**Article 6**
**FORUM THEATRE'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON SELF-ESTEEM IN CONFLICT**

## By Rikke Gürgens Gjærum and Gro Hilde Ramsdal (Norway)

## Abstract

The Communication and Conflict Solution in Working Life project aims to develop communication strategies to protect the self-esteem and identity of both parties in a dialogue. Employees of five industrial enterprises were given communication courses developed around the Forum Theatre method. State self-esteem (SSE) was measured before and after the plays and 20 per cent of the participants were asked to evaluate their own communicative competence. State self-esteem was raised after the plays in Course 1 and stabilised after the plays in Course 2. The self-evaluations of communicative competence contributed new insight into how learning is influenced by participants' original attitudes.

### Résumé

Le projet Communication et résolution des conflits dans le monde du travail a pour objectif de développer des stratégies de communication pour protéger l'amour-propre et l'identité des deux parties lors d'un dialogue. Les employés de cinq sociétés industrielles ont reçu des cours de communication développés autour de la méthode du Théâtre de Forum. L'amour-propre existant (SSE) a été mesuré avant et après les spectacles et vingt pourcent des participants ont évalué leur propre compétence communicative. L'amour-propre existant a été mentionné après les spectacles dans le Cours 1 et stabilisé après les spectacles lors du Cours 2. Les évaluations personnelles des compétences communicatives ont apporté de nouveaux aperçus sur la façon dont l'apprentissage est influencé par les attitudes initiales des participants.

### Resumen

El proyecto de la Solución de la Comunicación y Conflicto en la Vida Laboral tiene como objetivo desarrollar estrategias de comunicación a fin de proteger la autoestima e identidad de ambas partes dentro del diálogo. Los empleados de cinco empresas industriales recibieron cursos sobre la comunicación desarrollados sobre el método del Teatro Foro. El auto-estima del fuero interno [por sus iniciales en inglés SSE), se midió antes y después de las representaciones y al 20 por ciento de los participantes se les pidió que evaluaran su competencia en la comunicación. El auto-estima del fuero interno aumentó después de las representaciones en el Curso 1 y se estabilizó después de las representaciones en el Curso 2. La auto-evaluación de las competencias en la comunicación contribuyó a dar un nuevo entendimiento sobre como el aprendizaje es influenciado por las actitudes originales de los 'participantes'.

## Authors' biographies

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# FORUM THEATRE'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON SELF-ESTEEM IN CONFLICT

**Background**

In the period 1998–2004, the researchers developed a theatre-related instructional methodology for the university college sector. This development of an innovative Forum Theatre method was initiated at Harstad University College in Norway, a small educational and research centre located on the northern outskirts of Europe. The objective was to teach students sound practical communicative skills, and to enhance their understanding of theory and their skills in analysing communicative scenarios. The method was named 'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' (Gürgens and Ramsdal, 2005). Before long, health institutions as well as industrial enterprises in the region took an interest in the method. The present paper describes the research project 'Communication and Conflict-solving in Working Life', which can be seen as an extension and elaboration of the above-mentioned R&D work.

The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council as part of the program 'Industrial University College Initiatives'. It had a practical component consisting of two communication courses built around our self-produced Forum Theatre method. In the period 2005–06, employees from five regional industrial enterprises within various sectors such as transportation, petroleum, logistics, mobile phones and electronics, and manufacturing completed these courses. The objective of the project was to encourage participants to *apply* constructive communicative strategies in conflict situations and to *develop* sound communicative strategies in collaboration with their fellow employees, thus promoting relationship-building and conflict prevention at the workplace to obtain constructive problem-solving. We also wanted to conduct research on the learning and change processes taking place among the employees. We characterise our work as action research.

**Methods and Issues**

Initially, we had 6 hypotheses which we wanted to test:

1. Poor communication impairs the 'victim's' self-esteem.

2. Poor communication impairs inter-actor problem-solving.

3. The method 'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' inspires the actors to work more consciously with communication in real-life situations.

4. The method 'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' makes the actors change their communicative strategies.

5. The method 'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' makes the actors go for a more respectful and balanced communication with their conversation partners.

6. The method 'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' will strengthen or stabilise self-esteem.

The research design was mainly developed within a hermeneutic framework. However, we chose to conduct a quantitative as well as a qualitative study. We wanted to not only gain an understanding of *each individual*'s experience of communication and self-esteem, but also to learn something about how the *employees as a group* were influenced by the Forum Theatre method. We triangulated our methods in our investigation of the hypotheses.

The quantitative study consisted of:

- a questionnaire for tapping state self-esteem before and after Forum Theatre plays for all course participants (SSE, Heatherton and Polivy, 1991);

- a questionnaire to be completed early in the day, before the plays, tapping trait self- esteem for all participants (SLCS, Tafarodi and Swann, 1995);

- an evaluation form handed out to all participants related to the pedagogical composition of the method. This self-produced form contained nineteen tick-off questions and four open-ended questions;

- a numerical self-evaluation of communication behaviour. Both interviews were concluded by having the informants place themselves on a numerical scale ranging from 1–7 with respect to how well they felt they communicated on an 'ordinary' day, a 'good' day and a 'bad' day.

The questionnaires Self-liking/Self-competence Scale (SLCS) and State-Self-Esteem (SSE), as well as a self-produced evaluation form, were analysed by means of SPSS 14.0 software. We conducted a more interpretation-based analysis of the numerical evaluation participants made of their own communication behaviour.

The State-Self-Esteem test (SSE) which we used for measuring changes in self-esteem was translated into Norwegian for use in the present study. A Norwegian self-esteem researcher and a Norwegian linguist with English LSP as his specialty translated the test. Subsequently, the various translational solutions were discussed with a Norwegian-speaking American social psychology researcher. The Norwegian translation of the (SSE) used in this study had therefore not previously been validated. To compensate for this shortcoming in the research design, we incorporated an alternate and previously validated measure of the closely related but not identical concept of trait self-esteem, the Self-liking/Self-competence Scale (SLCS).[1] The correlation between the two self-esteem measures (SSE) State-Self-Esteem and (SLCS) Self-Liking/Self- Competence Scale was .65** for both courses covered by the study. The reported correlation is intended to support the convergent validity of the SSE translation by showing that it is positively correlated with a related and well-established construct (the two-dimensional self-esteem construct of Tafarodi and Swann, 1995). However, SLCS and SSE are not identical constructs and should not be expected to show correlations of the level expected for test–retest or internal reliability. In the validation study of Heatherton and Polivy (1991), the SSE correlated at .72* with the most commonly used measure of trait self-esteem, namely the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Our results are thus consistent with previous work.

Cronbach's Alpha for the SLCS was .83 in Course 1 and .74 in Course 2. Cronbach`s Alpha for SSE was .78 before Forum Plays and .82 after Forum Plays in Course 1, and .84 before Forum Plays and .88 after Forum Plays in Course 2. This would seem to indicate that the Norwegian translation of the SSE can yield reliable information on changes in situational self- esteem caused by the role-playing.

The qualitative study consisted of the following:

- two research interviews of a random sample of 20 per cent of the course participants, amounting to a total of 23 interviews. The random sample was selected by using the Table of Random Digits (Buffa and Dyer, 1978: 522):

- thirteen interviews prior to Course 1;

- 10 interviews after Course 2;

- the first interview guide, which contained 27 questions, and the second, which contained 20 questions;

- video recordings of the Forum Plays and the course participants' own notes on difficult communication experiences in the period between the two courses.

We tested 23 interviews against five hypotheses, and categorised the interview transcriptions by means of a grounded theory categorisation system, where interview/direct quotation qualities generated categories and concepts for the informants' interview statements (Glaser, 1992, 2001; Lorentsen, 1998).

In an earlier paper (Ramsdal and Gürgens, 2008), we analysed the *qualitative data* from the interviews and the *quantitative data* from the evaluation forms. In the present paper, we discuss the quantitative

findings related to state self-esteem and trait self-esteem, and the results from the participants' numerical evaluations of their own communication behaviour. However, to make the project intelligible, it is essential to give some information to the reader about the content, interventions and impact of the Forum Plays. Before we take a closer look at the results, we shall specify the premises and underlying ideology of the method.

**Description of the New Method**

'Forum Theatre with psychological dialogue analysis' is a cross-disciplinary drama-pedagogical method aimed at increasing people's *awareness* of their ways of communicating in conflict situations, and developing constructive communication strategies within the working group. We believe that, through the working group's active and joint effort to solve conflict situations, the individual participants will learn something essential about communication. This is consistent with Boal's ideas about what Forum Theatre should be: 'A theatre which is not didactic, in the old sense of the word and style,  but pedagogic,  in the sense of  collective learning'  (Boal,  1995: 7).

Our application of the method is an elaboration of Boal's traditional Forum Theatre. We use it within a Nordic cultural communication framework. Moreover, we draw upon philosophies and insights from psychological theory and research, actively defining this knowledge as an important context for analysis of the Forum Plays (Baumeister et al., 2003, 1999; Greenier et al., 1995; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). This framework will be described more thoroughly below.

Theatre researcher and drama teacher Gürgens Gjærum is the joker (facilitator) in the Forum Theatre Plays, and adapted the theatre as a communication forum within the aesthetic space. In this way, the communicative scenarios can function as a basis for a psychological dialogue analysis. Psychologist Ramsdal has been responsible for relating the theoretical understanding from the lectures to the experiences from the staged communication in the plays. She has also contributed to the analysis of the participants' dramatisations. The method is subdivided into five phases, applicable to groups of up to 40 persons (cf. Model 1 below).

*Methodological Structure (Model 1)*

*Introduction:*  Presentation of objectives, method, lecturers and course participants.

*Phase 1:*  Lecture on self-esteem needs in communication.

*Phase 2:*  Lecture on the origin and framework of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' and emancipatory pedagogics.

*Phase 3:*  Planning and improvisation of Forum Theatre plays in guided groups:
—  conversation about own experiences of oppressive communication;
—  choice of story to be enacted;
—  role assignments, staging of the play, and rehearsal.

*Phase 4:*  Plenary performances, each group in turn performing for the others:
—  enactment of scenes
—  negotiations of solutions by the joker
—  psychological dialogue analysis. The psychologist comments on the plays and relates comments to communication and psychological theories.

*Phase 5:*  Analysis and summing up (on blackboard/flip-over) of the successful strategies used by the participants in counteracting oppressive communication in the plays.

In several of our collaborating enterprises, the management suggested that we should stage actual ongoing and deadlocked conflicts ('hot conflicts') at the workplace. But the objective of the method is rather to *practise* constructive communication to preserve self-esteem in all parties involved, thereby contributing to preventing conflict in the long run. Boal states that the concept of conflict is very central to the theatre:

> Theatre is the passionate combat of two human beings on a platform … Theatre denotes conflict, contradiction, confrontation, defiance … theatre, as an art, does not have as its object the commonplace and the trivial, the valueless. It attaches itself to actions in which the characters have an investment, situations in which they venture their lives and their feeling, their moral and their political choices: their passions! (Boal, 1995: 16)

In our view, conflict prevention is precisely about taking seriously the fact that people 'venture their lives and their feeling' through their communication with other people (Boal, 1995: 16). Taking into account the emotional turmoil described to us by students dramatising conflict situations for us in Forum Plays over the years, it was important to develop a method that could remedy the negative consequences of such emotional reactions on communication. We gradually came to focus on teaching each individual participant in our Forum Play sessions about protecting his or her own self-esteem in communication without stepping on someone else's toes or self-esteem. Our experiences were confirmed by social psychology research stating that 'success and failure produce a number of affective outcomes, including moods highly associated with self-esteem (e.g. feelings of pride, confidence, shame, or stupidity)' (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991: 896). These researchers also stress the fact that emotional responses and self-esteem changes seem to be related to humiliation, in particular ego-threatening situations.

Our ambition has thus been to help develop communicative competence that should enable an individual to participate in constructive conflict prevention or conflict resolution at an early stage. We assumed that accomplishing such competence would increase or stabilise self- esteem. According to Boal, each individual's problem within the Theatre of the Oppressed represents a greater problem in community life: 'Macrocosm has been shown as microcosm.' (Boal, 1995) For Forum Theatre to contribute to stable and sound self-esteem, it should provide the actors with an optimistic view at the *microcosmic level*. Research has shown that high self- esteem can be a mixed blessing (Colvin et al., 1995), and that *stability* may be more important for psychological health and well-being than the absolute level of self-esteem. Much goes to show that when various types of humiliations threaten a high self-esteem, then aggression, unrealistic self-perception and risk of violence are generated (Baumeister et al., 1999; Greenier et al., 1995; Kernis et al., 1993; Kernis and Waschull, 1994). Thus it is an important communicative concern to protect the self against such threats in problem-solving processes and conflict situations. Our experience with Forum Theatre indicates that self-esteem is a key to conflict prevention in communication (Ramsdal and Gürgens, 2005).

In the development and application of our method, the pivotal point was to give participants the opportunity to really *experience, discover* and *comprehend.* This implies recognising the fixed rituals and roles that cause oppressive situations in everyday life, and that often escape conscious notice. Forum Theatre offers an opportunity to 'rediscover' or see the world in a different light:

> Only in a Forum Theatre show do the spectators acquire voice and movement, sound and colour, and thus become able to demonstrate their ideas and desires … Theatre is a therapy into which one enters body and soul, soma and psyche. (Boal, 1995: 23–28)

Our method is based on an optimistic view and a desire to instil in the minds of the participants confidence in human integrity, the potential for change and one's own powers. It was therefore considered important to enact all proposals from the spect-actors, whether or not the originator had the courage to enact his or her solution in person. The sole condition imposed by the joker was that the proposals must be enacted realistically and credibly in accord with the protagonist's personality and limitations. For example, a shy and self-conscious protagonist must necessarily fight oppression in his or her own diffident way, trying to find a solution within the limitations of this register. Unless this condition is imposed, Forum Theatre will fail as a motivating experience for real-life situations. Boal comments:

> Even more clearly, this truth dawned on me, when the spectator herself comes on the stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place. (Boal, 1995: 7)

Magical solutions and exaggerated optimism provide no breeding ground for credible changes. The personal and unique repertoire is the only path to change for all individuals. All dramatisations can be interpreted in very different directions according to the perspective of the interpreter. We often experience

that spect-actors disagree about who is the protagonist and who is the oppressor. The Joker helps to solve such disagreements by initiating a democratic process of casting votes.

**Psychological Dialogue Analysis: A New Element**

The summary of course activities in Model 1 shows that Phase 4 consists of three different elements: enactments of scenes; negotiations of solutions by the joker; and psychological dialogue analysis. These three activities are not sequential but integrated events.

Psychological dialogue analysis implies defining a specific context for understanding the conversations in Forum Plays. This was achieved in the course of the initial lectures by emphasising that self-esteem maintenance and identity protection are major concerns in communication (Phase 1). This way of thinking about the underlying structure of difficult conversations was inspired in particular by results from the Harvard Negotiations Project. Stone et al. (2000) maintain that all conversations are negotiations about the right to define oneself:

> The Identity Conversation looks inward: it's all about who we are and how we see ourselves. How does what happened affect my self-esteem, my self-image, my sense of who I am in the world? What impact will it have on my future? What self-doubts do I harbour? In short: Before, during, and after the difficult conversation, the Identity Conversation is about what I am saying to myself about me. (2000: 14)

This means that it is essential to keep track of the motivations of one's interventions in a discussion or negotiation. What I say, and even more the way that I say it, will be interpreted into the other person's Identity Conversation. Solving the problems of daily life at home and at work through communication can be complicated. The most challenging complications appear when conversations derail into battles of defending one's identity. Therefore, a main concern of the psychological dialogue analysis is to help the participants grasp the fact that all conversations imply negotiating identity. When searching for communicative solutions, the spect-actors are actively reminded of the fact that when they communicate, they influence the way other people feel and think about themselves. The feelings of self generated in their conversational partner will profoundly impact the answers they will receive in dialogue. Psychological dialogue analysis is developed to remind the spect-actors of, and actively focus them on, the Identity Conversation.

This development of the Forum Play method emerged in the wake of years of experience which taught us that lack of attention to this specific factor is one of the most common causes of conflict build-up and cementation. Time and again we ask ourselves and our students: 'Do you want to reach a satisfying solution to this difficult conversation or do you want to get even by making the other person feel as bad about herself as you feel about yourself at the moment?' Psychological dialogue analysis therefore reminds and helps the spect-actors to analyse how the content and the form of their interventions can affect the Identity Conversation and self-esteem of the oppressor, thus contributing more or less constructively to solutions of the Forum Plays. We will give an example to illustrate how this works.

In one of the plays, a shop assistant had a hard time working with his customer to solve a problem of a mobile phone the customer had bought for his wife. The phone was faulty and had to be replaced. The shop assistant (following shop procedure) was willing to replace the phone but needed time to document the actual problems. The customer was in a hurry and would not accept any of the routine solutions offered. The shop assistant got very stressed and irritated by the customer's lack of patience and will to negotiate. The spect-actors were infected by the shop assistant's irritation and had problems finding positive ways of influencing the customer. Psychological dialogue analysis reminded the spect-actors that the customer had said that he was buying the phone for his wife. His identity as a coping husband could be threatened if he failed to buy her a proper gift (in this case, a functioning phone). In all likelihood, he was worried about his wife's reaction to the delay and what this reaction could cause him to 'say to himself about himself'.

After this dialogue analysis, an immediate change seemed to occur in the spect-actors' interventions, reflecting a new identification with and understanding of the customer's problem. They now suggested solutions that could help him take care of his disappointed wife too. Taking the Identity Conversation into consideration thus gave better results. This experience was also used as part of the psychological

dialogue analysis to remind the spect-actors that, even when we do not understand other people's behaviour and intentions very well, working *with* as opposed to *against* the person is essential. Taking time to work *with* people will help not to challenge their self-concept and to protect their self-esteem. This careful way of gathering information will eventually give a better starting point for relevant positive interventions.

**Content of the Forum Plays, Spect-actors' Interventions and Discussion**

The course participants chose to dramatise events from their private and working lives, in all 23 scenarios. A number of themes emerged as common factors in the Forum Plays. The first theme we categorised as 'Being ignored'. The stories within this category were about not getting the required attention from bartenders, colleagues, bosses and shop assistants. They illustrated how the spect-actors had felt consciously ignored and how their physical presence, or the presence of their ideas or complaints, was not acknowledged. An example would be the employees at a gym who felt under-estimated when a young short-time stand-in was rewarded with a gift and a speech from the boss for doing routine work. The regular employees had never received any thanks or special attention for doing this kind of work over many years.

We chose to call the second theme in the Forum Plays 'Trivialising — being left out to dry'. Stories within this category described embarrassing or conflict-ridden situations where the protagonist appeals for support but receives none. During dramatisation of these stories, the response 'don't take it too personally!' occurred repeatedly. The protagonists described that they were not ignored, but their emotional reactions to the situations were not validated, leaving them with a feeling of doubt, disappointment and a need to defend themselves. An example from this category would be the two colleagues discussing negative feedback given at a meeting where both had been present. The protagonist felt that he had been personally criticised in front of an audience. The colleague responded by telling him he should stop complaining and that he had taken this too personally.

The third theme category we named 'Complaining and not getting a fair deal'. These Forum Plays told stories about disappointed protagonists trying unsuccessfully to renegotiate business deals. An example would be the customer at a gas station who wanted to swap a broken CD bought there only a few hours earlier. But the customer's request to swap was brusquely turned down because the cellophane wrapper had been removed.

The fourth and final theme category we named 'Manipulation/use of power'. In these Forum Plays, oppressors with a higher rank in the hierarchy of an organisation used their power to get their own way through manipulations and/or rude behaviour. An interesting example would be the experienced male boss welcoming a young, female geophysicist to an offshore oil installation. As a consultant, her rank and status in relation to the boss were not clearly defined. This caused the boss to use technical abbreviations familiar only to offshore personnel and to indulge in flirting comments, making an issue of her being a woman in a male-dominated workplace, thus causing confusion and insecurity in the young, female geophysicist.

Each of the 23 dramatisations was solved through several interventions from the spect- actors. The joker kept the spect-actors improvising and intervening until the group reached a positive solution to the conflict communication. Since it was important for the researchers to work within realistic goals, the lectures in both courses stated what we thought should qualify as a solution. In real life many conflicts cannot fully be solved through one specific communication, but will need repeated effort across situations over time. Therefore, a solution in our context consists of a positive turn in the communication, implying that the protagonist got a chance to explore the situation, try out some interventions that serve to reduce the level of aggressive tension in the situation, and at least experience an improved *possibility* for a satisfying solution over time. We instructed the protagonists to keep on improvising and asking for suggestions until they felt that the initial insults from the oppressors did not dominate their experience anymore. The spect-actors were instructed to continue their interventions until the protagonist felt that she or he had regained some communicative initiative and control over the situation without insulting the oppressor. In this way, the protagonist could leave the communicative conflict situation with a restored self-esteem and without activating Identity Conversations within the oppressor.

When working towards a solution of a Forum Play, the spect-actors worded suggestions of lines and actions for the protagonist to the joker. Early in this process, we allowed the 'audience' to limit its activity

to giving suggestions for the players to enact. This choice was made to help the spect-actors adapt to the situation and feel comfortable and relaxed. Gradually, as the spect-actors showed initiative and eagerness in their discussion of possible interventions, the joker carefully helped the spect-actors to enact their own suggestions. Thus the 'audience' became spect-actors according to Boal terminology. In the enactment of each of the 23 scenarios, there were several such interventions by spect-actors.

The employees of the five regional enterprises brought a total of 49 communicative strategies into play. On closer inspection, we found them to represent seventeen qualitatively different strategies. Seven examples of such strategies were: getting from monologue to dialogue; being honest, open and specific when in difficult situations; asking questions to clarify and to get an overview of the situation; important arguments communicated by the oppressor should somehow be integrated in the solution; no repercussions so be lenient; involve people witnessing the oppression; and use body language consciously to clarify and underline your verbal communication. In negotiation of solutions, the spect-actors soon became eager and energetically occupied arguing their points of view. After the closure of each Forum Play, the discussion of communicative strategies re-emerged with fierce intensity. The impact of the spect-actors' interventions was clearly and specifically worded during this phase. Spect-actors would talk about their motivation to get even, and their experience that these kinds of solutions did not help in producing positive solutions.

**'The Theatre of the Oppressed and the Role of Self-esteem**

The name 'The Theatre of the Oppressed' encompasses all theatrical forms associated with Augusto Boal's long theatrical career, including processual techniques based on tableaux, Invisible Theatre and Forum Theatre (Boal, 1995). Boal places himself in a position somewhere between Stanislavskij and Brecht. Boal's theatre can be enacted just as *credibly* as within the tradition of Stanislavskij, but with the objective of dealing within a *potential of change*, as within the tradition of Brecht. Boal claims that the aesthetic space possesses cognitive characteristics which can lead to changes in the minds of the actors. It offers:

> imaginary mirrors … The self-knowledge thus acquired allows him to be the subject (the one who observes) and another subject (the one who acts). It allows him to imagine variations of his action, to study alternatives. (Boal, 1995: 13)

Boal aims to provide an opportunity for all actors to eliminate oppressions by testing out liberating alternatives:

> The Theatre of the Oppressed has two fundamental principles: it aims (a) to help the spect-actor transform himself into a protagonist of the dramatic action and rehearse alternatives for his situation so that he may be able (b) to extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theatre. (Boal, 1995: 40)

One of the core questions in 'the Theatre of the Oppressed' is: Who plays the leading part in *your* life? Is it *you*, or are you subject to your *external* and *internal* oppressors? It was these internal oppressors that caught our attention. Psychologically, oppression has successfully been accomplished when the protagonist experiences self-doubt and reduced self-esteem. Therefore, keeping self-esteem stable throughout the conflict should be important to protect the self and prevent it from yielding to oppression. Keeping self-esteem stable seems to be an important precondition to maintain the leading part in one's own life.

**Quantitative Findings: Towards Interpretation and Analysis After Course 1**

One of the crucial objectives of researching the application of this variant of Forum Theatre was that we assumed that such role-playing would function as a form of rehearsal and coping, and thus boost the participants' self-esteem. It is important to remember here that the researchers did not measure communicative coping as such. We had instructed the participants to keep on exploring suggested solutions and improvising *until they experienced a positive development of the situation due to their improved communication.* Ending a Forum Play thus implied the

experience of communicative coping on behalf of the spect-actors. But did this coping experience help stabilise or increase state self-esteem?

Our study shows a significant difference at the .05 level for State-Self-Esteem (SSE), before and after the Course 1 participants had played their roles as the oppressor, the oppressed or as neutral.[2] The participants report a higher self-esteem after participating in the Course 1 plays. This implies that practising the communicative skills taught through Forum Theatre appears to have resulted in significant improvements in the self-esteem levels of the spect-actors. Research literature reports that documenting variations in state self-esteem has been difficult (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). Getting a significant variation in self-esteem before and after coping experiences therefore is a convincing result. This is also confirmed in the qualitative data. In the interviews after Course 2, the informants talked about experiences of learning and improved coping in the Forum Play situation, at work and in their private lives (Ramsdal and Gürgens Gjærum, 2008). As an example, one employee described to us how changing her communicative strategies according to her course experiences had totally changed her communication with her ex-husband. She went from no communication to communicating without conflict about practicalities concerning their children. Practising her communicative competence during the courses had increased her feeling of self-confidence and made her want to explore this mastery in real-life situations. The evaluation forms filled out by all participants after Course 2 confirmed these impressions: more than 60 per cent said they believed the employment of the acquired communicative strategies could influence their self-esteem positively in some situations (Ramsdal and Gürgens Gjærum, 2008).

Boal is concerned with how Forum Theatre as a scene prepares the ground for such personal experience processes within the five dimensions of the aesthetic space: action, time, space, memory and imagination (Boal, 1995: 20):

> The aesthetic space processes gnoseological properties, that is, properties which stimulate knowledge and discovery, cognition and recognition: properties which stimulate the process of learning by experience. Theatre is a form of knowledge. (Boal, 1995: 20)

In our work with the five enterprises, the area of tension between the dimensions of art and the concrete frames of reality described by Boal proved to be an exciting research object. We now conclude that a group of Norwegian employees without previous theatrical experience had their self-esteem strengthened and bolstered through their experiences in the aesthetic space. These coping experiences can be seen as a manifestation of the influential force of Forum Theatre. The participants' experiences can be related to the aesthetics theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer claims that:

> Instead, the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the persons that experience it. This happens both to the artist and to the spectators; the playing plays with both agents. (Gadamer, 1989: 101; see also Rasmussen and Gürgens, 2006: 239)

The changes described by Gadamer are represented in our data as a significant increase in self-esteem from before the play sequence to after the play sequence of Course 1. We interpret this change as an indication that working within the frame of Forum Theatre, coping with challenges in the plays, resulted in boosting self-esteem through reducing anxiety and overcoming passivity and bewilderment.[3]

Forum Theatre is an aesthetic form. Concurrently, the plays are definitely part of our vocal and bodily communication in an everyday setting (Boal, 1985). The pragmatic view of art characteristic of the Forum Theatre tradition has served as the basis and framework for our courses. The participants were given the opportunity to form thoughts and feelings related to everyday life through the plays; they went through an aesthetic creation process (Witkin, 1974). In our view, the Forum Theatre tradition associated with Boal and the conception of play associated with Gadamer converges on this point between pragmatics and autonomy aesthetics:

In sum, we suggest that Gadamer provides a passing stage in aesthetic theory by keeping a modern, autonomous ideal view of art, while at the same time pointing towards art as part of everyday linguistic meaning-making. (Rasmussen and Gürgens, 2006: 240)

In the Forum Theatre plays we exposed the participants to unfamiliar situations where they drew upon

their own personal resources in new ways in order to work linguistically and bodily with meaning-making in everyday life. The improvised scenarios were imbued with strong unpleasant feelings, difficult issues and great communicative challenges. They had to face up to all this in the presence of their colleagues as spect-actors — for many people, an intimidating situation associated with insecurity and fear of making a fool of oneself. Not withstanding this strain, they emerged from the plays with a sense of coping and improved self-esteem.

**Quantitative Findings: Towards an Interpretation and Analysis After Course 2**

The results from Course 2, held three to four months after Course 1, did not show a significant difference in State-Self-Esteem before and after the plays. At the first glance, this may seem to weaken our hypothesis that Forum Theatre can have a positive impact on coping and self-esteem. However, it is important to bear in mind that the participants entered into provocative, intimidating and deadlocked communicative situations in front of an audience in both courses. Our explicit objective was to use Forum Theatre to help the participants utilise communication techniques which would protect, stabilise and at best increase self-esteem. The result evidently shows that there were *no significant negative changes in self-esteem* caused by the strain to which they were exposed by participating in the plays. This, then, strengthens our hypothesis. The fact that self-esteem remained stable throughout the improvised scenarios is particularly important; because the staged situations were deliberately chosen to reflect just those situations which the participants reported had engendered feelings of inadequacy, lack of coping and reduced self- esteem. Through the techniques of Forum Theatre, the spect-actors were able to re-enter situations charged with negative emotionality in front of other spect-actors and work on their competence without experiencing a drop in self-esteem and sometimes experiencing an increase in self-esteem (Course 1).

The fact that no increase in self-esteem occurred after the Course 2 plays may partly be a consequence of greater familiarity with the method on the part of the participants, a well-known psychological mechanism called adaption. They told us at the start of Course 2 that they felt more secure about what was in store for them compared with the similar situation for Course 1. The level of self-esteem before and after the plays was therefore not significantly different in Course 2, but remained stable when they were put under the strain of acting in front of an audience. This was in line with our intentions, stabilising *or* increasing self-esteem in people while they are struggling to change their communicative strategies.

**Participants' Evaluation of Their Own Communicative Skills**

In the interviews we conducted with 20 per cent of the course participants, we used a tick-off form. The informants were to assess their own communicative skills. They were asked how well they communicated in their job situations: ordinarily, at their best and at their worst. They were instructed to tick off on a scale ranging from 1–7, where 1 represented 'very well' and 7 'very poorly'. In the analysis of the tick-off forms, we shall focus on three characteristics of the distribution of scores on communicative skills:

1. change — whether and how the scores changed for each individual participant from Course 1 to Course 2;

2. the placement of the three scores from each course in relation to the middle of the scale — that is, whether the participants considered their own communicative skills as being average, better than average or worse than average during different moods;

3. self-evaluated communicative variation range, or whether they are conscious of differences in communicative coping depending on mood and situation.

We found it expedient to juxtapose data from our own observations of the participants' communicative skills during the courses with data from the tick-off forms. In order to map the participants' formal competence, we mainly used data from the interviews and presentation rounds for the two courses.

Our observations called our attention to two categories which gave a particularly good indication of the communicative skills displayed by the individual participants in their work with the plays: *wealth of ideas*

and *implementation competence*. *Wealth of ideas* signifies the number and originality of ideas forming the basis of proposals for problem-resolution in connection with oppressive communication in the Forum Theatre plays. *Implementation competence* refers to the ability to stage ideas linguistically, bodily and spatially.

**Findings from the Tick-off Forms**

Five interesting findings emerged and are presented in Table 1. Employees of two of the enterprises (Enterprises 3 and 4) report a great variation range in their own communicative skills. This we construe as *awareness* on the part of these employees of great qualitative communicative variations, depending on mood and situation. Another interesting tendency for these two enterprises is that their employees score themselves high up on the scale towards maximum score for 'ordinary' days and 'good' days.

**[EDITOR: A portion of terxt appears to have been irrecoverably lost owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this.]**

**Table 1: Employees' Communicative Skills**

| | Data from observations during the courses and from the interviews | | Data from the interview tick-off forms | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Formal competence | Wealth of ideas and implementation competence | Communicative skill score changes from Course 1 to Course 2 | Placemen of t score in relation to the middle of the scale | Self-evaluated communicative variation range |
| **Enterprise 1** | The majority had only little formal competence above compulsory school level. | Good ideas to what should be done — not so good at figuring out how the ideas should be staged. | Increasescore: d two participants. Decreased score: one participant. | Around the middle of the scale. | Small variation range. |
| **Enterprise 2** | Vocational practical education. | Few ideas as to what should be done — also not so good at figuring out how the ideas should be staged. | Increasescore: d one participant. Decreased score: one participant. | Consistently above the middle of the scale. | Small variation range. |
| **Enterprise 3** | Upper secondary school + many in-house courses. | Many had good ideas as to what should be done — also good at figuring out how the ideas should be staged. | Increasescore: d one participant. Decreased score: one participant. | Well above the middle of the scale for 'ordinarily' and 'at their best', and below the middle for 'at their worst'. | Great variation range. |
| **Enterprise 4** | Masters level or above. | Good ideas as to what should be done — also good at figuring out how the ideas should be | Decreased score: One participant. | Well above the middle of the scale for 'ordinarily' and 'at their best', | Great variation range. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | staged. | | and below the middle for 'at their worst'. | |
| **Enterprise 5** | Upper secondary school + many in-house courses. | Few ideas as to what should be done — also not so good at figuring out how the ideas should be staged. | Decreased score. | Around the middle of the scale. | Small variation range. |

Summing up, the employees of these enterprises seem to think they generally communicate very well. They also seem to realise that in some contexts, depending on their own mood and particular situational challenges, they communicate poorly. They therefore signal a very limited potential for improvement.

The employees of the other three enterprises report a somewhat smaller variation range regarding self-evaluated communicative skills in different situations. As for two of these enterprises (Enterprises 1 and 5), the employees' scores cluster consistently around the middle of the scale. They thereby signal a *potential for improvement* for 'good' and 'ordinary', as well as 'bad', days.

As for the third enterprise with a small variation range in self-evaluated communicative skill (Enterprise 2), the scores cluster consistently above the middle of the scale, implying *little room for improvement* for any category of day, 'good', 'ordinary' or 'bad'. This is particularly interesting since the employees of this enterprise clearly faced the most arduous communicative challenges in their everyday professional life.

The employees in the five enterprises evidently have rather different opinions of their potential for improvement. Some think they can learn quite a lot, others think they can learn a lot within a restricted area, and yet others think that there is generally little they can learn. It seems reasonable to assume that different opinions as to one's own learning potential can have an effect on how the course participants approach and work with Forum Theatre in a learning situation.

Our study reveals different types of score changes. Those employees who *decrease their score* for self-evaluated communicative skill from Course 1 to Course 2 also score themselves generally *above the middle of the scale* for 'ordinary' and 'good' days. Very high scores tend to be somewhat reduced after the informants have participated in Forum Theatre plays. We interpret this as a confirmation of our assumption that the communication course can have a *reality- orienting effect.* Working on communication by delving deep into concrete difficult communicative situations will remind the employees of how complicated communication really is, and thus increase *the realism of the self-evaluation*. We believe this 'realism' interpretation to be well founded for the following reasons. When someone selects a score towards the very high end of the scale, he or she signals that not many others can surpass him or her in communicative achievements. Such a score is rarely realistic. Our interpretation is also supported by the 'better than average' research, which shows that 80–90 per cent of respondents tend to score themselves above the average when evaluating themselves against others in terms of traits and competence (Alicke, 1985; Alicke et al., 1995). Over-estimation is therefore a common phenomenon in self- evaluation. However, a more realistic self-evaluation of communicative competence occurs following participation in the problem-solving of the Forum Theatre plays.

Course participants who increased their scores in Course 2, initially had relatively moderate scores, and consequently a genuinely felt potential for improvement. The course seems to have led to a coping experience which these informants felt resulted in improved competence. Whether or not this is a fact is difficult to say. In any case, it is important that Forum Theatre plays bring about a change in the *feeling of competence* for some participants. This indicates a real possibility of influencing communicative competence by encouraging participants to continue with their play practices. If the method encourages practising, changes in skills will often take place over time.

Our last finding is that the participants with high formal competence seem to be those who report great variation range, have a wealth of ideas and exhibit good implementation competence. We interpret this as an expression of the fact that the employees of the enterprises with the highest formal competence are more aware that communication will vary in quality depending on 'good', 'ordinary' and 'bad' days. In our study, this self-insight is related to creativity with regard to communicative skills in Forum Theatre play situations. This group is also the one that scores itself at the high end of the scale for 'ordinary' and 'good'

days. Its members thereby signal that there is little room for improvement of their communicative skills in an important range of communicative situations. This self-reported communicative coping- experience seems to be an expression of a general complacency where the need for change is considered as relatively marginal and restricted to negative incidents on 'bad' days only. In attempting to increase the communicative competence within a group, such 'complacency' represents a challenge. The arrangement for future studies would therefore probably benefit from including strategies aimed at such conceptions.

**Concluding Remarks**

The overriding finding of the present study is that this communicative method was useful in helping colleagues at a workplace handle conflicts constructively in play situations, without reducing the self-esteem of the participants. Keeping self-esteem stable while exploring constructive communicative solutions to conflict situations is an important prerequisite to enable us *not* to succumb to oppression and thus keep the leading part in our lives.

The present study has given us an insight into the communicative functioning of a group of employees from five different enterprises, and their experiences from taking part with their colleagues in Forum Theatre plays. The self-evaluations of competence contributed new insight into how learning is influenced by participants' original attitudes. The prior conception of their own communicative competence initially held by the Forum Theatre play participants appears to have been crucial in terms of whether they report increased coping or reality orientation after completion of the courses.

## Notes

1.  Self-liking Self-competence Scale (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995), validated Norwegian translation (Silvera et al., 2001).

2.  Paired samples test.

3.  This interpretation is related to the qualitative analysis of the same study previously referred to (Ramsdal, Gürgens, 2007).

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