

Chapter 7: The Use of Theatre with Medical Residents: An Embodied Approach to Learning about Self and Other

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Theatre-based Teaching

Lesson Plan #1: Basic Improv Exercises

These short improv exercises teach foundational improv skills.

Objectives: To learn to help your scene partner by providing information for the scene, always say yes, always have 100% commitment, act on your impulse, build on what you've been given and listen.

Coaching points: Be specific, get out of your head, make offers and add to them, listen, stay in the present, use direct questions, focus on your partner and the action, share and collaborate.

Exercise 1: Yes *and*

This improv exercise teaches yes *and* a key principle of improv and acting and an excellent habit of effective communication.

1. Divide the class into two lines; A and B. Have the lines face each other, tell them that the person facing them is their partner.
2. Ask person A at one end of the line to come up with an offer for their partner (e.g. A: Would you like to have lunch with me? Their partner accepts the offer and adds to it (e.g. B. Yes and I know a great place where we can eat cheap if we do the dishes). A then accept the addition, and adds something new. (e.g. A: Great, let's go there, I love doing dishes)
3. Each person goes to the end of the opposite line and the next pair has a turn.
4. The game continues until everyone has had the chance to make the first offer (twice through the lines)

Helpful coaching point: Use direct questions

Stop the action when you hear them use open-ended questions. Suggest they avoid open ended questions; this makes their partners work too hard e.g. “What would you like to do” makes their partner have to come up with the idea for the scene. Instead they could try: How long have you been building that sandcastle?

Exercise 2: Come Again?

This game teaches participants to use direct questions.

1. Have the participants form a circle.
2. Ask one person to come up with an open-ended question. (e.g. Where are we?)

3. The person beside them changes the open-ended questions into something that provides more information and is thus more useful for the scene (e.g. Wow. Is this the magic castle you said you'd take me to?)
4. This person now asks the next person an open-ended question to the next person in the circle. Play continues until everyone has had a turn.

Exercise 3: Seven sentence stories

Improv concerns making up stories in the moment. This exercise provides a structure that makes it easy to do that. Encourage participants to work quickly without thinking too much; spontaneity is key to successful improv.

This exercise can be played in pairs, small groups or in the larger group. One person begins the story by completing the first sentence prompt below. The next person finishes the second sentence and so on until the story is complete:

Once upon a time....

And every day...

Until one day...

And because...

And because of that...

Until eventually...

And from that day forward...

Coaching points: Remind them to say yes, to listen, to build and to offer.

Lesson Plan #2: Embodied Presence

This 90 minute workshop is designed to build awareness of how our presence impacts others. Exercises are adapted from actor training methods and designed to assist participants to identify their unique patterns and habits and the effect of these habits on fostering/hampering relationship and communication. The exercises focus on breath, body awareness, storytelling and engaged listening to lay a foundation for ongoing embodied practice. Embodied practice allows us to be fully present and engaged with others. It requires an understanding or consciousness of self that includes being in relationship with our own body and breath. The body carries everything we know and have experienced. It houses and protects us and reveals who we are to others. We can learn to listen and respond to our internal impulses and reactions and use this information to deeply listen to both ourselves and others. To maximize learning, ensure that at the end of each exercise there is ample time for observations and reflections on the participant's unique experience of the work.

Workshop outline:

Exercise: 1. Physical awareness and breath (10 mins)

Objectives: To warm-up and develop awareness of breath and body.

1. Ask participants to find a neutral stance with hips stacked over knees and feet and shoulders stacked over hips. Ensure that heads are floating on the spine and shoulders relaxed. Have them focus on where their breath is landing in the body. Encourage them to place a hand on this place (note: there is no correct place, you want them to become of where they experience their own breath).

2. Starting at the feet, ask participants to focus on the sensation of their feet on the ground, encourage them to allow breath to drop all the way down to their feet, imagining breath between the bones. Move up the body encouraging a new breath into the ankles, shins, knees, etc.). Each inhalation encourages breath- space in the body and each exhalation encourages release. Once you have made it all the way up to the head, give them a moment to simply breathe and experience this new space in body.
3. Throughout the exercise, encourage learners to allow the jaw to release, shoulders to drop, knees to be soft, etc. The objective is for them to develop an ease in the breath, a breath that drops into the belly, an awareness of any habitual tension in the body and finding a new form of release in the body without collapse.

Exercise 2: Name Catch (15 mins)

Objectives: To uncover un-examined habits and encourage full engagement and connection.

Have the group form a circle with room for their arms to swing without hitting neighbours.

Instructor has 1 ball and explains that they will say their own name, make eye contact with someone across the circle and throw the ball to them.

1. Allow the exercise to proceed, stopping the action when contact isn't made, the ball is thrown too quickly, not received, etc. (reasons for this will be lack of commitment to partner, lack of intention in having the ball reach the partner, desire to get rid of the ball, worry about being able to catch or throw). Have the person who threw the ball repeat the action with this new information. You are trying to encourage full physical engagement and clear connection.

2. When the ball has gone around and names have been heard a couple of times, stop the action. Instruct the person throwing the ball to say their name AND the name of the person they are throwing to. Continue as above.
3. When they are comfortable add a second ball, followed by a third!
4. After things are well established and participants are enjoying the game, stop the action and ask for observations. Some will say that one ball is easier because there are fewer stimuli and some will say that more balls were easier because the spotlight is diffused. This is all good information for them. Ask them what habits/inhibitions they uncovered about themselves.
5. Throughout the exercise at different points, ask them what is happening with their jaw, their breath, their body. Encourage awareness of their physical landscape as they engage in this new task. (Ask them to think about this when they next learn a new medical procedure.)

Exercise 3: Personal Space Exploration (15 mins)

Objectives: To explore comfort with personal space, eye contact and connection.

1. Split the group in two and call one group “ones” and the other group “twos” (or whatever you want to call them).
2. Each group will form a line, standing shoulder to shoulder and facing the other group. There should be at least 12-15 feet between the 2 lines.
3. Ensure that everyone in the line has a partner across from them in the other line.

4. Tell the “ones” that they will slowly walk toward the twos and that their partner in the other line is responsible for telling the when to stop. Encourage them to take risks and push their personal comfort zone.
5. Ask that they work in silence.
6. When everyone is stopped and looking into the eyes of their partners let them be in this for two minutes.
7. Ask the “ones” to slowly back away from the “twos” maintaining eye contact until they are back in their line.
8. Repeat with “twos” walking towards the “ones” and “ones” governing when their partners stop.

Things to ask:

- What was this like for you? Why?”
- How did the eye contact feel?
- What was challenging? Why?
- What was more difficult walking towards or walking away?
- Etc., there will be many observations and much to talk about

Exercise 4: Understanding Presence through Patsy Rodenburg’s Circle Work (15 mins)

Objectives: To understand how personal and interpersonal energy both reflects and affects how we feel and are experienced by others. To recognize personal habits and patterns of communication.

1. Explain that they are going to investigate different ways that humans use their physical energy in interaction with the world. Ask them to work in silence and

remind them that they do not have to “perform” at all. Explain that they are going to explore 3 different “circles” or ways of moving through space.

2. Introduce what is known as “first circle”. Let them know that in this circle they are internally focused. They are not really taking anyone else in nor allowing themselves to be fully seen by others. There is no giving or receiving in this “circle”.
3. Have them walk around, sit, stop etc. in this circle of energy where everything is projected inwards for a few minutes.
4. Ask for observations.
5. Describe “second circle” as energy “going out”, all the time. Explain that in this circle of energy we rarely allow energy in, all of our energy is directed outwards.
6. Have them walk around, sit, stop etc. in this circle of energy, where all of their energy is projected outwards and nothing is being received. Continue this for a few minutes.
7. Ask for observations
8. Describe “third circle”. Explain that in this circle, we are both giving and receiving, seeing and being seen.
9. Have them walk around, sit, stop etc., in this circle of energy where they are both seeing others and allowing others to see them. Continue this for a few minutes.
10. Ask for observations
11. Note anything they did not bring up regarding the energy in the room and the nature of the interactions that you observed.

Exercise: Action and Affect Exercise (10 minutes)

Purpose: To discover how a simple physical quality can trigger an emotional response within the body and to increase awareness of physical responses. To discover the concept “*yes and*” *described above*.

1. Ask participants to find a partner.
2. Have them face their partner with three to four feet between them.
3. Tell them that they are going to pass an imaginary ball between them.
4. Let them do this for a couple of minutes.
5. Stop the action and ask them to reflect on the experience with the following questions:
 - How did you know how big the ball was?
 - How did you know when your partner actually received the ball?

They will note things such as: I followed the shape of my partner’s hands, or I followed their eyes, I did what they did, etc.

6. Point out that in order for this exercise; to work they needed to agree with what their partner was actually doing with their gestures/non-verbal cues. This is the concept of “*yes and*”; it is essential to any successful acting or improvisation exercise. We must agree with what our partner sets up.
7. Now ask them to repeat the exercise. Only this time, tell them that they are passing the most precious thing they will ever hold and that they must do it with care.
8. Allow them to pass this imaginary object for a couple of minutes
9. Stop the action and ask for observations. Ask them:
 - What did you notice happening in your body?
 - What did you feel?
 - How did the movement change?
 - How did your relationship with your scene partner change?

They will generally admit that they all had an emotional response to the object, that they felt cautious, scared, moved, etc. Let them know that this is because actions and gestures trigger feelings. As soon as they change the nature of the action, they are certain to have an immediate emotional response. We respond emotionally (and often unconsciously) to the actions of others and to the nature of our own actions. It is thought to be one of the mechanisms by which we develop empathy. This is why successful actors focus on playing actions rather than playing emotions.

Exercise: Boal Tableaux (25 minutes)

Objectives: To discover how personal narrative/bias and experience affect understanding

1. Divide participants into groups of 5-8 depending on the size of the group.
2. Tell participants they will have 10 minutes to create 3 different tableaux (motionless picture using all of their bodies) that tell the story of a conflict. Each one of the tableaux represents the beginning, the middle and the end of the story.
3. Emphasize that they will be most effective in physically working it out with their poses rather than discussing it.
4. Let them know when they have 2 minutes left.
5. Each group will present their tableaux as follows:
 - Ask observers to close their eyes.
 - When everyone is in place, tell observers to open their eyes.
 - Give observers time to take in the scene then ask them to close their eyes.
 - When everyone is in place for the second tableaux, tell observers to open their eyes.

- Repeat as above until all 3 tableaux have been viewed. (Beginning, middle and end tableaux.)
6. Ask the observers what they saw, have the group form any of the tableaux again and talk about what they see. Have an observer take the place of one body in the tableau or join as an additional body and in doing so, invite them to change the story. Talk about the change. Ask another person to change it in a different way. Talk about each individual's experience of how the external world shapes how they see and understand things.
 7. Repeat with remaining groups
 8. To wrap up the workshop, provide a list of the following questions for participants to take away:

Questions to ask yourself:

What does it mean to breathe and be present with someone?

What habits or defenses do I have that might get in the way of successful communication with my patients?

What do I do to make it easier for people to communicate with me?

Listening to the body:

Where do I hold tension in my body, how does this tension impede my communication?

Am I fully centred in my body, or do I slump or round my shoulders, look down, hide?

Do I take more or less space than I need? Is my energy internal/external?

What kind of energy do I respond to in others?

In communication with others (interacting, presenting, conflict resolution, etc.):

Am I breathing? (Deep? Shallow?) Can I feel my feet? What's happening in my jaw?

Can I authentically connect with the person(s) I am speaking to?

Do I rush when I present? Look away? Use a voice that sounds different from my usual voice?

What detail is receiving my attention?

Perspective:

What assumptions am I making based on my own physical experiences?

Do I fully understand the context and bias of others?

How do my experiences of the world affect my communication?

Lesson plan #3: Intro to Theatre as Research

Exercise: Newspaper Theatre Activity

“Newspaper Theatre” was developed by the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo, Brazil in collaboration with Augusto Boal. It teaches basic techniques for unpacking and transforming non-dramatic material into a piece for performance. The concepts/techniques learned in this exercise can be used with any type of data from pure research results to verbatim interviews to emergent themes as coded by researchers. You can select specific news events or stories to customize thematic content for curriculum objectives i.e. “ethics in end of life care” or “public vs private health care” or “the stigma of mental illness”.

Make groups of 4-5 people per group (depending on class size)

1. Distribute newspapers, magazines, journal articles, etc.
2. Each group will chose one article from the supplied resources.
3. Ask the groups to read their chosen article together out loud.
4. Ask them to discuss the content and to focus on strengths and weaknesses of the piece. They are to share feelings or thoughts about the subject matter or social issue that the

article addresses.

5. Each group will choose one of the methods listed below to deconstruct their article.
(Ensure that no two groups choose the same method.)
6. Encourage groups to “work on their feet” once they have chosen their method. They will move and work to critique, question, exaggerate, point to and/or complement the message or information in the article.

Methods of inquiry:

1. Complementary reading: data and information generally omitted by the newspapers appealing to the ruling classes are suddenly added to the news.
2. Rhythmical reading: as a musical commentary, the news is read to the rhythm of the samba, tango, hip-hop, etc., so that the rhythm functions as a critical ‘filter’ of the news, revealing its true content. The musical style, for example, may lead you to emphasize or repeat certain phrases.
3. Parallel action: the actors mime parallel actions while the news is read, showing the physical context in which the reported event really occurred.
4. Improvisation: the news story is improvised on stage to show all its different variants and possibilities. (Words and actions are used).
5. Concretion of the abstract: information which the news typically hides is made concrete through performing it on the stage: torture, hunger, unemployment, etc., are shown concretely, using a sequence of moving or still images.
6. Text out of context: the news is presented out of the context in which it was published. For example, an actor gives the speech about austerity previously delivered by the Minister of Economics while he devours an enormous dinner: the real truth

behind the minister's words becomes demystified – he wants austerity for the people but not for himself.

This humanities lesson plan is excerpted with permission from:

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