

Forum role playing as practical reflexivity: a critical examination of the method in theory and practice.

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Introduction

This paper sets out to critically examine the proposition that forum role playing as a learning methodology has the potential for achieving practical reflexivity as defined by Ann Cunliffe and Mark Easterby-Smith in their chapter, 'From reflection to practical reflexivity: experiential learning as lived experience'.

This analysis is stimulated by a profound interest in 'deep learning' and is built on the collected experience of fifteen years of working extensively with this methodology across sectors, hierarchies and interpersonal disciplines. There is a passionate belief among practitioners of the forum role playing method that its effective application generates significant positive change (behavioural and attitudinal) in learners. Generically, the power of role play (when effectively delivered) is evidenced by an overwhelming majority of participants in the experience (over 90%) who reflectively feed back that the role play intervention was the most beneficial component of a learning programme and from countless instances of (time elapsed) responses that the role play experience, "changed my life." For those who practice the delivery of role play, the method of forum role playing – which will be defined in more detail later but is, briefly, characterised by working in small groups, with a professional role player and where there is the facility to stop the role play and reflexively examine the interaction - is the pinnacle of this methodology.

Overwhelmingly the evidence cited above is supported by academic proposition. It is widely held that deep learning – that which encourages challenge to assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, existing frames of reference – is efficacious, not just in terms of producing change in learners but, significantly, catalysing organisational and societal evolution.

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. (Senge, 2006: 13-14)

It is the contention of this paper that, forum role playing does have the potential to stimulate practical reflexivity, that practical reflexivity catalyses 'real learning' and that 'real learning' is the means by which we generate transformational change. Of course, this proposition rests on a number of key assumptions. Firstly, that the preconditions for effective forum role playing are attainable. Secondly, that practical reflexivity is synonymous with real learning. Thirdly, that real learning does have meaningful impact. Finally, that transformational change is desirable and positive. Whilst a consensus of contemporary opinion indicates that there is a basis for logic in the flow of these assumptions, this paper will endeavour to hold these assumptions up to scrutiny.

The body of this paper will provide a consideration of levels of learning, a brief positioning of the field of experiential learning, a description of practical reflexivity, outline the essential characteristics of forum role playing, assess the pre-conditions for success of this methodology in terms of practical reflexivity and, finally, explore the priorities for safeguarding this method in order to ensure its efficacy as a mode of delivering critically reflective and reflexive practice.

Depth of Learning

It may be considered that learning takes place at different levels and that the deeper one goes, the more effective and efficacious the learning experience. Implicit in the analysis by Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, for example, is the argument that there is a hierarchical relationship between reflective learning and practical reflexivity, the latter providing substantial opportunities to challenge existing assumptions, “to problematise rather than simplify situations” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 13) and to engage with learning at a greater depth of criticality.

There is a sense in which this reflects the notion of levels of learning efficacy indicated by Burgoyne and Reynolds where we can distinguish between practice that is, “effective practice, reflective practice and critically reflective practice.” (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 1). Forum role playing can access all three levels, depending on how it is applied and how successfully the pre-conditions, explored later in this paper, are satisfied. At its most rudimentary, where learner, role player, facilitator and group are operating at a surface or mechanistic level it will be ‘effective practice’.

Such effectiveness is often judged as objective – the clear and reliable achievement of outcomes that are incontrovertibly judged to be good. In other ways such attributions of effectiveness can (and many theorists would prefer this formulation) be seen as a consensus of subjective views among those people who matter in a given situation. (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 1)

In practice, for example, the role play experience may lead to constructive learning outcomes such as managers having increased capacity to hold effective performance management conversations with line-reports.

At the next level, where stronger frames are provided by the facilitator, role player, group and learner, the learning output of forum role playing conforms to the prescription of reflective practice.

Reflective practitioners, in other words, have a working theory of their practice, which will tend to be normative in that it suggests what should be done and why it should work. (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 2)

In this sense the manager in the learning experience will not only be more effective in their practice of performance management, but will have a clear, accessible and sound framework for understanding the organisational and behavioural context in which this is taking place.

However, when the pre-conditions for forum role playing come together at a deeper level, where the facilitator, role player group and learner are prepared to hold existing and conventional mental models up to scrutiny, the method provides a profoundly rich learning experience that creates a forum in which learners can be critically reflective.

Producing critically reflective practice has another layer of theory behind the working normative theory. This is likely to be a rich and diverse mixture of descriptive, interpretative and critical theories, and also understanding of a range of rival normative theories to a 'preferred' one. (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 2)

In this sense, the learning outcomes are not only that managers develop new performance management skills and gain important insight into the context in which this management activity takes place, but are also equipped to challenge their own and others' assumptions about how they operate effectively within this organisational milieu and, moreover, develop a critical language for reassessing their own and others' paradigms. As this paper will contend it is the interactive and dialogic nature of forum role play that stimulates this critical reflection and provides the potential for pre-existing assumptions to be unpacked and challenged in a way that is less substantial through post-experience reflection.

Experiential Learning

Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith suggest two main forms of experiential learning, "reflection on experience created by instructors, or reflection on work experience." The former is characterised by such methods as outdoor development activities, team building, role play and the latter through work based journals, projects and self-diagnostic instruments. (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 1)

Josie Gregory (2002: 101-103) drawing principally on Mulligan's seven capacities of the individual (thinking, imaging, feeling, memory, intuition, sensing and will) and conflating this with Heron's four modes of knowing (experiential, presentational, propositional, practical) suggests that experiential learning, as a potentially holistic encounter has the capacity to engage learners with these four modes: experiential being the subjective *world of presence*; presentational being the imaginal and conceptual *world of appearance*; propositional being the intellectual *world of essence*; and practical being the action *world of existence*.

In experiential education, working with the internal world of participants we need to be alert to consistencies between the above modes or their discontinuances. At any one time one of the modes will be in the foreground while others will be tacit, falling into the background. (Gregory, 2002: 102-103).

As a form of constructed experiential learning, forum role play operates within all four modes. As we shall see later it invites learners to encounter 'real' worlds in a simulated context where they are variously engaged as subjective participants in practical modes of being where essential understandings are formed and reformed through reflection, discussion and dialogue.

Practical Reflexivity

Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith argue that practical reflexivity introduces the possibility of generating in learners, through experiential learning encounters, the opportunity to go beyond mere improved practice available to them through reflective modes of engagement. The significance of practical reflexivity is that it takes the learner to a deeper and more critical level in terms of their own knowing, being and understanding. It invites the re-negotiation of meaning, paradigmatic re-evaluation, challenge to existing conventions (in terms of both theory and practice) as well as substantial behavioural and attitudinal change.

The premise of this chapter is that the reflective approach to experience-based learning can be enhanced through practical reflexivity, which requires a different way of thinking about experiential learning. Whereas reflection encompasses learning by *reflecting on experience*, reflexive approaches embrace *learning in experience*. Reflection is generally characterised as a cognitive activity; practical reflexivity as a dialogic and relational activity. Reflection involves giving order to situations; practical reflexivity means unsettling conventional practices. (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 2)

It appears that there is broader context for this need for practically reflexive individuals. Jarvis describes a ‘risk society’ in which reflexivity is pre-requisite as, “the complexities of the contemporary world makes decisions based on certainty impossible, and the uncertainty is introduced into an instrumentally rational world,” while, “individuals are forced to take risks, to learn and reflect upon their decisions, and so forth.” They must, “decide for themselves, adjust to social changes and keep on learning, either by doing and reflecting upon the outcomes, or thinking and planning before the action takes place.” (Jarvis, 2002: 16).

Senge describes the same process in terms of the reformation of mental models; the deeply ingrained assumptions, beliefs, opinions and generalisations which characterise the ways of seeing and knowing the world around us that remain intact until challenged or re-evaluated through critically reflexive dialogue.

The discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on “learningful” conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. (Senge, 2006: 8-9)

Indeed Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith suggest that this experiential model of reflecting on experience, based on Kolb’s cycle where learners move cyclically between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation to active experimentation (from Whetten, Cameron and Woods, 1994: 55), can be made substantially and profoundly more efficacious through the application of practical reflexivity. Taking the example of a difficult meeting between manager and subordinate they claim that more than simply reflecting on the conversation after the event:

You might also take this a step further and recognize that you are engaged in defensive routines (Argyris, 1991), each seeking to blame the other. You consider how your own assumptions and behaviour contribute to the situation; about what you are both saying and not saying; and possibilities for relating to each other in different ways. By surfacing implicit and taken-for-granted aspects of the interchange and their impact, you are engaging in reflexive thinking. If you do this in the conversation with your boss, rather than after, this takes the form of practical reflexivity. (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 2-3).

Practical reflexivity is achieved, Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith contend through the assiduous application of a combination of attitudinal and practical approaches. It requires meditative thinking, going beyond mere reflection, “that means questioning our notions of being and acting in the world; how we create identities and relate to others.” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 6). It requires shifting the focus of our questions from the epistemological (learning about theories and techniques that can be applied to practice) to the ontological (learning within experience). Thus, “practical reflexivity differs from other types of reflexivity because it involves existential questioning rather than (*merely*) the reflexive questions of ideologies, texts or theories”. (My insertion). (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 6). It replaces “internal, cognitive processes” with “the notion that learning is an embodied, dialogical, and existential activity immediately tied to how we feel, what we say, and how we respond to others.” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 8).

It could be said that practical reflexivity pre-supposes a paradigm shift.

The more aware we are of our basic paradigms, maps or assumptions, and the extent to which we have been influenced by our experience, the more we can take responsibility for those paradigms, examine them, test them against reality, listen to others and be open to their perceptions, thereby getting a larger picture and far more objective view. (Covey, 1989: 29).

Moreover, Senge would argue that there is an organisational and societal imperative for generating such opportunities to embrace such ideological and paradigmatic shifts; that we have a responsibility to engender critical and practical reflexivity in learners in order to ensure that current modes of thinking, operating and being are challenged, refreshed and renewed.

If we want to see systemwide interrelationships, we need a language of interrelationships, a language made up of circles. Without such a language, our habitual ways of seeing the world produce fragmented views and counterproductive actions – as it has done for decision makers in the war on terrorism. Such a language is important in facing dynamically complex issues and strategic choices, especially when individuals, teams, and organisations need to see beyond events and into the forces that shape change. (Senge, 2006: 73-74)

Again, as we shall explore later, forum role playing, at its most efficacious, provides a forum in which this depth of experiential learning can take place; that not only does it encourage learners to expose and explore their current ways of constructing reality but also creates an environment in which they can engage with meaningful dialogue, critically in the moment, in the pursuit of the generation of new meaning.

Forum Role Playing

Potentially, and perhaps currently, in its most successful iterations, forum role playing is an example of practical reflexivity. It is not a specific teaching technique but a “way of interacting that focuses on enquiry and critical dialogue” where “meaning is continually constructed between people in their dialogue.” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 8).

Forum role playing can be seen as being structurally and processurally analogous with Problem Based Learning, as described by Jarvis (taken from Boud quoting Barrows and Tamblyn). Problem Based Learning is described as having the following principles.

- The problem is encountered first in the learning sequence, before any preparation or study has occurred.
- The problem situation is presented to the student in the same way that it would be presented in reality.
- The student works with the problem in a manner which permits his (*sic*) ability to reason and apply knowledge to be challenged and evaluated, appropriate to his level of learning.
- Need areas of learning are identified in the process of work with the problem used as a guide to individualised study.
- The skills and knowledge acquired by this study are applied back to the problem, to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning and to reinforce the learning.
- The learning that has occurred in the work with the problem and in the individualised study is summarized and integrated into the student’s existing knowledge and skill.

(Jarvis, 2002: 129)

While, arguably, this mechanistic definition of Problem Based Learning may not necessarily indicate practical reflexivity, when associated with other pre-conditions (explored further in the next section of this paper) the potential for achieving practically reflexive learning is obtained. Moreover it is the fact that a real problem is reconstructed in this form of experiential learning encounter that establishes a framework in which meaningful, non-artificial, transformative learning may take place.

If we conflate this construction of Problem Based Learning with the notion that role playing has its roots in psychodrama we begin to see its potential for significant learning and for stimulating practical reflexivity.

The principal emphasis of role-play, which is derived from psychodrama, is on behavioural performance in simulated, training-type settings, where participants take specified roles to rehearse or act out interactions; to practise particular skills (eg assertiveness); to explore options for handling a given scenario. Thus it may lead to

attitudinal and/or behavioural change, as well as promote self-awareness. (Tosey, 2002: 113).

Where this is taken to a new depth is when we begin to consider the method of forum role playing in more detail and how it draws together the essential elements of problem based learning, critical reflection, experience and reconstructive dialogue.

So, what is forum role playing? There are certain typical pre-requisites and characteristics:

- It takes place in small groups, usually between three and six learners;
- The learners are accompanied by a facilitator and a professional role player;
- The group operates, ostensibly, as an action learning set, in that there is, ideally, equivalent status and that the learners take shared responsibility for their learning;
- The problem is a real life scenario, typically one that is defined by the client organisation or the individual learner;
- The environment is constructed to create as much of a sense of reality as possible;
- There is usually a contextual reference for the 'problem'. For example, management of poor performance;
- The role player and learner (each in the group has an opportunity to engage with a role play situation) interact as if in real life.
- There is usually a learning reference for the practice, for example MBTI, Transactional Analysis, Emotional Intelligence, thus providing an 'interpretive framework' (see Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 3-4).
- There are (and this is key) opportunities for the role play to be stopped at any point and be re-started at any point. This is one of the critical aspects of forum role playing that distinguishes it from other forms of role play. The time outs provide a space in which critical reflexive dialogue can take place between the learner, role player, facilitator and group.
- During these time-outs discussion, evaluation, feedback, critical reflection and (in the most successful experiences) critical reflexivity take place. In short, there is a dialogue about the dialogue.

This is the construction in which forum role play establishes the potential for practical reflexivity. It is the combination of these constituent parts (each essential to the whole) that generates the forum in which powerful, deep and transformative learning can take place. Propitious group interaction, generative learning context, challenging facilitation, real problems, a dynamic methodology and the opportunity to reassess and re-evaluate, combine to deliver the means through which learners may engage in

a learning process that invites them to unpack existing beliefs, interrogate them and build anew. Moreover it is the fact that the experience is real for the participant that engenders this learning potential. The learner is not playing a role nor entering into an artificially constructed parallel world, but engaging with real problems that pose real challenges and evoke real responses and emotions. And yet it is equally significant that this is not actually the real world where, arguably, meaningful opportunities for critically reflexive dialogue are, in the context of task-based business imperatives, relatively limited. It is the fact that these real challenges are transplanted into a propitious experiential learning environment, one that (as we shall see later) is conducive to the stimulation of critical and transformative thinking, that is of fundamental importance.

It is through this method, from the point at which learners are invited to consider their interaction in the forum role play, that the opportunity exists to “continuously question all the claims, assumptions, contradictions, omissions and value judgements that are built into normative, descriptive and interpretive theories” (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997: 4) about what is happening and to invite the participants to question assumptions, frames, ideologies, mental models and interrelationships in the moment (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 11). It becomes, therefore, not merely a platform for learning new skills, of navigating through the Kolb cycle, or even simply of understanding impact of self on self and self on others in context, but a process through which, “meaning is continually constructed between people in their dialogue.” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 8).

There is a qualitative difference here between forum role playing experiences that can be described as practically reflexive and those that are merely skills based practice. These will be explored further under the next heading. Prior to this however it is worth contrasting forum role playing with other forms of role playing which, while being effective methods, do not have, in my view, the same potential for stimulating practical reflexivity.

Forum theatre is a method where the role players enact a situation, usually real(istic) which is observed by the learners, who, typically, are in greater numbers (anywhere between 10 and 500). The learners are placed as reflectors of the experience rather than reflectors in the experience and certainly not as practical reflexives.

Standard (uninterrupted) role playing, shares many of the features and characteristics of forum role playing with one key difference. There are no time-outs. Learners have the opportunity to reflect after the experience and to consider new strategies to be employed at a future stage. They are not practically reflexive in being able to re-construct and re-negotiate the dialogue in the moment.

Role playing with a colleague. This can be undertaken with any of the above methodological approaches (indeed many others that have not been mentioned above). Three elements that give forum role playing the potential for practical reflexivity are missing. Firstly, the sense of realism that is achieved through having an external, professional role player usually reduces the method to artifice. Secondly, a professional role player will judge the degree of stretch for each individual learner to ensure there is an opportunity for challenge of existing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, the professional role player has

the skills and capacity to help the participant to reconstruct their existing conceptions and assumptions from within the dialogue.

Pre-conditions for Achieving Practical Reflexivity through Forum Role Playing

I have indicated above that the method for forum role playing provides the pre-conditions for achieving practical reflexivity but that it does not, in and of itself, automatically confer this status upon the learning experience of participants. There are a number of qualitative factors that need to come into play in order to ensure that this potential is realised. There is no question that these requirements are stretching and, to a large extent, interdependent. In order for forum role play to engender 'real learning' through practical reflexivity (rather than 'merely' effective or reflective learning) does depend upon the conditions of each of the below components being in alignment with the principles of deep learning, ones that challenge learners to confront existing beliefs and ideologies.

Group

There are certain group characteristics required to create a propitious learning environment. Size (fewer than six), safety, cohesion, mutual trust, relative equity and a balance between support and challenge between the individuals are important. Brownhill characterises conducive groups in his analysis of Socratic method.

This dialogic approach is not confined to one pupil but in practice takes place with a group of people. It is a mutual search amongst peers for answers, and includes an idea of progress with no certainty that progress is being made. (Brownhill, 2002: 73)

Indeed Gregory asserts that through experiential modes of learning a (practically reflexive) group has the potential to construct new meaning.

Experiential learning in group settings allows for this critique of personal and group forms of established ways of thinking to be witnessed, critiqued and dissolved so that new constructions are co-created which are grounded in the shared experience rather than ideology or compulsive distorted interpretations of others. (Gregory, 2002: 105)

Indeed one may consider the group imperative from another point of view, one that positions the group dynamic as one which creates an opportunity for participants to enter into transformative dialogue through, as Senge describes it, the balance of advocacy (stating one's position) and inquiry (into the position of others) to achieve a state of "reciprocal inquiry."

By this we mean that everyone makes his or her thinking explicit and subject to public examination. This creates an atmosphere of genuine vulnerability. No one is hiding the evidence or reasoning behind his views – advancing them without making them open to scrutiny. For example, when inquiry and advocacy are balanced, I would not only be inquiring into the reasoning behind others' views but would be stating my views in such a way as to reveal my own assumptions and reasoning and to invite others to inquire into them. (Senge, 2006: 184-185)

In well facilitated forum role playing this is exactly what happens. Learners are encouraged, and encourage each other, to hold their assumptions, paradigms, beliefs, abstractions open to 'public' scrutiny, to have them tested and measured against the positions of others. It is the group that creates this opportunity for practical reflexivity and, perhaps, to establish a dialogic dynamic in which many views and assumptions are tested out for the benefit of the learning.

In dialogue, a group explores complex difficult issues from many points of view. Individuals suspend their assumptions but they communicate their assumptions freely. The result is a free exploration that brings to the surface the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet can move beyond individual views. (Senge, 2006: 224)

Of course such learning can take place in the format of a group discussion without the experiential or forum role playing demonstrations. However, as we shall see below, it is the elements of the learner (and his/her engagement with the experience) coupled with the experiential contribution of the professional role player (with his/her capacity to model and catalyse practical reflexivity) that very often stimulates this depth of interaction.

Facilitator

A second key component of establishing practical reflexivity in the forum role playing context is the facilitator. It is the role of the facilitator to encourage the learners to challenge existing beliefs and assumptions and to engage the learners (particularly the role playing participant) with the process of critically reflecting on the experience as it unfolds.

The facilitator works with internal constructs and their external manifestation in behaviour, bringing these to conscious awareness so that they can be looked at anew and developed if useful, or unlearned if inhibiting. Facilitation seeks to understand the frame of reference of self and the other, to reflect on how knowledge is derived from experience through implicit and explicit theoretical lens. (Gregory, 2002: 80).

This is precisely what happens when forum role playing is facilitated well. The facilitator expertly and with a light touch, brings in to sharp focus the learners sense of self, the lived-through experience, the theoretical lens of the learning context and challenges the learner to understand this experience in a different way. Their "process expertise rests on understanding the personal, interpersonal and group dynamics operating at social, psychological and existential levels of human relationships." (Gregory, 2002: 90).

Importantly, successful facilitators are able to distinguish between discussion (where different views are expressed and defended) and dialogue (where different views are expressed as a means to establishing a new view). (Senge, 2006: 23). They are able to create an environment in which it is safe for participants to suspend their assumptions and to resist the impact of, "our habits of thought (which) continually pull us toward discussion and away from dialogue." (Senge, 2006: 229)

Moreover, in this sense, effective forum role play facilitators are, in themselves, an embodiment of practical reflexivity.

For now the important distinction is that experiential facilitators are expected to be competent critical reflectors who can hold lightly a multi-perspectival view, will be experienced in working at the different levels of critique, subjective, social and cultural and who do not believe in one truth outside the individual, they live with uncertainty as the norm, wishing only to critically examine beliefs to liberate self and others from the oppressive bondage of imposed interpretative structures. (Gregory, 2002: 104).

Professional role player

A professional role player is an individual who engages with this form of learning as a profession and who has certain qualities and skills all of which combine to provide a learning environment in which practical reflexivity may take place. On an immediate level the role player is able to fulfil the conditions, outlined above, of Problem Based Learning. The 'problem' in the role play is real, and materialises as such at a practical, effective and affective level for the learner. The role player has the ability to stretch the learner to create the conditions under which their current level of skill, knowledge, behaviour, attitude and even belief are confronted. The professional role player has the insight and skill to constructively engage the learner in a reflexively critical dialogue in relation to the reality that was constructed through the role play experience.

Importantly the role player is able to challenge existing perspectives, assumptions and beliefs and to work with the learner to construct alternative meanings. Finally, and perhaps most significantly in terms of establishing the conditions for practical reflexivity, the professional role player is able to re-construct and re-define the role play experience, in the moment, in order to create a dynamic in which the challenge for the learner is appropriately renewed. For example the role player may consciously choose, in a performance management scenario, to behave in certain ways as a response to gender assumptions previously critically assessed during a time-out.

As with the facilitator the learning experience has its greatest potential where the role player is also practically reflexive.

The learner

The final essential component of forum role playing is the learner him/herself. The greatest advantage will be attained where there is an active contributor to their own learning, change and growth. That is: the learner has the desire, motivation, frame of mind and capacity to critically self-evaluate and to be open to coming to the experience with a critical perspective. There must be a willingness of the learner to "engage in both open and critical dialogue" (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 3), to subsume themselves in a "dialogical process, constructed in language and conversation in-the-moment." (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 3) and be active in the sense that they are "one who has personal agency in that he or she is self-directing, intrinsically curious and motivated to learn." (Gregory, 2002: 81).

They must on the one hand have the propensity to engage with mindful learning.

Mindful learning on the other hand implies an openness to make sense of new experiences using new categorization on that experience and using more than one perspective in interpretation. (Gregory, 2002: 103).

At the same time they should have the pre-disposition to be practically reflexive.

It assumes that people have the capacity to take control of their own lives and become autonomous legislators, and in this sense is aimed at people becoming self-directed learners. It also suggests that people have the capacity to become true reflective learners, become self-aware and really recognize their own basic values, which gives them the possibility of altering them for the better. (Brownhill 2002: 77).

It is important to note that there is an essential interdependence of these preconditions, that the learners experience, to a significant degree, is a result of their own capacity to engage with the learning environment and to embrace the potential for deep learning as well as the combined force of the group, the facilitator and the professional role player to stimulate practically reflexive dialogue.

Safeguarding the Method

It has been indicated that forum role playing only serves to engage learners with practically reflexive learning where certain pre-conditions are established. However, in my own practice, with highly skilled, emotionally intelligent role players, working with participants who have a high degree of engagement and low levels of resistance to change being facilitated in ways which invite critical inquiry, I have experienced forum role playing that has achieved the deep levels of learning available through practical reflexivity. While not rare, there are clearly opportunities to ensure that the skill, the will and the preconditions are created in which the potential to generate such learning is increased. It is incumbent upon those involved with delivering the method to ensure that learners, role players and facilitators are fully aware of this potential and that they are equipped to generate such opportunities.

Facilitators should be developed with the reflexive and inquiry management skills to enable groups to establish a climate in which challenging and critical dialogue can take place and, in addition, facilitators should model practical reflexivity not only in the manner in which they engage the learners in critical reflection but also through their own capacity to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions. "This does not necessarily mean using specific teaching techniques, but emphasizing a way of interacting that focuses on enquiry and critical dialogue." (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 8).

On an ongoing basis facilitators and role players should become more consciously aware of practical reflexivity and the implications for the application of the forum role play method. Their ongoing development might increasingly develop those skills that constitute the greatest opportunity for them to stimulate constructively challenging dialogue and to fundamentally bring into question the beliefs upon which normative theory and accepted practice are based.

Conclusion

While there appears to be a strong connection between the practice of forum role playing and practical reflexivity and a strong body of academic argument that supports the proposition that critically reflexive dialogue equates to efficacious and transformative learning, there are many unanswered questions. There is, for example, the need to establish a robust demonstration that the practice of forum role playing can, indeed, establish the learning conditions described above and to generate evidence that such 'real' learning does in fact take place. This will require, in the absence of existing formal empirical research, the development of a methodology to test out the hypothesis. Further, it would be useful to contrast the learning efficacy of this method with other contemporary approaches to 'whole person' development such as those proposed by Turnbull James and Ladkin including other arts-based approaches, bioenergetics, executive coaching, systems psychodynamic approach and collaborative and co-operative inquiry processes. (Turnbull James and Ladkin, 2008: 18-23).

Additionally, though the consensus of opinion appears to be that critical reflexivity stimulated by dialogic inquiry epitomises real learning and that such learning is efficacious in that it is transformational, there is, perhaps, the need to more rigorously examine the fundamental assumptions upon which that consensus is built.

Nevertheless, forum role playing remains a profoundly effective learning methodology, that has the capacity, in its most successful manifestations, to challenge learners to really think deeply about their skills, the frameworks in which those skills are applied and the belief systems within which those frameworks are constructed.

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