

PSYCHODRAMA AS A TEACHING METHOD

BY  
TRICIA WILLIAMS

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE PSYCHODRAMA INSTITUTE  
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

1975

This thesis has been completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements toward certification as a practitioner by the Board of Examiners of the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association, Incorporated. It represents a considerable body of work undertaken with extensive supervision. This knowledge and insight has been gained through hundreds of hours of experience, study and reflection.

© Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association Incorporated 2004. Copyright is held by the author and the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association Incorporated has the license to publish.

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission from the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association Incorporated.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical photocopying, recording or otherwise, save with written permission of Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association Incorporated.

The development, preparation and publication of this work have been undertaken with great care. However, the publisher is not responsible for any errors contained herein or for consequences that may ensue from use of materials or information contained in this work.

Enquiries: PO Box 232, Daw Park, South Australia 5041, Australia

Apart from the general skills Psychodrama training develops which are invaluable to the teacher, there are specific areas and skills which are of immense value in the classroom.

A. Role Training

We learn the roles we play in everyday life mainly from the family and school. Often we develop destructive roles or roles which are inadequate for the situations we find ourselves in. Role training can be helpful in getting a student to actually see the roles he plays and change and develop them where they are in conflict with his needs and intentions. The areas where I have found role training most useful are:

- (1) Class or School conflict situations
- (2) Home or Peer group conflict
- (3) Job interviews
- (4) Meeting new people or coping with difficult situations
- (5) Relating to members of the opposite sex
- (6) Creative writing

(1) Class and School Conflict Situations

Often a student does not realize how other people see his behaviour e.g., "What did I do?" is a common cry from a student who feels he is being put upon. His behaviour is often seen by others as insolence or rudeness and he is dealt with accordingly. This in turn tends to re-inforce the defensive behaviour without giving the student any idea about what it is that is causing offence.

If in this situation the student is happy to participate, the teacher can get the students to re-enact the situation.

Any other student in the class will be able to play the role accurately - the rest of the class can correct any inaccuracies. The best approach is to allow the protagonist, i.e., individual, who is examining his own behaviour, to choose someone who he thinks can be him for the re-enactment. The protagonist needs to play each of the roles in turn in the instance cited; he needs to experience his own behaviour from the role of the teacher or other students. If he has difficulty getting into their roles, others can play them and he can observe the interaction. At the completion of this process, comments from both the protagonist and other students about their reactions or feeling to the behaviour demonstrated will help the student see his behaviour as others see it. They in turn can check out their perceptions of his behaviour. This process makes students aware of the non-verbal communication in interactions between individuals and the role they play. If as is often the case, the student doesn't mean to be provocative he can get help and practice in altering his behaviour, e.g., Neil cannot ask any question without thrusting his chin out and adopting an aggressive tone. Even when he wants to take part in classroom activities his manner makes others, particularly teachers, react to his behaviour. In the process the teacher can also be made aware of how students feel about his, i.e., the teacher's, own behaviour. The advantage of this method of teaching the student about himself is that he gets his own insights and is more likely to accept them than he is to accept the insights of either the other students or the teacher.

This method can only be used with the wholehearted and unqualified support of the students.

If the teacher forces the students or persuades them in such strong terms that they feel they can't or shouldn't say no, then no one will be helped. Examining the roles played in the classroom can be beneficial to both students and teacher if it is presented in a non-threatening way as one method of gaining information and not if it is seen as yet another cudgel out of the teacher's bag of tricks to force the student to accept somebody else's standards of behaviour.

It is an excellent way of assisting students to see a series of events from the perspective of someone else. Where the student takes the role of the teacher and experiences his own behaviour from the teacher's role, he is able to understand more readily the teacher's point of view.

Arguments within the classroom or between two students, situations where the student feels he has received unjust treatment, situations where someone was kind or helpful and the individual was unable, because of embarrassment, to respond can all be dealt with in this way.

(2) Home or Peer Group Conflict

In the case of the above conflicts much the same can be done. It is by taking the roles of all the people in the situation that the individual gains insight.

The dramatization of these things can be helpful not only with individual dilemmas but also when students examine social issues such as racial prejudice, child abuse, etc.

Small role plays can help students develop their own roles where these are inadequate. For example, take a situation like the following one:

A rude and angry customer confronts a polite shop assistant in the presence of an embarrassed customer and the conflict is resolved by a polite and helpful policeman.

Students are chosen and given their roles privately. They are instructed to stay with the role.

Student "A" may be told:

'You are a polite and helpful shop assistant who believes the customer is always right.'

Student "B" may be told:

'You bought your wife --who you love very much -- an expensive box of chocolates for your first wedding anniversary. When she opened the box, the chocolates were all white and mouldy. You are very, very angry and determined to get satisfaction from the shop at which you bought them. You will not be pacified.'

After all students are given their roles they go into the situation intent on staying within their role and using their own spontaneity. If the quietest, meekest and most patient student takes the angry role and the most impatient the role of the polite and helpful shop assistant or the unruffleable policeman then students gain experience of roles other than those they normally adopt. This can lead to their life roles being extended.

### (3) Job Interviews

Another area where role training is valuable is in preparation for job interviews.

The class collects questions of the type asked in these situations either because they have been for an interview and have some idea of the type of questions or by putting themselves in the role of the employer and deciding what things they want to know about the person they plan to employ.

One student plays the role of the employer and another student plays himself going for an interview. He describes his dress, how he feels, what dialogue is going on in his head.

After the interview the students offer constructive criticism and the student who went for the interview, if he wishes, can watch another student play his role. It is important for the students playing the various roles to be aware of the non-verbal cues --particularly the body language.

This kind of activity does an enormous amount for the confidence of the students and is good preparation for actual interview situations.

(4) Meeting New People or Coping with New Situations

Shy students can be helped by role playing in small groups where they feel safe by practising meeting new people or coping with threatening situations. Often by sharing their fears with fellow students and realizing that others share these, they are able to be more confident.

e.g. Student "A" is in a situation where fear or embarrassment prevent him from saying anything. If the student dramatizes the incident as it actually was, he can then, with class help, show the situation as he would like it to have been. Other students can perhaps encourage the student in developing more assertive or creative roles for himself. Part of the helpfulness of these situations comes from the moral support students give each other in sharing their own thoughts and feelings.

(5) Relating to Members of the Opposite Sex

Many students have difficulty coping with social situations involving peer group members of the opposite sex. e.g. A boy who is too shy to ask a girl out because of his fear of rejection and his inability to handle this rejection (if it occurs) adequately. He can, through role training, learn ways of handling the rejection. He will also gain moral support from the group and by taking both his own role and that of the girl he is asking, he can get a better perspective of the situation.

Many adolescents fear making overtures of friendship to the opposite sex because they are afraid of being misinterpreted. This is a very common problem which is of great concern to most students. Role training can be useful because it makes students aware of the non-verbal messages other people give and by comparing, through dramatization, the difference between the roles of the friend and the lover students can more easily ensure that they send and receive messages accurately.

Most role training which involves situations of great importance to the individual are possible only if there is a bond of trust between students and students and teacher and students. There also needs to be a free atmosphere where students feel confident that they will not be judged or condemned. It is important too, to have a contract to keep things brought up in role playing that involve individual matters in confidence.

(6) Creative Writing

One of the most difficult tasks students experience in their creative writing is to get dialogue with an authentic ring to it. They are invariably impressed when an author has accurately captured the dialogue in his writing. e.g. The fight between Tom and the new boy in Tom Sawyer; Paul's fight with his mother in Sons and Lovers.

A method of helping students create authentic dialogue is to get them to set up the situation e.g. family argument, and then by taking the roles of all the characters involved to get a dialogue going. It is important at first that the student actually moves. A good method is to use a chair for each person involved. It can be done alone but it is better done in small groups with each group member taking a turn to use the group to create his own dialogue.

To get into the idea of things, one of the examples quoted above can be used to start the dialogue and the students can extend it as they see fit. A tape recorder is a useful aid in such cases. By doing this they become aware of the mood changes, changes in body positions etc, and nearly all students will experience the satisfaction of creating realistic dialogue.

B. Spontaneity Training

In many class room situations we expect students to suddenly become creative and spontaneous. However, by the time they reach high school few students are able to be spontaneous or creative in the class room. Their defenses are well and truly entrenched, particularly in adolescence when peer group acceptance is of paramount importance. Also much school time has been geared towards controlling and inhibiting their spontaneity.

There are several ways in which a teacher can develop the student's ability to be spontaneous. One of the easiest ways to begin is by using picture books such as Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are" or "The Bear on the Motor Bike" by Zimnik or "Leo the Late Bloomer". Other stories can be chosen bearing in mind that stories need to have satisfactory resolutions so that emotions aroused in the story are resolved in the story. The students can act out the stories as the narrator reads. As the story line is simple and not over-detailed there is great scope for tapping the spontaneity of the individual.

Another method is the Fantasy Trip. Students with teacher help, not direction, create a craft of some sort using either themselves or the furniture or their imagination. Once it is created, they board the craft for a journey.

Students close their eyes and the teacher leads them from take off to return, creating an atmosphere with her voice, channelling their awareness towards the concrete, the physical sensations they experience, e.g. taste, colour, sound. During the journey the only task of the teacher is to question; the students provide all the detail in their own imaginations. When the students have been returned to the classroom, allow time for them to silently digest their journey. Some students will be anxious to share their journey with the class -- however, if they are not don't force anyone. This is a very useful warm up for writing and also any student's journey can, instead of just being described, be put into action.

A variation of this can be the dream sequence. Starting with what students actually dream about and looking at dreams in the sense of hopes and ambitions, get the class to lie down and close their eyes. Following a similar pattern to that in the journey allow the dreamer to dream his dream (Where are you? What are you wearing? Who are you with? etc.). Allow the dreamer time to wake up after his dream and then ask students to share their dreams. And again there is the possibility of dramatizing any dream. This can allow a student to experience some of the things he dreams about like success or popularity.

All these activities can be used profitably as a prelude to creative writing. However the closer to the actual events the writing is, the better it will be. No more than 24 hours should pass between the two if the freshness of the events is to be captured and the mood changes and feelings are to be accurately recorded.

They also give students common and satisfying experiences to write about within the four walls of the classroom.

Initially many students will have difficulty: however with practice, and the assurance that there is no right or wrong way, students will be able to express themselves more easily and tap their own spontaneity.

There is also a series of Fantasy, Gestalt and encounter games and exercises, examples of which can be found in:

"Fantasy and Encounter Games" -- Dr Herbert Otto

"Growth Games" -- Lewis P Streitfield

"Born to Win" -- James P Jorgeward

Most of the activities in these books can be used to develop the student's spontaneity and his awareness of himself and others. They also, obviously, provide good warm ups for creative work.

One of the things that come out of this type of activity is that students begin to clarify their own values. The benefit in doing this is lasting, however, if the teacher imposes answers in any way at all, nothing will be achieved. The task of the teacher is to facilitate the student's development of himself; not try to fit him into a pre-planned pattern.

The two more general skills which Psychodrama training develops are:

- (i) the ability to become an active and sensitive listener.
- (ii) the ability to keep evaluation in its place and to demonstrate acceptance, appreciation and respect for activities in which students engage and which they value, without feeling the need to assess or correct them.

These skills basically involve a much greater awareness of the non-verbal responses people make in different situations. The training helps the teacher because they become aware through group activities of their own responses and how other people see their behaviour.

There is an enormous amount that could be said about these skills, but it would involve more detail than I think is necessary for this report.

The final area in which Psychodrama Training assists the teacher is that by using Transactional Analysis as a theoretical basis you are able to develop in students an awareness of their own behaviour and transactions because the language of Transactional Analysis is so simple they readily grasp it. The existence of this theoretical framework is invaluable especially in the area of discipline because it provides a method of pointing out why behaviour is inappropriate without condemning the individual or rejecting his behaviour. I have used Transactional Analysis extensively in helping students understand not only the reactions of other students and teachers but also those of their families. All have found it most helpful and beneficial and it has enabled many of them to act in a more positive way, especially when they are in a conflict situation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERNE, Eric. "Games People Play"  
"What Do You Say After You Say Hullo?"
- HARRIS, Thomas A. "I'm O.K. You're O.K."
- BRY, Adelaide. "The T.A. Primer"
- ERNST, K. "Games Students Play"
- GINOTT, Dr. Haim. "Between Parent & Child"  
"Parents and Teenagers"
- JAMES & JONGEWARD. "Born to Win"
- SCHULTZ, Will. "Joy"
- GORDON, "How to be an Effective Parent"
- PERLS, F. "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim"  
"In and Out of the Garbage Pail"
- PERLS, et al. "Gestalt Therapy"
- NURENBERG, P. Caleo. "How to Read a Person Like"