

Clown: playing with failure, experiencing the expression of the body



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LaXixa Teatre



WHERE DID THE PILOT SESSION TAKE PLACE

Barcelona



WHEN DID THE PILOT SESSION TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WAS IT

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WHO ARE WE ?

La Xixa Teatre is a non-profit organisation based in Barcelona, Spain, with the aim of researching, developing and multiplying educational and theatrical tools as a means for social transformation. The activities we carry out include workshops, training and performances targeting different groups of the population. We strongly believe in the embodiment of the experiences and in the amplification of the diverse voices.

In our work with educators, facilitators and trainers, we give special attention to verbal and non-verbal communication, to voice and movement, as they are the most powerful tools that we have to generate processes of individual and collective transformation and to reach the impact we aim for.



OUR METHOD



Through our experience, we have developed our own method, having always in mind the foundation bricks offered by Popular education and Participatory action research by Paulo Freire. We believe that all agents are capable of teaching and learning, they have knowledge, wisdom and creativity. They are always subject and not the object of the learning processes and have the same right to express their ideas, to discuss problems and solutions and to be listened to.

Given this important base, the methodologies that we combine are mainly the Theatre of the Oppressed¹ Clown and Process Work² However, in this article we will focus on the Clown methodology, as it was the one used in the implementation of the first training that we organised in the framework of the VOICE project.

The clown is more than merely an art product. It is a methodology that helps awaken the ancient desire to turn things upside down and look at them from a different perspective. This method opens to creativity and improvisation, but it also requires a profound self-knowledge of the body and the emotions, a deep closeness to success and failure. The clown is always attentive and responsive to what happens around, as the improvisation starts from reacting to the audience. For this reason, a clown needs to always be looking into someone's eyes, unless it is helping other clowns. When clowns make mistakes, they integrate them into the show, by repeating them three times. Clowns like making mistakes and being laughed at...in fact, when the audience laughs, clowns thank them.

1. The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), developed in the 1970s by Augusto Boal, has been one of the main tools for participatory communication and for Latin American popular education movements. It is a political theatre, a collective essay of emancipation, that finds its basis in the epistemology of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire. We use theatrical games based on the TO to de-mechanize our body, perceptions, and emotions, making us aware of our cultural filters, making explicit and collectivizing our own conflicts and experiences. The collectivization of individual stories, and the subsequent extrapolation to a group story, allows us to look for collective and creative alternatives to situations that are often difficult to solve from an individual position.

2. Process Work offers a model that integrates and uses contributions from various disciplines to facilitate transformation and growth both individually and collectively. It focuses on developing a state of consciousness, helping people realize how they perceive and live their experiences, learning to change their approach, and discovering information that they do not notice or marginalize, and that limits their ability to respond. Process Work consists of cognitive learning (theories, methods and structures) but, at the same time, requires deep internal work and a 'spiritual' attitude that allows us to transform difficulties into opportunities. Process Work teaches us to connect with our deepest being and learn to flow creatively in the midst of 'extreme circumstances'.

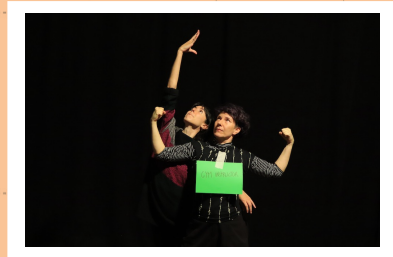
OUR EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE VOICE PROJECT

La Xixa carried out two trainings (one 12-hour and the other 30-hour long) in Barcelona that were addressed to professionals working in the field of formal and non-formal education, eager to work on their self-awareness and to acquire new tools that would help them in their profession.

The trainings were initially offered to 20 participants, in a way that the same participants of the first training could decide (once it was over) if they wanted to engage in the second one as well. The call had a great success, receiving 87 pre-inscriptions, which made it necessary to make a pre-selection based on the answers to the inscription Google form (mainly regarding their motivation, experience, and availability). The pre-selected participants were invited to an online 20-minute interview, which gave the team more elements to make the

final selection of participants. After the interviews, 30 participants were selected (24 women and 6 men). They all took part in the first training, while 18 also completed the second one.

The first training (12 hours + 2 additional hours for the performance), took place from 5th to the 26th of March 2022 and focused on basic theatrical tools provided by the clown methodology to work on body and voice awareness, while also fostering creativity, non-verbal communication and working on the relation to others. The training ended with a performance carried out on the 26th of March during the opening event of the new Centre de Vida Comunitària de la Trinitat Vella (Barcelona).



SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Educators often live in the dichotomy of being “seen and recognised” by the group that they are working with, while keeping the attention, and often pressure, to “see and recognise” everyone else. This means being able to give the necessary space to each participant and to taking into account their feedback, both when it is expressed verbally and when it is not verbalised, but in fact as important. This was the starting point of our training.

Participants were asked to stand in a circle and introduce themselves with their name...as simple as it is. In the second round, participants were asked to repeat their name, but now taking the time to look into the eyes of each person in the

room. This was the first contact to the clown methodology, according to which the clown “reads” the feedback from the audience and reacts to it, without a script, through improvisation...just as when, as educators, we need to be flexible and able to work around our plan according to the feedback that we receive from the group. When asked to express the change produced by the second part of the activity, the participants said that they suddenly felt more presence, contact with each other, they felt seen and they were able to “see” others, becoming more aware of the group and their impact on it.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIVERSITY

When working with groups, it is important for educators to be self-aware. The word “educator” implies many things, and it is easy (maybe?) to define the role and responsibilities that come with it...However, it is sometimes more challenging to take into account that “I as an educator” cannot be separated from the “I as a person”, with all the interconnections of axes and aspects that construct one’s identity. To recognise and to give value to the diversities represented in the group we are working with, as educators we need to fully be aware of our internal diversity and how certain aspects of our identity, belief systems and prejudices affect the way we relate to the group.

One of the activities proposed with this aim was what we call “Welcome to diversity” through which participants were invited to take a step forward if they felt identified by what the facilitator said. For example:

- People who identify themselves as women
- People who were born in Spain
- People who can speak more than two languages
- People who have had previous experiences with theatre
- People who are scared to speak in public
- People who feel anxious while working with groups, etc.

ERRARE HUMANUM EST

According to the philosopher Seneca, making mistakes is human nature, but persisting with the same mistake is demonic behaviour.

As an educator, most of the time we believe that making mistakes is itself demonic. We are terrified by what people might think if we do not give indications as clearly as they would like to receive them, if we show vulnerability while facilitating an activity, if we make comments that they do not agree with. The clown methodology comes very handy as, against all odds, it celebrates the mistakes, it opens the space to laugh about them, reducing the stress and anxiety produced by the horrible fear of doing something wrong. Easy to say, harder to put into practice...The good news is that we can train ourselves!

During our training, the participants were asked, while in a circle, to say again their name associating it with a movement and sound. They were then divided into groups of five with the indication of creating a choreography based on the movements and sounds that each group member made. This process had a series of difficulties (which can be encountered in the daily life of most educators) such as time constraints, decision making processes and the pressure of having to perform in front of the rest of the participants. The activities tackled the fear of imperfection, both in the execution and in the preparation of this short performance and generated a whole series of questions: How much space was given to each person to make their proposal? How well were they able to

integrate everyone's movement and sound? How did they make certain decisions? Who took the lead? How could people used to make theatrical performances and those who are not combine their strengths and weaknesses? How aesthetically interesting would the performance be? How did the performance differ from the expectations of each team member?

The concept of mistake and the pressure that the fear of making one implies were deepened through another activity which required the participants to walk in the space, trying to avoid making circles, always maintaining the same rhythm, and launching a small ball to each other. Every time a person received the ball, they had to make a sound. If the ball fell, the entire group had to make the sound "oh". The exercise started using only one ball, but then a second and a third one were integrated. During the debriefing, the participants shared that while at the beginning they were focusing on the movement, once the second and third ball were included in the game, they paid more attention to the ball than to themselves, feeling the pressure of catching the ball to avoid the sound underlying the "mistake". Another interesting aspect that was brought to attention was that, once a ball fell, the others did too, as all the attention was on the mistake more than following the activity.

THE VOICE OF THE BODY

In group facilitation, non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication. However, educators are usually more focused on what they say than on what the body communicates in the meanwhile, believing that their body will follow their words and convey always and with no doubt the same message. The bad news is that it is not so straightforward; the good news is that, as everything you will read in this article, it can be worked upon.

Another aspect that needs attention and that is not less important than the previous one is that people commonly use certain parts of their body, forgetting about a few others. So, we started from that.

Participants were asked to follow the movements done by the facilitator. Easy, right? Well, participants realised that for the first time they used certain body parts through movements which were not very familiar to them. This exercise gave them the possibility to experiment with their bodies, while also noticing their patterns. They were then asked to explore the space, while putting attention to their body, movement, breathing...they were asked to "simply"

notice them, without any modification even when they did not like something or thought that they were doing something wrong. The participants were then asked to find a place in the room and let their body on the floor, getting ready for a body scan that would make them focus on their head, shoulders, chest, arms, hands, fingers, waist, pelvis, legs, feet, toes. After the body scan, the participants were asked to activate again their body, moving different parts separately and making sounds that would accompany each movement, without thinking, just spontaneously accompanying the movement with a sound. They were asked to experiment with their body, to shift their weight from one part of the body to another, trying to use particularly those that they are normally less aware of.

TO BREATH OR NOT TO BREATH, THAT IS NOT THE QUESTION

Breathing is one of the most natural things that humans do. It is something as vital as subconscious. However, being aware of our breathing is fundamental as educators, as it has consequences on everything else we do, verbally and non-verbally.

To work on this dimension, we proposed an activity called "Gas station". Five volunteers were asked to occupy a certain place in the room representing each one a gas station. Everyone else was asked to move in the space, with the indication that they could "refill" air just when at a gas station. While walking from a gas station to another, they were asked to breathe out while making a

sound, starting with an "s", then with an "m" and then with vowels (a, e, i, o, u). During the debriefing, the participants shared what had been easy or difficult for them: some had more trouble breathing out while saying a certain specific letter; others would have suggested strategies so that people who needed to take air in more frequently would have had precedence. The important thing was that all of them became more aware of their breathing.

HERE AND NOW

As educators, one of the challenges we face is to be present, during the entire time, with all the energy, regardless having to keep in mind the program and objectives of the session/workshop/training. Theatre, and particularly the clown methodology, offers very useful tools to be more "present and focused". It is not just about active listening, or if it is, then we need to understand it as broadly to "listen" to the movements, body, and non-verbal communication as well as to words.

Let's say that we have an imaginary ball. It has the size, weight, texture that each participant wants. One person plays with it until he/she/they feel ready to pass it on. The next person receives it and can choose to transform it or not...and so on until the ball has been passed to all participants. The first time this is done in the circle; the second time, while the participants are moving in the room, with the aim of fostering attention and non-verbal communication. The third time, the participants are asked to improvise a dance while the ball is being passed through the room.



ONE NIGHT AS A CLOWN

As part of the process, the participants created a performance which was presented on the 26th of March. Various activities were carried out to inspire the creative process and to rehearse the performance. Most of those activities focused on managing stage fright, improvisation, and integrating the mistake into the performance.



WHAT DID PARTICIPANTS THINK ABOUT IT?

The participants were highly satisfied with the first training and excited about their first approach to the methods proposed. Moreover, they felt that a space where they could share openly their opinions, fears and concerns was created.

"I liked the safe space we created when it was time to express ourselves without any filters, creating an atmosphere of trust between the participants."

"I came with the idea of learning techniques to know and use better my body and I got so much more. Opening up, listening, connecting to each other and discovering different possibilities of expression."

"With reference to the tools that I felt I could use in my own work, I would highlight team building and self-exploration exercises".

"I believe that all the breathing exercises that were carried out can be used to acknowledge and manage emotions in both personal and work life, to promote concentration, to reduce stress..."

"The body awareness activities were very good for me to discover myself, to learn that the back has mobility in sections and that it is not a whole, to pay attention to the way I breathe, to reaffirm that the body and movement are tools I need to connect with the 'now' and 'here'. The best was walking through the space as a group; I felt part of a whole and very comfortable, I stopped feeling just an individual."

"The activities carried out have made me more aware of group work, of space, of concentration, of the relation between breathing and movement. I have discovered my strengths and weaknesses and I have acquired tools to keep working on them".What did trainers think about it?

At La Xixa, we were very satisfied by the learning process carried out with our participants. During this first training, it was very interesting for us to use exclusively the clown method, as we usually combine it with the Theatre of the Oppressed and Process Work. It was very powerful to re-discover how this methodology can provide tools for professionals such as educators who are continuously exposed in front of a group and that often need to transform challenges into opportunities (just as clowns do on stage).

The Clown method gave us many tools and activities to work on presence, non-verbal communication, but most importantly on 'reading' the group's feedback, integrating it in and welcoming mistakes as part of the learning process (both for learners and educators).

The biggest gift for the trainers was the commitment and interest to experiment and learn shown by the participants since the first session until the end of the training.

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