

Playback theatre as a transforming tool for personal strength

Applied playback theatre for training to work and for social integration

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■ Abstract

In this article an application of the playback theatre method pursuing training objectives of work and social integration is discussed, paying attention to its influence on the restoration of the disturbed sides of personality and disclosing the main aspects of the method. Stories' narration provides an opportunity to see a new perspective and affects knowing of oneself and others. Possibilities for self-investigation and revealing are created in the group-work, seeking the personal transformation and strengthening, when strategies to support motivation, effective training process and personal growth are applied. The structure and dynamics of PT group session and main practical issues, based on ethics and principles of social assistance and development of human potentials in the group, are revealed.

■ **Key words:** *playback theatre, working in groups, personality transformation, personal strengthening, narrative.*

Il playback theatre come strumento di potenziamento personale

Applicazione del playback theatre per la formazione al lavoro e per l'integrazione sociale

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■ Sommario

In questo articolo è discussa un'applicazione del metodo del playback theatre nel perseguimento degli obiettivi del training e dell'integrazione sociale, ponendo attenzione alla sua influenza nel miglioramento degli aspetti disturbati della personalità ed evidenziando gli aspetti principali del metodo. La narrazione di storie fornisce un'opportunità per scorgere una nuova prospettiva e incidere sulla conoscenza di sé e degli altri. Possibilità di indagine e rivelazioni su se stessi sono create nel gruppo di lavoro, cercando la trasformazione e il rafforzamento personale, quando sono applicate strategie per supportare la motivazione, processi effettivi di training e crescita personale. Sono descritte la struttura e le dinamiche della sessione di gruppo col playback theatre e i principali risultati pratici, basati sull'etica e sui principi dell'assistenza sociale e dello sviluppo delle potenzialità umane nel gruppo.

■ **Parole chiave:** *playback theatre, lavoro di gruppo, trasformazione personalità, potenziamento personale, narrazione.*

The Studio for Self-Awareness and Self-Realization (SsAsR) is a non governmental organization which started its activities in year 2002 with main goal to help people and communities to recognize their capacities and to find new and better ways for self realization by the work of professionals of psychology, professional instructors, training experts, social and cultural work and other highly-qualified specialists. SsAsR is especially focusing its efforts on development and implementation of the new forms in the adult-training sector and social change in Lithuania. Using innovative and non-traditional action methods to foster different social groups to find new ways for integration, organization works actively in non-formal education field.

SsAsR takes part in EU projects as executive organization as well as organization implementing services in creation of the training programs, methods and handbooks; in practical work with different target groups of adults. The main staff is experienced in international cooperation and EU projects implementation, and eagerly participates in the constant self-development activities. Organization is the member of International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) and participates in development of European PT communities' fostering the implementation of the new action methods in the social and educational fields.

Training groups and motivation

The training using the playback theatre method as an action method implementing the Grundtvig project was designed for two different groups of people. One of the training groups for playback theatre is the young people – students from the Vilnius University and Vilnius Pedagogic University as well as Belarusian Humanitarian University. All of them currently are in the active studies of social or humanitarian specialties' (psychology, pedagogy, and media). The other group was established of the women who are seeking for the better self realization, needing to know something new, willing to get new skills and knowledge. They were eager to look for their selves, to increase inner strength, to fill the time, to create, to be useful, to have fun, to have a special group to connect.

Both groups have met the challenge in the life to start or to re-start their careers, becoming more active and involved in the social life. If people searching for social and work activity are unable to find it, they usually lost their self-confidence and start blaming themselves on these failures. Such situation provokes negative emotions: anxiety, sadness, feeling of loneliness and helplessness. Negative emotions trigger people to take care of their lives encouraging them to look for a solution related with social support or active courses.

Working in the groups participants were motivated to create new social contacts with meaningful and deeper connection with people and to find new possibilities; to increase self confidence and creativity.

One person says: *"The reason to participate is a need for changes, which in each case depends on individual situation. In my case, I became jobless and to find new possibilities for work, I feel like I have to learn new roles and new ways of solving the problems I'm facing."*

The other participant describes her motivation to join the training: *“One of the reasons is the possibility to learn new things and improve such skills as improvisation, creativity, spontaneity which can help in every day situations. Also it’s a good way to meet new people who are interested in the same things and improve your communication skills.”*

Application of playback theatre

During the application of the playback theatre method and pursuing training objectives of work and social integration, a part of the influence is directed towards restoration and regulation of the disturbed sides of the personality. If the person wants to acquire knowledge or seeks for advice, wishes to participate in the training, it may be stated that situation is already improving.

Having paid attention to potential peculiarities of the training group in any of social settings, it is extremely important to follow principles of effective influence, related to the following:

- ambivalences, related to mixed feelings of the participant towards training and changes in oneself and acceptance;
- reflective listening, involving all interventions being told to the participants;
- open questions that invite participants to speak during discussion and continue the answer.

Narrative in playback theatre

People depend on their own emotions and permanently seek to shake them, whether they are bad or good. The experience is narrated aiming at brief recollection of those emotions, remaking them and generalizing (Fox, Salas, 1993). Narration of fixed, negative or painful attitudes during playback theatre workshops cleans out from these influencing emotions and allows changing when accepting new and different information. Stories narrated in playback theatre provide a possibility to look at the stories from a new perspective, regarding environment and time as one ‘story might inspire other stories about life’s challenges, expanding on the theme’ (Chesner, Hahn, 2002). This affects different knowing of oneself and others, provides possibility to accept new capabilities and integrate into one’s own experience new experiences and new knowledge.

Playback theatre method functions as a measure of enhancement regarding personality growth, socialization effectiveness and vocational integration. The method provides possibility to change oneself, change one’s attitude towards other person and response method in an important situation. Thus, when connecting measures of knowledge provision and internal personal experience, internalization of deep impact on the participants can be pursued. This causes a long-term change in a person’s behaviour in the field of social relations, development of adequate responding and ability of understanding the other person.

Pleasure in self-investigation and revealing possibilities

One of the most fundamental issues raised by behaviourists is the following: what provides behaviour with special driving force? How do emotions affect our long-term individual and social development? How do we acquire and act in accordance with the distant goals being pursued that lead our lives? How do specific psychological disorders occur and destroy emotional and motivational process of a human? The answers to the most part of these questions become clearer when we observe refinements of human emotions and motivational status.

During playback theatre training seminars, the following strategies are applied, required when pursuing support for motivation of the participants and assurance of effective training and personal influence:

- empathy and acceptance of each participant pursuing respectful communication with single participant separately and with the entire group as well (playback theatre's ritualized narration of personal stories and playing them);
- perception of one's wish to make changes in one's life situation, and support of positive expectations (playback theatre's spontaneous reflection of the past of the participant and his/her dream story);
- avoiding confrontation in pursuance of escaping defensiveness or hostility among the participants (main principles of playback theatre sessions: respect regarding story of the participant, absence of evaluation, security, acceptance and encouraging);
- work concerning resistance, emphatically reflecting indecision of each participant when making choice and changing oneself (spontaneity and improvisation tools at playback theatre are training exercises);
- enhancing of strength of participant personality, supporting and enhancing believing in one and in the fact that one may change oneself (drama tasks and training exercises of playback theatre).

Specificity of playback theatre method is related to non-traditional ways of changing oneself and learning narrating personal stories, experience revealing, acceptance and self-changing through drama, emotional personalism of stories and interactions in the group when integrating art elements of improvisation theatre. Playback theatre method directs participants of the training into deeper awareness and experience through repeated going through the story. While participants are working concerning their own experience and that of other members of the group, perception of themselves and the environment occurs and also development of the personality at various levels.

In 1997 conducted by Comedia survey "Defining Values: Evaluating Arts Programmes" (Matarasso, 1997) showed that an individual when participating in the artistic activity is able to do the following:

- enhance self-esteem and self-confidence;
- to assist the individual in becoming socially more active;
- allow the participant to see how he/she is assessed by others;
- enhance interest in art and its understanding;
- provide possibility of investigation of personal rights and responsibility;

- encourage adults to take up studies and develop themselves;
- to assist a person in acquiring new abilities and working experience;
- to assist in becoming luckier when searching for job.

Personality transformation

Work when applying playback theatre method encourages internal transformation of a personality as follows:

- develops self-confidence, enhancing a feeling of a personality value as of a unique one, revealing of positive sides of one's personality and ability to demonstrate good traits and features;
- strengthens abilities of interpersonal communication, teaches cooperation actively, common goal achievement, non-verbal communication and contact keeping, assists in feeling own relationship with the environment and determining own place there;
- reduces limitation and stress that manifest in both personality's inside and in the group. A person becomes free at greater extent, starts feeling confidence in own body, learns how to control own responses and becomes more courageous in expressing them. At the same time occurring confidence in each other in the group encourages reduction in stress of the entire group, feelings of unrestraint and unanimity that create peaceful atmosphere around;
- develops creativity of a personality and a team, promotes spontaneous usage of movements and speech, encourages self-expression energy while finding new self-realization means and ways, teaches free both verbal and non-verbal presentation of oneself;
- enhances sense of personal well being, occurrence of inner emotional balance and reduction in internal disagreement.

Structure and dynamics of a playback theatre session

The following takes place during playback theatre sessions:

- acceptable and secure environment is created;
- each participant is heard and seen from the very beginning;
- emphasized-respectful atmosphere and participation forms, involving all participants;
- acceptance of all problems, worries, attitudes, opinions and feelings;
- reflection;
- time management;
- feeling a bond with participants and close relationship;
- adequate end of the session.

The greater numbers of elements act the more successful and effective educational process is.

Applying Moreno sociometry method (Moreno, 1951) in each group it is pursued a complex model of relations between the participants that influences higher or lower level

of involving and vitality and effectiveness of the group. Sociometry analyses interpersonal systems aiming at maximization and development of participation of all members in the group.

Working in groups applying playback theatre

The method is based on ethics and principles of social assistance and gives priority to development of human potentials in the group, relationships with other people that go through the same problem. The same ethics is followed: confidence and recognition of inner power of a human, spiritual dignity and autonomy, the right to make own decisions self-dependently and choose the most appropriate one, and importance of self-engagement.

The aim of working in a group – to assist the participant in revealing his/her inner power in pursuance of improvement in his/her relationship with others and also one's own social functioning as follows: to create better conditions in one's own residential and working environment.

During the work process in the group, through narrated experiences and stories, individual social needs of participants are identified that have influence on social prosperity normalization: improvement in social life, social environment and social existence, taking into account needs and values of people in that society. Participants themselves are involved into identification of problems and needs, searching for ways out and provision of appropriate plans.

With the following two objectives in mind, the work in groups is organized:

- technical awareness of the field (vocational guidance, job motivation, possibilities and search);
- social activity related to personality experiences, values, needs and possibilities.

Practical methodological aspects

During playback theatre seminar, a secure relaxing atmosphere is created, and also active playful process takes place. Participants perform interactive tasks based on drama and improvisation, during which they share their own experience and feelings, learn to understand and accept others and themselves, analyse various situations of training object and develop personal abilities, required for solving the raised issues. Practical tasks are prepared by professionals - playback experts - and are applied when pursuing achievement of the set goals. Additionally, participants acquire the following abilities that help in every day life: hearing and understanding the other, non-verbal body language usage and identification, self-confidence and confidence in other participant in the team, flexibility and humour in various situations.

Creation of specific secure and encouraging for action atmosphere

A sense of secure space is created, where a structure defines the limits and eliminates worries. Still, the creative structure is not dry and strict, on the contrary, the supporting and stimulating space is provided for unrestricted drama action. Worries are eliminated

through creative structures, providing conditions that allow the narrator to gain courage and motivation. In such environment if the narrator does not know the structure of his/her own story, the leader assists him/her in finding the beginning, the middle and the end of the story, i.e. a particular part of narrator's life, his/her feelings and essence of the story. When working with stories (experiences) and feelings, the freedom of verbal and non-verbal expression is encouraged. Playback theatre "...aims to provide a respectful environment, where each teller and story is honoured." (Chesner, Hahn, 2002). The atmosphere of group's community guarantees support, security and confidence, where integrity and respect determine equality and absence of discrimination.

Leadership

The role of the leader of the session has certain sub-roles and functions that require the following:

- leading the individuals that participate in the process of group self-formation and in training sessions;
- creating an appropriate atmosphere so that the outcomes of the sessions would be successful and results desired achieved;
- being an expert in a special subject;
- being a wise guide and a fellow-passenger of the participants;
- interpreting for the participants the symbols that occur during the process.

This is an authentic and most frequently non-verbal communication that creates appropriate relationships and confidence among the leader and participants. The following is demonstrated to the participants: *"I want to create a secure space for you so that you would be able to risk and take a creative challenge; I propose and invite – share your experience."* If the leader does this in a professional way, the session takes place without obstructing. Friendliness of the leader influences ability of restless and shy people to cooperate with strangers.

Planning

The work in the group of PT seminar involves the following all component parts of social work process:

- analysis and assessment of a social problem of the group are conducted;
- a plan of solution to the problem is prepared;
- particular assistance is provided;
- changes that have taken place are evaluated;
- the process is finished.

Variety in activity strategies

Next to the standard work forms when applying playback theatre method in the educational model of activity, variety in strategies is important. The strategies are planned taking into account specificity of a target group and contents of training goals to be raised. In pursuance of transforming the restricted way of thinking and acting of a target group members, the following creative interactive training methods are used that enable more effective mastering of provided training material interiorizing it in one's inside more through experienced and emotional structures than cognitive ones.

- *Movement and body kinaesthetic* – mimic, body language, creative movement techniques and other. Usage of body becomes effective when thoughts and feelings are not clear enough. Stiffness is related to fear that one does something inappropriate, while attention to the body allows coping with the primary fear of stumble, as “I” is directed towards kinaesthetic perception.

If an individual is able to start to describe this, he/she is able to get to know it and start working appropriately.

- *Self-reflecting and acceptance* – meditation, relaxation, visualization, creative writing and other. Playback theatre involves holistic, directed towards personality teaching and learning. When this method is applied, the participants take part in the following three training domains in accordance with Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1964) system: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Personal aspects of identity and values arise when stories narrated are heard and respected, when participants listen to each other stories; perform experiences, feelings and prospects of each other with understanding and compassion. Weinstock-Wynters (1996) identifies these efforts as the third domain of holistic education that occurs when during a session; education becomes therapeutic, still not becoming therapy. This is a domain, in which learning takes place using emotions as well, where knowing starts to be constructed and obtain meaning on the basis not only of books and discussions but on sensing experiences, acceptance and working with oneself.

- *Acceptance of environment and others* – drama action, performing stories of others, listening to others and hearing them, drills on relationship with the environment, and other. Playback theatre method when creating relationship with the environment employs tasks that promote trust in each other, exercises concerning sensing one’s own self in the existing environment, identification of relationships with other people and one’s own place among them, develops abilities of listening to other people, hearing them, creative understanding and perception. In the active relationship with other participants in the group, a personal attitude towards different people transforms itself, peculiarities, differences of other people are accepted, and perception of the world expands.

- *Meeting of needs to belong and be recognized* – drama activities provide self-expression process, when the need of being heard and seen is met, and provides possibility to see and assess others. Belonging to the group during a seminar in secure environment meets the need of a human to be important and significant, a person becomes a member of a solid team that pursues common objectives and solves their own important problems.

- *Creativity development* – especially important is a role of a leader, his/her ability to model the set “I can”, not give in when exposed to a more complicated or unusual problem. An attitude or sets regarding own creativity are among the most significant creativity factors, therefore extremely important is evaluation of a person and his/her encouraging, which also comes out to be an essence of playback theatre method. Possibility of creation together with others, hearing their confirmation that one is creative assists in developing of self-confidence, allows “being infected” with new ideas, encourages new foresight possibilities regarding a new job and vocational vision, and creation of objectives and near tasks.

- *Creative solutions to problems* – playback theatre method provides creative collective initiative. Participants work in groups, recreating material of personal experience, perception of theoretical training problems, planning and foresight of the future, using artistic tools of expression. Questions, tasks and problems are solved applying working tools of this method.

Improvisation, when a person is involved and experimenting, is the best way to become creative – this has an effect in psychological and social domains. Associative ideas being employed at the playback theatre influence spontaneity, which is required for confidence and closeness in the group. ■

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■ WEB SITES

<http://playbackteatras.lt/>
<http://www.playbackcentre.org/our-partners/company-partners>

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