



Spontaneous Enactment in the Spirit of "Yes-And" is Profoundly Empowering

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Adam Blatner, MD, Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and Certified Trainer of Psychodrama, explores the value of arts experiences that require spontaneous enactment, or improvisation, and rely on the self as the source of creativity.

Recent efforts to present ways the arts can be therapeutic or health-promoting may be part of a trend towards more experiential modalities in education, personal growth, and therapy. The goals might extend beyond clinical work to prevention. The key elements are improvisation, enactment, and collaborative creativity.

Improvisation is the action extension of spontaneity, and these activities are empowering even more in an era when so much stimulation is given by mass media. Many kids after early childhood begin to forget that they can be the source of creativity. They can just make up stories instead of having them elaborately produced and delivered.

This applies to the great majority of arts education where again what is taught is how to perform that which is created by others, script-writers, choreographers, composers. The idea that one can experience the self as a source of creativity is hardly recognized. Of course, what we're really talking about is not the ordinary, immediately available, ordinary sense of self. This is actually a superficial coordinator when it works well. Often it's not even all that effective at this job. But spontaneity taps into the creative subconscious sources that may arise from archetypal dynamics beyond the brain, or for the diehard materialists, from the more creative neocortex that often gets inhibited by anxiety.

The point is that spontaneity combined with enactment—really doing it, rather than watching someone else do it—is profoundly empowering. The feeling of the self as the source of action may seem obvious, but again, our culture in the service of commercialism on one hand and efficiency in education on the other generates packages that can be seen rather than done. Remember that this present piece is in service of experiential education—learning by actually doing.

But even experiments as provided by most laboratory classes are just rituals. The problem of really not knowing, having to design an experiment, having it fail the first 19 times—who will take the time to have the kid learn that? The focus is on the product, but in fact, science is about the processes of what goes on between the 1st and 18th failure! The analysis, the re-thinking, the consultation, the crafting of yet another experiment, the stick-to-it-ive-ness, etc.

Finally, what also tends to be missed in school is the idea of teamwork. This undercuts the illusion of individual effort and competition, but let's consider that these seeming ideals are for many kids profoundly demoralizing. On the other hand, what is it like to have teammates who are friends, who support your efforts, root you on, find you enjoyable—and you like them too?

This in-pouring of psychic energy, encouragement, audience functions (they enjoy your performance), sharing associations—what in improvisational work is called a spirit of “yes-and,” these dynamics of collaborative creativity are profound. Just getting away from the frazzling of competition is good, but encouraging teamwork is far better.

These elements are especially important when dealing with activities that don’t have precise answers in words, but again need participation—i.e., the arts. Mixing this with a more multi-dimensional pedagogy is good also because only the verbally adept are appreciated in the current “logocentric” culture. The truth is that lots of kids who aren’t as good “academically” might be more flexible and talented in activities that involve less word-skills and more the kinds of skills that are highlighted by one or several other art forms.

My hope is that there will be far more exploration of the power of the arts to promote greater resilience, self-esteem, curiosity, and active participation in life.

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