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**SOCIODRAMA IN HIGHER EDUCATION Adam Blatner, M.D.**

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See related paper on [Sociodrama](http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/sociodrama.html) on this website.

A young man, barely twenty, is sitting in a café talking to a friend. Suddenly, the woman at the table next to him screams, "Faggot! You disgust me!" and throws a gin and tonic on him, drenching his face and shirt. The young man is humiliated, speechless, and looks to the restaurant staff and his shocked friend for support, finding none.  The woman, in her 50s, continues raging against gay men. Someone then walks up behind her, touches her shoulder, and says, "I am so angry because I can't find a man of my own." Another person replaces the first one, saying, "I hate myself for sinking so low; I can't stand to see you so happy!" A third student touches the young man and says, as if voicing his inner thoughts, "This is so unfair! You have no fucking right to talk to me like that!"

This scenario is a vignette from a sociodrama session that occurred  in a graduate -level course on inter-cultural communication. Students were role playing, using a real-life experience of one of the group members. The comments after the first interaction were examples of a sociodramatic technique called doubling, which dramatically expresses what the main players may have thought but did not say. The theme of the reenactment, homophobia and prejudice in general, and the exploration did not use abstract theory, but rather the more compelling process of experiencing the situation in drama–as if it were happening in the present. The point of the exercise was to expose the underlying personal and cultural assumptions, beliefs, and expectations relevant to any social issue or personal conflict, which tend to be unrecognized or implicit in more academic analyses.

This article describes the history of the sociodrama approach, gives examples, and  explores its promise and relevance for educators who would like to bring the lives of their students and the formal curriculum closer.

**History**

Sociodrama is a derivative of psychodrama, a method of group psychotherapy invented in the mid-1930s by Jacob L. Moreno, M.D. (1889-1974). While psychodrama clarifies the dilemmas of an individual in psychotherapy, sociodrama works in mainly non-clinical contexts to clarify the issues involved in intergroup conflicts  (Moreno, 1943, 1977). Personal and social issues are impacted by a host of individual and cultural variables--expectations and definitions of the roles we play (Kellermann, 1998; Blatner, 2000; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). We live in an era of exceptional change, and this change is not merely techological but also social: People expect more out of life, women and minorities seek more civil rights, and most social norms and arrangements are being challenged. Indeed, this ferment needs to be recognized as one of the central features of our postmodern era.

Sociodrama fosters critical questioning and helps students recognize how some people feel alienated and dislocated in a world where people are more transient, cultures are mixing, and old norms, values, and implicit social arrangements no longer offer the sense of security they once did. Sociodrama’s praxis, its dynamic interplay of theory and practice, resonates with recent writings in fields such as social philosophy and humanistic psychology, especially those seeking to promote greater interpersonal freedom.

**Sociodrama as a Psychosocial Laboratory**

Experiential learning, for some academic subjects, is an ideal tool. For example, astronauts use flight simulators, chemists use laboratories, generals use military exercises, computer software is tested, and politicians role play before debates. All these express a growing awareness that complex systems cannot be fully anticipated; some degree of experimentation is needed to test and adapt the subject matter to the styles of the users. Sociocultural and political situations are no less complex, and sociodrama offers a living laboratory.

The idea of a human relations laboratory is at the heart of sensitivity training, encounter groups, and many procedures in organizational development, having its roots in the “T-Group,” a method developed by applied behavioral scientists in Bethel, Maine in the late 1940s. The pioneers were influenced by Moreno and the field theorist Kurt Lewin, and the early sessions including role playing; hence this approach was also called the “laboratory method.”  Psychological perspectives are increasingly recognized as necessary for a deeper appreciation of history, political science, and other subjects in the humanities. Sociodrama, by integrating psychology, social group dynamics, and cultural assumptions, serves as an adjunct to the standard textbooks, illuminating the historical foundations in the arts and sciences. As an action and experiential method, it integrates body-learning and appeals to the hearts and minds of students (Propper, 2003). The improvisational nature of the method further provides educators with a way to communicate the creative process that is inherent in all modes of inquiry.

**Sociodrama and Psychodrama**

Sociodrama differs from psychodrama in that the latter involves the role playing of the particulars of an individual’s life, which involves the convergence of many different roles. In contrast, sociodrama examines just one or two roles in general, what most people in a given role might be dealing with as they relate to others in a complementary role. The key roles in a challenging situation have their own depth and inner tensions, and naming the roles and clarifying their associated expectations and other issues becomes the focus of the work.

In the sharing period, individuals offer examples of their own particular life experiences, noting how these are similar or different from the enacted sociodrama. Even if students disclose details of their personal life in the discussion, a more individual, therapy-like exploration should not be pursued. It is important in an educational context for the leader and/or group members to resist the temptation to turn the process into the more individual focus of psychodrama. If personal issues are pressing, acknowledging that personal counseling is available is all that is needed. Nor should the leader allow class members to be subtly manipulated by peer pressure to disclose more about themselves more than they would have done otherwise. Since directing personal psychodramas requires a level of psychotherapeutic training that most teachers don’t have, so in the classroom the tendency of sociodrama to drift into psychodrama should be avoided.

**The Sociodramatic Method**

Sociodrama involves four phases: First, the group decides on a topic and begins to warm up to it and each other. Second, they explore the theme through a series of role-played or enacted scenes, employing various psychodramatic techniques to expose the deeper levels associated with the conflicts. Third, this process is brought to a close and a sharing phase ensues, where participants disclose further thoughts, feelings, questions, and ideas that they experienced both in role and then as the actual student in the classroom. The fourth phase could include a more general discussion, depending on the subject-matter.

**Warming-Up**

In addition to a brief explanation of the method, the first phase of sociodrama involves activities that foster a sense of safety and trust and build group cohesion. Another element includes a measure of playfulness, a sense of tentative openness that is part of an improvised exploration. This playfulness encourages trust, because a given enactment can viewed as a rehearsal, not something that counts. The mixture of trust-building activities and playfulness is needed because improvisational role playing can only emerge spontaneously in contexts that have low anxiety. The creative flow of ideas unfolds naturally when people feel others will withhold judgment.

**Selecting the Theme**

      The theme may be chosen by the instructor or group leader as part of the curriculum, or the issue to be explored may arise from the group’s own concerns. Sometimes the theme is decided upon a week or more in advance, and the roles might even be identified and assigned at that point; the students are then expected to do some research into the predicament associated with their role. If the leader initiates the general theme, the first part of the discussion after building group cohesion involves finding living and relevant examples, situations that could help the students appreciate the predicaments of those involved. Examples include:

  – a situation in literature, such as a play, novel, or story in the Bible or some other religious scripture. The point is to evoke what is not explicitly stated–the thoughts not spoken in the text, or underlying assumptions and beliefs (Pitzele, 1999.)

   – a historical event, exploring  the deeper reasons why the decisions were made in that instance.

   – a current sociocultural situation in which familiar roles or norms are challenged, including episodes in personal lives–dating, marriage, parenting, or family relations.

   – health concerns, such as pressures to drink, have sex, the dynamics of domestic abuse.

   – anticipated situations, how the students might respond to some political or social change or upcoming event

The situations can include varying degrees of “surplus reality,” meaning the inclusion of enacted events that perhaps could never happen, such as having an encounter between two politicians, philosophers, or other thinkers who lived in different centuries.

Teachers should help group members identify all the roles to be played in the scene. The exploration of the situation might involve an encounter between two people. Then they change parts, each student taking the other role in the scene. Other students might be invited to substitute for the initial players, showing how they might handle the problem. This process of exploration and including new perspectives, ways of interacting, and so forth, may be re-iterated several more times. Certain sub-themes within this encounter can become separate scenes. This process will allow for critical analysis and the personal reactions that follow.

After an enactment, participants may reflect on the experience, including their feelings in the role or what the character may have felt but did not express. Then they can de-role, clearly communicate how they as real people are not their characters, and share what they feel as a student in this class and in life.

Some enactments may involve several participants, perhaps with all of the students taking a role. Whatever the number of actors, the scenes can be shifted so that participants have different roles. One of the goals is to help the students become aware of all the people who could influence the participants, such as a newspaper reporter or editorial writer, leaders of the opposing political parties, family members, and so on.

For example, in a sociodrama about abortion, the fetus may be given a voice, using the principle of surplus reality. This reflects the way the mind works: While someone who is dead or not yet born does not have a voice, those voices are imagined and heard inside our minds. In that sense, psychological truth is expressed. (For this reason, Moreno called psychodrama a “theatre of truth”– what was or could not be said may be more true than the shallow gestures that occurred in the superficial world of actual “truth.”)

Simply naming the different roles in a complex situation involves exercising the imagination: Who might need to be in this scene to fully understand its dynamics and impact? Show how the players have inner conflicts, by having each role in an encounter played by three people–the one officially in role, and two behind the that player who play the different conflicting viewpoints. The classical cartoon character who has an angel on one side and a devil on the other, each with its own set of rationalizations is an example.

**Using Sociodramatic Techniques**

The goal of using of various techniques derived from psychodrama is not simply to portray the event as it might be seen to happen, but rather to elucidate the underlying psychological and cultural issues involved. For example, Abraham Lincoln suffered from depression and troubles with his family, but the question for the class might be more the conflicting concerns that affected his decisions as president.

A trained “auxiliary”–someone who can role play easily–is often helps in teaching a sociodrama class. Although this element is not necessary, if the teacher has associates or advanced students who share in the appreciation of sociodrama as a method, they might want to team up in this fashion.

The stage area is another added element. A stage area can be a raised area six to twelve inches above the classroom floor, and about ten to twelve feet in diameter. However, simply assigning one part of the classroom for enacted encounters may suffice. Behaviors that are enacted in this area should not be taken as representative of the real feelings or attitudes of the students who volunteer to take roles in the scene. The enactments are not literal, but rather tentative explorations.

Perhaps the most important technique is pausing in the action, which is a key element in rehearsing music or drama: The director calls cut and makes a suggestion, or simply says, “take it over.” This practice often involves a number of repetitions while the actors refine their approach. A statement or action has a variety of ways to play it–more strongly, gently, coarsely, subtly, and so on–, and in considering issues of politics, literature, psychology, and so forth, how something is expressed may be as important if not more important than the actual words spoken.

The teacher as director may suggest that the student playing a role vary his or her nonverbal behavior. Practicing an attitude or belief with a full voice, rather than weak can be both dramatic and transformative. People’s nonverbal behavior reinforces certain attitudes in their own being as well as communicating to others.

The technique of the double is also powerful. This technique has one actor portraying the inner voice or voice over of another actor. Another variant of this is the aside, in which the player turns and talks to the audience, indicating that what is said is not heard by others in the scene.

If the sociodrama involves an encounter between two people, in addition to these roles, the teacher might assign roles to the different concerns or loyalties that might impact on each opponent–the multiple double technique. The technique has two to four doubles stand behind each party, illustrating the complexity of a true dialog.

**Exploring Deeper Levels of Consciousness**

The double technique demonstrates one of the key values of sociodrama, which is to disclose the kinds of issues that are not generally admitted in ordinary discourse. The purpose is understanding. Psychological reality is more complex than the conventional idea that two levels of disclosure exist–open dialogue and secret. Five levels that can theoretically be discerned and played.

The enactment might begin with the exploration of the first level, the statements that the people in role could express openly, including the standard slogans and, clichés. The second level is then brought forth, using asides or the double (i.e., an auxiliary or another student playing the inner voice.)

Using such techniques, sociodrama also brings into open discourse a third level, the pre-conscious realm in which awkward thoughts and feelings that are not ordinarily admitted are brought into the open. People have certain attitudes and expectations of which they are only vaguely conscious–they register briefly in people’s minds, but are pushed away as uncomfortable. If stated, they would be expressed with an understood “I don’t even like to admit this to myself, but...”  Many prejudices and irrational components of belief operate on this level; therefore, when brought into explicit consciousness in the group, they are more amenable to re-evaluation, deeper understanding, and healing.

The ideas that occur at level three, in the pre-conscious, are actually only the beginning. A fourth and deeper, unconscious level also exists that contains thoughts and feelings that are out of synch with the person’s beliefs about himself and cannot be consciously admitted. Carl Jung calls this level of repressed thoughts “the shadow.” Many find such ideas or feelings unacceptable, repugnant or socially disreputable.

Even though we generally cannot directly access our fourth level, just knowing that the unconscious exists begins to loosen the rigidity of repression and makes exploration a little more possible. Sociodrama can help students see in the imagined lives of the roles being played  what they might not have been able to permit themselves to see in themselves–especially if there is sufficient social distance–culturally, status, or age.

The fifth level can also be probed: These ideas have not been repressed so much as never considered. We live in a time of multiculturalism when what used to seem unthinkable as customs and attitudes are now being brought into discourse. It is becoming increasingly difficult to have never heard of previously taboo ideas.

The personal is political, and the psychological attitudes about various issues go deep. Dealing with such levels only at the level of logical argumentation denies the reality of the psychological influences on politics, economics, and social relations. Sociodrama brings these deeper attitudes into explicit awareness so they can be re-evaluated. The process aims to identify the norms, rules, values, assumptions, beliefs, and specific elements within human unconscious complexes that may be obsolete, arguable, worthy of revision or finer discrimination, or otherwise critiqued. Such forces are not merely influences in personal neurosis, but also determine major historical events, underlie schools of political and religious philosophy, and interpenetrate the study of the humanities. In other words, sociodrama is a process for analyzing and examining social situations in terms of their deeper psychological, social, and cultural dynamics.

**Developing Empathy**

Another major technique in sociodrama is that of role reversal–changing parts or having a person who was arguing a point shift roles and take the opposing position. Another variant, if several roles are present, is having everyone involved shift and take a different role part-way through an enactment, which will foster a more compassionate level of understanding.

Warming up to the issues and roles is not enough, it is also important to learn mental flexibility and imagine what it is like in other roles. This is the most reliable core of empathy, and a skill that can be practiced and developed. Thus, after acting out scenes at different levels and identifying some of the various issues, the scene is paused, and the participants change roles.

Shifting roles warms up the participants to imagining the situation from a different perspective, which is what actors do, especially in an unsavory part. Learning to explore a role quite different from one’s own familiar outlook may be one of the most important elements in not only learning about the world, but in developing one of the essential components of true maturity–the capacity to relinquish egocentricity.

**Rationale for Sociodrama in Education**

Sociodrama is useful because it is a vehicle for a number of educational dynamics and functions:

First, it recognizes that people learn best by doing, through experiential modes of education (Mathis, Fairchild & Cannon, 1980). In sociodrama, the students participate in all components of the process. This idea further integrates rational process that can be expressed in language, and the less rational but no less meaningful domain of feelings, intuitions, non-verbal dimensions of communication, and imagination into education.

Second, young adulthood ideally involves a relative consolidation of a sense of meaning, which entails a balancing of task and a heightened sensitivity to values: Whitehead (1948: 199) called this process aesthetic education, and noted that through it participation in the arts aided a more holistic approach. In this sense, sociodrama is part of an arts education–it is an improvisational and interactive application of theatre to help people become more aware of their own values, preferences and how they may be intellectually coordinated with evidence, concepts, and other modes of learning. A liberal education might involve this balance and integration of aesthetic sensitivity and task- and fact-oriented learning.

Hardin (1978) notes that opinion change involves possibly months of unconscious wrestling with new ideas as the mind re-adjusts its inner ecology. Sociodrama as a core element in the curriculum allows a gradual processes of re-evaluation and consolidation of worldviews. Yet the process also supports the emergence of a heightened degree of mental flexibility, because shifting roles leads to holding viewpoints more lightly.

This idea also recognizes that from high school onward many young people are developing their sense of meaning, belonging and purpose. Higher education offers an opportunity to rationally coordinate these ideas when more experiential modes such as sociodrama are part of the curriculum. The process brings up the question of relevance for students and challenges them to wonder for themselves what is important.

This involvement takes into account the unique learning style and requirements of each student. Each participant will generate his or her own interpretation of an event, based on personal background, temperament, abilities, types of motivation, interests, and more subtle forms of preference (Reiss, 2000; Blatner, 2005). Each of these variables has more specific types, and in combination, results in a complex interplay that cries out for a type of education that can be individualized. Sociodrama allows for and builds on the unique perspective of each participant.

The process of drama is exciting, drawing on the intrinsic motivation provided by improvisational activity. This excitement occurs because the mind is intrigued and often delighted by the subtle inspirations that come through the process of spontaneous interaction. One discovers unknown aspects of one’s creative unconscious. Being able to share this natural self-expressive impulse in a context of playful safety is fun, as is the experience of being creative.

Students also enjoy the implicit learning of psychology, because they find they often have mixed feelings, and this process validates their natural ambivalence. The role concept serves as a tool for appreciating and constructively working with both intra- and interpersonal conflicts.

Many of the benefits of a therapy group also apply to learning groups, especially those that call on the integration of personal understanding, empathy, and meaning-making. Processes such as modeling, sharing information, cultivating a degree of altruism and helpfulness, and discovering one’s concerns are shared by others add to group cohesion and a spirit of optimism in learning (Yalom, 1995).

Sociodrama’s capacity to help students re-evaluate general norms allows for a sublimation of a natural tendency towards rebellion, especially in late adolescence and the college years (Murray, 1948). This process also offers an alternative to the widespread tendency noted by Deborah Tannen (1998) to present issues in terms of polarized positions. Sociodrama offers a forum for an expression of a middle ground and the exploration of other alternatives.

Finally, the value of this skill applies to the elucidation of personal philosophy and a critique of general cultural clichés and the skills themselves are particularly appropriate for coping with a more complex and changing world.

**Implications for Education**

In the postmodern era, education needs to transform to evoke optimal degrees of creativity (Pink, 2005). Our culture is in transition, with the social institution of education leaving an era in which schooling was primarily a process of instilling information, and entering an era in which the process becomes educare, (from the Latin, "to draw out")  drawing forth from the students’ inner potentials. The technology of psychology is becoming widely applied and its concepts more integrated. Sociodrama is a method that embodies some implications of these developments for higher education:

  – It cultivates psychological literacy, building skills in communications, problem solving, and self-awareness.

  – Its techniques, such as role reversal, doubling, and taking role playing into a deeper appreciation of underlying assumptions and attitudes, promotes a truly relevant understanding of the people and the predicaments in human situations.

  -- Sociodrama’s group techniques also support students as they identify their own values, convictions, and perspectives, while leaving them provisional and open to development.

  -- It fosters the skills of improvisation, expression, and creativity, which are qualities needed in a changing world.

Psychology was once more of an academic subject but became increasingly known in association with the treatment of mental illness or simple neurosis. As such, the field was somewhat stigmatized. In a sense, it is analogous to the way computers were thought of as only for technicians until the user-friendly personal computer made it possible for ordinary people to apply these tools in a thousand ways. Psychology is now becoming recognized as a group of concepts and tools that can be practically applied in business, community-building, and the home. This recognition is only beginning to gain traction–the stigma still is prevalent. The hunger for greater effectiveness and the availability of ways of achieving this goal make it inevitable that psychology will become an integral part of education, business, organizational development, religion, parenting, and relationships in general. In turn, higher education is strategically important for those interested in fostering this integration.

**Summary:**

Let us return to the opening vignette in which a class in intercultural communication enacted a scenario drawn from the experience of one of its members. Imagine how much richer and deeper the subsequent discussion and debriefing would be if this sociodramatic exercise were compared to a straightforward lecture on homophobia from a professor. This contrast shows how higher education needs to integrate the benefits of the latest technologies. Practical techniques arising from psychotherapy, organizational development, the human potential movement, and other developments in the broad realm of the behavioral sciences are particularly promising.. Those fields were more compartmentalized a generation ago, but are becoming recognized as necessary for a truly relevant and contemporary educational process–that is, preparing people to cope with an ever-more-rapidly changing world. Schools should value creativity and seek to build on the skills that enhance it, which include noticing and adapting to individual differences, focusing on strengths and dealing wisely with weaknesses; learning the skills of psychological literacy; learning to be more empathic with others, addressing complex social and political situations (through sociodrama); working more effectively in groups and teams; and developing the capacity for improvisation and self-expression.

Certainly higher education as a social institution is capable of as much reform as other institutions in our culture, from marriage to various political and economic arrangements. IN higher education, these ideas apply to life-long learning, including classes for middle-aged people and seniors. Each age group has similar and different challenges, and throughout all, students as active participants give input as to what is important and relevant to them. Finally, the resulting process will require a greater degree of mutuality, and modification of focus and approach by both teachers and students.

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