

## HOW TO USE THEATRE TO DEVELOP SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Theatrical tools are a useful means for individual and social transformation. Through theatrical exercises and staging, we can work with reality at many different levels: visualizing it from many perspectives, analysing it, experimenting with it, generating creative strategies, and rehearsing for real life. Simultaneously, while doing so, we develop personal, relational, and social insight, awareness and skills. Theatre allows us to think about and act upon ourselves – mind, body and emotion – and our connection with others and with the world.

### Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre

A methodological approach to theatre which is particularly useful to understand and work on the connection between the self, to others and to the world is the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) approach. TO was developed in the 1970's by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal, and it is based on the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Paulo Freire, 1970) – where all people, no matter their age, background or situation, can teach and learn, are owners of some knowledge, have the same right to speak, be heard, and propose options, contents, problems and solutions. TO is used to analyse power structures to identify abuses of power perpetrated and perpetuated systemically in our daily lives. TO uses theatrical games and exercises to de-mechanise our perceptions making us aware of ourselves and our context. Using participants' experiences as core narratives to analyse the complexities of our own realities, this methodology allows us to search for and collectively create alternatives to conflicts that often prove difficult to resolve from an individual position.

Forum Theatre is the basic tool within Theatre of the Oppressed. The structure of Forum Theatre is based on presenting a short play which is stopped at the moment of maximum conflict. After the facilitator stops the play, they invites viewer to open the debate and to go on stage to replace the protagonists in order to change the situation.

The facilitator provides data to feed the debate, engage the audience and asks questions to generate a collective reflection about our behaviours in order to bring about awareness and change in our attitudes.

Thus the participants in the audience, through their performances on stage with the other actors, can intervene in the play and share their thoughts, desires, strategies and solutions. The scene is reinterpreted as often as different interventions are put forth by the audience. Each suggested alternative is discussed and analysed to explore the feasibility of the proposed solution.

### Process Work

To broaden our scope regarding group facilitation and to deal with the numerous emotions and reactions that might spur during TO-based workshops, we mix the methodology with Process Work. Process Work or Process Oriented Psychology (POP) integrates and uses contributions from various disciplines to facilitate the transformation and growth of individual and collective groups: community and organisational development, diversity and leadership training, counselling and group facilitation. Process Work focuses mainly on developing a state of consciousness by helping individuals and groups to realise how they perceive and live their experiences, learn to change their approach, and find the information which is not noticed or is marginalised (and hence limits a person's ability to respond). Much of the information we need to transform ourselves and to grow challenges our ordinary consciousness.

Without realising it, we marginalise certain aspects of our daily experience: emotions, desires, dreams, intuitions, fantasies, moods, etc., because they come into conflict with our basic belief system or with the dominant culture to which we belong. Process Work teaches us to connect with our deeper self and to be creative and navigate amid extreme circumstances.

Through different tools and exercises, POP allows us to:

- Redistribute power and give importance to the mood of the groups,
- Talk about different unresolved or difficult-to-solve issues,
- Respond to the feelings of frustration due to mistrust or fear of higher spheres of power,
- Challenge the hopelessness of achieving change,
- Rediscover the desire to train within and to experience the community,
- Improve the quality of group processes,
- Save time in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of processes,
- Transform conflict into spaces for reflection and action,
- Reconsider forms of organization in order to achieve group equality and ensure fairness and balance of power,
- Encourage the participation and commitment of all people involved taking into account group diversity.

This tool is aimed at finding new ways to understand social beings, and create more sustainable communities based on principles of coexistence in diversity.

#### Theatre and Process Work applied to social emotional learning in youth contexts

Theatre and Process Work are particularly useful tools when working in youth settings due to the developmental stage in which young people find themselves. During this period in life, young people experience critical physical, cognitive and social changes. Their relationships to others are particularly relevant in how these changes take place, as well as in their decision making and identity conformation. Many times, young people face difficulty understanding the complexity of how all of these elements interact, and they often lack the tools to address and manage this complexity, leading to conflicts with themselves and with others, and favouring risk behaviours.

Theatre and Process Work help young people identify, visualise, define, explore and address this complexity at their own pace and in their own words. Theatre and Process Work are useful tools for Youth workers to work with young people due to the following:

- These methods help explain difficult and/or abstract concepts in simple and easy-to-understand ways, bringing these concepts into everyday life situations the youth often encounter. Theatre is especially useful to develop the ability of young people to arrive at abstract concepts from concrete experiences.
- The embodied and participant-centred format of both methodologies allow young people to re-appropriate the method, adapt it to their own way of understanding reality, and analyse this reality from perspectives that are relevant to them. As a result, they may integrate self-awareness and self-management in the way they relate to themselves and to others.
- These methods, particularly Process Work, allow young people to bring afloat and explore hidden aspects of themselves such as their identities, desires, fears and belief systems, which have an impact in the way they relate to others. Through this exploration, young people gain awareness about their decisions, risk factors, and about possibilities to enact positive changes in themselves, their relationships and within their broader social context.

Due to the potentiality of these tools to work with young people while taking into account their perspective within a safe space, we believe Youth workers could find these methods useful when relating to young people, and when providing support to young people in the way they relate to themselves and to others.