

Role-Playing As a Training Technique

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The source of role-playing in drama and sociodrama and some of the reasons for its value as a training technique.

Once upon a time a pretty young lady went to church, wearing a new hat. She was very pleased with the hat and, of course, with herself. Her mind really wasn't on the sermon. She was more aware of the pleasant fact that people were looking at her and particularly at her new hat. Now actually on this particular occasion the people were not looking at the hat *exactly*, but rather at a louse crawling on the brim. The poet Burns concluded his story with this wish: "*Would that some power would give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us!*"

A Magic Mirror

Come down another century in time and look at the publishing lists in 1949, and you will find a title by Dr. Clyde Cluckhohn called *Mirror For Man*, a very interesting interpretation for the layman of what anthropology is, seeks to do, and can contribute to the problem of understanding people. This wish for the magic mirror that would interpret to us what others see in our actions is as old as history. It is this implicit wish for a magic mirror that underlies the universal and timeless appeal of the theater. How old is the theater? No one knows. But it probably began when some ancient man enacted for his fellows a description of the chase in which he had tracked and conquered some other animal.

Drama

Coming down through the centuries, man has found that the use of the dramatic form has highlighted the past for him. And as he has better understood the past, he has been able to live better in the present and to anticipate the future more effectively.

But, of course, the theater is not always turned to the past. Some of our greatest plays are written as inquiries into contemporary manners and morals. Other great plays have been written to venture interesting speculations about the future. The theatrical form becomes a magic time machine with which we can jump forward or backward in time. It also becomes a magic carpet in which we can jump to far distant places and far distant scenes.

But while the time and the setting are important, every dramatist knows that they are distinctly subordinate to the people about whom the play revolves. However intriguing the time or space jumps of a play may be, it is not those moves which hold our interest, but rather, the exposition of human behavior. We see ourselves as we were, we are, or we might be and it is this that holds our interest. The lure of the theater throughout history has been the fact that it is the magic mirror which reveals man to himself.

Psychodrama and Sociodrama

Some years ago an Austrian psychiatrist, speculating about the techniques of his profession, came to wonder about the possible uses of the dramatic form. His name—Dr. Joseph Moreno. He would set up scenes in which mentally disturbed patients would reenact their problems, real or imaginary, would explore their feelings and thoughts in soliloquies or in structured scenes of interaction with other people. Dr. Moreno found that this use of dramatic devices was an excellent aid to the exploration of the person's subconscious. In certain cases it revealed a great deal that other more conventional tools of psychoanalysis had not done. Dr. Moreno called this tool the "psychodrama." He is now in this country directing the Psychodramatic Institute at Beacon, New York, where people can study the uses of the magic mirror.

Dr. Moreno also found, as of course many others had found before him, that the dramatic device illustrated men's interactions with each other; and where the dramatic devices are used to study such interaction, they are called "sociodrama." The magic mirror, used as psychodrama or sociodrama, differs from the more conventional dramatic expressions because of its spontaneity. Plays and skits traditionally have had the human interaction described by the dramatist, and it was the actor's job to interpret what the dramatist had to say.

In psychodrama or sociodrama the scene is phrased only in general terms, and the actors in the scene express themselves and interact with each other in terms of their *own* understandings of the situation. This is truly actor-involvement

rather than actor-expression, and it becomes a tool which reveals the actors' concepts of life and its problems rather than those artificially imposed upon them by a playwright, however skilled and well-intentioned.

Role-Playing in Industry

When we use this technique in industry, it is commonly called "role-playing." This is not a very good term, and I wish there were a better one, but I hardly think that most business or industrial people would prefer "psychodrama" or "sociodrama" as synonyms. While the name may be imperfect, the tool is useful; and that's much more important.

In role-playing, we set up a scene in its bare outline, and then we ask members of the group to act it out. This sounds as though it might be very difficult, but actually it is not, if the leader of the group has done careful pre-planning so that the idea may be introduced very naturally. For example, in a sales meeting the young salesman may be describing some particularly difficult customer. It would be easy for the sales manager to say, "I'll play the part of the customer, and you could be yourself and show the other fellows just how it was." Thus role-playing could come about quickly and naturally.

Or take a scene in a factory. The foreman is trying to show the superintendent just what happened in an argument he's had with a man. Words prove inadequate, and the conflict is reenacted with someone else playing the part of the worker. Take another scene—a foreman's training class of new supervisors is trying to understand the admonition that in disciplinary contacts with the

workers you have to be "approachable and human" without being overly sympathetic. How could that be clarified other than by asking someone who *was* that kind of a person to actually demonstrate his manner in front of the group? There are many unconscious cues we react to and clues which reveal our inner states which can hardly be described in words. We respond to such things as posture, tone of voice, emphasis, and so on. They are frequently more important signals than the words alone.

Values of Role-Playing

Role-playing is a way of enacting more or less familiar scenes and situations. The individuals participating are expressing themselves or other people they know well and do not need a script. When it is done well, the role-players lose themselves in the role, and the observers can gain fruitful insights into human behavior. Role-playing can help us understand ourselves and others.

Role-playing can thus foster understanding. But, and far more important, for pragmatic people in business role-playing can also be used to project *different* performance in the future.

Let us take a situation in a company in which the management is working on an executive inventory. They evaluate each other in terms of some form or system, and they are charged with the responsibility of discussing this evaluation with each other. It is at this point of human interaction that most of these plans break down. This situ-

ation is uncomfortable and embarrassing to both parties unless it is handled with the utmost skill and tact. Role-playing can be used to illustrate what some of the problems are; to give some of the key participants some practice in trying action in a non-destructive atmosphere—to evolve and try out and evaluate differing types of action or modes of behavior in various situations. In such a way members of the group can put their collective insights to work helping each other to forecast possibilities and to evaluate them critically as they are tried out in scenes portrayed by role-playing.

Role-playing is a training device to make things concrete. As life gets more complex, so do our words. And we sometimes get caught in webs of airy abstraction which suspend us in space far removed from reality. Role-playing makes things tangible, makes everyone in the group see a common experience close to the real-life happening. We watch human behavior, and that's a lot more valuable as a guide than listening to words *about* human behavior.

We have heard for a long time that we have overemphasized the technical side of our existence, that we have failed to resolve the human problems of our society. Role-playing can make us all more aware of our common humanity. It can lead us to reveal in an atmosphere of tolerance our imperfections which we would hesitate to reveal in any other way. It can give clues to the viewers, which we could not transmit to the auditors of our words alone. It is the "magic mirror" which gives us the gift of being able to see ourselves as others see us.¹

¹A Role-playing Bibliography obtained by Mr. Moody from the Business Information Bureau, Cleveland Public Library, will be found on pages 30 to 34.