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# Get Dramatic: Utilizing Theatre in Peer Education

For centuries, theatre has been used as a way to tell stories, to educate, and to engage an audience with serious or not-so-serious subject matters.

Aristotle wrote of dramatic performances that were used as a kind of catharsis, or emotional venting, for entire communities. Actors would take on the weight of pressing issues on behalf of a community and present them back in a dramatic fashion.

Theatre, it turns out, is often a “safe container” for releasing emotion and discussing important topics.

In therapeutic settings, many people have benefited from a dramatic form called psychodrama, developed by J.L. Moreno in the 1920s. This structured form allows patients to recreate difficult or traumatic situations within the safety of a therapist’s office. Psychodrama provides the opportunity to “fix” the situation by “rewriting the ending.” It also allows a client to practice social skills and interactions before using them in real life situations.

Psychodrama has spawned many more types of healing theatre, each with a slightly different aim and philosophy. Using psychodrama takes special training and should only be done in more therapeutic settings (more information is provided on page 12).

The most common forms of theatre utilized in peer education settings include role-play and issues-based drama. In role-play, participants (performers and/or audience members) are invited to take part in a scene that depicts a particular situation, such as a personal conflict. Often there is a choice to be made on behalf of the participant. Role-play can be viewed as practice for real-life situations.

Many campuses use dramatic issues-based skits during orientation to talk about alcohol abuse, academic integrity, diversity, and social pressures. This is an effective tool because it allows a large number of students to experience a realistic scenario in a safe environment, and they can explore choices and consequences and process the information presented with a trained facilitator. It also allows students to consider a wide range of viewpoints.

We may often think of health issues as simply didactic principles—a topic area for which we provide education. But health is much more than this. Health is about change, development, readjusting attitudes and aligning behaviors to reflect those attitudes. Health is about personal stories.

## Scripted vs. Non-Scripted Theatre

Most campuses that perform issues-based theatre do so with the use of scripts. This allows professionals and experts to tweak and add to the content of the program, ensuring that it is correct and relevant. It also helps student actors not worry about what to say on the spot. Scripts provide a peer theatre group with a physical product that can be passed down through the generations of the organization.

The majority of theatre forms that arose from psychodrama do not use scripts. The scenes tend to utilize trained actors who pick up on essences of characters, emotions, and stories in order to create a psychologically-based work of art. Some theatre groups perform issues-based theatre without the use of scripts. This is not to say that the scenes are unrehearsed. Typically, the scenes are practiced repeatedly, until they are nearly flawless. The actors know what lines to say, as well as the general mood of the scene.

### Which form is right for you?

That depends. Non-scripted scenes tend to feel more organic and are easily altered to fit a variety of audiences. Scripted scenes allow for a very calculated, accurate presentation of issues. It also helps to build a library of potential scenes. Often, the choice comes down to the comfort level, experience, and training of a campus group, advisor, and administration.

People who smoke have a story behind how they started and their daily use. People who struggle with exercising enough have something to share about what makes it so hard. People who drink to excess may have a few memories about a parent or relative using, too. Unhealthy behaviors do not arise in a vacuum. There is impetus for it—a story behind the behavior.

In health education, helping connect the story to the unhealthy behavior can be facilitated through dramatic presentation. Creating and facilitating this compelling form of drama takes specialized training and a great deal of practice. However, some of the concepts can be utilized by almost any peer theatre group.

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## New Area One Consultant Appointed

This spring, we welcome a new Area Consultant to our national leadership team. Mark Shaw from the University of Washington will serve in the chief volunteer leadership role in Area One.

We look forward to the many talents Mark will share with our campus affiliates as the Area 1 Consultant.

**AREA 1 CONSULTANT** (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington)

**Mark Shaw**

Director of Health Promotion, University of Washington

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**What talents and areas of expertise do you bring to Area One?**

I am a 10-year member of Area 1 and have experience hosting the spring conference in 2003 that had the largest attendance this decade. I have been a good contact for informal support to colleges wanting to start a peer education program. I am known as a "creative thinker" and have worked with the Health Promotion section for the American College Health Association.

**What one new initiative would you like The BACCHUS Network™ to begin working on?** I would like to strengthen the program evaluation component.

## Alcohol Jeopardy Released

The BACCHUS Network™ is excited to offer you the interactive and educational Alcohol Jeopardy game, now available and ready to be mailed to you. This game is a great tool for educational programs, classes, and as part of an awareness event.



Questions? Learn more at [www.bacchusnetwork.org/store](http://www.bacchusnetwork.org/store) or call the BACCHUS Materials Center at (952) 920-8999.

### Psychologically-Based Theatre *from page 11*

There are dozens of different forms of psychologically-based theatre. Below are a few resources for learning more about the different types. Each one requires specific training in that theatre method. (The BACCHUS Network™ does not endorse any of the following methods or resources.)

**Psychodrama:** A therapeutic method most often used during counseling: [www.nationalpsychodramatrainingcenter.com](http://www.nationalpsychodramatrainingcenter.com)

**Playback Theatre:** A non-scripted theatre method that "plays back" a personal story, as told by volunteer tellers: [www.playbackschool.org](http://www.playbackschool.org)

**Theatre of the Oppressed:** A form that attempts to tell the stories of and give voice to marginalized citizens and communities: [www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org)

**Lifelines Theatre:** A theatre method calling on multiple generations to tell the stories of a particular community: Contact Tad Spencer for more information at [tad@bacchusnetwork.org](mailto:tad@bacchusnetwork.org)

You may want to depict the evolution of an addiction or create an abstract view of a particular health condition. Be creative and utilize metaphor (describing subjects in other, more accessible terms) to talk about difficult topics. (e.g. have a group of actors pile on another one as a way to talk about the guilt, fear, and anger associated with being addicted to cigarettes.) Once you reframe health issues as stories to tell, the empathy response opens up, and you gain credibility with the audience. It is a tremendous service to the campus community.

Using theatre also helps strengthen the membership of a peer education group. Practicing theatre skills and games at peer education group meetings builds spontaneity in those who participate. Moreno observed, the higher one's spontaneity, the lower the person's anxiety. As anxiety goes up, spontaneity goes down.

Developing spontaneity helps fortify a student's presentation skills by building stage presence/confidence and allowing the student to think on his/her feet. The use of theatre can enliven meetings and make them more fun and creatively productive. Laughter, especially, increases oxygen in the blood and helps the mind focus.

Perhaps most important of all, dramatic theatre practice can build empathy among the actors, allowing for a deeper connection with peers. That connection is at the core of what peer education is all about.

At the 2006 General Assembly, Tad Spencer presented "Pump Up the Right Side of Your Brain! Making Creativity an Essential Part of Health." The handout contains theatre games that groups can use as warm-ups or for skill building. A copy of this handout is available at [www.bacchusnetwork.org/advisor-corner.asp](http://www.bacchusnetwork.org/advisor-corner.asp)