

ACTIVITY 29: USING FORUM THEATRE FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION: RELIGION IN THE CLASSROOM

Overview of the activity

Religion in the classroom is a challenging issue for some. Through Forum Theatre, this will be explored further by making the power structures in the learning environment visible and addressing situations of cultural conflict collectively.

Objectives

- Explore and share situations of conflict derived from the presence of religion and/or secularity in the classroom
- Discuss and debate these situations through Forum Theatre
- Generate strategies which are usually difficult to develop individually

Duration (in minutes)	Min/max number of participants	Room/space requirements
2–4 hours, depending on the number of participants in the group	- Recommended: 12 - Minimum: 5 - Maximum: 20	A large room with enough space for participants to move around comfortably. Chairs should be available in case participants want to sit down. The room should be equipped with a computer, projector and screen, as well as with a board (or similar) for writing in large format.

Minimum knowledge requirements of participants	Materials needed	Preparation
None required	- Computer - Projector - Screen - A board (or similar, flipchart) for writing in large format	It would be useful for the trainer to have some background experience or familiarity with Forum Theatre

Instructions

1. After warming up, ask participants to divide into groups of 4 or 5 participants.
2. Give them about 20 minutes so that each participant in the group can share a story about religion in the classroom that sparked a conflict – that is, where the protagonist (usually the participant) was forced into a situation or conflict that made them unhappy, and where they found themselves at a disadvantage in terms of power (e.g. during a discussion with a teacher, or interactions with classmates who were discriminatory).
3. Once all members of the group have shared a story, ask the group to either choose one story (as long as the person who has shared the story feels comfortable) or to create a new story using the different stories of the group. Ask them to record in writing the following:
 - *Where and when does this story happen?* (define context)
 - *Who is in the story?* (define characters)
 - *What happens?* (define conflict/tension/issue)

- a. When all of the groups have their stories outlined on paper, ask them to give each character a fictional name, assign a character to the members of the group and rehearse the story through theatrical skits using improvisation, which means participants will decide what to say based on their knowledge of the situation and not on a learnt script. The theatrical skit should stop at the moment of maximum conflict. To create their theatrical skits, participants might focus on answering the following questions:
 - b. How does the action start? Where is each character located at the beginning of the action? What is each character doing? What is each character thinking? You could make a frozen image of the opening scene to 'fix' it.
 - c. What happens next? Who speaks to whom and why? Are there any props that are essential? If needed, how do characters enter and exit the scene?
 - d. How does the conflict start? What interactions happen during the conflict? What is each character thinking and feeling at the moment of the conflict? What is the moment of maximum conflict that is chosen to end the skit?
5. Once each group has rehearsed their story and everyone is ready to present it, ask one group to volunteer to present their story. Ask them to take their initial spots in the skit and freeze in those positions. Tell the other participants (the audience) to count to three and say, all together, 'Action!', to begin the skit. At the point of maximum conflict (which the facilitator/trainer should be aware of beforehand by having asked the group when to stop the performance), the facilitator says 'Stop!' and opens up the debate using the following questions:
 - *What have we seen?*
 - *Who is having a bad time and why?*
 - *Who can change the situation?*
6. Invite participants to propose alternatives to address the situation. If someone makes a clear proposal, invite the participant to go on stage and try it out (they could replace a person on stage or try out a new character who changes the situation, etc.). When all participants are ready, say '1, 2, 3, Action!' If the improvisation becomes stuck or when the proposal has been tried out, you should say 'Stop!' Thank the participant who tried out the alternative and ask them how they felt and whether they feel that they were able to change the situation. Ask the participant to sit down and open up the debate again to find other possible solutions. Try out as many solutions as time and energy permits. All proposals are valid and can be tried out on stage.

Proposals that suggest drastic changes to a character are called magical solutions and can be tried out on stage. In this case, assess whether or not the proposal presents a realistic option for change. For example, imagine a conflict where a Muslim participant who prays five times a day is attending a half-day training session. At noon, he asks the trainer if he can leave for five minutes to pray, but the trainer does not consider this a valid motive to abandon the classroom and tells the participant that if he leaves the classroom he should not come back. This means that the participant must choose between not complying with their faith or finishing the training. The participant decides to leave without arguing and does not return. In this conflict, a 'magic' solution would be to propose that either the participant does not leave to pray or that the teacher allows the participant to leave and return, as either option would eliminate the conflict 'magically'.

Not all proposals are meant to 'resolve' the situation, some might be oriented towards generating awareness or providing a sense of relief to those with less power in the conflict, which is usually the protagonist of the story. Use the time wisely so that there is enough time to present all the plays that were prepared by the participants and to discuss and try out possible alternatives.

7. Ask all participants to sit in a circle (on chairs or on the floor, whatever the group prefers) to reflect on the activity.
 - What happened?
 - How did they feel?
 - What did they learn?
 - Do they feel something has changed in their perception?
 - Do they feel this activity might give them insight into different approaches to conflict resolution, etc.?

Provide at least 10 minutes for this final part so the group can collectively assess their experiences.

Learning outcomes evidence collected

- Possibly, photos and/or videos of the plays performed
- Notes participants took when creating their stories

Evaluation

The final part of the activity (Step 7) is meant to be both an evaluation and closing process (see instructions above). Please be aware of emotions that might arise during the process and make sure that safety and respect is a priority for all participants. During the evaluation, ask participants to speak about themselves and to avoid commenting on the performance of others (e.g. 'When X did this on stage I felt ...', and not, 'I didn't like what X did on stage').

Teaching tips, stories and experiences during piloting

We suggest trainers have previous experience facilitating Theatre of the Oppressed processes. You can contact a Theatre of the Oppressed local organization to find out about training in this methodology or you could ask a trained professional to help out in facilitating this activity.

Questions for self-reflection

How did you feel about the stories participants told? Have you faced similar situations, that is, situations related to religion in the classroom? How did you deal with the situation? What was your role in the story? Has the Forum Theatre process helped you visualize strategies you might have used or could use in similar situations?

