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The Use of Theatre for Development in the Prevention of HIV/AIDS

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Abstract

Over the last three decades development practitioners have begun to search for new theoretical approaches to the problems of underdevelopment. This has given rise to approaches that focus on the participation of people and their culture in development programs.

The teachings of Paulo Freire, latterly developed by Augusto Boal, gave voice to theatre that is participatory, provides two-way communication and aims to raise the critical awareness of spectators. This form of theatre is known as Theatre for Development. It aims to promote awareness of political, social and economic issues. Theatre for Development goes beyond the theatrical event giving people skills to confront problems and solve them.

The AIDS pandemic is a human tragedy that is threatening development in the world's poorest countries. In fact, 95 per cent of people with HIV or AIDS live in developing countries. HIV accentuates inadequacies that exist in health care infrastructures and highlights social and economic inequalities. There is no known cure for this disease but through systematic national programs that focus on preventing HIV transmission it is possible to significantly lower infection rates. Theatre should be part of any national HIV/AIDS program.

Theatre for Development is effective in communicating HIV/AIDS related information and promoting attitude changes. Theatre has many advantages as an educational technique; it engages participants, is appropriate to the local situation, adapts to indigenous cultures, assists with skill development and encourages discussion about sensitive issues.

In Vanuatu, Wan Smolbag theatre uses Theatre for Development to provide people with the knowledge and skills required to prevent HIV/AIDS infection. The mainstay of this Non Governmental Organisations' (NGO) work is short interactive theatre pieces of 20 to 50 minutes. In addition, WSB has created videos, radio dramas and educational materials. WSB's HIV/AIDS theatre is based on the Freiran concepts of participation and dialogue. As a consequence, the group's theatre reflects the lives of its participants and is proving that theatre can be a powerful tool for improving people's knowledge of HIV/AIDS.

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Introduction: Development Theory, Culture and Popular Theatre

The differences between nations and how development and underdevelopment has occurred have traditionally been analysed from two perspectives: modernisation and dependency (Srampickal 1994: 3). These paradigms have also shaped debate within communication research and provided theoretical foundations for the practices of mass and traditional media. However, weaknesses within both of these major development paradigms have resulted in a search for more relevant approaches to development. As a consequence, many development programs now attempt to be more participative in program design and implementation. Popular theatre provides one mode by which participation and communication can be fostered between development agencies and local communities.

Modernisation theorists take an evolutionist approach to the question of development and compare modernity with traditional forms of society. The developed world is seen to have qualities that are not present in the developing world and the stress is on the diffusion of modern values and institutions to replace 'outdated', 'stagnant' and traditional ones. Thus, the modernisation paradigm is frequently concerned with attempting to copy Western development successes and as a consequence, the theory is synonymous with Westernisation (Hume and Tuner, 1990: 35). Modernisation theory has influenced development policy decisions since the Second World War yet it has failed to bridge the gap between developed and developing nations (Srampickal, 1994: 4).

Dependency theory rejects the premise that development is a linear progression which occurs through diffusion. Dependency theory replaced the evolutionist vision of modernisation theory with a more historical and holistic approach (Srampickal, 1994: 5). The theory considers the interaction of entire social systems and looks beyond underdeveloped nations to a world system of exploitation based on the international division of labour. As Marxism provides

dependency theory with its metatheoretical assumptions economic relationships are paramount in defining associations within and between nations.

Within communication research the age-old divisions between the liberal-pluralist and Marxist traditions emerge, and the distinction between the two approaches is generally presented as the dichotomy of theoretical and empirical studies. Because economic determinism is so fundamental to their beliefs, Marxists point to a link between monopoly capitalism and mass media. They argue that the media promulgates the beliefs of the dominant class. Workers within the mass media are socialised within the dominant class and are therefore not autonomous. The messages they create reflect the dominant ideology (Boafo 1985: 86). Consequently, mass communication is not an independent variable, but a reflection of the social, political and economic system (Mda, 1993).

However, mass communications in many developing nations has been influenced by modernisation theories, such as Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Nutbeam and Harris, 1998:39). According to Rogers media facilitate the spread of ideas and will produce high per capita income. The role of media is to diffuse information and persuade people of the benefits of modernisation (Srampickal, 1994: 14). Mda (1993) discusses these ideas in terms of "core" and "periphery". Messages flow from the core of the dominant classes to the periphery. At the periphery subjects receive information in a passive manner and are not involved in any interaction with the centre. The result is top-down communication that reinforces social and economic inequalities. The stress is on finding ways to stimulate, induce, or even coerce audiences to pattern their behaviour along the lines of industrialised Western nations.

Epskamp (1989) argues along these lines and believes that the conditions of colonialism and neo-colonialism have informed power relationships within and between Third World nations.

Ever since colonial rule, Third World countries have been made to adopt the North Atlantic worldview and lifestyles with respect to such concepts as 'tradition' and 'modernisation'. Development projects have frequently been based on a modernisation approach according to a North Atlantic model ... socio-political and technical restraints had so determined the relationship of dependence between North and South, even in this respect, that the flow of information could be reduced only with the greatest effort. Traditional ethnic cultures offered very little resistance to the one-way flow of information (Epskamp, 1989; 156).

Kerr (1995) argues that this was evident in colonial theatre, which was used in Africa to persuade communities to adopt colonial practices. Social goals and solutions were determined by the central administration and distributed to the people. There was little or no participatory element to the work, and colonial solutions were presented as the accepted approach to social and economic difficulties. However, while technical solutions were provided there was no analysis of the underlying reasons for difficulties (Kerr, 1995).

Herein lies the fundamental difference between the liberal-pluralist and Marxist perspective's. Liberal-pluralist's believe that society is a configuration of competing groups, none of which are dominant. Media organisations have autonomy from the state, political parties and interest groups and as a consequence, a range of positions is presented. Marxists argue that mass media does much more than reflect existing values. Rather, the media helps shape social relationships, both domestically and internationally, and plays a central role in consolidating and reinforcing the values and attitudes of audiences.

Development studies have begun to look beyond the grand narratives in an effort to understand the diversity of the Third World. (Schuurman, 1993). Development programs that use popular participation to assess difficulties and create solutions may be part of the way forward. The indigenisation of development programs acknowledges the importance of people's participation as a factor in the success of development projects and recognises that Third

World countries' traditions and experiences can form the basis of successful approaches to development (Brohman, 1996: 338).

Communication that results in change requires *participation* (Morrison 1991). Mda (1993) points to a movement away from persuasive communication, where the receivers are passive and have no influence on the message, to communication that is participatory. In this approach the community is involved with the formulation of the message and may in fact initiate the process. While people can receive messages from vehicles such as television and radio, people's behaviour is most effectively altered through personal relationships.

Popular theatre provides a means by which people can express their relationship with the environment. If development is a holistic process creating self-reliance in the production, distribution and exchange of goods, then theatre is an ideal forum through which communities can explore development possibilities (Prentki, 1998: 420).

Popular theatre is used in nations throughout the world, and examples can be found in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, South East Asia and the South Pacific. Theatre concerned with improving the lives of communities has been called various names: Theatre for Liberation, Theatre for Development, Participatory Theatre, Theatre for Integrated Rural Development and Theatre in Education. All these terms are concerned with the ability to use theatre to influence social change.

Marxism and theories of colonial domination have been instrumental in the rise of popular theatre as a vehicle of cultural change. Consequently, a discourse on theatre is ultimately about power relationships and theatre will inevitably illuminate relationships within society. However, practitioners define popular theatre differently and there is neither a clear ideological framework nor precise definition of popular theatre (Mumma, 1997: 8; Mwaansa, 1991: 27). Theatre analysis has tended to consider campaigns but these reports have generally failed to offer any sustained theoretical discussions of the enterprise (Frank, 1995: 18).

While a great deal of the literature associated with Theatre for Development lacks theoretical assumptions, a group of concepts has emerged from Theatre for Development programs. Central to these assumptions is Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. Freire believed that development requires liberation from the economic, political and social structures that restrain individuals. His theory accepts that everyone has the capability to understand, learn and participate in nation building (Srampickal; 1994: 6). Participation and dialogue are central tenets to Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and both have become foundation principles in Theatre for Development. The theoretical foundations of Theatre for Development are discussed in Chapter 1.

While proponents of both major development discourses have considered the influence of culture in development practice, neither has genuinely seen culture as the source and strength of sustainable development. The neglect of cultural forms has led to the failure of many development programs and models (Orr, 2000: 1). Partnerships between national and international agencies, and local people are more likely to create relevant and useful development outcomes (Orr, 2000: 2). Thus, an acceptance of Third World cultures is vital to the success of development programs.

Traditionally, indigenous cultures have been ignored or seen as an impediment to development. Colonial and neo-colonial leaders deemed many local celebrations and rituals as inappropriate and as a consequence, indigenous cultural forms were replaced with foreign and frequently Western cultures. This meant that many communities were rendered powerless because their traditions were almost completely ignored (Byam, 1999: 2).

During the last two decades governments and NGO's have accepted that theatre can be used to communicate important political and social messages (Epskamp, 1989). Performing arts are relatively inexpensive; they use the language of the people, avoid the problem of illiteracy, are part of the local culture and are also forms of entertainment. Chapter 2 presents ways Theatre

for Development is being used to communicate HIV/AIDS messages and supports these with examples.

It is important to know if Theatre for Development improves people's knowledge of HIV/AIDS, alters attitudes towards the virus and promotes behavioural change. Consequently, Chapter 3 assesses the effectiveness of Theatre for Development as a means of reaching the large numbers of people at risk of HIV/AIDS. While there is a limited amount of research on these issues, it is possible to reach some conclusions about how useful Theatre for Development is as a HIV/AIDS communication tool.

The final chapter explores the work of Wan Smolbag (WSB) theatre in Vanuatu. It investigates and assesses how effective WSB's drama presentations are as a tool for improving HIV/AIDS knowledge, altering attitudes to HIV/AIDS and changing high risk sexual behaviour. In particular, the research considers WSB's HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns during 1999 and the extent these interventions conformed to the Freiran concepts of participation and dialogue.

WSB emphasises the importance of supporting HIV/AIDS awareness messages with services, consequently, the theatre group has established its own community health centre, where services such as STD treatment and condom distribution are carried out. The development of the health centre is outlined and its effectiveness assessed. During July 2000 the writer spent some time with the WSB team observing their work and interviewing actors, health workers, scriptwriters and the team manager. These observations and interviews, supported by independent reviews of WSB's work, provide the basis for the critique of WSB theatre.