

**Healing through Dialogue:
Theatre of the Oppressed
and Beyond**

Jaya Iyer

Healing through Dialogue: Theatre of the Oppressed and Beyond

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

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Contents

Foreword	5
Introduction and Acknowledgements	7
Background	9
Participants, selection and profile	12
Broad Outline of the Core Workshop	14
Workshop Process Report	16
Action Plans	28
Feedback from the Participants	30
Follow up	33
Learnings	35
Plans for the Future	36

Foreword

‘Healing through Dialogue: Theatre of the Oppressed and Beyond’ is the ninth in the WISCOMP Discussion Paper series. It is the outcome of a Special Project designed and implemented by Jaya Iyer. The project explores the use of the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ technique for tackling social issues, through intensive training and hands-on practical application.

Every year WISCOMP awards Scholar of Peace Fellowships for media projects, academic research and special projects. The fellowships are awarded for original work at the intersection of gender with peace, conflict and non-traditional security concerns. The fellows include a wide range of professionals – academicians, defence and foreign policy practitioners, journalists, field activists, dramatists, social workers and so on. WISCOMP Discussion Papers and WISCOMP Perspective Papers bring the work of some of these fellows to a wider audience.

Jaya Iyer’s Workshop on ‘Understanding Theatre Of the Oppressed’ (UTOO) was conceived and implemented as the core of her work that was supported by WISCOMP. The use of theatre as a tool for generating awareness and action for social change has a rich history. Iyer’s work incorporates a strong commitment to initiating change through non-violent means.

The Workshop swept participants along into a journey into the self, which is simultaneously a personal exploration of hurts and trauma, courage and resilience as well as an effort to grasp social realities. The ‘healing’ this project brings is through the process of interaction and skilled dialogue – within the theatre/workshop group as well as with a wider public. The healing is at the level of self, many selves, and the level of society.

Issues thrown up during the Workshop included personal struggles against oppressive social structures, sexual harassment, domestic violence, discrimination of HIV positive persons, bullying in schools etc. Different forms of Theatre of the Oppressed – including image theatre, forum theatre and invisible theatre, provided a means to begin addressing these issues actively, collectively. Participants, who represented social organizations from many parts of the country,

emerged from the experience equipped with a method that would help them begin programs to tackle such issues on the ground. They prepared Action Plans that they went back to execute in their work areas.

The fellowship work indicated the vast potential that this medium has to deal with various crises in the contemporary world. The technique has an inbuilt multiplier effect, as those who learn it also begin to use, and in turn teach, it to others. Iyer hope to carry the process further – for which project we at WISCOMP wish her much success.

The WISCOMP Research Team

Introduction and Acknowledgements

‘Healing through Dialogue: Theatre of the Oppressed and Beyond’, a project spanning some three months, was a crucial segment of a larger process of creating forums for dialogue amongst various interest groups. The project was undertaken with the faith that creating facilitators who have internalized the value of healing through dialogues can create an amicable ambience for social healing.

Objectives

The project aimed at bringing about awareness (beyond mere information and skills) amongst the development and educational sectors about the healing potentials of arts, which connect rather than disturb.

The objectives of the project were:

- To train 10-15 teacher/ trainers as ‘Jokers’ (facilitator in Theatre of the Oppressed), through working on a wide range of media.
- To reach out to 5-8 different grassroots groups/ organizations and their respective audiences through these Jokers.
- To create spaces for public discourse of real choices against cosmetic options.

19 teacher/ trainers from 13 different groups underwent an intensive learning process through a five days retreat workshop in April 2005. The design of the workshop / retreat included space for introspection, healing self, dialoguing to build consensus as well as hands-on practice of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ technique. The participants were from organizations working at the grass roots level from North East, Delhi, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The group also drew up a detailed plan of action for incorporating the learnings into their mainstay work and have stayed in touch amongst themselves. Follow-up through the last few months has indicated that more than 70% are actively using the techniques they have learnt and are keen on a follow up workshop.

The design and execution of the Workshop and follow-up were a collaborative endeavour by Pravah, WISCOMP, (through Scholar of Peace Fellowship) and Sanskriti Prathishtan with participating organizations and institutions.

Jaya Iyer

Background

I have been working in the field of development theatre for the last 15 years and especially Theatre of the oppressed for the last 5 years. This theatre technique, which originated in Brazil under Augusto Boal, has proved to be a highly effective tool in enabling organizations/schools to address their own issues and actively seek solutions. In 1999 I had the opportunity to observe, learn, participate and practice the techniques of Theatre of the oppressed under Augusto Boal.

Having trained over 120 individuals during the next 4 or 5 years, in Theatre of the Oppressed technique, I felt a need to address the core issues of violence and peace for the individuals themselves. The same need emerged from many of the participants as well.

In 2005 I was awarded the WISCOMP Scholar of Peace Fellowship which provided the possible space to deepen and widen the training into learning, healing and connecting processes.

From the proposal

‘Be the change you wish to see’ – Gandhi

Lacunae in the existing work – There are thousands of organizations using theatre and allied arts in the field of academic and social education. But only a handful of individuals and still fewer organizations use Theatre of the oppressed methods. But even among the ones that use this technique the emphasis is not on peace and non-violent means. Their stance on the means of bringing about justice and equality remains at best ambiguous or unarticulated.

This project aims to assertively spell out the connection between violence and oppression and the need for non-violent sustainable ways to achieve freedom and peace. But more importantly it also hopes to provide a first hand experience of healing and internalizing the peace and connectedness to the teachers and trainers. This would be the greatest contribution this project can dream of making, for how can some one hurt, angry, broken from within, speak of peace?

‘We shall together become the change we wish to see.’

Theatre as a methodology is a very effective tool to address various issues. Theatre of the oppressed provides an opportunity to look into the very core and essence of a social issue and at the same time provides a platform for different people to voice opinions. Further it helps to arrive at multiple solutions borne out of varying perspectives on the issue at hand.

The different forms of theatre touched upon during the UTOO (Understanding Theatre Of the Oppressed) Workshop could be used to tackle social issues like violence, communalism, intolerance and environment or raise awareness about these. They could also be used to tackle issues within schools like teasing, intolerance, bullying and teacher-student relationships.

The Workshop was designed as a foundation course focusing mainly on Forum theatre. Its core is a four-day long intensive training module, which offers opportunities to do hands-on work. While the emphasis is on learning the techniques of doing Forum theatre, other forms like Image theatre and Legislative theatre are also included. Care is taken to provide the theoretical background of each form.

Objectives

By the end of the Workshop, the participants would be able to

1. Explain the theoretical core and core values of the Theatre of the oppressed
2. Enlist different forms of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’
3. Create the stereotype of the oppressor and the oppressed
4. Write scripts based on these characters
5. Translate the script into pieces for performance
6. Perform these plays
7. Solicit responses from the audience
8. Facilitate the spect-actor to perform
9. Generate a dialogue with the audience based on spect-actor’s response and build consensus.

The broad work plan for the fellowship period was as follows:

Date/Month	Activities
1-30 th March '05	Identification of and communication with potential participants for the Workshop
1-15 th April '05	Design of the workshop and logistical details
15-30 th April '05	Workshop retreat
1-30 th May '05	Report and follow up on progress

Participants: Selection and Profile

A mail detailing the broad objectives and design was sent to organizations with whose work we have been familiar. We asked for nominees who had experience in peace and conflict related work or theatre and preferably both. The enrollment was closed as soon as we crossed 20.

S. No.	Name	Organization/ Institution	Broad area of work of the organization	Designation
1	Amit	Jamghat, Delhi	A collective of street children	Coordinator
2	Jitin	Smile, Pravah	Voluntary youth program	Volunteer theatre group
3	Meenal	Pravah		Associate coordinator, Teachers Training
4	Uday	Youth Initiative for Peace	Youth group working to promote peace processes amongst South Asian Countries	Member
5	Pranjal	NERYC, Guwahati	Works to build peace processes in North East through youth engagement and networking of various organizations	Theatre coordinator
6	Peter	Pajhra, Assam	Works with Adivasi groups on rights and access	Youth coordinator
7	Fr. Surinder	NERYC, Arunachal	Works to build peace processes in North East through youth engagement and networking of various organizations	Trainer

S. No.	Name	Organization/ Institution	Broad area of work of the organization	Designation
8	Suraj	Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan, Delhi	On shelter rights with homeless	Community worker
9	Prashant	Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan, Delhi	On shelter rights with homeless	Community worker
10	Lakshmi	Andhra Educational Society – School	Senior secondary school	Teacher
11	Harendra	Pune4Change, CYDA, Pune	Works to mobilize youth to work on issues of urban poverty	Coordinator
12	Vijay	CECOEDECON, Jaipur	On rural integrated development	Smile Program Coordinator
13	Kavita	CECOEDECON, Jaipur	On rural integrated development	Women's group coordinator
14	Chaman	CECOEDECON, Jaipur	On rural integrated development	Women's group coordinator
15	Monica	Jagori	Works on Gender inequities	Coordinator
16	Ambika	Amana Vedika, Andhra Pradesh	Network of organizations working on issues of communalization	Program director
17	Kavita	Pravah		
18	Nanu Ram	Manthan, Rajasthan	Integrated rural development	Youth program coordinator
19	Rupamanjari	AADI, New Delhi	Access and inclusion issues – for people with disabilities	Community program coordinator

Most of the participants had had some exposure to theatre, mostly in the form of street theatre etc. However for many it was their first time in a theatre workshop. Almost all the participants had substantial exposure to community work and its issues.

Broad Outline of the Core Workshop

Day 1

Inauguration

Introductions

Icebreakers

Theatre of the Oppressed – Orientation

Understanding Theatre Of the Oppressed (TOO), the historical perspective and different forms.

- *Image theatre*
- *Invisible theatre*
- *Forum theatre*
- *Legislative theatre*
- *Games and exercises of TOO*

Day 2

Games and exercises

Origin of theatre and the history

Defining the oppressor and the oppressed theatrically

Creation of scenes

Image theatre

My personal story

Finding the oppression in our own life scripts

Sharing excerpts

Day 3

Politics of space – understanding self assertion and relationships – experientially

Oppression in every day life – a situation from urban living

Scripting for Invisible theatre

Performance of invisible theatre – on Delhi streets/ bus/ railway station etc.

Feedback on Theatre of the Oppressed

Day4

Problem definition and understanding the game (within and without)

Role of facilitator

Building the Story line for Forum theatre

Practicing the play

Performance of the forum theatre-play

Day5

Personal beliefs and values

“Joker” – understanding and practice of the techniques

Feedback and follow-up plans for self and the organization and network

Plans for the peace festival

Celebration

Workshop Process Report

Day 1

Introductions and Icebreakers

The Workshop started earlier than planned as all the participants had arrived in Sanskriti, Anandgram (the venue of the Workshop) by lunch time. The inauguration was an informal one with the participants declaring the Workshop open. This was followed by a round of introductions and several games. These icebreakers helped everyone to loosen up and raised the energy levels.

Then the participants as well the facilitator shared their expectations from the Workshop as outcomes as well as process –

The following are some salient expectations:

- Learn theatre techniques to use in the course of work
- Update skills
- Springboard to actively resume theatre
- Use theatre to reach out to a wider spectrum of people
- Interact with people from different organizations and background and learn from each other
- Make new friends and have fun

While most people felt that the workshop would be very useful to them in their work, there were a few whose objective was to get to know oneself and connect within and some did want to have fun and make new friends.

Overview: Theatre of the Oppressed

An overview of the Theatre of the Oppressed, historical context and movement and its various techniques were presented. Theatre of the oppressed draws its inspiration from Paulo Frierie’s work in the field of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Started by Augusto Boal in Brazil during the military Junta’s regime as a way of involving people it soon challenged the very paradigm of audience being passive recipient. Various forms like image, newspaper, invisible, forum and legislative were talked about.

Post dinner the participant made brief presentations about their work, their organization and the issues they are working on. It was an enriching experience as the range of geographical locations as well as issues and approaches were varied.

The day ended on a high note with some singing and dancing.

Day 2

Games

The second day, as all other days that were to follow, started with physical games and exercises. Games play a very central role in theatre per se and specifically in theatre of the oppressed. Our internal feelings and emotions are trapped in our bodies and we are conditioned to be a certain way physically. Certain games and exercises that prompt us to use, feel and interact differently with our own bodies can be very liberating.

Walking in different ways, shifting balance, rolling, hopping, screaming – all such activities were what mornings were made of.

The froggie people

Those who were late for any session were asked to jump like a frog and go around saying hello/ namaste/ good morning to people around. Every morning this was a common sight to see people jumping and waddling around and greeting the staff of Sanskriti and other guests.

The day began with physical exercises, through which we also explored the use of space. Breathing and voice exercises followed.

After breakfast we again played games, which helped us become more comfortable with each other, and more importantly were a lot of fun. This included a mirror exercise. This was played first in groups of 2 and then 3, and each group member's hand was to serve as a mirror for the other. One's face had to always remain facing one's 'mirror'. Both groups' members were in constant motion, moving their hands and thus forcing the other to move their face in tandem. A brief discussion about the importance of just-having-fun followed.

History of Theatre

We were then split into smaller groups and asked to prepare a short improvisation, depicting a Stone Age scenario, without the use of language. All the presentations were hilarious and were a lot of fun to both do and watch. Greeting by shaking each other's feet, animals (played by people), hanging upside down from bamboo sticks, and a stone-age wedding are some of the enduring images from the exercise. The ensuing discussion brought out the origins of theatre from the time of early-man. It became clear that theatre was a natural instinct of human beings. An interactive discussion helped trace the journey of theatre, from its spontaneous origin to present day. This also laid the foundation for bringing in the theatre of the oppressed's central philosophy - that theatre belongs to people and should be rightfully returned to them.

Image Theatre

After this exercise the participants were given a detailed explanation of the intricacies of 'image theatre'. Image theatre is an effective medium for communicating a stark message through a single image – like a snapshot/ a tableau that brings out the underlying script.

We discussed the importance of clarity in the images, and consequently the use of stereo-types to put forward the situation more clearly. We experimented with a few situations and images during the discussion itself and different participants put forward different ways of portraying the same situations of oppression. Following the discussion we were asked to prepare our own images on any chosen theme.

Each of the four groups prepared charts about their respective images, specifying and describing thereby the conflict and the characters of the oppressor and the oppressed. All the teams attempted to describe the characters in detail keeping in mind the discussion on the use of stereo-types while assigning the characters names, physical appearances and props.

The issues picked up by the different groups were –

- i. Female infanticide
- ii. Domestic violence
- iii. Attitudes of disabled children, and
- iv. Eve teasing in buses

The presentation of each image was followed by feedback from the rest of the group on the image, and attempts to improve upon it. A few important things to keep in mind, that came up in the course of the exercise were –

- a) To bring out the conflict very clearly, not mix up different issues and stay with one central issue.
- b) To use exaggerated images so that the audience can see the oppression clearly.
- c) To use stereotypes, to avoid confusions about their identities.
- d) To have ONE oppressor and only ONE oppressed, as it would help comprehension and give real options for acting.

Personal Life Scripts

The afternoon was devoted to a session on our own personal life scripts. After a guided meditation the entire team was asked to depict on paper incidents from our personal experiences, where we have been either oppressors or have been oppressed. This was necessary in order to address the issues of oppression within our own being. Unless we can squarely look at that which either hurts us or that which causes pain to others we can't talk of healing. Empathy and wholeness both come through introspection and self-work. The story could be depicted through images, colours, words, narration – whatever medium the person is comfortable using. These were later shared with the group.

A very intense session – as everyone shared many intimate feelings and thoughts. Several traumatic instances were narrated with immense courage, and received by others with respect.

This was a keystone session as it brought the entire learning to a real personal front requiring of everyone nonjudgmental acceptance of the other with courage to accept the truth. Challenging as it was, it also built trust within the team. The most important take-away being that it humanized the oppressor and the oppressed, and they became real people made of flesh and blood.

Later many participants shared that the session helped us ‘... realize that at some point in each of our lives we have all been in situations of oppression, whether it be on one side or the other. This session brought the entire group closer.’

Scripting for Invisible Theatre

Finally, before ending for the day the participants brainstormed about issues that they may be able to take up in invisible theatre on the streets the next day. After much discussion, and after many subjects had been discussed in detail, three separate groups came up with the themes of the three invisible plays that we would perform the next day. These were –

- i. Eve teasing in buses
- ii. Smoking in public places
- iii. Violence against women

The rest of the evening was spent informally working out the details of the plays within the groups.

Day 3

Thursday, 21st April 2005 began with the usual morning exercises. Post breakfast the entire group assembled in the museum to rehearse for Invisible Theatre. Each of the three teams enacted one play, each based on the different themes selected the day before. As each team presented their play the larger group gave their suggestions and asked for clarifications. Each team also had to work out the other details – venue, names of each character, where each one was going and for what purpose. Other logistics were also planned out – who would board which bus and from where, where would each one disembark, where would the team assemble etc.

It was decided that the first play would be enacted enroute bus no.517 from Anandgram to IIT, the second play at AIIMS bus stop, and the third again enroute bus no. 517 from AIIMS to Anandgram. Contingency plans were also made in case of any untoward incidents e.g. paying fine to the police.

Certain general guidelines were also given.

- i) Actors should remain as invisible as possible so that the general public doesn't realize that a play is being enacted.
- ii) Characters should remain in their roles even after the play was over.
- iii) To talk with co-passengers rather than try to take the centre stage.

- iv) To ensure that we don't create violent situations and avoid violence at all costs.
- v) Other logical details like carrying enough money to travel back to Sanskriti as well as emergency number and map to Sanskriti.
- vi) The team also tried to dress as appropriately as possible.

Invisible Theatre

After everybody boarded the bus from different stops and got seated the play began. Prasant and Harender started harassing Monica who began protesting. The play really gathered momentum as the passengers started responding and finally Prasant and Harender had to disembark. The responses were mixed yet quite strong.

The group assembled at Dilli Haat where the learnings from the first play were discussed and the group moved to the next venue – AIIMS bus stop.

Here Suraj and Pranjal started smoking standing in the middle of the crowd. As Kavita, Meenal and Rupamanjari expressed their disapproval a heated argument began. A few people reacted spontaneously and tried to convince Suraj to stop. However most people were indifferent and very few participated in the dialogue.

After this, the group boarded a bus – 517. As everyone got settled the play began. Vijay and Chaman, acting as husband and wife, began arguing. Suddenly Vijay became aggressive and almost pushed Chaman off the seat. To this Kavita, acting as co-passenger, reacted sharply. Some people intervened though most were silent observers. Interesting dialogues took place later about – it being an issue between a man and his wife/ about how the wife should not have been aggressive/ and that working women challenge their husbands.

Learning from Invisible Theatre

Post lunch session began with a few games which were refreshing and energizing. Following this the group got divided into four teams. Each team was asked to discuss the high points, low points and the learnings from the morning experience and then shares the main points with the larger group. The following are the highlights.

High Points

- Public Response – the general public responded well. The first two plays could generate prolonged, in-depth discussions. In the first play the public involvement was so much that the group members had to intervene to resolve the crisis. During the second play, a few people who were smoking moved away.
- The coordination and planning within the small as well as the larger group was good.
- All the members gave good performance.
- The way potentially dangerous situations were resolved was commendable. It reflected presence of mind and spontaneity on the part of the team.
- The venues chosen were ideal.
- All the team members exhibited a lot of interest and enthusiasm.
- The experience imparted a better understanding of the issues and boosted self-confidence of all the actors.

Low Points

- The issue of domestic violence could not be addressed in the real sense.
- Since the group was large it made itself conspicuous especially inside the bus.
- Both the first and the third plays began too soon. The third play ended also quickly and was not built up properly.
- In the third play the actors went out of their roles too soon and this was a sure give-away to the public.
- The venue selected in the second play was too noisy and crowded and hence inappropriate.
- There was lack of coordination within the group to some extent due to which identity of some actors got revealed to the public.
- The public response to the second and third plays was not as expected. In the second play people took it more as a routine affair and few people even continued to smoke. The essence of the third play was lost as people felt it was a personal affair and hence didn't respond adequately.

Overall Learnings

- For Invisible Theatre to be effective the group needs to be smaller – 5 to 7 people. This would make the actors less conspicuous and hence create more impact.
- The actors should be spread out all over the venue so that they can mingle easily with the general public. Also this would allow them to evoke more response.
- There should be more coordination within the group with regard to timing, planning etc. to avoid recognition by the public.
- Actors should have a clear understanding as to when to begin the play and when to bring it to an end as also when to get into a role and when to come out of one.
- Actors should also be clear as to when and how to initiate discussion with the public as also when and how to keep it alive and bring it to an end.
- Actors should have more clarity on the issues as well as more spontaneity and presence of mind so that they are better prepared to handle any unpredictable situation.
- Theatre of the Oppressed can be used as an effective tool to generate debate and hence raise public awareness towards many social issues.
- We should be able to carry the learnings into our real life.

Day 4

Politics of Space: Space and Self

After the morning exercises the team undertook an intense exercise of defining personal space and responding to it and to each other's space. Every one was invited to choose their own corner and draw a circle to define their space, then the facilitator entered their space – sometime aggressively, sometimes in a friendly way. After this the participants can visit each other, invite others etc. The processing of the exercise saw concepts of violence, aggression, and encroachment discussed. Respect, trust and sharing were the positive feelings, borne out during interaction amongst each other. Assertiveness was seen as respecting space – one's own and others' at the same time.

Preparing for Forum Theatre

The day was devoted to forum theatre. The team was split into four groups and asked to create forum plays. Forum is the most popular and effective form within the theatre of the oppressed array. Here like in the image theatre, a central conflict is identified and oppressor and the oppressed defined. Thereafter the script is built till it reaches its climax of oppression. There the play freezes, and members of audience are invited to come and resolve the conflict.

Joker plays a key role as he/ she is the link between the audience and the actors. Violence or magical solutions are not acceptable – only real dialogues are.

The entire group was split into four and they identified various themes on which they worked to create scripts. The themes were –

1. Female foeticide
2. Discrimination of HIV positive people
3. Impact of alcoholism within a family
4. Discrimination against the family members of commercial sex workers

The teams scripted their play and presented it to rest of the team, feedback was given which was incorporated in the play.

Around 5.30 p.m., the group went collecting an audience for the show – the Pheri with its trademark call – ‘aao aao natak dekho’ (Come come, see a play) – and managed to collect a reasonable number of spectators: about 50 including some from Pravah and elsewhere as well as workers in the estate.

Several games were played with the audience throughout the evening, which made the audience comfortable and feel like a part of the whole process.

The presentation began with a brief overview of the entire Workshop and forum by Uday. This was followed by the forum presentations.

The first play

Kavita played the joker of the first play which portrayed a family situation. The daughter in-law of the house is pregnant and forced to go for a test to determine the sex of the foetus and it turns out to be a

girl. She is asked by her father-in-law and mother-in-law to terminate the pregnancy to which she refuses. The ensuing argument turns violent. The play freezes here and two people from the audience volunteered to come and play the role of the daughter in law. They both challenged the patriarchal views which devalued the role of women thus leading to such practices.

The second play

Pranjali was the joker, and the play depicted another family, with a father who is an alcoholic and takes away the money put away by his wife for the daughter's school fee. He insists that he requires it for his drinks and when his wife tries to prevent him he starts beating her up. There were two spect-actors who came on to the stage and reasoned with the antagonist.

The third play

This was about a man who is tested HIV positive. His higher official decides to rusticate him on this ground. Monica played joker in this play and invited 2 persons from the audience to come and present their solutions. While one of them argued on the basis that it was inhuman and cruel another presented the human rights side of it.

The fourth play

The last play had Harender as the joker and narrated the story of a young girl, whose mother is a commercial sex worker. The girl applies for a job in a company where the interviewer, who is the head of the organization, not only refuses her the job on this ground but also harasses her sexually. There were three spect-actors this time all of them ready to take on the oppressor with their arguments.

The evening ended with notes of thanks and applause. The overall feedback from the audience was very positive and the thematic content as well the form were highly appreciated.

Day 5

We began the day with morning exercise at 7.30 a.m. which was followed by breakfast at 8.30 a.m. We began our first session at 9 a.m. In this session all the groups presented their opinion on "joker". All the groups were asked to present the qualities, responsibilities, do's and don'ts of the joker.

JOKER

- ***Qualities/Skills***

- Alert
- Sense of humor
- Sensitive
- Clarity on issue
- Fluent in language
- Clarity on process
- Non-threatening
- Pleasant
- Confident
- Audience should be able to relate to her or him
- Good communication skills
- Patient
- Should be able to elicit response
- Should know when to stop/intervene when dialoguing with audience
- Polite
- Sincere
- Lively
- Friendly

- ***Should Do***

- Stick to the issue
- Play game such that all are included
- Be active
- Try to get as many people to respond as possible, from the public
- Be responsive
- Speak loud and clear

- ***Don't***

- Give own opinion
- Be nervous
- Overact
- Be stiff
- Be part of the play
- Stop thing abruptly
- Pressurise audience to respond

Preparing Action Plans and Giving Feedback

The presentation was followed by a small tea break which was again followed by a game about challenges we face in our life journeys. The game was followed by the preparation and presentation of action plans by all the associations/NGOs represented.

After this, lunch and post-lunch sessions were devoted to the evaluation of the whole workshop. This was done through groups presenting images of high and low points. This was photographed and discussed. Written feedback was collected along with sharing in the group. Several songs and some tearful goodbyes were the notes on which the Workshop ended.

Action Plans

NERYC, Guwahati – Fr. Surindra, Peter and Pranjal

Goals: Creating awareness and consent in people on issues of health.

Details:

- 1st week of May – Forming a like-minded group
- 2nd week of May – A survey /study
- 3rd week of May – Rehearsal and practices
- 4th week of May – Performance

Resources: Money – NERYC
Human – NERYC youth
Expertise – Fr. Surinder, Pranjal Saikia, Peter

Pune4Change – Harendra

Goals: To make aware and sensitize public on several issues, such as Education for homeless children.

Tools: Forum and invisible theater.

Outcome: People should speak out and will be part of the process.

Work Plan

- 2nd week of May – 2 day Workshop
- 3rd week of May – Forum Theater

Issue: Education for homeless children

Time line: May month

One issue for a month

Three plays in a month

Feedback after every play

Resources: Money – P4C
Human – Act4Change and youth volunteers

Area: Depends on the situation and the issue

CECOEDECON – Vijay, Kavita and Chaman

Details: For capacity building and integrated development of organization partners – communities like poor, landless, deprived and marginalized, dalits, women and children – to use the theater forms namely image, forum and legislative theater.

Goals: To strengthen the CBOs and to identify the issues and problems and solve them.

Time line: Youth Mandal Workshop in June, Sharing with staff members.

Resources: CECOEDECON Human Resources: Youth Mandal

Expertise: Vijay, Kavita, Chaman and Pravah team.

Andhra School – AVS Lakshmi

Goals and outcomes: To create awareness, sensitivity and empower school students.

Details: To do some exercises and games with students (one and half hours every day).

To introduce the concept of oppressed and oppressor, types of theater (one and half hours every day 2nd week).

To involve students to do what they learnt (one and half hours every day 3rd week).

To show it to the public (one and half hours every day 4th week).

Resources: Human resources: Co-participants of the workshop.

Expertise: – Jaya and Kavita

Pravah – Kavita, Meenal

Goals: Use learning for our own growth.

Transferring knowledge + skills of UTOO within our sphere of influence.

Details:

1. UTOO Workshop with teacher
 - their own development
 - as tool with students
2. With school students, especially during action projects
3. Use it with other organizations for their capacity building.

Time line:

1. Need based workshop with school
2. Atleast 2-3 groups/schools for action projects

Human Resources: Meenal and Kavita, Delhi-based groups

Feedback from the Participants

The overall feedback has been very positive, with many of the participants feeling energized and more confident by the end of the Workshop. The positive factors that contributed to it were shared as – the overall design, facilitation style, and ambience of the Workshop. Public interaction during forum and invisible theatre rank as high in terms of building confidence and clarity about the form. Linking of self and oppression counts as another deep experience. The low points are more in terms of lacunae in organizing and time management. Suggestions include longer duration for the workshop as well as follow up trainings.

Given below are excerpts from the feedback, recorded verbatim.

1. Please share with us how you are feeling at the end of this workshop.

GREAT! Rejuvenated, energized, confident. – Rupamanjari

Wonderful! Elated! Equipped to start working! – Ambika

Feeling happy and enriched. Very useful experience – personally and professionally. – Meenal

I came here expecting something completely different. At this point I feel I have really grown. I feel attached to the group and enriched with this new form. I feel as if I have some kind of direction and purpose at this point – Uday

I feel that I achieved a lot like what I planned and wanted to achieve and learn. I feel I got all the necessary information. – Harendra

Sometimes I was bit irritated with the sessions when deliberations did not start and end on time. – Fr. Surindra

2. What have you gained from this workshop?

Self-confidence. Have been able to shed my inhibitions. Lots of new ideas. Orientation to and understanding of Too. – Rupamanjari

Use of theatre to discuss oppression. Theatre as participatory tool to involve audience and discuss social issues – Meenal

I have lived a very comfort filled and protected life. I feel that I greatly broadened my own horizons at the end of these 5 days and feel more responsible as a person. I have also gained a better understanding about how to dedicate oneself to a cause. – Uday

I have benefited a lot from the workshop. I came to know the types of theatre and how to reach out to the people and educate them. – Fr. Surindra

I learned the “Art of Theater” which can be used in my day to day life and also in my professional life. – Chaman

Some micro technical parts I learned about the theatre and process of making a play, action plan with play, joker etc. – Prashant

3. What have been the high points and low points of this workshop?

High Points – Bonding, knowing people from diverse backgrounds. Performing in public for the first time, fun, enjoyment, relaxation, food, surroundings. Games – a major factor in making me shed my inhibitions.

Low points – Mosquitoes (!) – Rupamanjari

We did not know each other at all, but worked together with great team spirit. Forum theatre and invisible theatre exercises were great – Ambika

High Points – Each and every moment of workshop.

Low Points – Me everyday becoming a Mendak (froggie). – Jitin

I usually don't enjoy sessions on self, but this one was useful in terms of linking of one self to oppression /oppressor and oppressed. – Meenal

High Points: ‘Sharing life-scripts’ activity, performance both of invisible as well as forum theatre. The mirror exercise was great fun. On the flip side I felt we did not extract everything we could have from the ‘image theatre’ session. I wish we could have been more focused. – Uday

High point: Different issues were coming out, also relationships between all the participants.

Low point: There should be some time for rest. – Harendra

Everything was carefully guided and was really good, educative, informative and inspiring. So, I don't put anything under high or low points. – Fr. Surinder

High Points: Performance of 3rd day play in Bus and public place as well as the stage show of 4th day : it boosted our self-confidence.

Low Points: Tenure of workshop is very much less time. – Prashant

4. Suggestions for improvement

Post dinner also if we had done some activity, like go over some of the games again, it would have been really more wonderful. – Ambika

If feedback forms can be objective type rather than descriptive like this form. – Jitin

The two places where I think we could have worked more were on image theatre and also on the use of symbols. I wish we could have spent a little more time on the practical experiments. – Uday

May be play or any forum done by experienced people – those who have attended UTOO earlier – shown to the participant can make us more confident and understanding. – Harendra

It would be really highly appreciated if the sessions and deliberations could start and end on time. – Fr. Surindra

Use more exercises for each form like image, invisible and forum, etc, and provide in depth knowledge about these. – Chaman

It could be nice if the post lunch break is extended bit more. – Peter

Any workshop should be continued at least 15 days. – Prashant

Follow up

Theatre of the Oppressed – Learnings in Action

Many participants got back to us to share their activities especially those related to theatre of the oppressed – Uday volunteered and did make a yahoo groups, which unfortunately couldn't remain active as most of the participants had limited or no access to net connectivity.

Given below are some stories that reached us through emails/ letters and telephonic or face to face conversations.

1. Lakshmi

Bullying in school

Lakshmi from Andhra School was one of the first to get back. When she saw a monitor of higher class bullying one of the students she decided to use forum with them. Summoning the students during a free period she urged them to play out a similar sequence – a monitor bullying students – and asked students to respond assertively yet non-violently. Several options came out including going to the class teacher, assertively challenging use of physical strength, and in fact the erring monitor himself played out one of these solutions. Post the exercise the students shared that they felt less victimized and more empowered.

Lakshmi has also decided to get theatre training included as an integral part of the school's extra-curricular activities as a way of addressing issues within school.

2. Nanu Ram

A worker from Manthan in Rajasthan, Nanu Ram created a play on the theme of Right to Information and showed it first to his own colleagues. After the show wherein several of his colleagues came on the stage to play the role of the oppressed, the colleagues shared that it was an empowering process for them. The play was then staged in front of a 2500 strong crowd during a Right to Information rally with several people playing the oppressed to counter the oppression.

During my recent visit to his organisation Nanu Ramji had got together a group of girls and his colleagues and created a play on girl child education and several girls from the village came onto the stage to challenge the oppression of denial of education .

3. The Delhi Network

Six of the participants – Amit , Jitin, Monica, Suraj, Prashant and Uday got together to create some invisible theatre pieces, however could not stage them anywhere. They are using these methods in their own work.

4. Harendra Godombe

Harendra has written to say he has created several forum plays on themes of discrimination against HIV positive people and shelter rights and staged these in several public places in Pune and the response has been very positive. He was also planning to use invisible theatre on the issue of sexual harassment.

5. Peter and the North East Team

Peter has used forum on several issues especially with his group to look at the issues of tribes in Assam but also to address other issues. He presented a workshop production on the theme of exploitation of staff , especially women, in a private firm and got many young people to come on to the stage and dialogue with the office manager and assert their rights.

Fr. Surinder and Pranjal also from the North East have used some of these methods in their work.

Peter is coordinating to organize a workshop on ‘Theatre of the oppressed’, in Tezpur for his group, Pajhra.

6. Kavita and Meenal

Both Kavita and Meenal from Pravah were new to theatre when they came for the workshop, however they are now using theatre in their trainings with teachers to bring out and discuss various issues.

7. Ambika

Ambika from Aman Vedika was a theatre person who was taking a break from theatre for a few years. Now she has resumed it and is also using theatre of the oppressed methodology. She is also coordinating to organize a Workshop on the same for several groups from Andhra Pradesh.

Learnings

This was the first time that I carried out the following two innovations within a theatre of the oppressed Workshop.

The first innovation was a deep connecting within one's own self to reflect on the instances of oppression that one might have experienced. This process took almost one day – with a central session “ My personal story”, and “identifying the oppressor and oppressed within”. This turned the workshop from a mere transference of skills to one of healing and integration. Many of the participants reported that it was a high point as well a great learning experience. But some had shared that it was challenging and difficult.

Though one had expected immense movements because of this , it was very different to experience it first hand. There were many sharings of traumatic experiences and indeed it was humbling to meet in a group such courageous and strong individuals who could rise above personal tragedies to work for social change. It was crucial to talk about those instances as it helped many to get in touch with inner hurts and questions that had been hidden away in the business of everyday living. It also helped one to pinpoint one's own role in making life what it is and it was very empowering to experience the change that one can bring about.

One participant shared about her father's demise and how he had been a strong supporter of her studying and moving on in life. Identifying various relatives who were against it as people she fought against, she was able to talk about how she had internalized her father's role within her.

One participant shared about his own health and how he was infected by a dangerous virus and how he had come to cope with it. Looking back at his own self as the oppressor he shared that he was able to reconcile with self and forgive oneself.

Another participant shared how traumatized she felt when one of her children was beaten up by another child from the neighborhood with that child's father standing there and supporting his son. Violence was just not physical but emotional as the child felt helpless. Her son had later questioned the family norm that fights and physical violence were to be abhorred as he had seen an adult endorsing it. She could not still come to terms with this incident and felt helpless.

Personally for me this was a particularly enriching workshop with many learnings. The need to put self centrally in the process of social change and to begin by healing self were reconfirmed in my own beliefs and understanding.

The second innovation was that time was allocated for action planning and intensive follow up. Putting down a detailed plan of action helped many of the participants to launch into action and use the learnings rather than succumbing to everyday work pressures.

Follow up in terms of telephone calls and emails as well as visits to participants' work sites helped in carrying on the learnings and staying in touch.

Plans for Future

The festival of peace which was planned between 11 September – 2 October 2005 could not take place due to preoccupation with other tasks as well lack of allocated resources. However the plan continues to be there.

Several of the participants are continuing to act as Jokers in their own regions. One would like to bring them together sometime during 2006 to celebrate the festival – probably in September – October might be realistic. Meanwhile we do continue to be touch and some of the participants are organizing similar retreat Workshops in their own regions. One such Workshop is planned in Andhra Pradesh which will be coordinated by Aman Vedika and another in Assam, which will be coordinated by Pajhra.