

Celebrating



How can experiencing a creative process within a group of people encourage change? Theatre, music, painting – combined with reflection these are some of the experiential methods that Tim Merry and his colleagues use to explore issues, to look for approaches to problem-solving and to get people to consider if they should re-align their course in life. In his article, Tim tells us more about the work of Celebrating Diversity!

People today are faced with enormous amounts of information and diversity via the media and new means of communication. This diversity we're exposed to is constantly undergoing changes within itself, which can make it hard to keep up, as we try to process and reconcile the new with the old. At the heart of our ability to survive, live and work in the information society is our potential to accept change and not let it disturb us. To become comfortable with being uncomfortable. To have the courage to redirect our trust from familiar institutions such as schools, governments and businesses, to ourselves and our human networks. It is these networks that enable us to (re)connect to a sense of interdependency and interconnectedness that will support us through change. Celebrating Diversity! offers an alternative way of approaching problems using creative and life-affirming processes combining music, interactive theatre, drama therapy and circle conversation.

Do you know that 99% of a rocket's journey to the moon is off target?

It is a constant process of re-adjustment and re-alignment. (If this process did not happen it would crash!) I feel it is this way with learning. As trainers, we create situations for people to explore their route so that they can realign and re-adjust their course if they want to.

On seminars we choose our rocket ships - the activities and methods - and we name our moon - what do we want to do? I believe we are always trying to fly to the same point inside ourselves where learning takes place. It is through our own personal development that we influence the world around us and the communities we belong to. Our passion will create its own structure ... if we let it.

✗ What happens between an empty canvas and a painting?

- ✗ What happens between an empty space and a piece of theatre?
- ✗ What happens when someone takes a creative process and uses it as a learning tool to explore an issue, transform a problem, structure an organisation?

Celebrating Diversity! is a project which brings groups together through creative processes. However, the groups are not asked to focus on creating a piece of theatre or music, or required to paint a masterpiece, although this may happen as a natural part of the group process. Instead we invite groups to explore the process in between: we are more interested in the route taken than the final destination.

This year Celebrating Diversity! contributed to a European youth conference on Values Beliefs and Identities in Uniting Europe. We used music to explore with the group how they were communicating cross culturally: Are we listening to each other as we play? Are we letting everyone be heard? Is communication taking place across our borders? The music sessions brought out some very clear messages of a lack of listening within the group and people finding it very hard to connect to each other on any other than a superficial level. The chaos of the music they created acted as a metaphor for the groups' communication. We then took these issues to debrief as questions for the group and explored their communication. One day later we facilitated again and the group created a piece of music in two hours then performed it live to a public audience in a shopping mall. The group were awesome, they had started to communicate and the music made it tangible. The process of creating the music together had created valuable and practical learning in terms of how they as individuals from different backgrounds could learn and grow together as a group.



by Tim Merry (left)



Through my work with groups and creativity I have found one constant thread. Truths emerge in the form of questions - questions that open our minds and hearts to further learning. Some that have inspired me recently are:

“How can we organise in such a way that people care enough to contribute?” (Cultural Youth Centre, Utrecht July 2001)

“How can we organise it so that instinctively enough people hold the bass line to let the others improvise and not lose the beat?” (Slovenia, Youth camp 2001)

“Can we trust ourselves enough to do this?”

(Slovenia, before a small performance, Youth Camp 2001)

“Why does our thinking stop us doing?”

(Utrecht, Engage! Training on performance skills August 2001)

Circle Processes

As I write this, I am working with two people: Rachel Smith, an international drama therapist, and Luke Concannon, a UK-based singer and percussionist. Both these trainers use their respective skills to enable community building within diverse groups who are often in conflict, for example prisons and low income housing projects. My own passion lies in interactive theatre balanced with circle processes and debrief sessions to capture learning. While the debrief process is often a space in which to challenge and be challenged, Circle is a space in which to share experience and listen (for more information see *Calling the Circle* by Christina Baldwin; Bantam 1998). In *Celebrating Diversity!*'s work with groups we combine these diverse methods to address a variety of different issues, from entrepreneurship and leadership to creative problem solving and citizenship.

The type of work we are called on to do varies greatly and we find the methods we use are applicable to working with many issues and in many time frames. The shortest sessions we have done to this date is one hour and the longest was four days. We create a process using creativity as the experience to learn from. This could be creating a piece of percussion or voice work working with theatre in situational contexts (role play), using theatre games to physically explore issues of trust or even using a musical soundscape to relax a group. Often many of our different skills merge together to create something we never expected, musical statues of group leadership roles for example. We then bring this into circle or debrief to gather the learning and explore next steps. Much of the skill of facilitating in this context is the ability to rest in the moment with the group and be prepared to throw the plan out and respond to the needs of the group. Always remaining the guide by the side, not the sage on the stage.

Here are some of the outcomes I have witnessed in our group sessions:

Participants learn to trust themselves and trust the others in the group.

Participants learn to listen to each other and trust that others will listen to them.

By speaking the truth and being honest to ourselves in the here and now, we go in the right direction.

Participants learn they are good enough and that their way - although different - is as useful to the whole as everyone else's. The group realises that co-creation depends on diversity.

There must be passion: when we care, we contribute, and from that passion a structure emerges.

Outcomes such as these alter the way people choose to live their lives on a fundamental level. If the processes that are used can encourage people to alter within themselves, that change will then extend itself to the world around them. That change starts in each of us.

There is an air of celebration to our work, but also an atmosphere of challenge. For an eclectic group of young people to come together and work effectively with creative processes, they must communicate on a profound level. And this is a challenge. A young guy said to me after having done some drumming work: “it was all our different instruments that made it sound good, and for that we had to listen to each other”. What we try and do then in reflection in circle and through debrief is connect the learnings from the creative work to real life and the issues facing the group. When people communicate deeply, they awaken to a new reality. “This woman who is sitting next to me playing a drum has a completely different life to me, but still we are able to communicate in this moment.” “That man who is improvising with me sees this situation in another way to me but I still reckon we sound good.”

In this way our differences are our greatest unifier and our greatest divider. Artistic processes throw people into this paradox with their hearts and minds wide open. It is the chaos of division and the power of unity that allow our differences to make a difference. These concepts of chaos and unity underlie all contemporary issues. Our reality today is a constant dance between chaos and order. T.S. Elliot: “There is only the dance.”

Of course no group ever reaches the moon, as it is only a temporary signpost that guides the way to the next destination. Nor do we ever find the right route – if we did, we would be in equilibrium. And, as Stuart Kauffman, a theoretical biologist, says in *“At Home in the Universe”* (OUP 1995): “When you reach an equilibrium in biology, you are dead”.

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Celebrating Diversity! is offered by Engage! InterAct (www.engage.nu/interact/) in the Netherlands and Red Zebra in the UK (www.redzebra.org.uk).