Integrating Drama into Community Activities (2017)

Whether working with children, junior youth, youth or adults, the arts can bring enjoyment as well as a deeper qualitative understanding of the material under study. On this series of pages, we discuss some simple ways of invigorating community activities, such as study circles, junior youth groups, children's classes and even devotional gatherings. Something as simple as putting on a prop turban can transport us to the Heroic Age as we strive to open our hearts and minds to a new pattern of service and outreach.

GAMES

Build energy, camaraderie and focus

Playing games is a terrific way to energize a group and to create a sense of intimacy and camaraderie that you don't really get from just sitting and talking. They are like an appetizer, a spice or a dessert to the main course under study. Even so, they don't need to be seen as tangential. Games often have a point, a quality they require from us, such as unity or spontaneity, and so can often be shaped to support the day's lesson. The useful lifespan of a game will rarely extend beyond 15 or 20 minutes; some are quite effective at 3 to 5 minutes.

As a rule, lean towards collaborative games and away from competitive win-lose games. (Sports are another thing.) If the game is competitive, consider playing a version that doesn't eliminate the loser, but instead re-integrates them in some way.

For example, there is a simple but fun game called "Touch something _____." It begins with someone calling out, "Touch something green!" for example. Then everyone scurries to find something green to touch. The last person to find something green is not eliminated, they just have to call out the next description. So they say, "Touch something metal" or "fluffy" or "round"... And everyone scurries again and the game continues.

There are some great websites online with descriptions of these kinds of games. Two examples are

wilderdom.com/games
dramaresource.com/drama-games

SKITS

Illuminate and Integrate a key concept or story

We can think of a "skit" as a quickly crafted scene meant to reinforce some concept under discussion. Dramatizing a concept is a way of integrating it into the understanding that surpasses the usual manner of verbal or intellectual absorption. The mind can then process that point in a more holistic way.

In a skit, the performers don't need to memorize a script or build a set; they just need to work out a basic storyline, maybe include a symbolic prop or costume to open up the imagination, and then to remember, at most, a critical line or two of dialogue at a high point or the end.

For example, in Ruhi Book 4, where we encounter stories from the lives of the Twin Manifestations of God, certain phrases from the accounts jump out at us as particularly meaningful, phrases that we might like to remember when we share the story with others. A skit affords us an opportunity to reflect on the shape of the story and to distinguish general set-up from the details that need to be expressed "just so" to convey the story's full impact. (While we avoid portraying the Holy Figures themselves, we can certainly convey their words and actions through creative use of other figures in the story.)

While a skit draws mainly on the creativity of the participants, it helps a lot when clear directions are provided at the outset. The study circle facilitator, junior youth animator or children's class teacher can focus the activity in such a way as to maximize the engagement of the participants. The following are some things to consider in this vein:

1. Group size and makeup

The most productive group size is probably two to four. Three is a magic number in drama. A "triad" relationship is just inherently dynamic. If you have more than four people, less assertive individuals tend to slip into the background. At the same time, you need to limit the number of skits. If you have a large group and you start going over 3 or 4 presentations, the exercise begins to lose its appeal. As with many things, it's a balancing act.

Separating people into groups in non-awkward ways is a bit of an art, especially when working with junior youth or youth and when the kids have favorites and let everyone know it. A simple tactic is to ask them to line up according to some tangential topic (e.g., birth month, middle initial) and then to either indicate dividing lines or have them count off by however many groups you want.

2. Setting parameters

"Okay, now come up with a skit!" might not be as effective a prompt as the following: "The central image of this quote is a mirror reflecting the sun. So, in your group, come up with a story that represents this relationship. The only rule is that you need to include—at some point in your story—both a light source and a reflective surface. So take about eight minutes..."

Notice the difference lies in adding a degree of specificity to the request. Many of us find ourselves surrounded by a mind-numbing layer of inertia that keeps us from engaging creatively with the world around us. Thankfully, this layer often can be pierced by a simple provocation. The key is to introduce the right amount of specificity, and not so much that the participants feel constrained. Pointing to the concrete images in a quote is a starting place.

3. How much time to practice

Once the groups are divided up and directions given, tell the participants how much time they have. Here is one time in life where it helps to underestimate. Maybe tell them 3 minutes if they might need 5, tell them 5 minutes if they might need 10, and so on. Foster a creative dissonance by inserting some urgency. (This kind of facilitating is like benevolent mischief-making.) And when 5 minutes have passed,

ask them if they need more time. The goal is to optimize creative engagement, so stop soon after the energy seems to peak.

One crucial thing is that they get off their feet and practice, rather than sitting and talking about it. Go around the room and encourage them to try it out, to rehearse. Then have them perform before everything is worked out exactly. Skits are not works of art. They are collaborative learning exercises, and we're shooting for the spark of truth to emerge from universal participation.

ROLE-PLAYING

Explore a new behavior in a safe environment

Here “role-playing” is a variation on the skit, yet with a distinct purpose. What is most important is not collaboration or the conveying of a point or a story. Here what is most important is the exploration of situations that are new or not-yet-integrated into our everyday behavior.

Here we use the conceit of theatre as a safe forum to try out a role in which we might not be completely comfortable or effective in the "real world." Here there is room for mistakes as we try out ways of speaking and acting that may feel foreign. This method is frequently used in Ruhi Book 2 as we explore introducing significant spiritual subjects into our everyday conversations. The method should, however, be continued vigorously into the other books.

In Ruhi Book 3, we will need to role-play multiple times the actions of a children's class teacher with the class. In Book 4, we role-play being a storyteller as we attempt to narrate those beautiful and holy episodes from our Faith's history. In Book 5, we will certainly want to role-play interactions with junior youth before working with the Energizer Bunnies themselves. In Book 6, the basic role is between the teacher of the Faith and the receptive soul. Finally, in Book 7, the relationship under consideration is that of tutor and study circle participant.

The first step is to ensure that those who are role-playing are clear on their intentions in this interaction. It will be the same as in the real-life context. For example, “I am striving to communicate this concept with the children so they understand” or “I am inviting someone to a community event and also listening for their concerns and ideas.” The participants therefore do not have to memorize a speech, but they continually adjust their words to how they are being received and how their intention is playing out.

One recommendation for tutors of all of these books: pay attention to the participants who are role-playing the recipient roles (i.e., the children, the listeners, the junior youth, the seekers, the participants in a study circle, etc...) At first, participants may be prone to "play-acting" as opposed to "role-playing." By that is meant they might indulge in behaving as children, for example, beyond what is helpful for the exercise. And indeed it might be funny, but as tutors we need to make sure the process is not shortchanged. So we can laugh and then gently remind them of the goal, which is to recreate the situation in order to familiarize the rising servant with the mechanics of their sacred act of service.

There is another key consideration related to the role of the "recipients." Just as they should not be too indulgent in their roles, so too they should not be so easy-going that they provide no challenge to the participant assuming the active role. This would render the exercise a lost opportunity.

For example, if the role-play is between "teacher" and "seeker," it is most helpful if the seeker responds more or less realistically to the teacher's words. If the teacher uses a term unfamiliar to the seeker, she or he might ask, "What does that mean?" If the teacher says something that might surprise, the seeker can express that. If the teacher says something moving, the seeker will acknowledge that. The key is honesty and re-creating the likely responses of the intended audience for the sake of the learning of both the individuals role-playing and the group as a whole.

Theatre is not the same as pretend. Theatre is a pretense in which we find ourselves freed up to be truthful, sometimes even more than in "real life."