

Theatre-based Methods in Facilitating Organizational Learning

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The need for new practices to encourage learning has been recognized in organizations in which diversity and multiple socially constructed realities are prevailing. Diverse and opposing views in an organization offer noteworthy potential for innovation and learning. But they are to be managed in constructive, integrative ways which cultivate interpretation as a fragmented, open-ended and multi-voiced process of dialogue aiming at the creation of a richer polyphonic understanding. (e.g. Brown & Duguid 1991, Van de Ven et al. 2008, Marshak & Grant 2008)

We are interested in developing novel intervention techniques to facilitate interaction in organizations to advance shared polyphonic understanding. Our research interest is practical: how to create theatrical and narrative techniques which enrich collaboration and joint understanding?

Our method is called research-based theatre (RBT). It is an interdisciplinary approach combining learning, organizational development and innovation management studies with art and cultural studies, applied theatre and social sciences.

We propose a novel narrative technique of storytelling. The main idea is narration through images which are theatrical pictures utilizing various drama techniques (e.g. Heikkinen 2002). Pictures are used as an aid to create both individual and group stories. The stories are then analyzed, scripted and produced into theatrical scenes. The scenes are presented back to the narrators as a theatrical performance to encourage reflection, discussion, interpretation and solution proposals. The approach is based on one of Boal's ideas of "making thought visible" (Boal 1995).

We tested this RBT method in a big Finnish industrial company in winter 2008, and our first impressions are encouraging. The narrative technique using theatre and theatrical pictures seems to offer practical tools for interacting, guiding conversation and helping participants to observe their habits and practices in a new way. The method may even enable to point out real social episodes and tensions. But above all, the RBT method seemed to empower participants, enabling the development project to be a deconstruction of all the participants and not only the management's tool for change. Interactions became more of a dialogue and more democratic. The RBT method seemed to support the creation of expansive interpretation of the participants' experiences, but nonetheless there is no shortcut. A shared understanding in an organization is a complex puzzle.