

Mainstreaming Moreno

Teaching teachers to use Action Methods

by Keith Tyler-Smith

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Introduction

At the 1996 ANZPA conference in Brisbane I attended a workshop run by Elizabeth Synnot, in which she used Sociodrama to set out a series of principles to be considered when working psychodramatically with commercial, government or other organisations. The main thrust of these principles were that, to achieve recognition and acceptance by the organisation you are working with, it is necessary to understand and use the cultural norms and language of the organisation and to frame the methods you are using with their own workplace terms and practices.

This article describes how a course on *Advanced Action Methods for Teaching Professionals* was designed, approved and taught for the staff development unit of the Christchurch Polytechnic as part of their Certificate of Adult Teaching (CAT) programme. This course is

one module in a series of courses that make up the Diploma of Adult Teaching, a nationally recognised qualification for tertiary level tutors.

The challenge was to design a course that met the needs and requirements of a teaching institution while at the same time preserving the essential principles of spontaneity, role development, sociometry and warm up, as developed by J.L. Moreno.

Changing direction

Three years ago I changed careers and became a Polytechnic tutor, teaching television production in a degree programme. The previous seventeen years had been spent directing and producing television programmes for the national state owned television network, so the change in careers was not wildly dramatic, particularly as I had also done some part time teaching before being appointed a full time tutor.

My adaptation to the teaching role was further eased by virtue of the nearly five years of psychodrama training I had done to that point. This helped considerably in developing those roles associated with managing the group dynamics of the class and being a facilitator of student learning. I also actively took what opportunities I could to use *Action Methods* in my classroom teaching work.

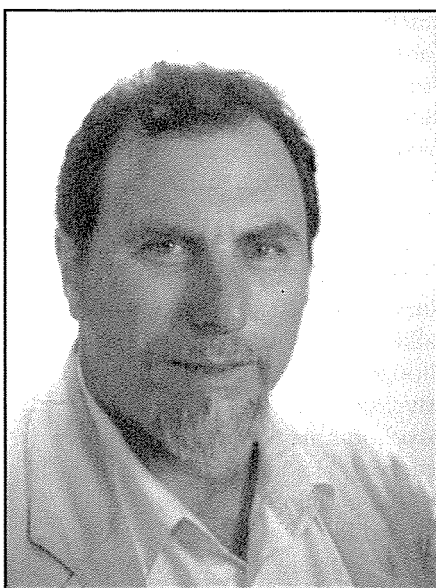
While I had confidence in my group skills and the subject area I was teaching I had a great deal to learn about the educational processes of learning objectives, rationales, outcomes, unit standards, range statements as well as such things as formative and summative assessment procedures. These formal aspects of the educational system required me to become a student again myself as I took advantage of a variety of courses offered to Polytechnic tutors which taught the fundamentals of educational theory and professional tutoring practice.

Two of these courses were significant in my development as a tutor, but for quite different reasons. One of the courses, which was focused on a variety of teaching methods, had a session on what was termed *Action Methods*. This was a very perfunctory, once over lightly session that mostly dealt with action group starters and very basic warm up exercises and "ice breakers". There was little or no explanation given for the terms used, or the theoretical or underlying principles for these activities and how or why you would use them. Almost anything that had students up and out of their seats was classified as an action method and terms like "warm up" and "ice breakers" were virtually interchangeable.

They were largely designed to be implemented as ways of starting off a new group of students or as a way of getting a bit of variety and student participation into classroom teaching practice. As a reasonably experienced psychodrama trainee I found this session quite lacking in depth or understanding of the principles involved, but I was intrigued at how challenging and exciting some of the other tutors found even these very simple action oriented ideas and activities.

The second course I did, which was to have a far reaching effect, was one on how to design a course and write it up in such a way that it could be successfully steered through the rigorous processes of the Course Approvals Committee. Because all courses inevitably involve teaching and tutor resources, space and facilities and in some cases expensive equipment, all new courses have to justify their purpose and value to the institution and have to gain approval by this committee before they can be run. Furthermore, for a course to get approval, it must be presented with all the appropriate documentation which outline not only the content but also a rationale, a resource schedule, all the assessment processes, the learning objectives and outcomes involved and the educational theory on which the course is based.

This course dealt with a variety of education theories as well as all the formal quantitative and qualitative protocols for measuring and assessing the learning outcomes of the students being taught. I found this a very challenging course, both enlivening and frustrating at the same time: enlivening in that it opened up a great many new ideas and understandings for me and frustrating in that designing a formal



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course is a very time consuming and complex task.

Course design requires the designer to ask some very fundamental questions about what is to be taught, how it will be taught and what assessment processes will be used to measure the success or otherwise of the various learning outcomes. The complexity stems from the requirement that the learning must be broken down into its component parts and be measurable, demonstrable and documentable. As with any discipline, there is a language and a set of concepts to master which become the currency of intellectual exchange within that discipline.

The major part of this course's assessment process was that each of the course participants had to design a course of their own devising.

Psychodrama and the teaching institution

The starting point for deciding on what sort of course I would design came out of the Christchurch

Institute of Training in Psychodrama's requirement for advanced trainees to set up and run a supervised group practice in 1996. As part of their training programme each advanced trainee was to set up and run a group under the supervision of their primary trainer. My interest and focus for some time had been to find ways of using psychodrama within the institution I was working and to adapt the method to meet the institution's educational expectations so I was keen to set something up at the Polytechnic.

There have from time to time been workshops run by various experienced and qualified psychodramatists for tutors at the Polytechnic, but these were largely experiential workshops rather than being focused on teaching aspects of the method itself, though no doubt much good teaching took place. The fact that these workshops were very sporadic, with quite long gaps between them meant that their value to the tutors as models for their own practice were limited. Some tutors had tried to apply some of the ideas and activities they had picked up in these workshops, but a lack of continuity and ongoing supervision meant that problems in implementation were not resolved and the resulting loss of confidence and lack of experience meant that the ideas and activities, though exciting and valuable, quickly fell into disuse.

There was a perception, particularly among the staff education and development unit, that psychodrama was too potent and complex for tutors to use in the normal course of their teaching. There was a fear that it was too easy for emotional stuff to be let loose and for the tutor to lose control or

worse, cause damage by inappropriately handling the situation. Additionally, psychodramatic methods were seen as something too vague to measure in terms of educational assessment processes and too difficult and complex to define in terms of educational objectives and learning outcomes.

The experience with the so called *Action Methods* I had had on the CAT course on different teaching methods made me realise that there was a serious lack in knowledge, understanding and practice of the theoretical and experiential processes of *Action Methods* and consequently there existed a significant niche that a properly designed course could fill.

With the confluence of these various considerations, my goal became one of a) setting up a group situation that would further my training and move me closer to becoming accredited as a *Role Trainer*; b) find an appropriate subject area that would be suitable for designing a course for and thus enrich my role as a tutor; and c) design a course that I could get approved and run as part of the staff education and development programme and thus have a psychodramatically based course as part of the Polytechnic's formal teaching programme that was both true to its Morenian principles and had legitimacy as a properly constituted and educationally sound course of study.

Designing the course

One of the first issues I had to deal with, as far as designing a course that was to teach psychodramatic methods for teachers, was concerned with how to break down a very deep and complex subject area into

teachable sessions. The inspiration for how to proceed came from a conversation I had with Graham Geddes, a teacher and psychodramatist from Timaru in South Canterbury. We were both residents at a five day workshop being run by Max Clayton and Chris Hosking at a Scout camp called Raincliff near Timaru. Graham was talking about how he had once thought about writing his psychodrama thesis on teaching psychodrama techniques to other teachers. His idea was to take each of the techniques used in psychodrama separately and teach them as discrete units, building up a comprehensive overview of the entire method over time.

This idea sat in my memory banks for a couple of years and when I sat down to think through the detail of how to design such a course I used his concept as the starting point and for that I am very grateful to Graham.

The second issue I had to deal with was what to call this course. I was already aware that there was quite a strong resistance to anything with the term *Psychodrama*. included. Psychodrama was seen as therapy and not appropriate for use in the classroom, particularly one where non-affective subjects were being taught. My strategy here was to co-opt the term *Action Methods* as understood by the institution.

To distinguish it from its low-level cousin I decided to call the course *Advanced Action Methods for the Teaching Professional*. This I felt would give the course a certain stature and would warm up prospective participants to the notion that this would be a useful and enriching course to do particularly those who were experimenting with or using basic *Action Methods*. It

would also be less threatening than using the term *Psychodrama* and would capitalise on what was already familiar and understood by the teaching fraternity at the Polytechnic and its relatively high and accepted recognition factor would be an advantage.

I took as my operating philosophy the definition of *Action Methods* that Antony Williams describes in his book, *Forbidden Agendas: Strategic Action in Groups* (Routledge, London & New York, 1994):

In action methods, as distinct from psychodrama, the action may only last a short time, and does not usually involve the family-of-origin. It may be group-centred rather than individual-centred, and could even be a simple illustration of a point – explaining or teaching something perhaps, by having chairs or cushions representing two sides of a debate or two scientific theories. Mostly there tends to be a bit of moving around, and the taking up of roles. The versatility of action and colour makes contrasts clearer, allow new points to emerge and can inject an exhilarating air of experimentation and play. At the same time, their ability to be safe and low key makes action methods suitable for groups, organisations or classrooms where there is no commitment to psychodrama as such, and where indeed the processes of a full psychodrama would be inappropriate.

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In designing a course you start at the end and work backwards. The first thing you have to decide is what the course participant will know and be able to do when they have finished the course. The second thing is to devise a series of assessment strategies that will test whether or not the course participant can demonstrate that they know, understand or can do what they have been taught ...

the course. The second thing is to devise a series of assessment strategies that will test whether or not the course participant can demonstrate that they know, understand or can do what they have been taught. Once this has been achieved then what goes into the course will be determined by these other two processes. So in order for my course to cover the wide variety of techniques, theory, functional performance and experiential learning activities I had to design a series of objectives and outcomes that would allow for this to happen.

The course structure

The course was designed to be delivered in ten, three hour sessions. Eight sessions to be delivered on a weekly basis with two sessions

delivered in a six hour workshop style session. In total the course comprised of thirty hours of class activity and thirty hours of out of class practise, study and reflection.

The course aim

This course was designed for full-time and part-time tutors who regularly teach groups of students. The participants were to explore, experience and apply a range of *Advanced Action Methods* appropriate to their teaching circumstances and practise. They were to be introduced to the principles of Role Theory as defined by J.L. Moreno, as it applied to the use of *Action Methods* and working with learning groups. Emphasis would be placed on designing learning experiences that would cater for individual thinking, learning and interacting styles.

Learning objectives and outcomes

Some of these learning objectives and outcomes were as follows. On completion of the course, participants would be able to:

- Describe Moreno's concept of a role
- Describe Moreno's concept of spontaneity
- Describe the main components of Moreno's role theory
- Identify a range of roles and role relationships of individuals in a learning group
- Describe Moreno's concept of warm up and how it applies to a learning group
- Identify and discuss the nature of a group's warm up to a learning task in terms of its strength and nature
- Identify and discuss the way a tutor's personal warm up affects

the learning group's warm up to a learning task and subsequent performance

- Explore and make explicit a range of sociometric relationships within a learning group
- Use sociometric principles to measure and describe aspects of the learning needs of individuals within a learning group
- Chart the workplace social atom of a colleague
- Demonstrate the use of a variety of action methods including Concretisation, Interviewing for a Role, Scene Setting, Role Reversal, Mirroring, Coaching, Doubling, Sociodramatic Enactment and Sociometric Explorations through structured class exercises to an acceptable standard
- Plan a teaching activity that incorporates one or more Action Method as part of a structured learning process
- Design and carry out a sequence of steps necessary to implement Action Methods in a structured teaching/learning session with peers
- Design and carry out a teaching/learning session in own area of expertise, using Action Methods and have the session monitored by a tutor or a peer
- Reflect and evaluate the effectiveness of using Action Methods for a lesson through a structured evaluation process.

The course content

The course content were divided up into the following ten sessions:

1. Experiential learning, and an introduction to Action Methods and Moreno's concepts of warm up and spontaneity
2. Moreno's Role Theory and the concept of role systems, role

- relationships, role naming and role analysis
3. Concretisation, making abstract concepts concrete
 4. Interviewing for a role, scene setting and role reversal
 5. Sociometry and the workplace cultural atom – making explicit, measuring and charting relationships within a variety of teaching/learning groups
 6. Mirroring, doubling and coaching as aids to learning and role development
 7. Mini-teaching session in which course participants design and deliver a twenty minute action methods based teaching session using the course members as students and receiving verbal and written feedback on their performance
 8. As in 7
 9. Sociodramatic enactment, exploring group issues and concerns
 10. Course revision and specific practice.

Course assessment processes

The assessment processes were to be a mixture of formative and summative assessments. The formative assessments were to consist of a variety of practical sessions within class time in which the course members would practice various methods and receive direct feedback from peers and the tutor. Participants were encouraged to bring specific teaching issues to the session from their own teaching practice so that they could explore and rehearse various options the course work provided. Participants were also encouraged to try out various ideas and activities in their own classes and to reflect on their

own performance and success during this course, again having the opportunity to explore, examine, discuss and rehearse in safety.

The summative assessments were to consist of a variety of practical exercises, written and verbal evaluations from peers and the tutor and written reflections on their own practice and performance. Three summative assessment points were nominated:

1. A mini-teaching session in which each participant taught a twenty minute session in class time, using their fellow course members as students. Each session was to be accompanied by a verbal and a written feedback session. Each course member was then to reflect on their own performance and write a reflexive essay which detailed their own primary learning points.
2. Design and deliver a teaching session in a tutor's own class situation in which action methods were to be used. This session was then to be observed either by the *Action Methods* tutor, or a peer from the course. This observer was then to organise an evaluation process with the students to determine the learning experienced and give feedback to the tutor and to write a report based on these findings.
3. The course member was then to reflect on and write a report on their own perceptions of their performance and how the class evaluation squared or otherwise with their intention.
4. Write an essay that reflected on the course member's own role system and functioning as it applies to their teaching role and what had been developed during the *Action Methods* course

Proposing and delivering the course

It took the best part of six months of part time work to finally get all the various parts of the course design in place and have it ready to be assessed. It was passed as completed in July of 1996 and I was deemed to have successfully completed the course. I then approached the Staff Education and Development Unit with a proposal to run this course starting in October of 1996. They were keen to have the course run as part of their end of year programme and the course outline was duly sent to the Course Approvals Committee for ratification. At the same time I sent the course outline to the C.I.T.P. for approval for this proposed course to fulfil the requirements for my psychodrama training in the supervised group practice programme for advanced trainees. In due time both the Course Approvals Committee and the C.I.T.P. gave their go ahead and the course began on Thursday October 3.

I had eight students, seven of whom were women and one of whom was a staff trainer. The course exceeded my own expectations and that of the participants, if the course evaluations are anything to go by. I learned a huge amount and enjoyed teaching the course immensely.

Someone once wrote that if you want to learn more about something; teach it! In my case this was never more true. My own understanding and knowledge of Moreno's ideas were greatly enlarged and developed through having to be well enough prepared to explain it in simple terms to people who were not familiar with the concepts. I came to a greater appreciation of those who have thought long and hard about these concepts and have written

about them. Particularly the likes of Tony Williams, Max Clayton and Anne Hale, they and others became important inspirations in the development and maintenance of my own warm up and for the written resources I used in the classwork. I learned how valuable it was to have an auxiliary in the group who had some experience with psychodrama and how this enlivened my creativity and spontaneity. Above all though, I came to a greater appreciation of my own qualities as a spontaneous facilitator of learning, a psychodramatic communicator and group leader and a recognition of how much I had grown in those roles during the development and duration of the course.

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I enjoyed the growth of the course participants as they came to grips with difficult concepts and took large risks with their own learning and functioning. I have vivid memories of being taught the mysteries of how computers process their data and the specifics of differentiating between a Hawke's Bay Chardonnay or one from Marlborough, all through the use of *Action Methods*. I particularly value the courage and perseverance

exhibited by several course members as they tried something that did not work as was intended, willingly shared their sense of failure and then went back and tried again, each time building on their experience and their greater understanding. Perhaps the single biggest source of satisfaction was to see how the concept of the tutor's warm up, and that of the group and each individual, was taken aboard by those on the course so that it became understood as a continually unfolding process that influences everything that is done, rather than a one off party trick used to impress or entertain a new group.

Of course there will be a few things I'll change and approaches to particular elements I'll revisit when I come to do the course again. I'd also like to get hold of more written resources that are focused on using action methods in non-therapeutic settings. There seems to be something of a shortage of such materials that even trawling the internet has not helped as much as I might have expected. My thanks to Francis Batten and Mike Consedine for their generous provision of written materials and support.

Above all, though, I am very pleased that Moreno's vision is now firmly part of the mainstream of the education thought and practice of this institution, albeit a small, tender and growing part.