

Exploring transformative actions through Forum Theatre

A participatory drama technique facilitating community dialogue on social issues

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In brief

Purpose of Forum Theatre

To facilitate community dialogue on social issues to enable transformative actions.

When to do Forum Theatre?

When community dialogue is useful to explore open or underlying oppression and to identify possible actions for transformation.

Who can participate?

This can be an opportunity to bring together a range of stakeholders; the more diverse the group the more interesting the stories become. It is important to ensure an experienced facilitator guides the process to ensure optimal learning and a safe space.

How long does the process take?

Forum Theatre can vary in length, but usually takes two to three days.

Forum Theatre can help explore complex situations and different pathways for action. (Photo: Mohamed Diop)

Description

Forum Theatre is a participatory drama technique used to facilitate community dialogue on social issues, involving communities in pursuing transformative actions. It is part of the Theatre of the Oppressed drama techniques, developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal from the 1970s up to his death in 2009.

The key assumptions of Forum Theatre are:

- Human beings think with their entire body and the entire body must be involved in the search for



alternatives to the unresolved conflicts the audience is experiencing.

- Playing together, having fun and using the imagination are essential ways to 'de-mechanise' ourselves from the 'mechanised' responses we give to oppressive situations. Without imagination, it is impossible to break the cycle of the social reproduction of injustice. Imagination can transform a conflict into an opportunity to build other relationships between human beings, instead of just leaving it as something to manage.
- The oppressed are those who experience conflict with other people, groups or institutions where the distribution of power (intellectual, legal, economic or cultural) is unbalanced. A situation is oppressive when those who have more power use it to achieve their goals and in doing so prevent those who have less power from obtaining their legitimate rights.
- The oppressed are not passive victims who accept the imbalance of power and the denial of their rights. The oppressed want to change their situation but fail because of the imbalance of power embedded in historical, legal and

economic structures (e.g. gender roles, discriminating laws, unequal economic relations between nations, etc.).

- The oppressed could fail in their fight for their rights also because they internalise the imbalance of power and the ideological structures of domination of those who have more power in a given context. As a consequence, the oppressed see these structures as normal, desirable and unchangeable. To transform the oppressive situation in which they find themselves, the oppressed need first of all to change themselves and the way they see their situation.
- The oppressed have a wealth of embodied knowledge (acquired through direct and reiterated experience of the mechanisms of oppression), and theatre can be a way to give value to this knowledge and share it with the community, building individual and collective motivation to change.

Forum Theatre is not based on a preconceived idea of change. It is not 'sensitisation' of the audience on what they should do to change their situation. It is rather a tool for individual and community 'empowerment', a space for the re-appropriation of physical and symbolic powers for those who are suffering because of unfair power structures within and outside the community. This re-appropriation of powers taps into the intellectual, motivational and material resources individuals and communities can mobilise within and around themselves.

The facilitator and the actors do not support a 'proposed solution' to the conflict; they present a conflict the community is experiencing and ask the audience: 'Is this situation real for you?' 'Did it happen to someone you know?' 'What could the protagonists do to change?'

The joker

The Forum Theatre facilitator is called the 'joker'. Their role is to facilitate the aesthetic and 'embodied' dialogue between the actors and the audience (called the 'spect-actors'). The joker applies a 'maieutic' (of the midwife) attitude. Like Socrates in Plato's dialogues, the joker is not 'pregnant' with the 'solution' to the problem – only the community is pregnant with the responses to its own problems – but the joker and the actors can, like the midwife, help the community give birth to such responses, using theatre as a dialogical space for exploring what to do when confronting a certain problem.

A Forum Theatre play is composed of two parts:

- At the beginning of a Forum Theatre play, the play is presented; it ends with the defeat of at least one character (the oppressed).
- After this presentation, the joker invites whoever has an idea of what the oppressed character should do to come the stage, replace the character they think is the most oppressed by the situation and improvise their idea. After each replacement, the joker

asks the audience what they think about the alternative proposed (and tested on stage) by the person who replaced a character, in an ongoing dialogue between the audience, the joker and the actors.

The joker does not take a position on the alternatives proposed by the spect-actors but ensures the process remains a dialogical and non-judgemental search for alternatives, and guarantees that the process does not become dominated by those who benefit from existing power relations within the community (e.g. elders vs. youth, men vs. women, educated vs. illiterate, etc.).

Forum Theatre is a way for the audience to imagine and embody change and test their strategies in a safe, playful and non-judgemental environment. The role of the facilitator is to create a symbolic 'container' of 'embodied ideas', where every voice is equally heard, especially the voice of those who often are not heard in a community (children, people with disability, minorities, women, illiterate people, etc.).