

# Playing the ideal role

Becky Simpson assesses the value of drama based training to healthcare professionals





David Gee

MANY OF THE people who act as clinicians or patients in television programmes have been involved in some sort of drama based training.

There are many similarities between the acting and clinical professions, and such training can be an exciting and innovative way for healthcare professionals to develop their communication skills.

For drama based training to be effective however, the use of theatre skills such as performing scenes and role playing should involve professional role playing actors and should be managed sensitively by trained facilitators.

Theatre performances by professional actors can energise and introduce fun into training or conference programmes while helping them to meet their aims.

Sketches can be written and performed so that they are thought provoking and entertaining, and can highlight issues such as the management of conflict, diversity and appraisals.

They can also be used to demonstrate good and bad outcomes, analyse appropriate strategies for improvement, and offer delegates opportunities to reflect on different styles of communication. Such group work can also offer staff opportunities to work together in teams.

Most delegates prefer to observe rather than take part in theatre performances, although such observation can help to persuade them to take part.

Another such 'ice breaker' is forum theatre, a theatrical device derived from Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal that involves delegates re-directing and re-enacting the theatre performances they have already seen.

The purpose of this work is usually to identify points of conflict between characters in the performance and, with the help of facilitators, create strategies to resolve these.



Author **Becky Simpson** and her colleague **David Schaal** demonstrate role play for delegates

### Role play

Perhaps the most valuable way to challenge how people usually communicate and help them develop their self knowledge is role play.

This offers delegates opportunities to practise their communication skills by talking to actors playing patients or colleagues in near real life situations.

Delegates are often surprised by how much they enjoy and are stimulated by role play, and often learn to experiment with different approaches.

Role play must be handled sensitively however, by experienced trainers and actors. Participation must be optional and never humiliating, and delegates should leave role play sessions, not only confident in their existing skills, but with new ideas about developing their expertise further.

If role play is to work well, facilitators and clients must be aware of the criticism it has occasionally received. For example, some delegates will have already had unpleasant experiences performing role play sessions that were managed badly, while others may feel anxious about performing in front of their colleagues.

It should always be part of good role play practice therefore to reassure nervous delegates and to manage their anxiety, and it is the job of professional drama trainers to judge sensitively when to persuade delegates to express themselves and when to 'back off', or when to reassure them that their performance is good and when to challenge them to do better.

Role play is not necessarily about 'getting it right' but it can provide great opportunities to experiment in a safe environment with different approaches.

When colleagues perform role play without professional actors to help them, it often fails. This may be because their perceived differences in status prevent them from expressing themselves fully or because they fear retribution if they do, or simply because one or more of them suddenly has a fit of the giggles.

Professional actors are experienced however and well briefed in the parts they play. Because they are experts at adjusting their behaviours to different situations while staying in role moreover, they can become 'foils' for the non-professional delegates.

Effective role playing is less about acting and more about reacting, and good role play actors are trained to respond appropriately and to adjust their behaviour to the individuals with whom they work.

Actors who regularly work alongside particular professions, for example with clinical professionals can learn about the arenas in which they work, and can use what they have learned in their role play and feedback.

Feedback is an important aspect of role play and most actors are trained to give constructive comments to delegates.

There are various models for facilitating such feedback, the most commonly used being adapted versions of Pendleton's rules or the Calgary Cambridge guide (Box 1).

#### Box 1. Guides for facilitating feedback

##### Pendleton's rules adapted for actors and delegates

- ▶ The delegates describe what was done well
- ▶ The actors describe what was done well
- ▶ The facilitator sums up
- ▶ The delegates say what could be done differently
- ▶ The actors say what could be done differently
- ▶ The facilitator sums up and reiterates what was done well

Adapted from Faculty Development (2007)

##### The Calgary Cambridge guide adapted for actors and delegates

- ▶ The delegates describe their aims to the facilitator
- ▶ The facilitator asks delegates to describe what help they need to achieve their aims
- ▶ The facilitator asks the delegates what problems they have experienced in achieving their aims and encourages them to overcome these problems themselves
- ▶ The facilitator directs feedback sessions among delegates to ensure that it is balanced and objective, and is descriptive rather than judgmental

Adapted from Chowdhury and Kalu (2004)



## Actors and facilitators

Actors can introduce creativity, energy, enthusiasm, realism and objectivity to drama based training. They are used to managing anxiety and, because they are not caught up in the 'office politics' of client organisations, they are not constrained by them.

Like some non-actors however, actors can be unprofessional when performing role play. If they expect a script, make up, lights and special treatment, limousines or pampering, they will be disappointed.

They must be able to improvise and they must understand that the training sessions are about the delegates, not them.

To ensure a professional approach is taken during acting sessions, facilitators are sometimes needed.

Their key qualities are objectivity, sensitivity, flexibility, energy and imagination. They must be confident because, if they are not, their anxiety can spread to the groups with whom they work.

But they must not lecture delegates or, worse still, demonstrate how they should have performed interactions. Instead, they must reassure and direct them, and sum up how the interactions went when they have ended.

The services described in this article were launched 20 years ago by the communications and presentations training company, Payout (Box 2).

It should come as no surprise therefore that actors at Payout have worked alongside clinicians for several years.

After all, many good healthcare professionals demonstrate acting skills, not least by adjusting their style to communicate effectively with different patients or clients.

Breaking bad news to someone for example requires a different tone of voice from telling someone that an operation has been a success.

Most healthcare professionals know that the ability to communicate well is an important part of their jobs, although some argue that they do not have enough time and resources to develop good communication skills.

It takes skill for healthcare professionals to tell patients or their relatives that they do not know what's wrong with them, or that they know what

is wrong but there is nothing they can do about it.

By inviting professional actors to act as patients in role play sessions therefore, nurses and other clinicians can gain new insights into the experiences of their patients **nm**

**Becky Simpson is managing director of Payout**

## References

Faculty Development (2007) *Models of Giving Feedback: Pendleton's rules*. [www.faculty.londondeanery.ac.uk/e-learning/feedback/models-of-giving-feedback/](http://www.faculty.londondeanery.ac.uk/e-learning/feedback/models-of-giving-feedback/) (Last accessed January 16 2008).

Chowdhury RR, Kalu G (2004) Learning to give feedback in medical education. *The Obstetrician and Gynaecologist* 6, 4, 243-247.

## Box 2. Payout

Payout is a communications and presentations training company that helped pioneer drama training 20 years ago.

It uses theatre performances, role play and forum theatre. It also produces DVDs featuring training programmes written by professional scriptwriters and performed by professional actors. These can be used as training tools or as a means to follow up training. Payout also runs training courses for leaders and facilitators and its members have worked with facilitators from both clinical and non-clinical backgrounds.

Payout has trained health service staff and healthcare students, and regularly provides courses for clients including The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust, in London, Brighton and Hove City Teaching Primary Care Trust, Brighton and Sussex Medical School and Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

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