



Community theatre-in-education

1. Introduction

For key and/or focus class students this fourth phase of Cooling Conflicts follows the peer teaching phases and empowers the students to lead the cultural harmony agenda not only within the school, but also into the school's neighbourhood and wider community.

In this phase, the drama work turns to performance, to creating a play for a public audience but one that also involves the audience in active participation derived from forum theatre and process drama.

It is advisable that teachers intending to implement this phase have some drama teaching training and/or at least practical theatre experience.

Like all public performance, it involves time-consuming preparation and rehearsal, some of it possibly extra-curricular time. It may involve travel and some production costs and, particularly during the performance week, some timetable adjustments.



The benefits are:

- **for the audiences** – an entertaining and thought-provoking presentation of conflict issues by young people from their own community, performed with sincerity and energy
- **for the performers** – like the peer teaching, the work involved in devising and presenting the performance reinforces their learning and understanding. The work also automatically carries the many other widely recognised benefits of devising and producing a public theatrical production
- **for the school** – which can be seen leading the community in developing harmony and cultural understanding.

2. Implementation

Ideally a term's work in one subject should be devoted to this project.

The project can be broken into three:

Research and devising	3–4 weeks
Rehearsal and production	5–6 weeks
Performance and reflection	1 week.

Research and devising

Identifying the context and audience

The first step – and the first lesson – is to discuss with the students what problematic cultural issues exist within the local community (and sub-communities) beyond the school. These can be discussed in the conflict management terms with which the students are now familiar, of looking at clashes of interests, rights and power, where assumptions and stereotyping prevent a harmonious co-existence and lead to latent, brewing or manifest conflict. The word cultural should be left loosely defined and incorporate cultural perceptions of race and ethnicity, family, gender, age, disability, life-style, class and socio-economic circumstances, etc.





At this time, an appropriate audience can be canvassed. This should be of people with some stake in the cultural issue being identified, likely to be approachable for the purposes of research and likely to be interested in attending a performance by the students that will raise and examine the issues.

Possible audiences could include:

- other students their own age from neighbouring schools
- community interest groups, e.g. environmental groups
- senior citizens
- groups of workers, e.g. police officers, nurses
- local primary schools
- parents
- local non-English speaking communities
- the local Aboriginal community
- social and sporting clubs.

It is important not to let this discussion drag on, but to make a majority or consensus decision at the end of the lesson.

Research

The students become researchers and consult with the communities involved to find raw material that is germane to the cultural conflict issue identified and to create interest in the production. This usually means visits to become familiar with the community context and how it operates, interviewing key citizens, holding discussion groups with others and keeping their eyes and ears open.

Getting personal stories is usually the richest source of potential theatre. Video and sound recorders become valuable aids to documenting.

Ethical issues and matters of confidentiality invariably arise here – which are different in each context. You and the class must ensure (sometimes in writing) that respondents are willing to have their lives examined and their opinions, stories etc. used and changed in the play. It is sometimes necessary for the students to explain that all data will be fictionalised to be individually unrecognisable.





Improvising

As soon as data and stories are gathered, perhaps in parallel with this process, the class can start improvising, creating scenes and exploring the dramatic possibilities of the material. Another reason for starting this as soon as possible is to get the group all actively involved in the context and feeling ownership of the material.

The keynote here must be respect for the community and their problems. This does not mean that the raw material need be treated with reverence. It should be played with, fictionalised, pulled around and extended with the dual aims of

- illuminating and giving insights into the community context, and
- making the stories and material theatrically interesting.

A wide range of improvisational techniques can be used. Headlines playbuilding and some of the techniques incorporated within are valuable starters (see *Ways into drama work* on the *Cooling Conflicts* website. Process drama techniques are also useful (see *Process drama* on the *Cooling Conflicts* website).

To prevent disappointment later it is important early to stress that many improvisations will happen and much material generated that will not find its way into the final product, though it may be very good in itself. Another important point to make at the outset is that whatever characters students play in improvisations, they will not necessarily play those characters if they are written into the final product.

Although there will be a strong impetus to create scenes to be performed, this should not drive the process. For instance, if a story is interesting and thought-provoking, to explore it further by hot-seating some of the characters, or creating a time-jump to explore the background of latent conflict or the consequences of a stalemate will immediately give interesting new lines to pursue and also start to flesh out those characters in case any of them is retained in the final performance. It needs to be remembered also that the audience is to be integrally involved in some way (see below).

Some of the scenes should definitely be role-played seriously, to help the students find empathy and discover the authenticity of the situations.





It is usually wise not to seize on the exact shape or defining style of the play too early. This often closes the door on better ideas. However, a basic structural idea will probably emerge quite quickly, e.g. a single story to be dramatised, or a collage of stories to be woven together.

Refining and scripting

During this period students should be aware that a lot of the material that they generate in the improvisations will not be able to be used but they should be encouraged to document those scenes or moments that seem significant or likely to be useable. They may be encouraged to tape-record dialogue or even write fragments of script.

Other forms of writing will also prove very valuable, often more so than the first tentative written dialogue. Ask the students to do some in-role writing as a character, writing or speaking in the first person. This could be a diary entry or an angry letter to the editor or a talkback radio tirade. Often asking the students to write a song or poem that crystallises some aspect of the conflict will produce material that may not be immediately useable but provide a powerful or moving moment in the final production.

As the ideas clarify, a structure and stylistic ideas will begin to emerge. Although the community context of conflict is very real, as will be much of the early improvisations and role-play, it is a good idea to introduce the notion of using non-naturalistic theatrical conventions. For one thing, effective naturalistic script and acting are both very difficult. The students will be quick to notice with dissatisfaction that their first scripting or performing efforts based on trying to recapture powerfully empathic improvisations usually come out like bad television soap opera.

There is another important dramatic reason for bringing in non-naturalistic elements to find and experiment with dramatic irony. Distanced theatrical conventions re-create or refract a story in a fresh, unexpected way that creates new insight and understanding, by contrast, into the theme or the relationship.

The teacher can suggest that scenes be re-created in entirely non-naturalistic ways. Examples include:

- as dance or stylised movement
- re-telling the story as a fairytale





- recreating the essence of the scene symbolically using no more than ten words
- recreating some aspect as a comic patter act
- turning the story into a game, a new sport or a game-show
- turning the story into a ritual
- turning it into grotesque slapstick.

Several of these devices involve finding some kind of analogy for the context and the issues. This can often prove very valuable in providing a framework for the eventual performance, for another reason: the community context of conflict, by its very nature, will involve sensitivities and potentially high emotions. If the performance is to create thought and entertainment, rather than pain and anger, those sensitivities need to be distanced. Some kind of distance and irony are essential to provide the audience with protection, an emotional safety net, so that they can recognise the relevance of the piece but not feel personally threatened.

As the students become more confident and skilled with the improvisational process, another useful way of developing the material is to ask the students either to revisit scenes and situations, or to develop new ones. They must include at least one or two non-naturalistic or symbolic elements in the scene so that it is still recognisable as a scene that tells a story, but sharpened up and made more arresting. Sometimes it is valuable to prescribe these as a compulsory constraint. Here are a few useful techniques:

- a soliloquy – a character stepping out and addressing the audience directly
- percussion instruments (supply a few), so that key moments are underlined in sound
- masks – e.g. neutral masks for at least one character throughout
- a song or the chorus of a song included more than once
- at the climax, an ‘alienating’ moment of slapstick or grotesquerie.

The class should aim to provide twenty to thirty minutes of quality performance – more than that is not usually reasonable. The whole performance will be extended by the use of audience participation appropriate to the particular audience and context. The extent to which the teacher needs to shape and even write the final script will vary, according to the age and skills level of the class and the difficulty of the community context.





Considering the audience

It is necessary during the above steps for the students to relate to and explore the context and material in their own terms, though the community's perspectives will impact on this. Before the final shaping of the piece the audience must be reconsidered. Their interests, concerns and needs must become the centre of the process.

Firstly, the play must excite and entertain the audience, even though the subject matter may be close and painful. The class must consider next what they want their performance to achieve, in terms of the issue at stake. The play must not attempt to offer solutions, preach, tell the audience what they ought to know or to make any didactic statement. It is important to stress that offering solutions to other people's problems is arrogant and trivialises the issues. Not all conflicts can be resolved.

In some way the play should open up the subject in a way that the audience will respond to and recognise as relevant, but not find intrusive, accusatory or threatening. Within these constraints it should seek to be provocative and raise rather than seek to answer questions. In conflict handling terms, the performance is like a meeting with a mediator. The mediator does not tell the protagonists what to do but tries to help them look coolly enough at the issue to reshape their reactions and thinking and allow the possibility of negotiation, and eventually help them listen to the other side.

Devising audience participation

This is where the audience participation comes in. Rather than just showing them the issue or portraying their conflicts for them to think about, this kind of theatre can give them a chance to address actively their concerns, protected by the fiction ['this isn't me doing this – it's only a play']. With the students leading, they can join in a community exploration and productive discussion that is designed to raise the issues in fresh ways.

Audience participation needs to be carefully set up, particularly for adults. For one thing, the idea of audience participation transgresses against people's expectation of what happens in theatre. At least in Western theatre an audience sits and watches, usually safely in the dark, while others act. Audience participation is common enough in African and some Asian forms. It breaks the contract of theatre (see *The context of drama in education* on the





Cooling Conflicts website. Some people potentially find this very confronting and uncomfortable. They don't initially want to be active or exposed and must be encouraged, even seduced into it.

The performers do start with a number of factors on their side in this:

- they are young and their energy, commitment and sincerity has a great deal of appeal to most audiences
- they are not professionals whose very performing skills are often a barrier to an audience feeling they can contribute on the same platform
- some of the audience are likely to already have been involved as respondents in the research stage and feel ownership, that they already have a hand in the play
- the students are likely to be known to a proportion of the audience, at least those respondents and other friends or relatives from within the community
- the issues being portrayed are close to the hearts of the audience.

It has been demonstrated in the techniques of forum theatre (see *Enhanced forum theatre* on the Cooling Conflicts website) how an audience can be encouraged to join in a performance as spect-actors. It is important that they are aware from the start that they are going to be taking an active part and that they will not be expected to do anything uncomfortable.

The next thing is to beguile them into wanting to take part. By the time the spect-actors are invited into the performance, they have seen a full-on destructive conflict and it is a natural human reaction to want to join in and help resolve a conflict, especially if you like the people involved.

Forum theatre actually originated in community theatre and spect-acting is one of the natural techniques that can be adapted to audience participation in theatre in education. The other mainstay comes from process drama, hot-seating, where the audience is invited to question or interrogate one or more of the characters that they have seen.

The crucial factor is for a question to have been posed that the audience has a stake in answering ('Whose fault was it?' 'How can we get round that problem?' 'Which horn of the dilemma is the lesser evil?') and wants to talk to the character to find out more in order to help solve that question by cross-





examining the character: ('Why did you walk away?' 'Couldn't you see that would escalate the conflict?' 'Why were you so horrible to her?' etc.).

This hot-seating can be at the end of the performance and lead into a critical discussion among the performers and the audience. Alternatively, it can be in the middle, where the action is frozen and the audience invited to put a character on the spot or offer advice. In some clever plays, the scene can proceed differently according to the advice, or the majority vote, of the audience.

It is quite a good idea to have a few students, or confreres from another class, in the audience as plants, primed and ready to ask a question in the hot-seat or make a spect-actor intervention. This is as much for the sake of allaying the students' anxieties as for the need to fill an embarrassed vacuum. If plants are used, it must be made clear to them not to hog the limelight and to give the real audience time to gather their wits and contribute.

There are other more ambitious or demanding forms of audience participation. Some might be suggested by the locale of the performance, if it is not in a theatre. A celebratory or reconciliatory ethnic dance at the end might be appropriate if the production is in a cultural community hall. Some singing might be appropriate in the same way.

If the audience is small and willing, some of the other techniques of process drama might be invoked as audience participation such as asking them to do a role-play, or play a game, or engage in some piece of dramatic reconstruction. The limits of the participation are defined by the space, the time, the actors' levels of skill and control and the contract that can be established with the audience. It should be remembered that students are not teachers or professional group managers and for some staying in role without a script, as is necessary in hot-seating, is quite difficult.

Rehearsal and production

Casting

Decisions about casting the performance should be left until the beginning of rehearsals. Even if individuals have played a particular character through one or more improvisations, it should not be seen to be their prerogative (or burden) to play that character in the final play.





Although it may be tempting to an experienced drama teacher to cast the play, experience suggests that in a group-devised piece it can usually best be left to the students. This way they keep ownership of the piece, whereas a teacher's decisions can cause rifts and disappointment. The teacher usually will need to control the process, deal with the occasional extremist behaviour and make suggestions.

A lesson or at least half an hour should be devoted to the process. This in itself is a very useful learning experience and revealing to the teacher. The simplest way is to write all the parts on the board, including any important non-acting roles, such as stage manager, production manager or lighting operator, then discuss what each of them demands and what kind of person the character is. Then ask for volunteers. Some strange meta-communication imposes reality-checks and though the teacher may greet a few decisions with scepticism, the student usually rises to the part.

Let the rehearsals begin

The rehearsals then proceed as normal for any production, but with two additional elements:

- the particular audience needs to be kept constantly in mind. It can be healthy and helpful to invite one of the original respondents, or one of the community's leaders, to a rehearsal, to check a scene's authenticity, or give advice (and this invariably has the spin-off benefit of increasing anticipation in the audience)
- the audience participation has to be prepared for and practised. This is not easy to do as no script can be rehearsed.

Particularly for techniques like hot-seating the actors must work hard in backgrounding their characters. The participation element will fall flat and the whole effect of the play will be lost if the characters cannot effectively and consistently sustain their roles. Student actors are normally much more fearless than professional actors in this task – who often are lost without their scripts – but they can be cavalier or not realise the importance of deep backgrounding.



Then, both for hot-seating and forum theatre, dummy-runs must be practised where all the likely questions are asked and fielded and the possible interventions are considered and tried out.

Performance and reflection

If the development and production have been effectively managed, then the performance will take care of itself. As is well known in theatre, it's usually all right on the night and students invariably surprise their teachers by rising to unexpected heights when confronted by the moment of truth on stage. In addition, theatre, like music, hath charms to soothe the savage breast. There is invariably a well of goodwill even greater than usual. The students are young and full of good faith because they are bravely presenting matters of real concern to the audience. The audience feels privileged to have been singled out and respected, and intrigued to find out what the youngsters have made of it all.

Some form of gauging or analysing audience response is often a good idea as a strong reinforcer of the learning, or even a corrector of the performers' misapprehensions. If time permits, a visit to the community or the initial respondents following the performance is very valuable. The community and the students can discuss the issues of how they addressed them and whether they made a realistic or substantive contribution.

Something of this can happen in post-performance discussion but experience shows that is not a good time. For one thing, actors of any age, immediately after a show, need to be patted and reassured. This is not just indulgent egotism. They have invested heavily of themselves and this needs to be affirmed.

Secondly, the focus on the drama, the fiction and the theatrical excitement, which will be shared by audience and actors alike — especially after the audience participation — makes it difficult and perhaps inappropriate to focus on the substantive issues of conflict that will still remain even after the show.

Thirdly, audience members may have some awkward and deflating points or arguments to make. They may indeed be valid and sought-after responses to the play but sit uneasily with the post-show euphoria, as an anti-climax to the event and are likely to be resented for that reason, rather than given serious consideration.



Fourthly, the young actors are likely to be exhausted by their physical and nervous effort.

Something of this intention will in fact happen informally if the actors and audience are encouraged to mingle informally and talk after the performance. The audience will be polite, but individual useful points of response can be garnered and pooled by the class in reflective discussion on another occasion. Giving out a questionnaire to the audience can be useful for the class's reflective discussion, though again this is, for the audience, something of an anti-climax.

Whatever happens with the audience itself it is crucial that sufficient time is allowed for a thorough reflective discussion, far enough from the performance for the group to have come down to earth and be able to be a little dispassionate. This discussion should be as soon as possible brought round to bear on the substantive community conflict issues that initiated the project and the class should consider three themes:

- what effect the performance may have had, or might reasonably be expected to have
- what the class themselves have learned about that arena of conflict and about their own community.
- what the project has taught them or reinforced for them about the nature of cultural conflict – about interests, rights and power, about the assumptions and stereotypes that underlie conflict, about how conflict escalates in the community and what measures individuals and groups can take to de-escalate it.

Any one of these themes, or all of them, can form the basis of a very significant assignment to assess not only what the students have learnt through their contact with the *Cooling Conflicts* program but what they now know they know.

