



2.5. CHANGING THE OUTCOME

Aim

Tableau work in small groups focusing on changing the position of the powerless in a given situation, aiming to explore the experience of feeling powerless, to express it visually and to try out alternatives and see their effect. This approach is based loosely on the work of Augusto Boal (see notes on Boal on page 91).



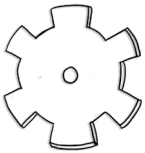
Time needed
50 minutes



Resources needed
None



Group size
Variable, in groups
of three people



Step-by-step description

1. Ask participants to think individually of an incident in which they felt powerless and unable to do anything. It could be a situation that they tried but failed to change, or one in which they would have liked to achieve a different outcome. (five minutes)
2. In groups of three, each person in turn silently sculpts the rest of the group into three tableaux that depict the beginning, the middle and the end of the situation. It is necessary to tell people who they are only if they are confused about what they are representing in the tableau. (10 minutes)
3. When all the groups have produced the set of tableaux for each of their members, they choose one of the stories to work on. Run the sequence of tableaux again for the chosen story, this time incorporating one spoken thought for each of the characters – that is, one thought in each tableau. The thoughts should be spoken in a predetermined order.
4. Working on the same story, extend the tableaux and thoughts into three short scenes – no more than a minute for each. Each person turns his or her thought into a sentence, combining it with some appropriate physical action. (five minutes)
5. Come back to the whole group and see the work from each subgroup. Choose one of the subgroups to use in a demonstration. Take a tableau that has an easily identifiable oppressor, and an oppressed person with whom we can feel sympathy. Ask the rest of the participants to suggest how the powerless person might act to alter the situation. Try out these suggestions, with the participant who has the new idea going into the piece and playing the person whose actions they want to change. Continue this process with each of the stories, either as one group or with two of the groups joining together and serving as an audience for each other. (15 minutes)

Reflection and evaluation

What is the effect of different actions on the outcome? How does the exercise relate to the lives of participants? What can they take away from this work? (five minutes)

Some further tips

It is important that the group works on creative alternatives to the powerless response, rather than merely criticising it. A group will often be able to see solutions that the individual does not see.



Some notes on Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed

“While some people make theatre, we all are theatre.”

Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) during the 1960s. He wanted to transform the monologue of traditional performance into a dialogue between audience and stage. Boal experimented with many kinds of interactive theatre, believing that dialogue is the common, healthy dynamic between all humans, that all human beings desire and are capable of dialogue, and that when a dialogue becomes a monologue, oppression ensues.

Inevitably, when someone shows us an image or tells us a story about their experiences, we invest that story and those characters with the colours of our own experiences. Image theatre uses the human body as a tool of representing feelings, ideas and relationships. Through sculpting others or using your own body to demonstrate a body position, you can create anything from one-person to large-group image sculptures that reflect the sculptor’s impression of a situation or oppression. You can use image theatre with groups that are familiar and confident with dramatic techniques and those with little or no experience. No one has to learn lines or perform, but the technique often helps people explore their own feelings and experiences in a non-threatening environment. It can also be a lot of fun!

For example, with a group of young people you might start to explore the theme of social exclusion. Two volunteers are invited to create a frozen picture or tableau, each holding a position in relation to one another – for example, one could be a confident member of society, the other a person who perceives themselves or is perceived by the others as an outsider. Other group members can contribute additional images to add to the picture – for example, bystanders, passers-by, or friends of either person in the picture – by inserting themselves into the tableau. The group leader taps each person in the tableau one by one on the shoulder and asks them to speak one or more of their thoughts aloud. It can be very illuminating to release members of the tableau individually for a short while and allow them to examine the picture created before they take up their place again.

This exercise can be developed in a number of ways. The original tableau could be held in front of the rest of the group, who are asked to decide on a location for the encounter, and who each person could be – name, age, occupation/role and so on. They are asked to think of other situations that may have led up to this particular encounter. When they have thought of enough different situations, they are divided into groups, each with the task of creating a tableau for one of the scenes, in order, leading up to the final tableau.

Following this, the whole group returns to the original tableau. Those not involved in the tableau are asked to move the situation towards some kind of resolution. They do this by replacing any character: by tapping that person on the shoulder, taking their place and assuming a new position, and perhaps speaking a new thought or spoken line.

These exercises generate a great deal of discussion, which will need to be sensitively handled by the leader.

Another feature of Boal’s work is Forum Theatre. In essence, this is a form of dramatic exploration that, in a subversive way, provokes understanding and learning, devising possible coping strategies to assist a group or individual in investigating possible solutions to particular oppressions or challenges. In the Forum Theatre people explore other persons, other ways which give them more power in a certain situation. It is about learning another kind of behaviour if it helps to prevent oppression. Forum does not compel, it does not say this is what you must do, but it does say maybe you could try this or that – it is up to you to decide in the end.

Forum scenes are usually presented as short scenes, which may well involve bringing to life the frozen images or tableaux already explored. Initially, the audience watches the whole scene, facilitated by a “joker”. The joker then tells the audience that the sketch will be performed again, except this time if anyone in the audience wants to suggest a different action or change to the script to bring about a better solution they must shout “STOP!” The audience member can then exchange places with the actor and try out their idea themselves or tell them how they want the scene to change. If the audience is reluctant to halt the action, the joker may do so and then invite the audience to suggest possible solutions.

Forum theatre not only empowers audiences and makes them part of the action, it also illustrates that there are always alternatives and choices to make, which can change outcomes.

Further reading:

Boal A. (1979), *The theatre of the oppressed*, Urizen Books, New York.

Boal A. (1992), *Games for actors and non-actors*, Routledge Press, New York.

Boal A. (1995), *The rainbow of desire. Selected articles by Augusto Boal*, Routledge Press, New York.
