Psychodrama at Distance: Effective Supervision Using Communication Technologies

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Abstract
Psychodrama and electronic technologies seem unlikely bedfellows. As this paper demonstrates, they are, in fact, made for each other though surprisingly little has been written about their combined potential. Drawing on vignettes and case examples as illustration, John Farnsworth demonstrates how effective supervision can take place in the absence of a physical psychodrama stage. He describes the way in which he uses all aspects of the psychodrama method via email, phone, digital and online communications, to create warm, functional working relationships. Psychodramatists are invited to reflect on the way that psychodrama can and will be used in the emerging vibrant electronic worlds of the future.

Key Words
coaching, communication, distance supervision, doubling, email, internet, media, mirroring, new technologies, phone, psychodrama, relationship, role reversal, social and cultural atom

Introduction

I have just finished a phone supervision session with an adult student living in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand's largest city. I am 600 kilometres away in Dunedin. He is excited about a big project he is developing on radio news announcing. He is a skilled professional broadcaster who knows his field far better than I. What he does not know is how to write up such a project, as his course requires, and he is very anxious about this. So, over the phone, by email, using the internet and even texting, I am assisting him — not only with his writing but his anxiety.

What better method to guide me in this distance supervision work than psychodrama? I can assist my writer by utilising warm up, role theory, sociometry,

social and cultural atom repair, doubling, mirroring and role reversal. I can call on the roles of teacher, facilitator, consultant and evaluator (Williams, 1995), all at distance, to do so. Even though we have never met, and may never do so, we have sustained an active and positive working relationship facilitated by modern communication technologies for over a year now. My client is enthusiastic about how much he enjoys this method of learning.

Our interaction is typical of my experience with distance supervision. Over the last twelve years I have experienced effective supervision at distance in clinical, educational and psychodramatic contexts, as both supervisor and supervisee. Interactivity over distance, away from the face to face, has expanded exponentially with the arrival of new digital technologies (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). In the supervision field, work can be undertaken through videoconferencing (Gammon et al., 1998), online teaching (Sullivan & Glanz, 2004), online counselling (Borders & Brown, 2005), email (Suler, 2001; Graf, 2002), telepsychiatry (Heckner & Giard, 2005), telephone (Manosevitz, 2006) and online supervision (GroupInterVisual). As well, there is distance psychology and psychotherapy (Hauke, 2009).

In this article I demonstrate the ways in which Moreno's methods maintain their effectiveness when physical distance requires the use of communication technologies. Setting, stage, auxiliaries and props may be absent but the central element remains, and that is the relationship. As on a stage, the relationship at distance can be assessed, developed, sustained and deepened through the psychodramatic method, through the maximisation of spontaneity and creativity. I use educational supervision for illustration because it vividly highlights how educational and clinical aspects of the method can be applied at distance.

When I am supervising at physical distance I pay attention to different relational cues than when I work face to face, so I do not become blind or deaf to the nuances of a supervisee's roles. In practice, different communication media shape the working relationship in distinctive ways. For example, it is more difficult to detect nonverbal communication in the blandness of electronic texts than to pick up the intricate hesitations and subtle tonal shifts in phone conversations. The many new media available, from Facebook to Twitter, even Second Life, each poses unique communication challenges (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; boyd, 2009) for supervision at distance.

Using Psychodrama to Develop Sound Principles of Distance Supervision Practice

As a distance supervisor, I have largely been involved with professional broadcasters. They are a lively and highly engaged group of supervisees who are usually, though not always, good communicators. Many live in New Zealand but some are scattered as far as Vietnam, Egypt, Singapore and Britain. They range from broadcasting executives, journalists and film makers to radio station

managers, sales people and technical staff. My relationship with each normally lasts between one and two years, beginning with a teaching relationship and moving towards supervision of a major project connected to the workplace. By reflecting on our interactions, I have generated some sound principles for distance supervision using Moreno's theories and methods.

As I describe them, the most important principles include attention to the developing relationship, the importance of effective staging, the warm up to spontaneity and progressive role development, and attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues that constitute the relationship. There is also the use of role assessments these cues offer, and the continuous use of doubling, mirroring and role reversal to encourage sustained role development, whatever communication medium is involved.

Paying Attention to the Supervisory Relationship

The key principle is the development of the relationship. If this is established effectively, it can withstand the limitations that sometimes arise through lack of face to face contact. It can also tie together interactions across all sorts of different settings and circumstances. In turn, this allows the supervisor to pay attention to the different kinds of cues and nonverbal signals available through a particular medium, and the way the medium itself shapes exchanges in the relationship. To take a simple example, the tempo of exchanges is much slower through the mail system than it is through email. Knowing this, a supervisor can be alert to the different lengths of silence that may signal an interruption or communication failure in one system as opposed to another (Suler, 2001). Breaks, of whatever length, can indicate the need for relationship maintenance or repair. On the other hand, when the tempo speeds up, this often suggests an intensifying warm up by each member of the supervisory relationship and a greater engagement with the task at hand. It may also communicate increasing spontaneity.

The Relationship is the Stage

Building the relationship is important in another way too. The stage is a central component of psychodrama, generally considered as a physical space constructed in a quite specific way. What happens to the stage when there is no face to face contact and no common physical space? The relationship itself and the medium of communication act in this capacity. As a distance relationship grows, it develops boundaries regarding the interactions that take place within it. These become, in effect, the stage. The cues, gestures, interchanges and content, whether on paper, aurally or electronically, form the staging of the relationship. In this context, different communication media simply offer different opportunities for staging.

For example, when I read a supervisee's email, I recall the previous contact and relationship we have developed. More than that, the words on the screen, just like any conversation, offer clues to the roles mobilised by the sender in writing the email. These are also likely to prompt my own warm up and counter roles. Out

of these, I form a response which becomes my reply to the sender. I have warmed up to action and my reply, in the context of an email, is the action I take.

Through this one simple sequence staging has taken place, a sequence that develops from, and then continues to build, our relationship. And so it continues in the exchanges between us. The relationship itself is the stage, with all the existing and developing roles in both of us that constitute it. Knowing this, as a supervisor engaged with the psychodrama method, I can then draw on the instruments of the drama. I can assist the development of spontaneity and new roles through all the techniques available in psychodrama, from doubling, mirroring and role reversal to modelling, maximising and soliloquy. I give examples below.

Paying Attention to the Level of Warm Up

The value of the relationship and the way in which it is conducted suggest two other important principles of distance supervision. As I have just suggested, one is to pay attention to the level of warm up to the relationship. The supervisor who stays alert to the cues as well as the content offered through different media gains valuable information about how a client's warm up increases or decreases, as well as to the direction of the warm up. I recently supervised a young broadcaster who, unknown to me, had suffered a harsh and destructive working relationship with her previous boss. The supervision was conducted through email and I was puzzled at first by the sporadic exchanges between us. Her warm up to writing assignments rose and fell. As the relationship developed I learnt that the irregularity of her contact reflected her waxing and waning confidence. The hesitancy, enthusiasm and doubt expressed in her emails at different times were manifestations of the conflicted roles she was experiencing. My response was to double her consistently. I contacted her regularly, inquired about her progress, and responded rapidly to pitfalls and difficulties that she reported. I articulated her unvoiced doubts and highlighted progressive roles that she displayed in the assignments that she sent in. By her third assignment, her grades began to improve, she started to show more assurance in her writing and, finally, took the risk to branch out on a research topic very different from the timid and conserved idea she had first proposed. It was only at the end of our working relationship, when she sent her concluding media diary that I appreciated her full experience from initial despair to her final enthusiastic engagement with a project that clearly mattered to her. She flowered from her initial role of *hesitant despairer* to become a *confident risk taker* and, eventually, an *enthusiastic engager*. It matched my own role as a *delighted companion* to her accomplishment.

Progressive Role Development

To tell my young broadcaster's story, even in brief, is to point to a fourth principle of distance supervision, and that is the warm up to new role development. This, as her example illustrates, is related to the growth of spontaneity and to the

gradual reduction of anxiety in the context of an increasingly reliable relationship. Spontaneity, in this case, grew out of the development of the relationship and the application of the ongoing role assessments I undertook in response to her emails. These role assessments were based on the nonverbal cues contained in her emails, the lapses and surges in her communication, the restricted and minimal content she supplied, the uncertainty in her occasional requests for help, the concern and bafflement this evoked in me, her avoidance of phone contact and much more. Together, just as in a face to face session, she provided me with clues that enabled me to develop my continuing role assessments and what I hoped were my adequate responses, first through doubling and later through extensive mirroring, for example in her writing.

The Challenges of Distance Supervision

Distance supervision poses some special challenges, some just to do with the distance and media involved. Distance allows the other party (or parties) simply to disappear into the ether if they choose, sometimes never to return. I am always disappointed when I lose clients to the tyranny of distance, without ever really knowing the reasons. Distance can equal total silence. When the supervisee does not respond to correspondence, emails and phone calls, or changes their address and phone number, then the relationship hangs in the air, incomplete and unsustainable. Anecdotally, distance teaching is notorious for its high failure rate and, in my experience the same is true of distance supervision.

For instance, I lost contact with a Maori broadcaster after only the most minimal relationship building. After almost a year of silence she recontacted me and we both warmed up again in a long phone conversation. I strongly engaged with her passion for programme development in the Maori Television Service, a passion which matched my own experience as a former broadcaster. Yet this warm up was interrupted a week later when she emailed to say that her completed assignments had mysteriously disappeared in a computer failure. We were back to the beginning and she has not been in contact since. In these circumstances it is difficult even to make an assessment, but I wondered about someone working in isolation, inadequately doubled because distance and lack of face to face contact prevented it. I wondered, too, about the role conflict she enacted, alternately moving towards me in the phone call and away again in the subsequent distancing email. I was left disappointed and incomplete as a consequence. I reflected on roles she enacted that oscillated between the *isolated struggler* and the *ambivalent connector* before she vanished altogether.

On the other hand, a distance supervisory relationship may begin, appear to wither and then resume unexpectedly. In the last two years, three supervisees have dropped out of contact and then re-emerged, to my delight, after some nine months of silence, keen to make up for lost time and interested to develop something new. In each case this amounted to a tacit acknowledgement of the

strength of our relationship despite the time and distance involved. In one case, the client reconnected to fulfil a commitment to a Pacific Islands broadcasting project which a chaotic work life in journalism had put on hold. She told me later that my strong warm up to assisting her develop this important, undervalued work was pivotal to her completing the project. Our relationship had persisted even through the silence.

Psychodramatic Production at Distance

If staging can take place through distance supervision, can there be production too? The answer, of course, is yes. In educational supervision, the production is the work produced as part of formal course requirements. In clinical supervision it will usually be the new role development arising out of the engagement with clients and the working through of professional issues. In both, the roles identified by Antony Williams (1995) of teacher, facilitator, consultant and evaluator will be present. In either case, all the elements of psychodrama practice can be fully realised. If there is a warm up, then there are also phases of action, as I have described. Action opens up the possibility for the catharses of abreaction and integration. These are likely to be experienced far more silently in the context of distance work, but they can still be present. I explore this later. With educational supervision, both can become evident through the emergence of a new confidence, the expression of a sense of achievement, or through the integration of the skills of analysis, argument, enquiry and innovatory ideas. There is also space for sharing after the enactment, sometimes through a common reflection in emails or by post about the experience of working together. When there is production or enactment a supervisor can make use of all the techniques available in psychodrama. But what does it mean, for example, to model or maximise at physical distance? How can this be undertaken on paper, electronically or over the phone?

Modelling is a good place to start. When broadcasting supervisees send me their initial assignments, I notice that their writing reflects the worlds in which they work. Journalists' writing, for instance, may be vivid but it is also compressed. This suits their working environments but does not serve academic writing requirements. Footnoting and referencing often seem tiresome and pedantic to journalists but these form the mechanics of academic argument. I will often show them how it is done, rewriting, paraphrasing and adding quotes and citations, even though examples are available in course material. This is to model, both the role required, the *academic writer*, as well as the how and why of applying a skill to a specific situation. I may need to model again in a later assignment but, usually, it is enough to point to course materials. Such modelling, of course, involves role assessment along with doubling, mirroring and role reversal, so that the writer feels I am alongside them at those critical moments when support is needed. Role flexibility is required on my part, as I shift between the *empathic companion*, the *sharp-eyed lynx*, the *patient illuminator* and the *engaged guide*.

Distance supervision employs other psychodramatic techniques as well. I maximise, for instance, when faced with persistent spelling and grammatical errors, in a way that reduces the chance the error will be repeated. I highlight errors consecutively, with underlining, exclamation marks or comments. My aim is role development, enlarging in the supervisee the role of the *confident skilled academic writer*.

Coaching works in the same way. Marginal comments in essays, for instance, are a form of coaching. They explain a difficulty of expression, argument or writing and suggest ideas for improvement. I am surprised to find, for instance, that broadcasters often have trouble with paraphrasing. They will often add their own opinion when a summary is all that is needed. I draw their attention to this, itself a form of mirroring, and suggest how a sentence could be rephrased (modelling) or indicate the principle it is based on (coaching).

These interventions are all grounded in Moreno's method regardless of whether writing arrives electronically or in hardcopy. As interventions, these link the relationship to warm up, to doubling, mirroring and role reversal, to spontaneity and to potential new role development. They allow attention to be paid to the numerous cues displayed aurally and visually in each act of communication. The communication medium itself will indicate the cues that may need attention, so that the lack of face to face contact on the phone, for instance, can be supplemented by listening more closely to the subtleties of intonation, the pattern of breathing, the speed of speaking, the moment of calling, the background noises or distractions along with the content of the conversation. In fact, all of the paralinguistic signals around speaking and listening (Dalianis & Hovy, 1993). While these may not replace the much fuller nonverbal communication available in face to face interactions, they still allow for the relationship to be developed and for effective, creative supervision work to be done.

Applying the Clinical Perspectives of Psychodrama to Educational Supervision at Distance

The central principles of relationship and role development are particularly important in successfully conducting supervision at distance. To recap, the issue is not the technology or medium that enables distance communication but the creation and maintenance of an effective working relationship (Moreno, 1977a). The supervisor's warm up, under these conditions, is most effective when it is to the relationship and not to the technology of email, the phone or the internet. These are the principles I illustrate in the vignette below.

The advantage of working like this is to allow the clinical perspectives of psychodrama to be readily applied in other, nonclinical settings. It is possible, for example, to pinpoint the development of new roles and chart the social atom repair that accompanies them. In turn, this provides a fuller, clinical picture of a supervisee's whole functioning and ties the development of academic skills firmly to an individual's progressive role system. This possibility arises from

Moreno's (1977b) emphasis on spontaneity and creativity, where a clinical assessment is less a diagnosis of illness and much more one related to an individual's whole, integrated functioning. For this reason, a psychodramatic approach to supervision is an excellent vehicle for bringing dynamic clinical thinking into areas such as educational supervision where it has not previously been considered.

Social Atom Repair with Dave

As part of my role as an educational supervisor, I worked with Dave. He was an ambitious man, already possessing very good grades in an advanced business degree. He was a perfectionist who wanted to use the project writing, presentational and research skills he expected to develop for rapid career advancement and, I suspected, to impress others. Certainly, he began by impressing me with the ferocity of his peremptory demands about the exact way in which I would work with him and meet his needs. In fact, by six weeks into our projected year's work together, I was beginning to feel intimidated and inadequate. This was not eased by my realisation that his writing was actually not very good. It was filled with elementary errors, forceful statements lacking any credible evidence and difficulties of expression. I began to wonder how he had received such consistently good grades to date.

I wondered how we were to find common ground, especially when the first grades he received from me were barely pass marks. How, he thundered through the email, was I to explain my marking when he had done so well in everything else? I felt at a loss. Indeed, I was in danger of moving into some of my own coping roles, the *uncertain complier* (he must be right) or the *rebellious tyrant* (I'm the boss, just suck it up). Instead, I reflected again on the very simple shortcomings he repeatedly displayed. I explained to Dave in great detail the way in which I had arrived at my assessment at each point in his assignment so that he would fully understand my reasoning. I also expressed my view of his grading, my understanding of supervision and the way that I attempted to grasp, as best as I could, his ideas. To my astonishment, Dave responded with gratitude. No-one, it turned out, had ever explained ordinary English or academic writing to him. He had never known the reason for supporting a view with evidence, nor how to arrange one's thoughts to persuade or get alongside a reader.

From this moment, our relationship improved. Dave's role of *demanding bully* increasingly dropped away and a more progressive *inquiring, eager learner* came into play. For my part, I could gauge far more accurately how much, and when, to intervene in his future work. Of course, there were further tests and returns to less progressive roles, but the joint understanding we had established survived these. Dave's writing and presentation became more flexible, exploratory and, simply, more human.

How does Dave's case fit the model I have described? Dave initially approached me functioning from a coping system, moving against me in the powerful bully

role which threatened to activate my own coping roles. Needless to say, these were forged in my own family of origin where bullying adults were an unavoidable reality. Had I given way to my own coping roles, they would have produced parallel restrictive roles in both of us: compliance or authoritarian bullying on my side and deference or bullying on his. The relationship of authority and dependence would have been repeated, or fought over, throughout our time together. The key shift, however, involved me sustaining the progressive *compassionate observer* role towards myself and Dave. For me, it meant generosity towards my own reactive fears. For Dave it was in noticing and not rejecting my observation of the inadequacies of his writing, which was in fact mirroring. My allocation of low grades and comments accurately mirrored his inadequacies as a writer. This was a part of his functioning that he had long disguised by becoming a *blustering bully*. As Max Clayton (1992) notes, mirroring wakes an individual up to an aspect of their functioning. Implicitly, by explaining my thinking to Dave, I role reversed with him and then doubled the unexpressed role of the *isolated, needy child* in him. Once this had been addressed and worked through, the possibility of co-creation became a reality towards which we could both work. This was social atom repair at work in educational supervision at distance.

Conclusion

Dave's case illustrates many of the aspects of distance supervision using psychodrama, doubling, mirroring and role reversal translated through the media of writing, email and phone calls. It moves rapidly from warm up to production and then to a catharsis of abreaction and integration, all assisted by instruments of the drama. Yet all of this took place without a physical stage but within a developing, tested relationship.

More broadly, Dave's case illustrates the way that psychodrama can be enacted effectively at distance in relation to a wide range of communication technologies. I have outlined its efficacy in distance supervision but its potential is as great for role training, sociometry, clinical practice or any other aspect of the method. New mobile digital technologies will only increase these opportunities. Smartphones, for instance, increasingly rely on digital devices to enhance their interactive emotional and relational worlds (Gee, 2010; Lasen, 2004). They actively invite psychodramatic participation in the ways I have described here. I can only urge psychodramatists to take up the promises and challenges offered by these vibrant, new electronic domains.

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