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# Psychodrama and Action Methods in Education

**Abstract:** This paper gives an indication of the wide range of educational activities that can benefit from the use of a variety of psychodrama and action methods. These can enhance and add both educational and enjoyment value to educational events and lead to a better experience for both the facilitators and the students. Although psychodrama is primarily a method of psychotherapy it has since its origins after the end of the First World War been used extensively in education settings with participants from under 5 to over 70.

**Key words:** action methods, education, psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry.

## Introduction

Learning is a lifelong process. It starts with informal education in the pre-school setting and (for passionate learners) carries on beyond the period of formal education. Or better still, never finishes. We learn from our own experience, from others, from the group and through action.

Action techniques are the outward and visible expression of a particular theory of development and change, a philosophy that encompasses warm up, spontaneity and creativity as universal potential (White, 2002). J.L Moreno, the father of psychodrama and sociodrama, was also the initiator (or a trigger) for a

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great many of the methods and techniques, referred to as action methods. Opposing the Freudian approach to life and therapy, Moreno valued “here and now” and “encounter” as the essence of communication and exchange, and also included body movement and nonverbal aspects in group work. Action is not motivated by force, action and interaction, change and exchange, are spontaneous and innate, while immobility and isolation are the result of inhibition (Carlson-Sabelli, Sabelli and Hale, 1994).

The first references to the use of psychodramatic techniques in an educational setting are written up in Moreno’s classic work on the foundations of action methods “Who Shall Survive” (Moreno, 1934). In this book, he describes his work in a girls reform school, where he used sociometric methods, particularly the sociogram, to firstly explore the relationships between the girls and then to use this information to rearrange the living accommodation (so that the girls were living with other children that they preferred to be with). Both formal and informal sociometry has been used in schools both in Europe and the US, since the 1950’s (Gronlund and Norman, 1959; Evans, 1962). Beacon House also published a collection of papers on Psychodrama and Sociodrama in American Education as early as 1949 (Hass, 1949).

### **Sociometry and Group Building**

It is well established in the field of group psychotherapy particularly in the much quoted work of the existential group psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom in the “Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy” (Yalom, 1985), that one of the most important aspects of the development of a group is building group cohesion. What psychodramatists bring to this issue is the use of simple warm-ups and sociometric exercises that are extraordinarily good at rapidly making participants feel safe. Sadly the theories of group development do not always or perhaps rarely translate to the building of educational groups.

It is completely normal and in fact healthy for people to feel anxiety when joining a new group, this is higher when joining a new school or college made up of hundreds or thousands of individuals. For some people these very high levels of anxiety can be overwhelming and result in serious self-destructive behaviour such as a massive over use of alcohol or illegal drugs, particular cannabis. Although for most students these early problems are gradually overcome through normal social interactions and the development of natural sub-groupings etc., the introduction of simple sociometric exercises can speed this process up, help cut down on the

production of isolates and massively improve the effectiveness of the educational group.

One of the major side effects of pathologically high anxiety levels classically referred to as part of the “fight or flight mechanism” results in students’ levels of fear being so high that they cannot think normally or retain any information given to them. For a minority this will eventually result in them falling far behind, believing that they are stupid and eventually abandoning their course of study. Both of us have seen many people in our clinical psychotherapy practice, who have been through this process or indeed we have supported them to remain in it and have challenged their perceptions that they are incapable of learning.

Another example from clinical practice as group psychotherapists is that we have seen a large number of clients, whose experience of being in an educational group, particularly school has been such a traumatic experience that they are terrified of joining another group.

A lot of the negative expression of lack of group cohesion, such as scapegoating and bullying can be enormously helped by the use of sociometry in the student group. Here are some of the structures that can be most helpful:

### **Name Warm-ups**

Action requires a warming up process. The first step in the process of building group cohesion is the introduction process. At the beginning of a group, workshop or any similar event, the level of anxiety is quite high and the level of spontaneity is low.

Warm-ups which are opening the space for creativity and action are an excellent choice in this stage. The link between spontaneity and a warm up process is quite strong, and it is very important to choose the right one for the purpose. There are different warm ups, but the most general types are physical and cognitive. There are also starters that trigger the whole group at the same time, small groups (subgroups) or individuals in the group.

These are exercises that facilitate members to get to know each other’s names, they vary from very simple repetition exercises to more intimacy building processes such as introducing themselves, talking about how they understand the meaning of their name and who gave it to them and why?

They can also invent their new names for the time being, exchange them on the spot and present their names through movement, sculpture, sound or materials (scarves, paper, cloths etc.).

### **Social atom**

Moreno developed sociometry from role theory, postulating that social roles pre-exist the formation of individual identity. The sense of a self develops from the somatic and social roles developed by interaction with others. This is why consistent interaction with others is such an important part of infant development (Moreno, 1946). One of the basic concepts of sociometry, the social atom exercise, explores the network of our relationships with others. Moreno considered the individual as a relational creature, whose internal structure is also connected with their network of relationships.

The social atom changes, and also maps our presence and the level of importance for certain relationships in our lives. This technique could enable individual and group learning, it could be informative, provoking and energising. The closeness, appeal, hate, love, ambivalence can be all represented firstly on paper, and then placed into action in the room. Individuals are first asked to represent themselves in the centre of a piece of paper, usually as a circle for a woman and triangle for a man. They then put other people that they in a relationship with on the paper, showing if they are close or distant from them. Lines are then drawn between self and others that may be in different colours to represent different feelings.

Social atom exploration can be used for different purposes, as an excellent tool for exploration of the individual preferences towards other group members, and also relationships in the team or in groups generally

### **The action sociogram**

Learning about ourselves and others is easier when we understand our position and roles in the group. It is not the easiest of tasks, and Moreno believed that there is much to be learned from what is not being given expression. The action sociogram concretises the presence of the group members and their relationships with each other.

We use action sociograms routinely to help build trust at the beginning of workshops. These are mainly about making connections with other members of the group. Once people feel connections with each other, they feel safer and their anxiety diminishes. The group is divided up by the facilitator or on suggestions from group members using a number of criteria, such as gender, age, where are you from, who has a pet?, what sort of music do you like?, do you love Arsenal FC or Partisan Belgrade?, etc.

The criteria need to be chosen to fit the group and also the group purpose or subject. It may be possible to introduce more challenging subjects such as race and sexual orientation, although this has to be done carefully. *Susan Aaron from Canada has a really excellent way of doing this. She gets everyone into a group called the heterosexual assumption, where you can stay if you wish, or if you feel safe enough you can choose to step out as a gay, lesbian or bisexual person. There can be dangers in this process of course but if the whole atmosphere is one of support and mutual respect then it is much harder for group members to go against this as a prevailing group culture (www.youremotions.com).*

### Spectograms

Another simple sociometric structure is the spectrogram. Here we have a continuum line across the room, with a negative to positive scale, everything from *how tall are you, how much experience to you have of this subject?* This can also bring in some playful competitive experience and this can be commented on by the facilitators: where is competition normal and healthy and where does it become problematic and destructive as in scapegoating and bullying. We can use spectrograms to clarify presence of some emotion, or level of presence in the group (level of spontaneity) and also we can “measure” some attitudes toward certain specific subject, that is relevant to our work.

### The Use of Psychodrama/sociodrama Techniques in Subject Exploration

Moreno believed that asymmetry in the group is normal and expected. Differences, disputes and arguments provoked by different opinions could also be used as an educative tool. Learning how to explore different issues is very important and it is an open-ended process.

Action methods can easily be used in exploring a number of issues from an educational rather than therapeutic perspective. *An example might be “how a computer works”. Participants take the roles of parts of a computer such as the main processor, hard drive, RAM memory, keyboard, mouse etc. How are they connected and how information flows can be explained.* With younger children role taking has been used to see how developed they are in their role repertoire and how they understand roles. Roles of mother, father, friend, shopkeeper or teacher can be

portrayed fairly easily. More difficult might be exploring complex roles or those unfamiliar to their own experience (lawyer, stockbroker etc).

### Sociodrama in Social and Political Education

Sociodrama is a group learning process focussed on providing practice in solving problems of human relations (Sternberg and Garcia, 1989). Sociodrama is predominantly an educational, rather than clinical or therapeutic group method, and it provides the training ground for collective action. It has three aims: improved understanding of social situations, an increase of participant's knowledge about their own point of view and of others related to the situation, and emotional release (Wiener, 1985).

Sociodrama as a method was first developed by Moreno in response to a particular historical event in the development of psychodrama. The protagonist was working on a dispute over the boundary fence between their two properties. It emerged that there was a much bigger issue involved related to the ethnic origins of the protagonist and his neighbour. Attempts to resolve the issue on a personal level were blocked and failed. There was a need to explore the intercultural conflict issues that were behind the boundary dispute. In sociodrama the protagonist is the group, rather than the individual. The issues involved are explored from the point of view of all the participants, rather than just one person. The group members get an opportunity to play a range of roles and the director needs to acknowledge any of their own personal and cultural connections. *A recent example is of a sociodrama that took place at an international conference in Israel that was around some of the participant's experience of passing through the border between Gaza and Israel. They were horrified by what they experienced as humiliating for the Palestinians who were subjected to what seemed appalling to everyone except some of the Israelis present. It was important to also explore their perception of this event that was understandably coloured by their sense of danger and this justified (in their eyes) the way that the Palestinians were being treated. Although most of the participants, including some of the Israelis still thought what was happening was wrong, the Sociodrama had helped greatly in enabling people to see the different points of view involved.*

In politics it is quite common for politicians to deliberately misrepresent the views of the opposition, usually in order to discredit and make them seem superior in some way but often this results in them actually discrediting themselves. Further information about the use of sociodrama can be found in the recently

published book "Sociodrama in a Changing World" (Weiner, Adderley and Kirk, eds, 2011).

### **Psychodrama and Encounter in exploring group relationships**

The psychodramatic encounter is a method for helping to understand and resolve individual conflicts in a group. When two people are angry with each other for some reason, or have some dispute where it appears to others that the feelings being expressed are out of proportion to the issues being represented, the encounter can be explored in action. Each person in turn is asked to say how they feel and also to identify other people (often family members) that they have a similar feeling towards. An empty chair is used to represent these other people and each person is encouraged to express the extra emotional charge to the empty chair, rather than continue with the encounter. This does not deny that there is a real conflict but it both helps people to feel heard and also to remove the extra "transference". The learning processes of individuals are also happening individually but they are enabled by the group setting. The group is the microcosm, and also the place where individual and group energies meet, exchange, clash or unite. Among other curative factors in group therapy, there are several linked closely to the learning processes in the group: altruism, development of socialising techniques and interpersonal learning (Yalom, 1985).

*A good example of effective learning in a group is the development of socialising techniques, such as coping with negative feedback, when group members practise with each other and slowly accept a different approach to an old situation. Not only do they accept the differences, but they also get support from the group, as a momentary encouragement and support for their change.*

### **Bibliodrama – group enactment of stories**

The term bibliodrama refers to the enactment of stories (Moreno, 1946). Inspired by children's play, where stories they invented were spontaneously enacted, Moreno found that spontaneity and the inventiveness in role taking was a very powerful learning process for children. He observed that they often played out stories that were connected to their own family story. He gave an example of a boy whose father was in prison who used to play with the bars on the school gate with his friends on the other side so that he could not reach them. It was throu-

gh these experiences of watching children, that he decided to incorporate story enactments as one of the basics of his therapy methods.

In educational settings this approach can be used in variety of ways, as in enactment of fairy tales, children stories, legends, book stories, famous movie scenes, etc. Role taking, role playing and communication and exchange from roles, can bring much insight about group dynamics. This method can also be good in the exploration of attitudes towards rules, social demands and expectations, prejudices, and behavioural stereotypes.

### **Learning new behaviour**

One way to learn new behaviour is to modify one's manner in expressing certain emotions, responses or to learn how to stop the expression of it (for example managing anger expression in social situations). Another possibility is to start from scratch, and learn something entirely new. Role play is hugely useful in enabling people to step out of their role-boundness and try something new. This process can be hard and sometimes frightening for people, however, exploration and rehearsal through action is quite efficient in supporting this process. Being in the role of the new behaviour can be supportive, and also support in trying different tactics (acting out the old situation by using the new approach, for example without shouting at others, or by creating a stronger appearance in order to leave a stronger impression).

### **Rehearsal of a new role through action**

Similar to the previous section but much more complex is new role development, through its rehearsal in the group. Moreno thought that expanding of our role repertoire in life, enables us to be more spontaneous, creative and therefore, healthier.

The technique of *role reversal* can be used, for example when the student takes the role of the professor (lecturer) in order to see how it feels, as a part of the preparation for the role of "the presenter" of the group research.

*Role play*, as one of the most commonly used techniques for the purpose of trying out new roles, or breaking up stage fright and anxiety about new situations (such as an interview for a job, for example) can be very valuable.



The protagonist enacts the situation as it happens now, or watches it being played out by other members of the group. This technique is also useful for team building and other Human Resources areas of education.

The *Future projection* technique enables us to take ourselves ahead, and to try out our future self, our future role. It can be used for the rehearsal of a scene in the future, where that role will be valuable, or through an encounter with our future self in that role, when we will have a chance to ask some questions to our future role, and also get a response by reversing roles with it.

### Group warm ups to a specific subject

Action methods are frequently used in workshops or trainings around specific issues, like: gender roles exploration, communication strategies improvement, nonverbal communication, stereotypes in media etc.

After an initial phase of getting to know each other's names, origin, working place, and maybe a bit of personal information (depending on the type and goals of the workshop), the group needs to be warmed up to the specific issue. A very quick and efficient approach is *dividing into small groups* where each group can enact part of the problem (issue) or by using sculptures representing aspects of the theme, or the groups /factors/elements which are building it.

An excellent use of action methods can be in the exploration of intercultural differences in the group. Group members take part in sociometric exercises to explore the differences in the group and then are encouraged to take the role of others who come from a different culture of sub-cultural group, this may be related to religious or country identities and can also be used to explore gender differences although some children (particularly boys) find it difficult to be in the role of a girl, however once they become used to it and everyone is taking part they it can be extremely helpful in developing better understanding of difference.

### Communication skills improvement

Advancing social skills is one of the top priorities in organisational work, but also in the pedagogical educational curriculum. Communication skills are an essential part of social skills, so they can be improved through communication and exchange with large number of people in a group.

There are many different approaches to this, and action methods can be used for *practicing communication in pairs* while experiencing different obstacles

to communication (ignoring, contradiction, provocation etc) and also watching others practicing it. Some deeper communication strategy analysis can be done by involving different (hidden) aspects of communication, played by other group (team) members and then watching through role play. Also, action techniques can be used to explore non-verbal communication, also in pairs or in small groups. *The task of the actors can be to describe non verbally through gestures some of their moods, emotions or attitudes. Role play techniques can be used to practice some problematic situations in life, and use various communication strategies to improve it. Sociometry can be used to "measure" some of the phrases, expressions or statements as an adequate one, or an inadequate one.*

### Improving Emotional intelligence

Exploring emotions, in addition to its therapeutic component can also be educational. One of the most important factors in the development of mental health problems is people's restricted access to their range of appropriate emotions. Through the use of action methods, emotions can be liberated, more easily recognised, explored in a safe way, exchanged in a symbolic way (when another group member represents some important person in life) or directly through an exchange in action.

*One action based approach is an emotional mapping exercise. In the first phase, group members (or a person) draws a map of their emotions, placing them closer or nearer to the symbol which represents themselves, and drawing them in different colours (depending on their strength, visibility, openness in expression etc). In the second phase this map can be moved into action, by using group members to represent different emotions. The protagonist can learn where their emotions are coming from, how they are structured and what are the ways to express them and to understand the difference between emotions and behaviour (such as anger and aggression).*

### Educational work with children

Action methods are easily accepted and natural when used with children, due to their higher level of spontaneity and greater need for action and their enjoyment of physical movement.

Group cohesion exercises for children can include: balls, ropes, toys and different objects that children find interesting and amusing. For example in getting to know each other, a very good exercise is to throw a ball to a person you

would like to meet (to introduce yourself to) while standing in the circle. Then, the chosen one chooses another, and so on. This warm up game, assures that each group member will be chosen by the end.

Suitable exercises for warming up the group towards more cohesion can be done through small group task performing activities such as: to find the hidden treasure, find some solution to a problem, decorate a box, or prepare a comedy sketch. Another example is to enact a role play based on a written scenario in small groups, with a demand from each subgroup to act it out with a different genre (comedy, melodrama, SciFi , Soap opera etc.).

Socialisation exercises can include exercises asking children to address each other (individually or in small groups) in gibberish language (the language which doesn't exist), and it will enable them to put some of the differences they have (especially in the way they verbally present themselves) in brackets.

Children can also learn how to develop self-reflection, for instance by sing play-back theatre action exercises such as: acting out personal stories, plots or problematic situations by others from the group, and them seeing it from the outside and then making some changes (this is using the psychodrama technique called mirroring).

Fairy tales and other well-known stories provide structure to focus action. Permission to deviate from the story line facilitates the emergence of personal interpretation that has sociometric significance (Carlson-Sabelli, Sabelli and Hale, 1994). Maybe the most efficient exercises which include creativity cooperation and playfulness are co-creation games. They consist in two parts, first part is invented by the facilitator and the second part must come from the group. *For example a big group is divided into small group units. When facilitators say run, everybody runs, and when they say "stop" and "make number 3" every subgroup needs to invent a way of forming the number 3.*

### **An Integrative approach to the learning process**

Different people learn in different ways. They have their own learning styles, capacities, preferences and limitations. Some prefer to start with practical action and then reflect on what does or does not work, others prefer to have the theoretical explanation first. What is important is to learn how to combine positive sides of different personal styles, and different methodological approaches to reach as many people as possible.

Action methods can easily be combined with different approaches and techniques, whilst keeping in mind the complexity of any integration procedure that may unfold.

*Integration of action methods and art therapy:*

The first step may be to create a group painting, ideally without verbalisation (in silence). The painting can then be put into action, choosing group members to represent different elements, colours or emotions in the scene, and then verbalise them. This type of exercise can enable the process of self-expression in many different ways.

*Integration of action methods and movement (dance) therapy:*

Using movement or elements of dance to express your: feeling, present mood, goals in your life, opinion about something. These exercises can be used as ice breakers in further training in self-expression, and/or assertiveness training. It can also improve insight into how to be more spontaneous in communication, and how to be more in touch with non-verbal communication (extremely important for supporting professions, councillors, teachers, and managers).

*Integration of action methods and Transactional Analysis:*

Although mostly used in therapy, the TA concept of the life script for example can be externalised as an enactment. It is also possible to explore ego states (parent, adult and child) represented by empty chairs (or played by different group members) which can also improve the awareness of communication styles and improve the quality of communication. These can also be a good exercise for a life changes warm up and in the advancement of management skills and/or supervising skills.

*Integration of action methods and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*

Action methods can be included in learning how to reduce the level of anxiety, practising new roles, and assertiveness training for example.

*Systemic family therapy and action methods*

Some of the earliest work in systemic family therapy focused on communication, both verbal, non-verbal, followed by action analysis. As communication is the

central focus of cybernetics, psychodramatic action methods are often used with family explorations.

Some of the good examples of integration are: communication models and conflict resolution in relationships, the language of analogue communication exploration and nonverbal communication analysis can be also benefit from the inclusion of actions methods in work within the family.

### **Supervising through action**

Supervision can be a very important part of the continuing learning process, which encourages openness, flexibility and self-awareness. Supervisors tend to integrate the developmental role of the educator with the support provider. Instead of talking about the things which we, as supervisors/tutors, propose as improvements, we can communicate them through action.

Using action in group supervision is practical, because group members can represent (symbolise) the outcomes, including both positive and less positive sides of our learning process. We can also demonstrate progress, inhibitions, etc. To put these factors into life, we can give them movement, words or place them into line based on the priorities of that moment.

### **Using action methods in closure and evaluation**

Wrapping up of the whole training day, several days or even longer events is sometimes hard and tiresome. In order to be efficient and less long and drawn out, we can use some techniques which are instructed to be brief and direct, such as:

*Placing empty chairs* at the middle of the conference/training space, naming these chairs as: things I have expected, things I got from this event, things I will work on later (or will develop further). Depending on the time limitation, group members can stand beside the chair and share, or sit in each chair and express both verbally and with their body postures.

One efficient technique is to use a variety of symbolic objects (stones, toys, postcards) from which every participant chooses before they leave. They can then state how this represents an issue or feeling that they have about this particular training experience.

Action methods can be well combined and integrated with art and creative activities such as painting and movement, so that closure could involve drawings of the impressions that participant have gained or one group painting. Another

possibility is a group dance in which each member can invent one movement and everybody else can follow and add their own.

Evaluation could be also be facilitated with the use of empty chairs, representing the things we have learned (closure is more for the experience), or placing themselves on a continuum in the room (from 0- 100%) marking some of the important criteria for that training/event.

### Caution

Finally, we would like to emphasise that although some of the exercises and examples given in this paper are simple and straight forward to use, some are more sophisticated and need a certain amount of psychodrama or action methods training and experience before they can be used, particularly those which involve emotional exploration.

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## Psihodrama i akcione metode u obrazovanju

**Apstrakt:** U radu se prikazuje širok spektar aktivnosti u kojima se mogu koristiti psihodrama i akcione metode. Ovim se povećava mogućnost učenja, ali i obezbeđuje zadovoljstvo u procesu saznavanja, što zajedno vodi do pozitivnih iskustava i učenika i facilitatora. Iako je psihodrama prvenstveno pravac u psihoterapiji, ona se intenzivno od svog nastanka nakon završetka Prvog svetskog rata koristi u obrazovnom procesu sa učesnicima od 5 do 70 godina.

**Ključne reči:** akcione metode, obrazovanje, psihodrama, sociodrama, sociometrija.

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