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Methodical Materials

Storytelling – "Myself and Others"

Material written by the Portuguese staff (Associação Empresarial de Paços de Ferreira) for the Grundtvig project Common Stories of Europe

Introduction

C. Wright Mills defines 'sociological imagination' as the concept of 'being able to think ourselves away from the familiar routines of our daily lives... of being aware of the relationship between individual experience and the wider society, in order to look at them anew', a concept which proves useful not only for social scientists, but for individuals and democratic societies in general. It follows that, in order to have a sociological imagination, we must be able to pull away from the immediate situation and think from an alternative point of view, trying to grasp the same issue from different perspectives. This promotion of critical thinking coupled with democratic and assertive values is one of the main goals of training and education, besides the development of specific skills and professional competences. Instead of teaching *what* to think, trainers should teach *how* to think. Like Bandura says, «the content of most textbooks is perishable, but the tools of self-directness serve one well over time». Storytelling tools like "Myself and Others" (**M&O**) are one of the ways we can achieve this.

This method aims at the promotion of critical thinking by enabling, in a fun way, democratic group discussion around important topics related to the psychological development of adolescents and young adults. This non-formal pedagogical tool consists in 8 interactive stories, which can be video-projected for greater effect; these stories are each dedicated to a particular topic: Growing-Up, Friendship, School, Family, Love, Drugs, Leisure, and the Future. Participants are asked 'to place themselves in the shoes' of the main characters and lead them throughout a series of hypothetical decisions, discussing their options in group, as the story unfolds; different choices will lead to different endings. This tool uses the whole group as the working-unit, focusing on the different individual opinions as the catalysts for critical discussion. It gives great emphasis to the process of choice, as participants are encouraged to respect other opinions and also to realize that each choice has a different impact on the story, therefore promoting responsibility for one's own choices. Bandura states that «people who believe they have the power to exercise some measure of control over their lives are healthier, more effective and more successful than those who lack faith in their ability to effect changes in their lives», which means that we should consider our life-choices as rationally as possible, discarding the notion that we're passive bystanders and that things happen of their own accord. For this reason, the pedagogical process shouldn't focus exclusively on professional skills and competences: learning to be happy and/or to think critically is just as important, if not more, than learning to write, to count or to work with a computer. «Critical self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure», Bandura would add. In this fashion, the story/trainer acts as a **neutral** moderator, simply by presenting different role-models and scenarios for analysis, while encouraging free and democratic discussion around everyday topics. Furthermore, it allows the trainers to address sensitive issues related to conformity

while in a group (learning to say 'no') by the presentation of specific moral dilemmas. Finally, following Gardener's theory, the **M&O** is designed in such a way as to promote different forms of intelligence at once: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, inter/intra personal, or even naturalistic or existential. This tool was created by SICAD and it can be used in different contexts, including professional training and education, but moderators must always receive the adequate training and proper certification beforehand.

Target-Groups

This method is best suited for young learners (15–20 years of age), but it can be adapted to older publics as well, for example as when older participants are encouraged to think in terms of how much their life has changed since they were teenagers (different risks and problems), or what kind of issues their children are currently going through. It uses pictures that improve the story's appeal. The recommended number of participants is 10-20.

Objectives

The main objective is to reinforce the pedagogical process by creating a trusting relationship between trainers and trainees, while promoting self-analysis and relational competences:

- ✓ Listening to others
- ✓ Comparing different points of view
- ✓ Presenting a logic and coherent argument
- ✓ Voting decisions
- ✓ Agreeing or disagreeing freely
- ✓ Excellent opportunity to address difficult and personal topics, without assuming a punishing or moralizing role.

Instructions

Participants will have to lead a group of fictional characters throughout the game, by taking collective decisions about how the story unfolds and by discussing every decision along the way. After each paragraph, participants are faced with several options, of which they must choose only one, therefore promoting discussion. The goal is to have a group debate, with the story itself acting as the moderator; in other words, the topics and rhythm of discussion are structured by the way the story unfolds and by the participant's choices. There are many ways to explore this tool: several stories can be used with the same person/group, or just one single story; the recommended duration for each story is 7 hours (7 one-hour sessions) but it can be explored in a shorter/longer period of time.

Step I – Explaining the tool and the rules for playing to the group
The main goals are explained, giving a great emphasis to the fact that they are free to choose whatever option is available, as long as they can present an argument for it. Participants are also informed of the importance of following rules: speaking on their turn, raising their hand before speaking, learning to present arguments instead of just opinions, respecting group decisions when others have the power to choose the next step.

Step II – Getting to know the characters
There are 8 characters, 4 male and 4 female. Participants can use the character's descriptions already available, or they can adapt them or even create new ones. Each participant has different physical and psychological characteristics, and participants are asked to choose the character with which they identify the most.

Step III – Reading/Playing the story
The story is read by the participants, normally each person reads a couple of paragraphs but this can be changed. Participants can also have different roles: for example, there can be someone elected by the rest of the participants, which has veto-power over the decisions of the group. Each choice must be debated: some will be consensual and others will not, but everyone should be entitled to presenting their arguments in a respectful way. In this way assertiveness is being reinforced. Several activities and group-dynamics can also be incorporated into the storytelling, enriching the way the story unfolds and creating realistic situations to explore the most important concepts. For example, if there is a situation when several characters are interacting in a given context, participants might be asked to perform a quick theatre play in order to make the scene more explicit. Creativity is highly encouraged.

Step IV – Final group-discussion
Group discussion is encouraged throughout the story, for each paragraph/choice, but there should be a final debate regarding the ending/outcome. This should focus on two areas: the story itself and the way participants behaved. Participants are therefore encouraged to imagine other points of view and, at the same time, to identify themselves with certain characters or specific actions, thereby promoting self-analysis (what did this character do vs. what would I do? Has the same story happened to me?). Participants are also encouraged to think about different endings to the story and to comment on the participant's communication skills (who was the most assertive participant? Who was nervous? Who was clearer or more synthetic?)

Conclusion

The M&O method proves useful in the development of our trainees, by allowing them to discuss certain topics which otherwise aren't a part of their academic curricula. In other words, it allows the trainers to discuss transversal topics without explicitly addressing them and without assuming the role of moral guides. This project also aims at the prevention of risky behaviour, related to violence, substance abuse or love/sexual relationships. More importantly, trainees consider it an extremely fun way to have meaningful discussions, besides who won the last football match or what happened in last night's soap opera.

Further reading:

C Wright Mills – The sociological imagination

Albert Bandura – Self-efficacy, The exercise of control

Howard Gardner – Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences