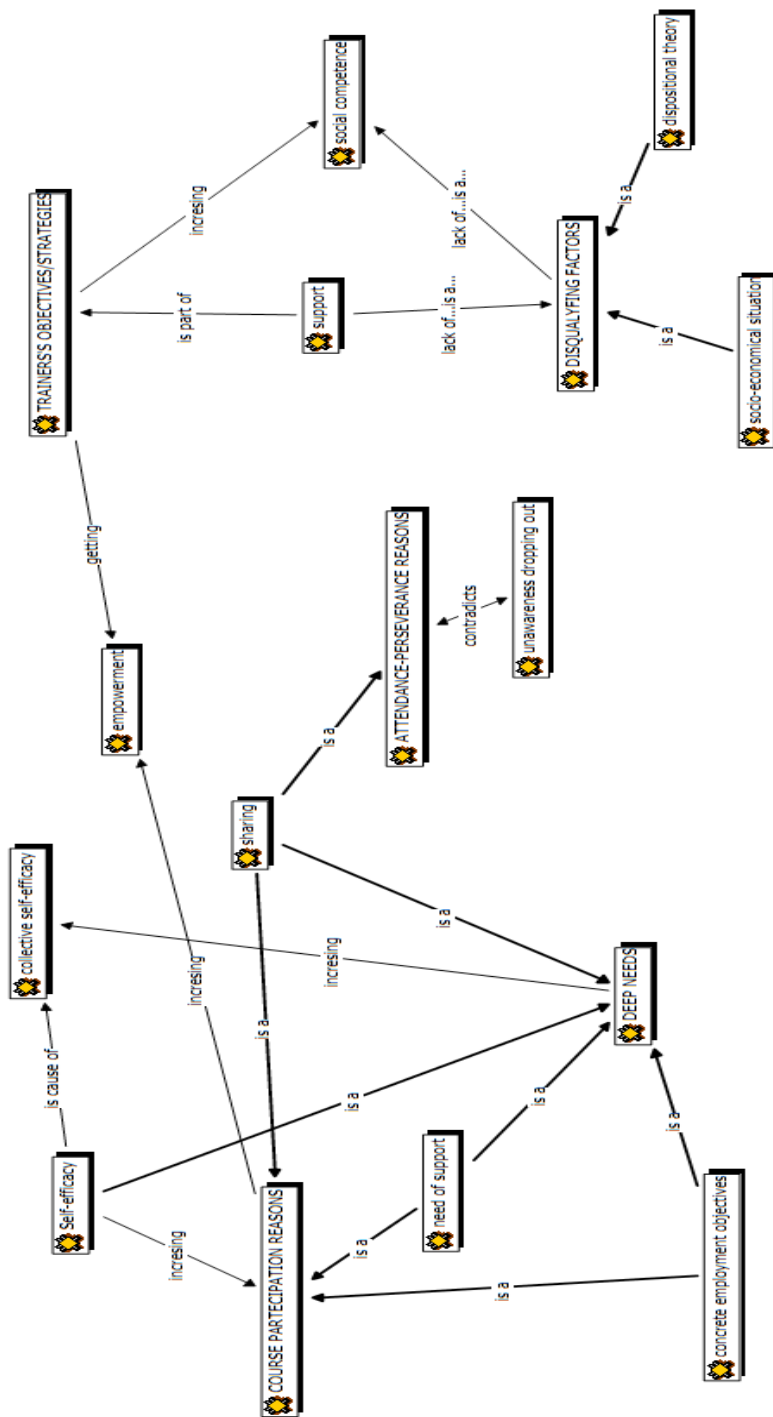
- practical laboratory (techniques learning and managing exercises);
- public event (open to external participants - method testing with external audience).

The Morenian techniques adopted involved a thirty students group which experimented different roles and functions. In fact, every participant was involved both in stage activity and in conduction activity, playing roles as conductor, performer, musician, (public) and storyteller.

J.L. Moreno's role theory (Moreno, 1985, 1987) contribution helped to understand the right behaviour to be adopted with disadvantaged groups, in particular to lead active listening process. Playback theatre conduction experience and the teamwork playing the actor role permitted to train directly these skills. The roles of narrator and group member during free exchange offered suggestions to think about how much these techniques and theories can influence participant's way of relating with each other and develop active listening skills also in situations more unstructured than performances. The project has three different moments with specific aims: direct experience, theoretical analysis, learned skills experimentation.

The conduction direct experience phase helped trainees to develop their role of group facilitators, ritual setting guarantors, active listeners. It is evident how playback theatre practice is constitutively designed as favourable to non-interpretative listening: the conductor collects the story but delegates to actors the staging and to narrator himself the comment about what returned to him. Participants, playing the actor role, trained on explicit different points of view assumption (roles and counter-roles) that the potential user, more or less aware, could mention. The theoretical analysis carried out after experience allowed students to signify insights had on the scene and to develop more effective and richer ways to listen. The role theory (Moreno, 1985, 1987) focuses on narrator-user neurophysiologic, psychological (cognitive-emotional) and social-relational and value levels. Playback theatre theory (Fox, 1994) reads the story on personal, interpersonal, social, and transpersonal levels. These two interpretations interplay allows to discern protagonists constitutive

Graph 1 - Pre-test results.



and experiential dimensions and narrative dimensions offer a sophisticated and effective interpretation for listening and support and for training interventions designing highly effective meet to participant needs.

Exchange and storytelling moments were for participants an opportunity to measure how much the different dimension awareness was actually useful to find for themselves and the others new and more appropriate needs of relationship, of work and unemployment. In particular, quality and adequacy participant's contributions during sharing time proved to be a positive indication of practical and theoretical learning expression dimensions beyond the theatre scene in strict sense.

## Results

Padua University Research Team that dealt with Grundtvig Programme has developed an initial test (pre-test) and a final test (post-test) to verify the validity of the tools adopted during the training.

Pre-test results in Italy (*Graph 1*), that can be seen in the graph above, revealed that reasons that may motivate people to attend a retraining course are to increase empowerment, self-efficacy and professional and relational skills. It is important also to consider the need to share professional reality and support need. We focused on these issues to improve, giving strength and value, our future theatre trainer's education for community development.

The transition from being part of the public to performer, conductor or musician role assumption implies a different intent that became in our context as empowerment: from being conducted to act.

Self-efficacy requires participants to assume a clear position also towards themselves. Intentional action subject has to explain what deeply wants to say. Then he meets himself through relationship with others and confronts with change possibility, towards outside (towards the world, the social, the other) and towards inside (towards the emotionality, towards the itself).

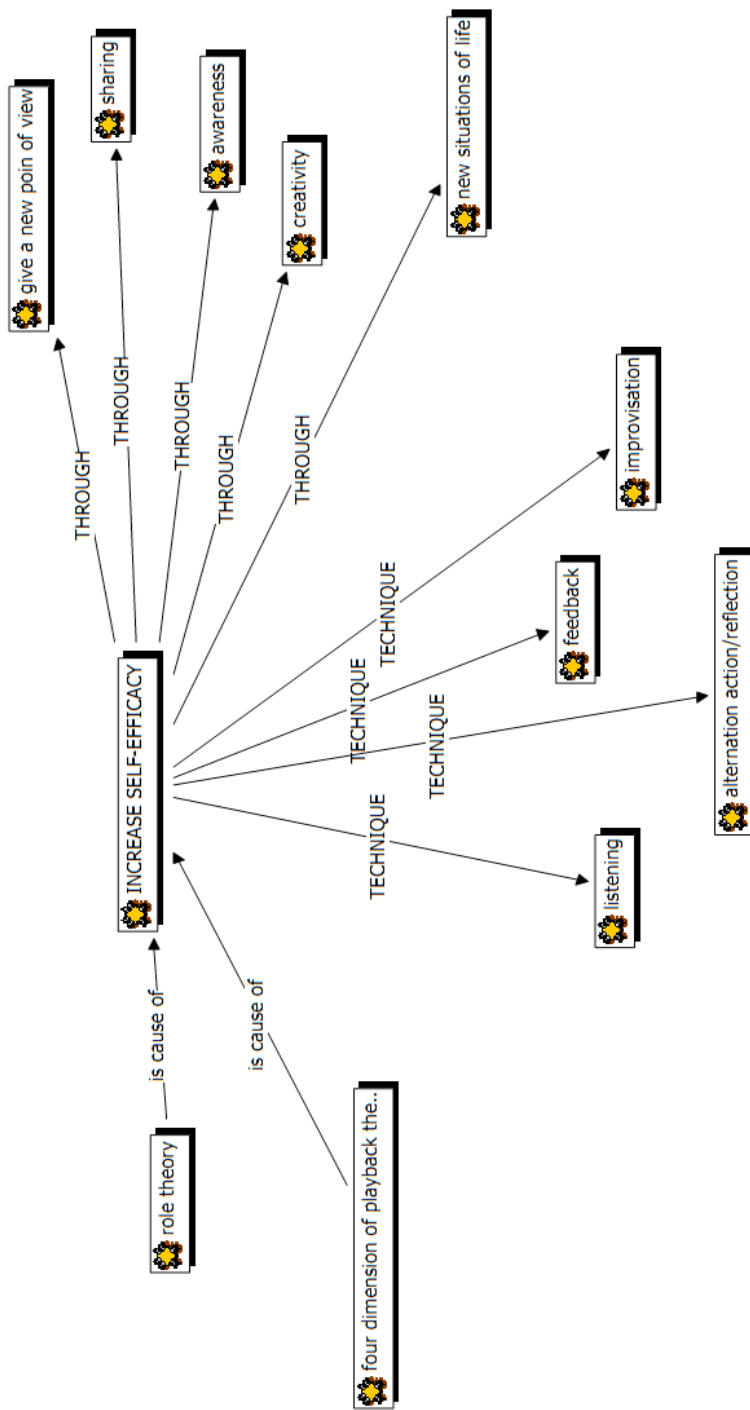
Intentional action means subjectively action in a group relationship, with consequent relational skills development.

Group that represents the story or the emotion lived by the narrator has the need to act as a single representative instrument, that is, to allow narrator and audience to identify themselves with what happens on stage, bringing a greater range of views, reflective opportunities and new emotional stimuli.

The second graph (*Graph 2*), resulting from post-test analysis, is the project effectiveness perception by trainers involved and proves that self-efficacy occurred thanks to awareness achieved, to a new viewpoint that allows facing difficult situations, through creativity and sharing.

Morenian role theory (Moreno, 1985, 1987) and the four playback theatre dimensions, personal, interpersonal, social, and transpersonal (are the main tools for self-efficacy realization, while useful techniques have been listening, action/reflection alternating, improvisation and feedback.

Graph 2 - Post-test results.



## **A challenge and an opportunity for trainers and trainees**

For school trainers' staff this was an opportunity to experience and reflect on Morenian and playback theatre theories and methodological tools application in areas without set and settings defined by explicit stage presence. It should be noted in fact that trainees are normally formed to the use of playback theatre as a tool to form companies, to realize experiential workshops moreover classic performance managed by a formed company. It is not explicitly discussed theories and techniques adoption in educational contexts.

It is difficult to think about a training process based on Morenian theory in a completely unstructured context, it must be explicit then that the anomaly is the absence of stage space intended as physical and static place (set), but also as mental and procedural place (setting). Trainer role maintains playback theatre and sociodrama conductor constituting aspects, ensuring participants subjectivity respect and giving adequate space to everyone, guaranteeing a constant alternation between action, observation and reflection.

The training path showed the importance of developing more and more accurately shared the training models that use the theory of Moreno and playback theatre as content moreover as method basis. The opportunity to use it as key to explain and analyse phenomenon studied by researchers, as self-efficacy or self-handicapping resulted to be extremely valuable.

Strong point is definitely the coherence between theory and methods: conductor gives confidence and responsibility to the group, activating its resources without replacing it, similarly an empowerment path requires resources activation such as trust and responsibility assignment.

## **Hypothetical project development**

The current economic crisis appears to be a strong obstacle for most vulnerable classes introduction to labour market, including young people and women and for reintroduction of people that lost their work, like over fifty people. We consider therefore important to convey our efforts in this direction, providing our expertise to projects that refers to women and unemployed young people. We want therefore highlight the following points.

- Methodological and theoretical elaboration was greatly enriched by possibility of comparison and exchange between educators and students with international partners, thanks both to visits received during conferences organized in Italy and to events abroad, particularly in Romania and Lithuania. Expanding international comparison with a larger partners number, would definitely offer enhanced exchanges and comparisons, increasing participants stimuli, awareness and effectiveness level of training proposed. A successive project that favours more exchanges with European colleagues would permit development of theoretical material shared and enriched by each others contributions.
- The project demonstrated, over adopted methods effectiveness, the validity of scientific researches that accompanied it. To evaluate the results obtained becomes necessary to scientifically validate them. Basing on the experience gained with this project, we could define even better the data necessities to define the evaluation needs starting from the stakeholders. This would help to acquire a reflective and self-criticism culture. ■