



A three-day workshop on the theatre of the oppressed in a Nepalese medical school

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BRIEF REPORT

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Abstract

A three-day theatre of the oppressed workshop was conducted at KIST Medical College, Lalitpur, Nepal. In this manuscript the author describes salient features of the workshop.

Key Words

Nepal, medical school, theatre of the oppressed

Theatre of the oppressed (TO) explores shared perceptions, serves as a means of empowering the oppressed and provokes a dialogue that goes beyond words.¹ TO was developed by the noted Brazilian theatre personality, Augusto Boal based on the philosophy of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere.

The Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC), Bengaluru, India works towards familiarising educators with TO and has conducted workshops in many educational institutions. Dr Radha Ramaswamy, the founder president of CCDC and her team conducted a workshop at KIST Medical College (KISTMC), Lalitpur, Nepal from 6–8 April 2012 in the college auditorium from 9am to 5pm.

Why was the workshop conducted? A Medical Humanities (MH) workshop is conducted for all first year students in the institution. TO is used by Dr Ramaswamy and her team to explore various issues in MH in different medical schools. The

workshop was conducted to further explore different issues covered during MH modules and offer participants a perspective of the disadvantaged and the oppressed. Another objective was to help participants identify the 'internal' oppressing factors existing within each of them and chalk out strategies to address and overcome these. The games and activities were fun, encouraged participants to think 'outside the box' and promoted teamwork and cooperation. The two important activities, image theatre and forum theatre introduce participants to social issues in medicine and explore methods to address social and other problems.

Agreements: The workshop used games and small group activities to develop team spirit and camaraderie among participants. It also used techniques like Image Theatre and Forum Theatre to explore various interpersonal and social issues. Thirty students and faculty members participated. After the inauguration by the Principal, Professor TP Thapa, the workshop started with a brief introduction by the facilitator. The list of agreements was accepted by all participants. Among these were honouring confidentiality and maintaining privacy, using 'I' statements, listening for understanding, agreeing to disagree, giving unconditional respect to others and to oneself, and right to not participate (or pass) certain activities or games. A list of issues which participants would like to be covered during the workshop was agreed upon and listed on the white board.

Initial activities: The workshop started with an exercise called 'sociometry' where participants arranged themselves in a line according to how confident they felt about their participation in the workshop. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and indicate why they were standing in the particular position on the line. 'Columbian hypnosis' was an activity done in pairs. One member of the pair 'hypnotised' the other person using the palm of his/her hand. The hypnotised person followed the hand in space using his/her face and body. Later on the roles were reversed. The exercise introduced participants to the perspectives of being a 'leader' and a



'follower' and explored the emotional issues associated with both these roles. Later it was used as a means of oppression in forum theatre and participants explored different means to overcome the oppression.

Image and Forum Theatre: Blind exercises with eyes closed were interesting and fun. They also provided a first-hand experience of the problems faced by the blind. Doctors have to be aware of the problems faced by blind people who can be regarded as an 'oppressed' population and how blindness can cause problems in accessing care and seeking treatment. At a personal level walking with eyes closed in a crowded room is an uncomfortable and frightening experience and participants learn to overcome this fear. In groups participants learn to trust each other and work as a team which are important objectives of the workshop. In Image Theatre the body shape is used to express emotions and feelings. The image gallery was an exercise where the facilitator mentioned an issue or an emotion and all participants assumed a body shape reflecting the same. There was a gallery walk where participants walked around the gallery of different shapes. In Forum Theatre a simple play was staged in which one individual played an oppressed role. Members of the audience were invited to be 'spect-actors', replace the 'oppressed character' and tackle the issue in their own way. The script became flexible and creative and various approaches were acted out. This technique was introduced through the 'Bus forum' where a young woman is sitting in the last seat of an empty bus. At the next stop a young man boards the bus and though the bus is empty goes and sits next to the woman who becomes uncomfortable and afraid.

Glass cobra and other games: 'Carnival in Rio' was the community building exercise on day two conducted in triads. Each person was asked to perform a simple body movement and a sound and keep on doing it. On the facilitator's command each triad was asked to adopt a single movement and sound without speaking. Then each triad was asked to step into the centre repeating their movement and sound. Eventually the entire group would adopt one movement and sound which could be from a particular group or a mixture of sounds and movements from different groups. The 'Glass cobra' is a widely appreciated exercise developed by Boal based on a Chilean legend. Participants stand in a circle close to each other and with eyes closed feel the head and shoulders of the person in front of them. They remember details of the 'head' so that they can later locate it. Then the participants walk away from one another and with eyes closed try to locate the person who was in front of them. Once they locate their partner they place both their hands on the partner's shoulders. The game continues until the circle reforms.

More activities: 'Complete the image' is an activity using Image Theatre where a person assumes a shape. Then another person steps in and without speaking responds to this shape using another body shape. Then the first person leaves the stage and a new person steps up and responds to the second person using a body shape. The process continues until the facilitator decides to bring it to a close. 'Cop in the head' was a beautiful exercise where different conflicts going on in a person's mind were concretised and placed in front of the individual. The voices in the head were represented by different individuals who acted out the conflicts and disagreements in the open.

Forum theatre: On the morning of the third day participants were divided into two groups and asked to form a working 'machine' based on the topic provided to them. Rehearsing for the afternoon's forum performance occupied the rest of the morning. Participants formed five groups using body images and similarities of body shapes. The five scenarios were then presented in front of an audience of students and faculty of the institution. The audience voted to work on a scenario where a grandfather is abandoned in an old age shelter by his family. A young medical student returning home after college asks her father where her grandfather is. Different 'spect-actors' took the place of the girl and tried to address the issue in their own way.

The workshop helped to address various issues covered during the MH module using a different approach. Learning was fun and the sessions were conducted without using advanced equipment and learning aids. TO can serve to introduce medical students, doctors and faculty members to various 'issues' in human life and help them understand the perspective of the oppressed. It can help to reduce the traditional barriers between teachers and the taught!

References

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PEER REVIEW

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no competing interest

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ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Not required

Table: Activities conducted during the workshop

* Not all activities have been described in the text

Day	Date	Activities conducted
6 th April	Friday	Introduction to TO and the workshop Agreements, list of issues Community building exercises: Sociometry, name playback, cover the space, Columbian hypnosis Blind exercises Image gallery Pushing Bus forum Debrief
7 th April	Saturday	Recap of day 1 Community building exercises: Carnival in Rio, Glass cobra, Fainting by numbers Irish duels Image theatre (groups): Dynamising images Zip-zap-zoom Cop in the head
8 th April	Sunday	Recap of day 2 Community building exercises: Fear/protector, balancing circle, the machine Preparing for forum theatre Forum Debrief and closing feedback