YOUTH DRAMA: THE ‘YOUTH WORK ACT’?

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An important and influential book called *Youth Work*, published in 1987 and edited by Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith, set out to explore the multifaceted nature of youth work and the way in which the role of the youth worker draws on aspects of numerous other professions, occupations and pursuits. The title of each chapter begins with the words “Youth Workers as…” and then an additional word or term is inserted, including:

- social workers;
- educators;
- community workers;
- entrepreneurs;
- character builders;
- redcoats (referring to the entertainment staff at Butlins holiday camps).

It is probably immediately obvious to anyone with experience of youth work practice how a case could be made for seeing youth workers from each of these perspectives. The case for youth workers as educators is particularly strong, of course, and has been formally acknowledged as such by the definition in the Youth Work Act 2000. But there is no denying the link between at least certain types of youth work and social work, particularly in their historical development. Youth work and community work are integrally connected in theory and practice and are taught together within the same professional programmes in my own university. That youth workers need to be entrepreneurial is, in the sense of being resourceful, strategic, risk-taking (within reason), and “enterprising” will probably be acknowledged by most people, particularly in the current economic climate. Although most would also caution against the dangers of “privateering” youth work as has begun to happen in parts of Britain. The term “character building” has taken on a new and more rigorous connotation in principle facilitating young people to build their characters, need not be either of these things (and in fact this chapter is question marked for a “socialistic alternative” to the traditional character building model). And since young people take part in youth work voluntarily, it needs to be sufficiently enjoyable to attract and sustain their interest and involvement, meaning that an element of entertainment is inevitable. There is nothing wrong with this: all good education should be fun as well as challenging.

But even in 1987 I first read it I thought that there was another chapter that could have been included in the book, providing another perspective and called “Youth Workers as Actors”. I have said as much many times over the years to the youth work students at Hull Metropolitan but have never got around to writing such a chapter myself. I haven’t got my act together, so to speak.

The invitation to contribute to Youth Drama Ireland was therefore very welcome because it prompted me to rethink the idea as well as to look more generally at youth drama and its value in the youth work context.

This is something in which I have a particular interest, not least because drama and youth work to a significant extent occupy a shared space in my personal history. It was in my very early teens that I discovered both, and they have both remained very important to me ever since. My introduction to drama was partly through my involvement in youth work (as well as school) and there was certainly a substantial overlap and an enormous degree of complementarity – between what I gained from both.

Like many young people I found the role of playing of drama enormously liberating and empowering. After all, if the process of identity development is essentially about exploring oneself with the question “who am I?” (and related questions such as “what are the possibilities for me?” “what kind of person could I be?”), then what better method could there be for undertaking such exploration (and what safer and more “constructive” method in every sense) than engaging in collaborative and imaginative activity that enables you to be “in a variety of ways, by taking on you to see the world from different perspectives and “act” accordingly. This experience, combined with the related opportunities I gained from youth work to exercise responsibility and leadership, develop skills of facilitation and presentation and work as a partner with adults in the local community, was enormously important in shaping me personally and professionally.

The longer I was involved in youth work (as a volunteer, then part-time paid and now full-time paid) the more I could see the relevance of insights and skills acquired in the field of drama to working with people young or old. Most obviously, when one’s job is to work educationally and developmentally with individuals and groups in settings where challenges of one kind or another are common (meaning, for instance, that the capacity to appear confident even when nervous or apprehensive is a considerable asset), and in which a variety of roles have to be adopted from time to time as appropriate (leading, listening, informing, advising, demonstrating, emphasizing, encouraging and even – as suggested above – entertaining), the correspondence with the skills involved in theatrical role playing is considerable. In this (rather limited) sense alone, youth workers can be seen as being among other things, “actors”.

But the link goes deeper than this, and the lessons of drama are relevant not just for youth workers but for young people and indeed not just for youth work but for all human engagement and interaction. This idea was brilliantly elaborated upon by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959 and reissued in print since.

By the time I came across it in the early 1960s I had studied Drama and English at college and was very familiar with the metaphorical words of Jacques in As You Like It: “in the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players”. I knew moreover that this metaphor was a very old one, having been expressed at least as early as in the works of Platos (indeed Shakespeare probably...
Intended to last not only a lifetime but also as long as
we can bear it, but it is also a way to explore what we
have been through and what we are going to experience.

Referring specifically to the When of action, Loffman
wrote, "All the world is not of course a stage, but the
stage is the world."

He meant that there is a "performative" dimension to all
social interaction, that we are always aware (even if
subconsciously) of the fact that others are observing
and interpreting our behaviour and we usually want it to
be interpreted in a particular way. The better we are at
"acting" the more likely it is that the interpretation will
agree with our intentions. Equally as the "audience"
observing and interpreting the actions of others, we are
conscious that there is a meaning being inferred from these
actions and often out of a kindness we pretend that this is
the meaning we have taken, even if we have actually
recognized something else (just as, for the most part, we
do not bow and floss in the theatre when we see an actor's
performance anonymously).

Like all good ideas, Loffman's dramaturgical perspective
on social life can be taken to uncountable lengths and needs
to be applied judiciously. But at its core it is a vitally
important acknowledgment of the potentially creative and
destructive nature of human communication and therefore of all
social interaction. Loffman can in fact be regarded as part of a more
general approach within sociolinguistics called symbolic interactionism,
whose key principles include the following:

- Symbols are the basis for communication. Symbols can
  include words, gestures, objects, emblems and so on. A symbol
  is something that stands for - that means - something else.
- Human beings can only use symbols, we can create and
  recreate them, manipulating their meaning (as in the case
  of languages that evolve and change over centuries, or
  fashion trends that can change from year to year) - the
  "symbolic" size of headlines or subheadings, the most "attractive"
  colours or shapes of clothes
- Context is crucially important. The same symbol - a spoken
  word, a non-verbal gesture, a particular combination of colours
  on a flag or even off - it can have very positive connotations
  in one social or cultural context and very negative connotations
  in another.

Symbolic interactionism alone does not of course explain all
aspects of social life. Its most obvious uses are in explaining
interpersonal and small group interaction rather than broader
social, political or economic processes. But it can shed light even
on these. Certainly, anyone who is introduced to the insights of
writers such as Loffman into the performative dynamics of human
relationships or the central importance of symbols in social
interaction has the opportunity to become a better communicator,
more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others (and vice
versa) more sensitive to the nuances of verbal and non-verbal
exchanges, more alert to the importance of both content and
context in the interpretation of meaning, and these things matter
much in issues such as the public announcements of politicians
and "world leaders" as they do in our everyday encounters with
family, friends and colleagues.

While symbolism is central to social life in general, its significance
can be seen particularly clearly in all aspects of theatrical performance
(the spoken word, body language and movement, costume, the
context of time, light and space) and this is where youth drama
comes in, because youth drama does not just provide the
opportunity to explore the ideas and issues mentioned above in
an academic, textbook manner, it facilitates their exploration in
very practical, energetic and enjoyable ways, creating new,
realistic and creative ways to be used in daily life.
but also all rich in potential for personal and social learning.

In one sequence participants broke into pairs. Partner A was given a photographic image of a person in some setting or other— it could be male or female, any age, anywhere in the world, an animal, a machine, and asked to embody this image in a still pose, for partner B to observe (some use of props was allowed, from what was already to hand). Partner B, without having seen the original photograph, then interpreted and described the image as embodied by partner A to the rest of the group. The various partners then stayed in their fixed positions while the Bis walked around and compared the original photograph, now on display with the image created by A, bearing in mind the interpretation provided in each case by partner B. Not surprisingly this led to much hilarity. For instance whereas one partner A was described by his partner B as a young man standing after a mountain walk, the original inspiration was a picture of Tina Turner in a particularly raunchy pose (or at least, it seemed a reasonable interpretation that her intention was to appear raunchy). After reversing roles and some discussion of the various representations and interpretations provided, each A and B pair then came together to create a joint image drawing on their individual photographs, and they were asked to strike an attitude that physically focused on another couple’s joint image. Each couple was then asked to move position and recreate the image struck by the couple they had been focusing on. Next, Dave handed out the opening lines of a dialogue between the two people in each couple, and they were asked to improvise a scene for several minutes (each started with the same exchange, but they all developed in very different ways). After some further discussion about process and content, the short scenes were then re-enacted in sequence, with only a slight pause between each, giving the event—as Dave said—something of the feel of ritual. And again the groups engaged in discussions, focusing on issues such as the process of deciding on how and what to represent, the relationship between what was intended to be represented and what was discovered or perceived by others, and more “technical” questions of what would need to be addressed if this were part of a preparation for a public performance.

This account of part of the workshop, while rather schematic and certainly not doing justice to the quality of the work of the participants or of Dave as facilitator, does hopefully give some sense of the way in which drama as an artform is dense with possibilities for exploring and expressing themes and issues that go right to the heart of “human being”, and all the more so in a youth-work context, where the emphasis is not just on experience but on reflecting on and learning from that experience. Perception, symbol, emotion, attitude (in both the physical and mental senses) and intellect all come into play in dramabased work, and the symbiotic relationship between individual and society can be strikingly enacted. As Dave Kelly commented to the group at the end of the workshop: “You had to make sense of things in the exercises you were asked to do, but we (the observers) had to allow you to make sense of things”.

This is true of so many human situations and relationships, not just interpersonal but intergenerational (and it applies equally in both directions). It is also entirely in keeping with Goffman’s “dramaturgical perspective” on life, in which actors make sense of their social reality together, creating and re-creating its meaning. In a constructive and collaborative process. The material during the workshop in which each pair was given the same opening lines of dialogue meant the resulting scenes were divergent in such a way, also touches on an important aspect of social life and indeed a central question in social theory—the extent to which individuals are free to make choices for themselves (to exercise “agency”) even when external (“structural”) constraints operate. In this as in so many other respects, youth drama provides creative mechanisms for acquiring knowledge, skills and personal attitudes that are enormously relevant to living and learning in today’s complex world. This is borne out by the young people themselves. At the end of the workshop, I asked the young participants to pick a word to express what they gained from their involvement in youth drama that they might not gain otherwise. I will leave the final words to them: support, creativity, reflection, challenge, communication, confidence, togetherness, physicality, artistry, imagination.

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