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ABSTRACT

This training design describes how to employ the use of interactive theater to promote experiential learning in volunteer settings. The audience, performers, and narrator all benefit from the exchange of ideas and solutions generated through an active discussion that occurs after the audience observes a problematic role play.

Using On-Stage Interactive Theater Techniques to Enhance Learning (A Training Design)

Donna Urbansky

BACKGROUND

The Elmira Players originated the technique of using role play for public educational purposes at the Elmira Psychiatric Center in Elmira, New York. The first program in 1969 received national acclaim. In 1978 they received a Federal grant that provided for the training of other groups nationwide. Many mental health player groups were formed including the Kentucky Mental Health Players in 1986. In 1991 they were succeeded by the Hospice of Louisville Players who patterned their troupe after the basic interactive theater design used by their predecessors.

This all-volunteer troupe began with the recruitment of one narrator and three players. The troupe now numbers four narrators and 20 players. Some players recruit friends, but the most effective recruitment has been to invite all hospice volunteers (regardless of what type of hospice volunteering they do) to interactive theater informational meetings.

The Hospice of Louisville Players has developed their structure and techniques to enhance their purpose: to promote awareness of health and end-of-life care issues through the use of experiential interactive theater techniques. This is accomplished in an entertaining yet thought-provoking way intended to stimulate and enhance the learning process.

TRAINING DESIGN

PERFORMERS:

Two to five players and one narrator.

GROUP SIZE:

Optimum 25- to 30-member audience.
Can be as few as 10 or as many as 100.

GROUP TYPE:

Group will have a common interest, such as health care or end-of-life issues.

Donna Urbansky has served as the director of volunteer services for the Hospice of Louisville for the past four years. Previous experience includes coordinating a mental health crisis center, serving as the director of a social service agency, and working for the U.S. Army in Korea. She has led workshops locally, nationally, and internationally on topics of volunteer management and the use of interactive theater for educational purposes. As an active member of a self-directed theater troupe (the Hospice of Louisville Players) she has performed for many audiences and has promoted the use of interactive theater as an entertaining yet thought-provoking medium to stimulate learning.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Interactive theater is a technique for using a specific type of role play for educational purposes. Each role play has a beginning point, intermediate dialogue, and a conflict situation or issue building to a climax. Learning occurs as the audience witnesses this confrontation between the actors. The value of interactive theater lies in getting audience members emotionally involved and actively responding to the role play issue or topic rather than letting them be passive spectators.

TIME REQUIRED:

Twenty minutes per issue or topic.

PROCESS:

The complete presentation of an interactive role play occurs as follows:

- 1) **Lead-in.** The scene is introduced by the narrator in a short, action-oriented statement that describes the circumstances or situation of the players.
- 2) **Improvisation.** Players improvise a three-to-five minute scene. The scene gradually builds to a climax of conflict between the players.
- 3) **Interaction.** At the point of highest conflict, the narrator interrupts the scene and asks the audience members about what they have just observed. Players and audience interact for approximately 15 minutes guided by the narrator. Performers continue to portray the characters they role played during the entire interaction with the audience.
- 4) **Summary.** Narrator then provides a brief summary of the main points brought up by the audience during the interaction.
- 5) **De-roling.** The role play ends with the players identifying themselves and letting the audience know they are not the characters they played.

SAMPLE ROLE PLAY

Interactive theater has elements of improvisation in that the characters' lines are not memorized although the players, or characters, write the essence of the role play scene or skit in advance. The scene is more like a short vignette. What follows is a sample skit/scenario.

Subject

Professionalism and respect.

Performers

Hospice patient care volunteer, hospice patient, and narrator.

Audience

Hospice volunteers at a training session.

Issues

Should volunteers discuss concerns and complaints with patients? Should volunteers do what they feel is right or should volunteers accept patient choices? When should the advice of a supervisor be sought?

Lead in

Narrator states the scene takes place in the home of a patient.

Improvisation

A volunteer who has worked with hospice for a long time arrives at the home of her assigned terminally ill patient. The volunteer and the patient have had a very good relationship. The volunteer enters complaining that the social worker (or nurse) did not inform her that the patient was transferred back to her home from the hospital. The volunteer explains she has just gone all the way to the hospital to discover the patient had been discharged. The volunteer asks how the patient is feeling. The patient complains of a few minor physical discomforts. The volunteer then makes uncomplimentary remarks regarding the care the patient is receiving and about the social worker and/or nurse. The volunteer says she is glad she is now

with the patient to give her the proper attention she deserves. The patient is visibly upset because she has trusted and liked the social worker and nurses and says so to the volunteer. The volunteer asks the patient what medication she is currently taking. The patient shows her the bottles. The volunteer claims one of the medications has serious side effects. The volunteer says she wants what is best for the patient and cannot understand why the patient is taking a drug that has such serious side effects. The patient says she follows the advice of her doctor. The volunteer then says she wants to have a serious discussion with the patient regarding her soul because the patient doesn't have long to live. The patient says she talks to the chaplain. The volunteer wants to read Bible versus to her. The patient objects.

Conflict

The narrator stops the skit at this point of greatest conflict and asks the audience how they feel about what they just witnessed.

Interaction

The narrator facilitates an exchange of comments, ideas, and questions from the audience to the volunteer and patient. The audience is encouraged to speak directly to the volunteer and patient, who respond from the perspective of the roles they are playing.

Note: The following is only a partial list of questions likely to be discussed. Should a volunteer be notified of a patient's discharge? By whom? How are patients informed of the effects of medication? How are patients informed of the side effects of medication? If a volunteer has a strong religious faith, should she share her views with a patient? When should a volunteer get advice from a supervisor?

Summary

After 10-15 minutes the narrator summarizes some of the thoughts expressed.

De-Role

The narrator asks the volunteer and patient to identify themselves and let the audience know they are volunteer actors.

RESULTS

The use of interactive theater functions as an experiential learning tool, not as a means to promote any one system of belief. Although performances often are informative and compelling, the narrator and players do not impose any particular point of view on an audience, but rather seek to enhance individual self-awareness and generate problem-solving among audience participants.

The role play consists of a short presentation that gradually builds to a climax. The narrator interrupts the action at the moment of highest tension and then guides the audience in becoming actively involved with the players. The players remain in character throughout the exchange.

Once the exchange with the audience begins, the characters interact only with the audience and not with each other. This is important because resuming the role play between performers causes the audience to begin observing rather than responding to the issues raised.

An essential feature of dynamic dramatizations is conflict. A negative tone is purposefully sought by the players. If an agreeable version of a problem is presented, with solutions outlined and issues resolved, then the audience is not being asked to think and feel about that problem and does not feel compelled to interact and respond with ideas of their own.

There may or may not be a satisfactory resolution to the problem that is presented in a role play. Individuals in the audience may differ regarding the best resolutions. In the sample role play one individual may feel the volunteer was correct in questioning the care her patient was receiving; another may think questioning physical care is not the volunteer's role. The audience is told by the narrator that certain points will be clari-

fied after a summary of the issues raised.

The narrator then summarizes key points brought out during the interaction. The narrator asks the players to re-role (introduce themselves) so the audience realizes the play was just that—a play. Without the de-roling process, audience members may approach performers after the role play is over and address them as if they were still in character. This happens because scenes are often so realistic that individuals personally identify with a player. This causes an awkward and confusing situation that can be avoided with proper de-roling.

Finally, if certain issues need further clarification, the person responsible for the training discuss them with reference to the policies or guidelines of the organization.

CONCLUSION

Consider television talk shows and why they are popular. The host (the narrator) invites guests (the players) to discuss two different sides of an issue. At the point at which the guests begin to intensify their disagreement, the host stops the discussion and asks for audience input. The audience has responded emotionally to the discussion and is now ready to offer views or solutions. The conflictual tone stimulates interaction from the audience. Learning occurs by reflecting problems, fears, and ignorance the audience members may be experiencing or have had themselves.

It is this heightened sense of awareness and exchange of feelings and ideas that keep talk shows popular. Similarly, interactive theater allows for everyone to be involved in the learning process.

Interactive theater is a technique using brief role plays for educational purposes. A narrator guides the audience into a meaningful exchange of views, ideas, and alternatives. Interactive theater, then, serves as a vehicle through which increased awareness and problem-solving begin, and learning occurs.