

## **Exercises**

An exercise is a learning method. I conceive the theory of how this works as follows.

An exercise acts as an image for a real situation: and one can practice for reality within the image.

So we can speak of the skills or awareness which such a situation is intended to provide. And we can speak of the situations to which those skills and awareness can be transferred. There is also a third aspect to an exercise, which is the effect it has on the interaction of the people taking part. It is likely to be connected with the skills and awareness but it is useful to think of it separately, as a group dynamic effect.

A way in to thinking about exercises is to look at some that are used in the theatre. Perhaps this is because theatre is itself an image of reality. There are many simple exercises that are used in theatre or performance art of some kind. At least they appear simple in the instructions by which they are set up. Here are a few.

### **The Hat exercise**

A theatre improvisation classic, devised by Bill Gaskill or Keith Johnstone (don't know which) and used often by them.

For two people. One wears a hat (a traditional black bowler works well).

Instruction to the person without the hat: set up a scene, any scene, not planning it in advance. Try to distract the wearer's attention. Then, at the first opportunity, try to take the hat.

Instruction to the wearer: take part in the scene, play it to the full. Protect the hat, that is try not to let it be taken, but only when the attempt is made to take it.

Instruction to both: don't refer to the hat at all.

In this, as with improvisation in general, not-planning works much the best, in fact planning really doesn't work at all. This is the case even when following a scenario structure. ('Take the hat' is like an element of script in a scenario).

The hat exercise is one of the richest in any repertoire of exercises. It generally promotes spontaneity and high energy, and can be very funny.

### **The Mirror exercise**

Another theatre classic.

Instruction: for two people, one is in front of an imaginary mirror, the other is the image, who of course therefore has to follow what the first person does. Useful for the observation of posture and movement, and of course for working together. A lot of fun, too.

### **Lying Down, position in relation to space.**

Instruction: lie on the floor on your back. I discovered this by accident (can't remember why I asked people to lie down). Some people lie square on in the space, ie parallel to two of the walls, while other people lie oblique, ie at an angle. And once attention is drawn to this, and they are asked to change their position (from 'straight' to 'oblique' and vice versa), people feel a sense of discomfort in the position they had not initially chosen, there is a definite preference. I found that this exercise gives people a new sense of the space they are in, and they become able to relate to it with more awareness. It surprised me.

### **Relating to an Object**

This is for one person, in front of the rest of the group or workshop or whatever. The object should be somewhat nondescript, like a piece of cloth or the cylinder from the inside of a roll of wallpaper or a cardboard box or any object that does not immediately seem to dictate what to do with it.

Instruction: 'Sit next to that. Do something with it, or nothing. Finish when you don't want to do any more'. (The wording is important - especially the 'or nothing'). What happens is that there's a very clear distinction between when the person is convincing and even compelling to watch, and when contrived.

It's an exercise for being absorbed by what one is performing, being possessed by it even - the concept of possession and trance is developed in relation to the use of masks in the article 'Possession' in the section History and Design of Courses). So: this is the state that a performer is working for in inhabiting a character or fulfilling an action in a performance - or a teacher giving a lecture or a politician making a speech. For me it also provides a language or a set of criteria relating to a certain kind of truthfulness. (See 'Ethics of Acting' in the section Destination).

### **Cross The Space Ten Times**

This was a script, or 'notation', that was devised and used by the 'happenings' group Further Granulated Advice that I started and ran (well, we all wrote notations for it) at Goldsmith's College (this group is described in the article 'Happenings', and pictures of some of its work can be seen in 'FGA'). It was very surprising what people did when asked to follow this instruction - nothing grotesque but following the same criteria as with Relating to an Object, that's to say either compelling to watch (with an experienced group more likely) or contrived. It is a performance script rather than an exercise.

### **Bring Materials To Build A Space For Yourself, Then Interact With Others**

Again, a script, which we did in a private studio space, with rich results.

### **Stick Rubbish Down On The Pavement**

This was the script that we followed one day on a wide part of the pavement in Tottenham Court Road, London. Again, rich results, passers-by stopped and watched, someone asked us if this was a demonstration of some kind, people deliberately dropped things for us to stick down, quite a crowd collected.

'Happenings' long ago came to be called 'performance art' or 'live art'. And it does seem to me that an event which disrupts existing expectations or provides a new view does in a way do the same as an exercise. At any rate that, I think, was our unspoken philosophy and is so for all artists perhaps.

### **The Go-Round**

Of course a universal structure for all kinds of gatherings and all kinds of purposes.

### **Other Exercises**

There is of course a huge wealth of exercises out there, not always easy to find in any order. Several good books on theatre have been written, by William Gaskill, Peter Brook, James Roose-Evans, Keith Johnstone (I think this is much the best on theatre improvisation), Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal... only the last has an actual list (though even that one not an index) of exercises. One person who has put together two published lists of exercises is Larry Butler, 'Games Games' and 'Nibbles', not specifically for theatre but rather for groups (the second geared towards writers).

There are also of course many publications on organisation learning. Again, I don't know of any book that actually lists in a convenient way learning structures. I am trying to put together some titles and will add them to this section.

Meanwhile - design them yourself!