



Playback in Theatre for Development

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Theatre for Development (TFD) is used as an egalitarian method to access and distill information, working with communities to create a self-sustaining tool for dialogue and from that dialogue to affect policy. TFD creates an infrastructure for communities to define themselves by developing systems of communication that identify key issues, implement solutions, and establish partnerships between resource groups.

TFD is a genre of community theatre that emerged during the 1970's as a vehicle of communication. Mass forms of communication such as newspapers and television were unable to access rural areas. TFD provided an alternative way for development agencies to acquire and distill information. Practitioners including Micheal Etherton, Martin Banham, and David Kerr worked within university systems in Africa to establish collaborative development programs with primarily health and sanitation NGO's. The traveling theatre troupes often performed agit prop productions that instigated discussions and then worked with the participating communities to identify issues and create action plans towards solutions.

A common TFD project consists of the following steps for implementation: a) practitioners live within the community, or may visit the community on an ongoing basis for a long duration of time (the emphasis at this stage is to adjust to the cultural norms, to build trust/relationships, and to observe daily life); b) community members create performances based on issues related to the causes of their underdevelopment; c) key issues are researched and linked by practitioners to NGO's and GO's which may have a relation to the cause/solution to the issue (in many cases it may concern the Ministry of Health or Education); d) solutions are created through participatory theatre in which the community act out interventions; e) action plans are created for community, governmental and international application.

The interactive and participatory dynamic of theatre fosters a web of human relationships that has its own unique systems of communication. TFD offers an alternative route to developmental goals, in that the tools utilized are centered on dynamics of human relationships and experience. While traditional development practices offer outside assistance through economic aid or loans, TFD works within the target community to define the causes of underdevelopment and to find viable solutions that promote self governance. To do this, TFD must assimilate to the contexts of the communities that it serves. Theatre is used as the container for the human experience, to transcend and transform time and space to nurture the power of the human spirit.

The TFD model hopes to establish a form of communication that goes from the inside out. That is, which works from within the community to establish a needs base from which members of the community develop their own answers to their needs of development, which is then taken to the top. This way, inside/out versus top/down methods of communication creates a framework that services the community and acknowledges its cultural wisdom and values.

TFD practices have been implemented across the globe including projects in India, Africa, Brazil, and the Philippines. Theatre has been used as a venue to access rural and illiterate communities to

promote hygiene campaigns, AIDS awareness, and economic reform, amongst others. The form utilizes indigenous codes of communication, traditional practices, and cultural expression to simultaneously

identify key concerns while acting out or “performing” the solutions. The partnerships between the local community, governmental sources, and international agencies develop an arena for addressing key concerns on a local scale and elevating them into a global dialogue. The methodology and pedagogy is based on principals of popular education and participatory theory practices. Common techniques include Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre for Conscientization, and Agitation Propaganda. Facilitation teams work with the local community to identify key concerns through direct observation, mapping, town meetings, and one on one interviews. Key resources and informants are identified as potential partners in the project, integrating community based organizations and government officials. Local participants stage real life scenarios based on key concerns, in which audience members act out or discuss the potential action plans needed. Through the partnerships with outside agencies, links are made to establish financial and political support.

While TFD is used as an information gathering and development implementation tool, it also works as a methodology for teambuilding, cultural identification, and conflict resolution. Theatre creates an open space to play the roles of self and other, thus communities are given the opportunity to question and challenge social hierarchies, gender roles, and discrimination. As a case study, the New York Forum Theatre Initiative (FTI) used strategies from a Brazilian theatre practitioner named Augusto Boal who originally developed a method for community activism called Theatre of the Oppressed. In this form, Boal dispenses of theatres traditional function of “catharsis” by turning the spectators into what he calls “Spect Actors”. As Spect Actors the audience must intervene in performances and sometimes rehearse possible solutions to political and social oppression. Boal uses practices such as “Forum Theatre” as a problem solving device so that citizens can critically assess the conflict situation. The FTI used these techniques as a method for conflict resolution and peace building between parents and administration at Public School 26 in Brooklyn, New York.

Playback theatre provides an exciting opportunity to enhance TFD projects through community building techniques and storytelling. While TFD creates a structure for needs assessment, design implementation, creation of partnerships, and development of project action plans – Playback can offer a substantial contribution to the field. Any TFD project begins with the needs and wants of the community that it serves. Playback utilizes participant stories which are then played back to the audience. The potential of training community participants to enact the stories furthers the possibility of creating sustainable development applications to address issues surrounding sensitive areas such as traditional practices, gender discrimination, and AIDS. By training local participants in the methodology of TFD and Playback, indigenous modes of communication can be utilized to address main concerns and issues, opening the door to further dialogue and critical thinking. The emotional openness of Playback and its strong ritual container, allows for the sharing of core experiences necessary for dealing with conflict and allowing reconciliation.

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