

1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

Title

Dramatically re-examining conflict management with forum theatre

Abstract

In delivering content, professors often use case studies where students negotiate conflicts with each other. However, the quality of learning is dependent on the dyad's contribution. This loss of control on the learning outcomes can be rectified by re-examining the process of experiential learning. This session proposes using forum theatre, an improvisational pedagogy that demands meaning-making of a conflict situation. Here, participants uncover values, attitudes, and beliefs that affect communication. Similarly, through the improvisation, they get to rehearse a change in the outcome. This pedagogical model becomes a richer platform for learning as a process, rather than as a 'product'.

Keywords

conflict management, improvisation, forum theatre, experiential learning

2) Teaching Implications

Learning Objectives

Through this experiential learning session:

- (i) Participants will improvise and create imaginary situations (as a way to tap into problem-solving later);
- (ii) Participants will rehearse different strategies to overcome a conflict situation (as an embodied form of learning to address dissent in action);
- (iii) Participants will address, and reflect, on conflicts based on different values in critical and affective ways.

Teaching Topics

Using the study by Schulz-Hardt, Mojzish and Vogelgesang (2008) as a point of departure, the key teaching concepts are:

1. That conflicts and dissenting opinions can be productive, rather than destructive
2. That dialectical leadership can stimulate creativity and (organizational) performance
3. That dissent can lead to perspective-taking and mutual understanding.

Relevance and Theoretical Foundations

Within management studies, some researchers have examined conflict from the perspective of emotions, such as Fineman (1993, 2006), Ostell (1996), Averill (1997), Smedslund (1997), Deutsch & Coleman (2000), Forgas (2001), Mayne & Bonanno (2001), Vince (2002), Lindner (2006), Dreu & Gelfand (2008), and Simpson & Marshall (2010). They have acknowledged the multiple meanings emotions can have, while being embedded within a matrix of social practices, behaviours, and histories. Drawing on Fineman & Eden's "Adding Reality to Roleplay" (1981), this experiential workshop allows participants to feel the intensity of their emotions in a fictional context based on a real conflict. This methodology seeks to acknowledge people's value systems, ideologies, and beliefs about what is right or wrong. Yet at the same time, this format – "forum theatre" – allows for interventions to be played out in a 'drama', enhancing the authenticity of affective experiences while being in role. In a roleplaying situation such as this, consequences are affectively weighed and acted out. This form of rehearsal is akin to what Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch and Vogelgesang (2008) have identified as "dialectical leadership", where the expression of dissent and the transformation of dissent is facilitated within an organization to propose alternative solutions. It is also found that authentic dissent – rather than contrived dissent – is important in facilitating divergent thinking (see Nemeth, Brown, and Rogers, 2001). In a drama context, the conditions acting upon a conflict are dynamic, and as such, dramatic roleplaying of this nature (as opposed to behavioural training) is real life – and is arguably more effective in re-examining conflict management.

3) Session Description and Plan:

Session Duration

90 minutes

Class Size

20

Session Outline

10 minutes	Introduction to Workshop: expectations and objectives
20 minutes	Improvisation games
10 minutes	Processing
30 minutes	Forum Theatre: scenework and interventions
15 minutes	Processing ethical dilemmas and conflicts
05 minutes	Closure

At the start of the workshop, participants are seated in a circle. The facilitator introduces himself and invites the participants to introduce themselves very briefly. The participants are then invited to draw or write what their expectations are with regards to this workshop on experiential learning and conflict management on the board or flipchart. A brief discussion ensues.

The facilitator then invites the group to engage in some theatre games that foster improvisations and quick thinking. For example, an object is taken out on display one at a time, and participants are to “create” a new object with a different function. For example, a pen’s function is for writing. In the demonstration, the facilitator explains that this function needs to be changed to another object, and they would need to do a show-and-tell. Here, the pen can be changed into a telescope, a toothpick, or a javelin. Throughout this exercise, different objects will be brought out for creative exploration. There will be other theatre exercises to help participants respond and think on their feet – all of which are scaffolds to get them to discuss and manage the conflict creatively in the forum theatre later.

A quick processing happens to invite participants to reflect on the games and the skills they had acquired. Some of these might include: listening intently; imagination is creating something anew; empathy; spontaneity; embodiment; and

being able to articulate their own feelings and thoughts. The latter is an important focus as it becomes the driving 'force' for the conflicts in a drama later on, hence it is important for participants to articulate their own feelings and emotions through their bodies and voices.

In the next 30 minutes, the facilitator introduces a conflict situation (in this example, as a piece of forum theatre). Some participants are invited to create the scenes in freeze frames, so that the conflict becomes clearer sequentially. Once that has been "visualized", the facilitator invites the actors to improvise the dialogue that seems coherent with the case study. The facilitator then informs the other participants to think of what the protagonist in the story could have done differently to overcome this conflict. The scene is replayed, and any member of the audience can stop the action. The facilitator probes and invites them for deeper critical thinking. Whenever it is possible, the audience member replaces the original protagonist on stage, and then seeks to rehearse a new possibility to overcome the conflict. Some of the questions to provoke critical thinking include:

- What did you notice or observe about the characters when watching the performance?
- Is this a realistic portrayal of a conflict situation at work?
- Can you identify with this situation?
- Whose reality is this?
- What questions do you have for this actor?
- What values or beliefs governed the action of this actor/ protagonist?
- In what ways are these values, beliefs, or behaviours contradictory to the majority view?
- Who controlled the actions?
- Do we need new strategies to overcome this conflict, or are we happy with the status quo? Why?
- How did you/ we overcome or address this conflict?
- What strategies worked, and what did not work?
- How did you feel about this?

Discussions continue and facilitator invites more interventions until all the strategies are 'exhausted'. The facilitator summarises the scenes and the strategies for conflict management, and then problematizes them further, so that the conversation does not end with one right answer. This processing phase is important – and is often lacking in roleplays and case studies in conventional

management classes – because now that the participants have had a lived experience in the ‘drama’, they are able to emotively, cognitively, and kinesthetically respond to similar situations in the future. Questions such as

- What struck you about this activity?
- What new insights did you have from this forum theatre/ improvisation?

will elicit personal responses from the participants, while acknowledging the various interpretations and interventions of the same conflict.

This forum theatre methodology (Boal, 2002, 2008) is a rehearsal for change, and is one of the many ways process dramas and roleplays focus on thinking-in-action as a processual model (see also O’Toole, 1992; Bolton and Heathcote, 1999; Taylor and Warner, 2006) rather than finding solutions or behaviours as a training model with an ideal outcome.

In closing, the facilitator invites the participants to look at their expectations written down at the start of the workshop to review what they have learned. Essentially, what changed? Were expectations met? How did this method of thinking affect their ways of thinking and problem-solving? A brief plenary feedback is given and the facilitator ends the workshop.

4) Application to Conference theme: “Navigating the Changing Currents”

Theme Application

Feelings and emotions are not static (see, for example, Lindner, 2006). Identities are equally fluid. As such, concepts around values, beliefs, ideologies and behaviours associated with personhood and the organization are constantly in flux. They influence, as well as are being influenced by, histories, cultures, and life experiences. Yet in management studies, case studies, scenarios, and roleplays are not often executed (see, for example, Goyal & Parekh, 2012). They found that powerpoints, for faculty members, were the easiest to deliver, but students found projects to be the most effective. But their findings also showed that simulations and case studies were the most useful pedagogy. I would argue that if role plays were used, these activities tend to be instrumental and are devoid of real feelings and emotions in the negotiation or reconciliation process.

From a pedagogical perspective, Rangan and Zaltman (1998) advocated the use of high quality teaching of conceptual and contextual knowledge; Whitby (2007) asserted that the 21st century offers a new paradigm towards creativity; Ginsburg (2010) argued for a more student-centred pedagogy. These are the changing currents within management studies. I propose that a critical pedagogy embedded in cultures, norms, values, and complex human emotions would address these pedagogical gaps. A drama-based forum theatre methodology not only inculcates spontaneity and improvisational skills, but it also sharpens critical thinking, whilst foregrounding authenticity and vulnerability in real social contexts. These are also pre-requisites for leaders who are supposed to have emotional intelligence. This workshop is a demonstration in critical pedagogy, and it is argued that this model can address some of the complex human issues in tumultuous times.

5) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the OBTC conference?

Uniqueness

It is the first time I am presenting at OBTC.

However, in my curriculum design and execution of programmes as an a higher education lecturer, it is not the first time I am facilitating or teaching an experiential session with participants. The difference here is that my professional and academic training stems from drama and theatre, so I find that the use of “roleplays”, “simulations”, “case studies” within the business school context hardly explores human emotions and feelings in a real, contextualized manner. The absence of this emotions eventually presents roleplays (though potentially very powerful) as a ‘textbook’ activity with no change in beliefs, attitudes, or even behaviours. In *A Compendium of Pedagogies for Teaching Entrepreneurship* (2007) by Gibb and Price, for example, even the way a role play is executed is often seen in mock ‘interviews’ or behavioural training. This is in contrast to the essence of drama in education where participants do not ‘act’, but ‘react’ within a conceptual frame to give nuances to human interactions (see Bolton & Heathcote, 1999).

A similar example of this workshop will be presented at the Eastern Academy of Management conference in Baltimore, MD under EAL. For that other conference, the case study explored is different, even though the forum theatre methodology is the same. In this demonstration, the focus is on role history and biography within a conflict situation in an organization.

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