

Connecting the Strategies of Therapeutic Drama: The Irresistible Response of Students in the University of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Drama Therapy has been introduced as a novel course of study in Applied Theatre at the Theatre Arts Department, University of Ghana, Legon. Under Applied Theatre at the University of Ghana, two main courses are taught: Drama in Education and Theatre for Development. Recently, however, a third course, Drama Therapy has been added. The enthusiasm with which students have embraced the course is overwhelming. The students have indeed demonstrated over the past four years that, with assured opportunities, they can achieve a lot. A comprehensive mentorship program with additional strategies will help them work on themselves, and with various groups to achieve their self-worth while they are still in school. This paper highlights how Drama Therapy continues to help develop students' capacities. In this study, drama as therapy and other components of the expressive arts have been explored to teach, heal, empower and rejuvenate students at the University of Ghana. Drama therapy as a developmental model places increasing demand on participants to demonstrate great spontaneity, flexibility, intuition and interactive capabilities in the creative processes to achieve healing and development. These creative approaches have been expressed vividly through improvisation, story-telling, mime and visual art in this research. In this case, the arts and healing are seen as manifesting two harmonizing positions and when they unite with intent, they do not compete against one another; they rather join forces to achieve greater heights in diverse development fields.

Keywords: Drama Therapy, Neuroscience, Clinical Psychology, Expressive Arts, Mirroring, Doubling, Role-reversal

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Drama therapy, psychodrama and other expressive arts therapies are all creative devices explored primarily to achieve healing, but their tentacles extend far beyond the boundaries of the theatre to embrace Guidance and Counselling, Clinical Psychology, and Neuroscience. Clinical Psychology came into existence with outstanding contributions and efforts to respect and treat all humankind with dignity and respect to ensure healthy human development. Neuroscience has also made us aware of the two hemispheres; and how the right hemisphere or the right brain is more inclined to artistic or visual imagery and processes more intuitively, holistically and randomly. In a previous study conducted, it is inferred that although most societies tend to value more highly the verbal, sequential and analytical skills of the left hemisphere, consciously and unconsciously, the right hemisphere, where artistic, visual and simultaneous abilities are housed, is an unsurpassed alternative for many.

Drama Therapy is a novel course of study which has been introduced to the students of the Theatre Arts Department, University of Ghana, Legon. It is a semester course for the final year students. In the initial stages, roleplay, mime, and group/play therapy were the only strategies explored. Recently, poetry, art and other psycho-dramatic strategies like doubling,

mirroring and role-reversal have been added. In this case, the most basic form of drama therapy which is known as the creative expressive mode, where participants are motivated to exhibit their potentials to the fullest is explored. In these improvisations, students are encouraged to discover the skills of spontaneity and creativity within this framework. With its inception in 2020, students' enrolment started with 21, the following year 2021, they increased to 51. In the third year 2022, the numbers improved to 57, in 2023, the numbers increased to 111, and in the year 2024, the enrollment was 175. This time around, students have enrolled from different departments. From Sociology, Religions, Linguistics, Modern Languages, Geography, English, Business Administration and Psychology. The enthusiasm with which students have embraced Drama Therapy is incredible.

As the Drama Therapy course takes off, students are taken through various dramatic techniques and familiarized with personalities and their works in the fields of Psychology, Psychotherapy, Guidance and Counselling etc. These contributions usher students into the world of drama as therapy. These personalities include Jacob Levi Moreno, Peter Slade, Arnold Allan Lazarus, Sue Jennings, Adam Blatner, Geraldine Siks, Natalie Rogers etc. Drama therapy uses dramatic processes such as improvisation, mime, role-play, etc. for its therapeutic processes. Peter Slade is often accredited as the first to use drama as therapy, during his work in education in the United Kingdom, when he became aware of how children's play enhanced their lives to foster their development. Drama therapy was further developed by anthropologist Jennings, who seized the golden opportunity in the early sixties in Britain when the application of drama within the educational framework began to direct itself towards work in clinical areas. It is held that while psychodrama was flourishing in the United States of America, drama therapy was also evolving in the United Kingdom. And whereas psychodrama worked with individuals mainly adults, drama therapy functioned with groups and focused predominantly on children.

BRIEF LITERATURE

As Rogers (1993) affirms, "Ancient cultures did not separate their arts from healing. It was all one and the same. Dance, music, and visual art were part of everyday life, and it was understood that all aspects of the self must participate in life to be whole" (p. 96). "Using expressive arts therapy can therefore foster emotional healing, resolve inner conflicts and awakens individual creativity in expanded fields" (pp. 1-2).

Rogers (1993) again emphasizes that, "the creative process as experienced through the expressive arts is one path to self-discovery, self-esteem and self-empowerment" (p. 22). In this case, the arts are used as tools for training these children to achieve social change, personal transformation and growth.

Hargo (2012) stresses that, "dance educational experiences have therapeutic values in providing opportunity for mastery, spontaneity and growth (p. 35). In this dance project, Hargo explored dance therapy with the hearing impaired, where rhythm became the main focus for assimilation and healing.

Jennings (1995) built her concept on Slade's and Moreno's ideas of drama therapy and psychodrama. She was particularly interested in how drama is used in therapy and renamed Moreno's theories as; "*Embodiment, Projection and Role*" (EPR). *Embodiment*; is used to explore the immediate external world by projecting feelings and intentions upon objects and people in their surroundings, *Projection*; brings about a sense of feeling of the self through their relationship with others and *Role*; a process in which children are ready to explore and play roles with others. The processes employed in drama therapy most often are not rigid but allow a very flexible course of action which will transform the user positively. In other words; the E stage deals with the child's early experiences. The P stage is the time for transition and

the R stage begins when the child responds to the world beyond the body to facilitate problem solving and conflict resolution.

Blatner and Blatner (1988), similarly note that Adam Blatner who built his theory broadly on Moreno's ideas, also identified four main stages in psychodrama which he named the Dermal, Playful, Useful and Co-operative. The dermal; the exploratory state; the playful; the beginnings of interaction with other objects and people; and the useful; where the child gains an identity, and interacts with other objects; and the co-operative; when the child functions well in a group (Blatner & Blatner, 1988, p. 49).

These concepts see creativity and spontaneity as their central ingredients that reflect a desire for more humanistic and dependable social relations. These concepts act on empathy and cross-identification; which is derived from the role play and the role reversal and expands to other facets of human consciousness. This means that therapeutic drama, begins within a person's ability to do something, then opens to multiple internal and external messages which then form a response that captures his ultimate decision.

In Rubin (1987)'s résumés about the *Approaches to Art Therapy*, she notes, "there are many paradigms and more than one lens through which to view our complex world" (p. 317). With increase in the number of lenses, art therapists are able to put into their clinical "frames" a multiplicity of perspectives which go beyond the mere use of art materials and forms. In order to achieve intellectual, logical, emotional and intuitive benefits, both feeling and thought must be integrated in the therapeutic processes.

The image and the complexity of both patient and process in art therapy are based on certain strongly-held convictions that every human being has genuine creative potentials. However, the natural tendency to actualize that potential at increasing mature levels to achieve growth must first of all be activated deliberately.

According to Wilber (2001), "the Freudian Psychoanalytic theory recognizes that, 'man's most important communications are based on descriptions of images. The attempts therefore to use "pressure or concentration" technique to evoke forgotten memories are central to Freud's theory and his idea of the *ego*, *superego* and *id*'".

Psychoanalytic psychotherapy brought to bear two goals; first; uncovering repressed materials, and second; helping the patient to gain insight into the meaning of his/her behavior and assess internal, external or internalized conflicts within the metaphorical parts of the mind; "id, ego, or superego".

According to Rubin (1987), there is only a thin line between active imagination and art...there is magic in both healing and creating...While we are involved in this process of active imagination through any of the arts, we do not only place emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of our work but also on the healing (p. 119).

Art and healing are closely related, but one must see beyond the ordinary in a relentless effort; to see deeper and in a more profound way than the art work appears. That is the only way; our interpretation of the art work would give a new meaning in a dimension of breakthrough to users.

That is why behavior therapy rejects the notion that; problematic behavior is a symptom of underlying conflict maintained by unconscious dynamic process. Rather, the behaviorists view aberrant behavior, as a learned phenomenon which is maintained by environmental and situational determinants. The commonly used one is known as the *Paulovian* and the *Skinnerian* concepts. While the Paulovian concepts of learning has its major focus on emotional learning and has outpatient settings, the Skinnerian concepts lay emphasis on observable behavior and change, through contingent reinforcement, which also has in-patient settings (Roth & Barrett, 1982, pp. 213-218). The behaviorists' model of treatment therefore, is to first assess the behavior, and then alter it through procedures that can modify old behavior in order to teach new behavior.

The *operant conditioning technique* advanced by Skinner, talks about how behaviors are controlled (strengthened or weakened) by the use of “*reinforcement*”. These reinforcements come in different forms. The operant conditioning techniques employ *shaping* which involves bringing a subject closer to a desired behavior by reinforcing small steps that gradually lead to the terminal behavior; *Chaining*, involves developing a sequence of behaviors. “Shaping” and “Chaining” are however facilitated by *prompts*, which involve cues, instructions, gestures, directions, examples and models which can help to initiate a response. The operant condition technique also uses *fading* which refers to the gradual removal of prompts (Rubin, 1987, pp. 213-216). When working with children with special needs, the use of reinforcements remains unconditional and cannot be disregarded.

Another important component of the operant paradigm is the concept of *generalization*; which underscores the fact that; learned behavior may be generalized or transferred to other settings (stimulus generalization) or changes in a behavior may be associated with changes in related behaviors; response generalization. Dollard and Roth cited in Rubin (1987), postulate that, if neurotic behavior is learned, it should be unlearned by some combination of some principles by which it was taught. Psychotherapy therefore establishes a set of conditions by which neurotic habits may be unlearned and non-neurotic habits learned, therefore, we view the therapist as a kind of teacher and the patient as a learner (p. 215).

The behavioral approach to treatment therefore begins by identifying a specific complaint (target behavior) that requires modification. History of the problem is then taken, to learn about the cause and effects of the said problem behavior. The therapist and client develop a working relationship in which the goal of therapy is mutually agreed upon where the target behavior is carefully described, to be observed, measured and agreed upon. Essentially, the relationship between the therapist and the patient must be based on trust, acceptance, and tolerance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The youth, such as students have diverse issues; be it psychological/emotional, socio-cultural, interpersonal relationships or mental health issues. Students resonate with the course drama therapy because they know that their challenges will be addressed. Drama Therapy is an action therapy, however, most of the students trying to discover themselves prefer talk therapy instead of action therapy. The essence of the course is to help students rediscover, heal and gain knowledge to help themselves and others in similar situations. When creative interventions are applied as teaching tools to help unearth the talents and latent abilities in students, it can propel them to rise and turn challenges into gainful ventures that can benefit them and society at large. Drama therapy has a developmental model, with increasing demand placed on participants, to exhibit great resilience, insight and interpersonal capabilities. This is the first time a course of its kind has been introduced at the University of Ghana, and since only a few of the students have Psychology and Drama as a combination, all students in the drama therapy class are therefore compelled to study some form of psychology in addition to drama in order to grasp the concept. As an educator of Drama Therapy, my ultimate aim is to help my students to attain self-discovery, build their confidence and solve their problems as well as help others in diverse capacities using these creative strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

To encourage students to discover themselves in the various therapeutic processes and be able to work with others.

To inspire students to study psychology and other related courses in order to achieve the purpose of therapy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent can students be encouraged to explore Drama Therapy to discover and develop their creative capabilities and improve themselves as well as work with others?

In which ways can the students be inspired to study psychology and other related courses to help achieve the purpose of therapy?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The idea of introducing Drama Therapy as a course of study at the University of Ghana is innovative; its potential impact will continue to benefit scholarship and practice in the following ways: Firstly, it will achieve healing and development in students' participants to gain confidence to be able to help themselves before helping others. The study will also support as an additional resource for research by students and lecturers. The study will impart practice as a creative orientation for dramatists, teachers, facilitators, and other practitioners. The students who participate directly in the creative activities will become more psychologically, creatively, socially, physically and emotionally alert and can evolve fascinating potentials that can improve their lives both directly and indirectly.

SOME TECHNIQUES EXPLORED

Psychodrama is mind's action, an effective tool and interactive activity with persons who are having problematic psychological and emotional issues. It helps the person to gain consciousness and also return to a healthy state of mind. Jacob L. Moreno developed psychodrama to heal people suffering from psychological trauma. The techniques come in stages hence, the healing process is from one stage to the other. The stages are mirroring, doubling and role reversal. Moreno uses the protagonist, antagonist and auxiliary.

The Mirroring stage allows the victimized person to act out an incident that has happened or to witness a situation he or she has been through by another person and see it as a spectator. As a spectator, the person sees his or her behavior right before their eyes just like standing in a mirror. The Doubling stage helps persons to identify who they are because it is a good way of improving their communication skills to be well understood. He or she can experience the reality or truth about themselves. In this case, a person's experience is dramatized to express his/her emotions by enabling the therapist to know the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the client. Role Reversal takes place when the client takes up the role of the other person in his or her experience. This sometimes happens in group therapy sessions. A protagonist partaking in the group therapy also acts as the antagonist. This aids the client in resolving some of the conflicts within him or herself.

Jennings Sue, on the other hand, is a drama therapist who also uses drama as therapy to help in the development of children. She developed a concept known as EPR which stands for Embodiment- Projection- Role. This concept is designed for children from birth to age seven. It helps the well-being of children from one stage to the other to develop their physical, social, cognitive and emotional health through drama therapy. She uses these activities in her concept to support, nurture and help in problem-solving to promote growth and independence. Although Moreno, Blatner, and Jennings use different wordings for their techniques, their theories describe the same *modus operandi* and their works achieve the same purpose senses. These experiences are needed for the development of the 'body-self'. The child is expected to live in his or her body to feel confident. Projection which is the second stage, allows a child to see beyond his or her body. Thus, the child plays with objects and props outside the body. These objects and props can symbolize imaginary or real situations. It also makes the projection play technique meaningful. These techniques and strategies are remarkable and encourage students to act and write based on their experiences that bring about healing and relaxation whilst achieving the goal of acquiring knowledge.

PRACTICAL SESSIONS WISH STUDENTS

Students are encouraged to create statements from their own experiences. Regarding these client statements, students look at the sample accounts in diverse situations and create scenarios for their improvisations. Students develop the skill of experiencing the issue at hand from different angles in each scenario in order not to be biased in their judgement. This sharpens students' ability to tell stories from various perspectives. Techniques such as *Role Reversal*, *Doubling* and *Mirroring* are the main channels of dissecting the pertinent issue and finding proper resolutions. Students play the role of therapist and clients and suggest possible solutions to sample client statements that have been looked at in class. Picture 1 shows students discussing one client statement in three different groups. Pictures 2 and 3 show the different classroom sessions. This is because the classes are large and are therefore divided into various groups.



Picture 1, 2 and 3: Class discussions



Picture 4, 5, 6 and 7: Drawing and scribbling during classroom sessions

The students have loved the Art sessions which include drawing and scribbling. Above, are randomly selected works. Pictures 4, 5, 6 and 7 are art sessions. Students are given the opportunity to explain and express the feelings behind the artwork. At this level, the stress is not on the beauty of the artwork but the meaning and the healing attained at the end of the day. One interesting technique which most students acknowledged that helped them a lot, was the whipping sessions. In these episodes, students are allowed to whip a tree which is located within the school, so that they can vent their anger on the antagonist who more or less has perpetrated evil on them.

POETRY AS MEDICINE OR HEALING

When people use writing, such as journaling, poetry, drama or prose to tell their stories, they reflect to make sense of their experiences and feelings. Writing as an expressive art form can help people cope with trauma, clarify their thoughts, express their creativity, and achieve personal growth. Writing Poems is another therapeutic form which was overwhelmingly used by the students. Poetic Medicine, one of the study materials that was used during the semester introduces students to writing poems, and what a writer may go through before, during and after the creation of a poem. This session comes with illustrations of poems and students get the opportunity to write what they feel, in various dimensions in artistic ways as well as acting them out. If students are not keen on acting their creative works, they are free to select auxiliaries to do so on their behalf. The poems below are randomly selected from students' works.

DON'T GIVE UP! By Nicholas Brown

They'd like to really make you feel bad. You become afraid of getting closer to them
Because they'd question you on every fun you've had because of their social standing
Not even the painful look of expression on your face can deter them.
You're afraid because of the little you have
So embarrassing, you ask yourself, "why me?" You feel all hang-up and sad
But seeing you that way delights them
Looking at them makes you question yourself and wonder where it all went wrong
And why you feel you don't even belong
To a world where jokes of the powerful is laughable
And the joke of a lowly bloke is an abomination
A world where you're always shutdown whenever you try to make a contribution Because
you're considered as an object to be used
As they see you as inferior to them
But in all these, you look up to the author and finisher of our faith in the heavens
And you say to yourself,
DON'T GIVE UP!

Poem-Red and Blue by Julie Vargas

All I see is a blur of red and blue lights
Loud sirens blare down the street and my heavy breathing flood my ears I sit helplessly on the
cold pavement
Tears streaming down my face, she's yelling at me
"WHAT HAPPENED" "PLEASE ANSWER ME" "YOU'RE BLEEDING"
I ignore everything close my eyes just for a moment
I recall them on top of me and the slurred words being yelled I hoped in those moments it
would stop but it continued

Continued to hurt me, and in those actions, scar was created I look down and see red blood and blue bruises

In that moment I knew I had to answer her

“They hit me I was abused, is that what you want to hear” I close my eyes again

This time to think of anything else

The sirens return flooding out all the yelling

A blur of red and blue lights follows

I hoped in that moment she would stop yelling

Yelling is really the only thing she knew how to do

As I sat there, I was cold and bitter covered in red blood and blue bruises

Going Back into My Shell by Michelle Kumi

I have always felt like a pretender

Hiding my feelings and who I am

I have always felt like a manipulator

Making people feel bad for how they treated me

I tried to forget the things done to me

But at time it comes to me strongly Which surprises me

It makes me think of being heartless and being the meanest person I can think of Is that who I've become?

All I ever see myself doing is hurting the people I love without realizing,

I had developed hatred for someone.

I vowed never to have a partner who never supports me

Which made me drive away someone I love

Opening myself up made me feel like a victim

But hiding my feelings so much made me forget who I am.

Is that who I've become?

I think I never knew who I was Feeling worthless and aimless made me consider suicide

I gave up on the things I love doing

And found solace in working for the Lord

I still say the meanest thing to people I love. Not because I want to

But I find myself saying them

Going back to my shell is what I want to do.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Therapeutic drama and its related methods are designed to encourage creativity and healing in numerous contexts. Drama therapy/psychodrama among creative and psychotherapies can address the widest range of issues, from intra-psychic, interpersonal, emotional and cognition to spiritual and artistic. Since its introduction, students now understand themselves, their emotions, and life issues that come along the way and be able to manage themselves. Below are some comments from randomly selected students from the Drama Therapy class.

“Studying Drama therapy as a course has been a creative and a therapeutic experience for me. I am still overwhelmed from the profound impact it had on my personal and social life. The course gave me a sense of the “healing power of drama” with evidence-based therapeutic techniques such as writing, drawing and talking among others, providing a safe and supportive environment for my mental and emotional growth. I highly recommend this course to be studied in the University as one of the “most do” courses before leaving the university and to face the world out there”. By Precious Kumah.

“Africans typically do not like to talk about their feelings. We would usually rather bury them or release them in “unconventional ways” so a course that helps us explore talking about our feelings through acting or recreating the scenarios that brought about the feeling is quite revolutionary. It is a novel experience exploring your past through recreations and act outs. This helped a lot of people in the class to open up and come to terms with certain events in their lives, eventually making peace with their pain and moving on. The Drama Therapy class is a class that deserves to be supported, funded and even advertised. Everyone should be able to take it, even university officials and lectures”. By Seyram Hlormador.

“Initially, I contemplated on what I would derive from the class after seeing the course title because “therapy” implies a lot. I almost cancelled that course after adding it and I do not regret studying it at all. I grew up with so much trauma and I had no channel to share it. Joining the class helped me understand that I was not alone as I listened to other people share their experiences and I shared mine too. I felt great relief knowing that I am not alone and my experiences are validated. I have learnt during my study to find channels to release whatever bad energy I feel at any point. Either by scribbling, hitting something or talking to someone”. By Mildred Xorlali Abra Babantsi.

“Most people think it’s easy to get your emotions out and express yourself freely. What people fail to realize is that, most theatre arts students wait till they have a performance to dig from their emotions well and ‘flow’. The emptiness that follows and the silence that comes with ending a production and going home is not talked about. Drama therapy provided a space for me to let go of the pain I did not realize I was holding on to as myself and not as a character. The drama therapy class also gave me a safe space to grow and learn. I think it is one of the most useful classes I took in my years in the university”. By Amira Marga.

Drama Therapy as a course has offered a broad perspective on therapy. The course utilized various methods and processes that helped achieve healing. The various techniques also allow students to try many other techniques they are not familiar with. In all these, the artistic models derived from this research have served as a resource for many students to achieve healing and growth. The course is broad in the sense that it takes into consideration, different techniques to arrive at the solutions desired. One remarkable thing about the course is how student-centered and practical it is. Students are encouraged to write and pay attention to details, note and express their observations, and when these reflections are achieved through artistic endeavors, healing is assured. Based on their involvements, students act out their experiences to bring about healing, whilst achieving the goal of acquiring knowledge.

The creative connections come about as students use these art-based activities, such as music, dance, art, poetry or writing, to express and process their emotions, thoughts, and experiences to achieve healing and development. Most students experience heightened states of emotions as they share and explain their works with the rest of the class.

These weekly exercises ultimately offer therapeutic benefits to these students at the same time. One remarkable thing about the course is how students cantered in the practical as the weeks evolved. Students showed excessive interest in improvisations, flogging, drawing and scribbling as well as ‘poetic medicine’ or poetry as healing. Students are usually encouraged to write based on their experiences and act out these skills. These skills in turn bring about healing and relaxation whilst achieving the goal of development and acquiring knowledge.

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