

## Learning in Freedom

### ON TEACHING DRAMATECHNIQUES TO CORPORATE TRAINERS AND COACHES

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I describe how we train corporate trainers and coaches to use Psychodrama, Voice Dialogue and the diverse variants of these two methods in their training courses and individual coaching. The course, as described below, is a product of the courses for psychotherapists which the Dutch psychologist Lex Mulder has been giving every year since 1980. Through the years, the training course has become more and more geared towards corporate trainers and coaches. Since 2002, the course – now called ‘The trainer as director’ – has been taught as a collaborative effort between Lex Mulder and ‘*het Balkon, Kenniscentrum voor Interventiekundigen*’ in Vasse (trans.: the Balcony, Knowledge Center for Intervention Experts).

I use the term ‘drama techniques’ as a collective term for all the forms of drama which we teach in our courses (1). I use the term Psychodrama or Voice Dialogue when I describe something more specific with regards to one of these methods.

How do we work with Psychodrama? We do not teach our students to employ Psychodrama as a therapeutic instrument or to become therapists or Psychodramaturgists. After all, corporate training courses and coaching are not meant for working towards therapeutic goals. Our students learn how they can use Psychodrama and other drama techniques as instruments for guiding people towards a better self-understanding and towards more effective behavior in their work and their career. Even though the participants of corporate training courses and coaching are influenced by their own personal histories, we rarely focus on the past and rather focus on functioning in the here and now. It is because of this that we distinguish ourselves from other schools, where the classic and primarily more therapeutic Psychodrama is taught.

Psychodrama lends itself very well to non-therapeutic use in corporate training courses. It can be quite a revelation for a manager to discover, in a Psychodrama, that he downsizes himself whenever he comes face-to-face with his boss, and to discover which inner forces and beliefs lead to this mentality. To experience this, to actually see it, has a much greater impact than simply talking about it. Through the play, the manager can also discover what he must do to adopt a more mature attitude towards his boss. Voice Dialogue, Voicedrama and Behavior drama (2) are also fantastic instruments for livening up and deepening the learning processes in training sessions.

During our one year training course ‘The trainer as director’, we teach trainers and coaches to work with these drama techniques. On the one hand, this is extremely fun to do. On the other hand, it is not that easy a task. Psychodrama and Voice Dialogue are complex and layered methods which require a great deal of time and

practice if you are to become skillful at them, even when you do not have any therapeutic aspirations. A considerable amount of skill is required for guiding the shorter forms of drama as well. It is best to structure the course in such a way that the students familiarize themselves with all aspects of the craft step by step, to create an atmosphere in which it is safe to practice and experiment as much as you like.

In our training course, we succeed in doing this. Playing and having fun go hand in hand with skillfully learning to work with drama techniques. Throughout the course, we notice a growing enthusiasm in our students for wanting to head out and put everything into practice. This is partially due to the objective and the build up of the course (paragraph 2) and partially due to the preconditions and our vision on the learning process (paragraph 3). Learning through experience (experience oriented learning) is one of the most important pillars of our approach. In this article, I describe how we set about establishing our training course.

## **2. THE OBJECTIVE AND BUILD UP OF OUR TRAINING COURSE**

First, we will give a brief overview of the course to serve as a background:

### **2.1. The students**

The students, a maximum of 16 per training group, are all active as corporate trainers and/or coaches spread throughout all social sectors, public and private. They provide various types of training courses and coaching: dealing with management skills, assertiveness, team building, negotiating, communication, etc. They are set on improving how people function in professional organizations. All of the students are experienced to very experienced professionals. People who are interested in participating but who do not have any experience working with groups or with individual coaching are referred to a basic education in this field. Although an individual participant might be active as a (psycho)therapist, we do not aim at teaching therapeutic interventions.

### **2.2. The objectives and the content of the training course**

We teach our students how to use drama techniques to liven up corporate training courses and coaching and to facilitate in-depth learning processes. We begin by teaching them four extensive forms of drama: Psychodrama, Voice Dialogue, Voicedrama and Behavior drama. Our students learn how to guide a 1-1.5 hour Psychodrama, from the warm-up to the sharing. We also teach them to work with various shorter variants of Psychodrama and other drama techniques. Take, for instance, the warm-ups, energizers and stagings of often used theoretic models such as the Core quadrant, the model for Situational leadership, Leary's Rose, the Enneagram and the SWOT-analysis. (Mulder, L. and J. Budde, 2006) (3) Finally, we stress that our students learn to come up with their own forms of drama. In this way, in their own practice, they can think up new forms of playing which they find suitable for the needs of a certain training group or client.

### **2.3. Individual intake interview**

The course starts with an individual intake interview in which we become acquainted and examine if the course suits the student's experience and wishes. This intake

interview is an important moment for informing the student about the fundamental ideas of the course.

## **2.4. The training course**

The course consists of four residential meetings of five consecutive days within a period of one year. In total, the course takes up 66 day-segments, practice groups and literature study excluded. Each course segment contains recurring subject matter.

### **2.4.1. Demonstration sessions**

In the demonstration sessions, the purpose of which is to catch a glimpse of the art form, our students become acquainted with the various drama techniques. These exemplary sessions are highly necessary for learning the trade. In a demonstration session, the instructor may showcase various drama techniques. During the technical discussion afterwards, the students can raise any questions they might have. However, we are rather frugal when it comes to demonstration sessions, because they also contain a possible drawback: the experienced instructor just conducted a Psychodrama or a Voice Dialogue session in a seemingly effortless manner. This can easily evoke such reactions as “I’ll never learn how to do that!” In turn, this does not aid the students in their willingness to practise on their own. We create enough room for the expression of these feelings, and we are open and honest with regards to our own learning process. As the course progresses, we give less and less demonstration sessions. Later on, we mainly conduct them to show something which has not come up yet.

### **2.4.2. Practicing on your own**

Ultimately, you learn to work with Psychodrama and other drama techniques mostly by doing it, by experiencing it as a protagonist and by acquiring as many flying hours as possible as the director. No matter which role you have, as a student, you can always learn something. You can learn from the audience’s role, because you are enabled from an observational position to assess what is happening in the play and how the director, be it a student or an instructor, is handling the situation. Playing the part of an antagonist helps you learn to experience what it is like to be an adversary and to learn what you, as the antagonist, need from the director and perhaps the co-director. In the protagonist’s role, you experience what it is like to be guided by the director and what it is like to work on your own questions. Naturally, the role of director teaches a great deal as it is necessary for acquiring the right physical and mental dexterity.

We spend a great deal of time practicing in subgroups (practice sessions). We gradually build up the practicing. During the first few days of the course, we start with developing subskills. The students practice setting up a vignette in order to get used to the role of director and to experiment with staging an image. We practice doubling, staging surplus realities and energetic induction (a technique from the Voice Dialogue method). This is how the students pick up the first techniques. Later on in the first week, the students guide their first, short Psychodrama in a subgroup. In each subgroup, one of the instructors is present to give assistance and feedback. In the beginning of the course, we actively interfere with the play. Later on, we gradually reduce the frequency of our interventions and, ultimately, we only help the participants during the play when asked for.

### **2.4.3. Reflecting on the practice sessions**

The discussion after a practice session is always focused on the learning process of the student which practised the role of the director. How did he or she experience guiding the play? What did he or she want to experiment with? What went easy, which moments were more difficult? The experiences of the protagonist and the antagonists are discussed when they prove to be of value with regards to the director's approach. Here, it is important to find a balance between constructive feedback – paying attention to what went well – and indicating what the student could improve on towards a next play.

### **2.4.4. Theory**

We teach theory when it is necessary to understand the methodology and concepts of Psychodrama and Voice Dialogue. We liven up these introductions by playing with examples as much as possible. We stress the importance of making our students participants of the rich tradition laid down by the founders of these methods, to make it clear that they are learning something which has already proven its value decades ago.

The rest of the theory is introduced during the technical-theoretical discussions of our demonstrations and practice sessions. Quite often, these are very educative moments at which the students can ask why the instructor chose a certain course of action during the drama session. These are also moments at which the theoretical and experiential knowledge of the instructors is explicated, through an immediate connection to what has just been experienced.

## **2.5. Supervision**

In between the four course segments there are three days of supervision. During these days, students receive supervision on their experiences with the application of the drama techniques in their own training and coaching practices.

## **2.6. Practice groups**

We stimulate our students to start up practice groups amongst themselves, in which they can gather flying hours on their own, without our guidance. Although we choose to highly recommend these practice groups, we still keep them optional. The responsibility for this part of the learning process lies with the participant. However, we have noticed that practice groups have been created during every course and that the participants frequently come together, sometimes even years after the course has finished.

## **2.7. Literature study**

Finally, the course also requires a minimum of 60 hours of literature study in the field of Psychodrama and Voice Dialogue. Next to a list with a number of required books and CD's, the students also receive an extensive list for further reading, the titles of which they can consult in the library of our institutes.

## **2.8. Certificate**

The course is concluded with a certificate of participation. This certificate allows the participant to apply for a candidate-membership with the Dutch Society for

Psychodrama. Students who missed more than 10% of the day segments receive an additional assignment so they can become eligible for the certificate.

### **2.9. Refresher courses**

Students who have successfully concluded the course can attend a supervised practice day 3 times a year. Every two years we organize a three-day Masterclass for our alumni during which they can learn of the latest developments and can practise under supervision.

### **2.10. The staff**

We teach the course with three instructors. Two of the staff members are present throughout the entire course and during the supervision days. The third staff member takes care of the segments on Voice Dialogue and is also present when the three subgroups have practice sessions.

## **3. OUR VISION ON EDUCATING**

Learning to guide drama techniques takes place in a group setting. Students that practise literally stand there for everyone to see, and this makes them vulnerable. Therefore, it is even more necessary for us to create a safe and inviting climate to learn in. In this paragraph I describe which choices we make in order to cultivate such a climate. These choices are rooted in our didactic principles, the preconditions, the learning contract and the way in which we deal with group dynamics.

### **3.1. A clear contract and one training objective**

We strongly advocate working with a clear contract and with one single educational objective: to pass on the professional skills necessary to guide drama techniques. This has led us to two important didactic choices.

#### **3.1.1. The professional learning process is key**

In a course such as this, inevitably, the students also go through a personal learning process. During the practice sessions they introduce career questions, dilemmas and other problems as practice material for others. And when everything goes smoothly, they will consequently gain certain insights during these sessions. The discoveries which the students make about themselves are important and valuable for them personally as well as professionally: as a person, because they find a possible answer to their question or dilemma, and as a professional, because it is important to experience the impact of the various methods.

Nevertheless, we stress that the students realize that working on personal and therapeutic matters does not constitute a course objective. Our primary focus lies on the student's professional development. Each individual's personal learning process is secondary to the professional learning process; learning to function as a director. After all, the students have come to learn how to guide drama techniques. During the intake interview, we clearly explain this fundamental principle so that everyone knows what they are dealing with from the start. In addition, at the beginning of the course, we fully illustrate this choice again with various arguments.

The purpose of this clear contract is to make it safe for the students to practise being the director during the course. The protagonist's 'happiness' does not depend on it. You are entitled to practise on the other person, and it does not have to be 'perfect'.

This knowledge enables the students to feel free to experiment and to use their creativity, within acceptable boundaries of course. As instructors, we intervene and help when necessary, if the protagonist were to, say, become somewhat threatened by the inability of a practising director.

For a coach or trainer to be able to practise meaningfully, it is necessary that, as the protagonist, a student introduces true and actual questions, preferably questions which are also asked in the actual practice of corporate training and coaching. The student who practises being the director will direct an entire Psychodrama, starting from the choice of the protagonist all the way through to the sharing. Up until the sharing is concluded, all attention is directed towards the protagonist and to what he or she is discovering and experiencing throughout the practice session. Afterwards there is a technical discussion on the practice session in which all attention is then focused on the student who practised functioning as the director – it is no longer focused on the protagonist.

It does occur that a protagonist exits a drama session with a feeling of incompleteness and that there is not much time to respond to this feeling. In a technical sense, there is time to respond, to enable the director to learn from it, but not in a therapeutic sense, to give the protagonist a moment to gain more insights. For this reason, it is important that the students feel secure and balanced enough when they participate in the course, and that they consciously choose which subject matter they will or will not introduce. This is discussed during the intake interview.

To introduce a dilemma or question, to proceed to work with it and to then switch back to the role of a student requires a great deal of energy. This is why we schedule moments in the program which provide us with enough room to exchange views on how this tension is affecting everyone and to also tell each other what results the practice sessions have had so far for each person individually. In between segments, if the situation were to arise, we sometimes also offer allow participants to have an individual session with one of the instructors when a particular topic that has come up requires further attention. When it appears that a participant is in need of a more extended therapeutic process, it is common practice that we do not tend to do this ourselves but that we refer the participant to a suitable, competent colleague. In this manner, we can maintain our role as instructor instead of becoming a therapist.

### **3.1.2. We work with the group process as implicitly as we can**

We prefer to work with the group process as implicitly as we can throughout the course. Obviously, the group process *is* there. Sometimes it can be very useful and necessary to discuss it explicitly. However, when possible, we prefer to guide the group process in an implicit manner. Why and how do we do this?

Everyone comes to the course to learn how to work with drama techniques and not to learn how to guide group processes. This is a complex skill which requires separate schooling. Knowledge of group dynamics is of great importance for conducting a corporate training session in general, and in particular for guiding a Psychodrama. Students who do not have enough knowledge in these areas are recommended to follow proper training. To this end, they can attend a course in Group Dynamics at our institute. There, in our course 'The trainer as director', we do spend quite some

time on how working with Psychodrama influences the group development and vice versa (4).

Only when the mutual relationships are getting in the way of our primary task do we take out time to explicitly pay attention to group dynamics. We explain that we know from experience that the more time we spend on discussing mutual relationships in the group, the more and more time this will take. After all, that which you pay attention to usually tends to become larger. Many students appreciate this didactic choice. "Oh, thank god, no never-ending sessions loaded with tears where no one seems to know what everyone is going on about."

However, we do start each morning by spending some time on issues which students would like to ask or comment on with regards to the day before, or the night before. Such as: "As far as I am concerned, the tempo could be raised a bit today." or "I had a great time yesterday leading a drama all by myself. I am feeling more confident now." or "I received a rather troublesome phone call from home this morning. I might seem somewhat absentminded today." To stimulate a good climate for learning, it is important that such matters can be expressed. Not necessarily to start working with them, but just to know where everybody is at the moment, so we can then focus ourselves as much as possible on proceeding with our work. Most students probably know this method of working from their own training courses and understand what our intent is.

As instructors, we constantly keep an eye on how the group is developing. We attune our interventions to what we think the group needs in order to become a constructive and safe learning group. When necessary, we implicitly try to influence the situation. An example: a group is made up of people with large age differences. We notice that the group might split into a group of older and a group of younger participants. When forming subgroups, the younger people are always very quick to choose one another. We want to break through this pattern. However, we do not inform the group of the possible split up. In doing this, we would be focusing their attention on the group process, which is precisely what we are trying to avoid. At such a moment, we choose a different approach: the next time subgroups need to be formed, we choose an approach which we definitely know will change the group composition. For instance, by numbering all the participants. All the numbers 1 will form one subgroup; all the numbers 2 and so on. This way, the balance is restored and a split up has been avoided.

Furthermore, we make use of group-dynamic interventions. An example: a student comments that he feels as if he 'will never learn it'. The other students start asking him all sorts of questions. At this moment, we will make such comments as "Those kind of feelings are quite normal in this stage of the learning process" and "You are definitely not the only one who thinks that" in order to normalize and to spread these feelings.

We stimulate tolerance and appreciation for mutual differences. Students are different, they have diverse backgrounds and needs. We stimulate the groups to quickly take responsibility for making good use of these differences.

### **3.3. We are as explicit about our didactic approach as we can be**

This may seem to be in contradiction with the former, however we are as explicit about our professional choices as we can be. We argue as much as possible why

we do what we do. We do not discuss much about the group process, but we do explain explicitly *why* we do not do this. Since our students work with groups themselves, they continuously see us on two levels. In the first place, they see us as experts in the field of drama techniques and, in the second place, they experience us as colleagues in the field of training and coaching. By being transparent about our didactic choices throughout the course, we try to minimize the possibilities for transference. In doing this, any transference is not fully prevented, but it is reduced.

### **3.4. Students are experts**

Indeed, our participants may not be experienced with drama techniques, but they are experts when it comes to guiding groups and guiding exercises. From the beginning of the course, we put their expertise to good use. This can be done in many ways. Every morning and noon, two participants provide a warm-up of maximum 20 minutes as an introduction to the program of that day's segment. To start with, this assignment gives them the opportunity to show their expertise and to share it. This helps in making the uneasy feeling, which comes with learning a new and complex skill, more bearable. Little by little, the students collect a treasure chest of fun and creative exercises throughout the course. They also realize that the wisdom comes from the entire group, and not just from the instructors. This stimulates them to actively participate, give feedback, ask questions and to become independent of the instructors.

This assignment is also an exercise in choosing suitable warm-ups, an important skill needed for directing dramas. Finally, leading a short warm-up with two people helps you to get used to the idea that, later on, you will be practising much longer Psychodramas in front of the entire group. This lowers the anxiety threshold for practicing later on.

Near the second or third segment of the course, there are almost always students who suggest exchanging exercises or who want to showcase something from their own expertise within the course. If the group wants to try this out, we take some time for this. This also helps to limit the dependency on the instructors and to regard and use each other as experts.

### **3.5. Students own their own learning process**

We let our students direct their own learning process as much as we can. At the end of the first segment, when a strong foundation for working with drama techniques has been laid down, we ask the students to put their professional learning objectives down on paper. One participant might want to spend his or her time learning to guide shorter forms of working, and another might want to use his or her own practice for extended Psychodramas. Yet another might prefer to work some more with Voice Dialogue. There are many differences in personal style and points of interest. One student will want to learn how to be less dominant as a director whereas another precisely wants to learn how to be more directive and less unsteady. These professional learning objectives will serve as their compass for the remainder of the course. By choosing which aspect he or she wants to practise in the next drama, the student directs the course of the feedback he or she will receive. This helps in allowing everyone to be different and to learn at their own pace.

### **3.6. Freedom and creativity above the rules**

Among other reasons, Moreno developed Psychodrama to stimulate creativity and spontaneity. Being able to play and to experiment freely are core concepts.



Throughout our course, we constantly focus on cultivating the creativity, spontaneity and self-confidence of the director. We do not use checklists to inspect if a drama went according to the rules of the game. With every playful step, the student learns how Psychodrama and the other drama techniques work. We find a dogmatic attitude to be counterproductive. However, at the same time there are a few basic principles and guidelines which help to guide a drama more effectively. We possess a great deal of knowledge on what works and what does not, and it is useful that we share this knowledge.

While guiding drama techniques, it is important to maintain a certain flexibility, a certain looseness, and to not be constantly thinking what the best course for the play could be. The more in touch the guide is with the protagonist and himself, the more organically the play will flow. The student must learn to trust that the play will unfold in and of itself.

During the practice sessions and the following technical discussions, we rather tell our students 'how things can go' and 'what tends to work in practice' than 'what is allowed and what is not'. We hardly ever say something was 'not good', but instead we examine the effects of the attempted approach and suggest some alternatives. We are focused on not creating a climate where the participants are occupied with doing it 'right' or 'by the book'. We appreciate it when our students develop their own style. They do not need to become our clones.

Naturally, we do give warnings when necessary. For instance, we advise our students against using Psychodrama in dealing with conflicts within teams. If you were to go about this by using Psychodrama, there is a big chance you will end up having to deal with all sorts of projections, and that your teams will end up even further from their goal than where they started. Luckily enough, there are enough methods to tackle conflicts between teams.

#### **4. In summary**

We position ourselves as experts, but not as all-knowing instructors. Our experience and expertise are needed, and they are expected of us. At the same time, we show our students that learning to work with drama techniques can be done, and that there are many ways to guide a drama session.

When we ourselves overlook certain things during a demonstration session, this becomes subject for discussion afterwards. We are not perfect, and our students do not have to be either. As soon as we can, we try to start a learning process in which each individual's expertise is valued and can be contributed. We do this to avoid that the group becomes dependent on us as instructors. We stimulate the fact that our students develop their own style and that they do not become our duplicates. And, regularly, we say "You did a wonderful job!", the memorable words often spoken by Dean and Doreen Eleftery, from whom my colleague-instructors and I learned this wonderful craft – directly or indirectly.

Vasse, December 14<sup>th</sup> 2007  
Judith Budde

## On the author

Drs. Judith Budde is the director of *Het Balkon*, a conference and training center in Vasse (East Netherlands). Since 1987, she has been active as a coach and a corporate trainer (NIP-registration).

Since 1997, she has also been active in the training of trainers and coaches. She attended a two-year Psychodrama course under Lex Mulder. She became passionate about this method and about the way in which he teaches it: playful and undogmatic.

Since 2002, she has been teaching courses in Psychodrama, Voice Dialogue and other related drama techniques at *Het Balkon*, alongside Lex Mulder and Berry Collewijn.

She is co-author of '*Drama in bedrijf. Werken met dramatechnieken in training en coaching*' (trans.: 'Drama in chapter/company. Working with drama techniques in training and coaching'). Judith Budde can be contacted through [www.hetbalkon.nl](http://www.hetbalkon.nl).

## Notes:

1. I use the word 'drama techniques' as a collective term for methods and ways of working in which playing, imagination and working at the experiential level are key, such as Psychodrama, Voicedrama, Voice Dialogue, Behavior drama and their shorter variations.  
Almost all of the drama techniques which we teach in our course are rooted in Psychodrama and Voice Dialogue. However, the term 'drama techniques' is not really adequate. Psychodrama consists of a whole lot more than a method of drama, and Voice Dialogue would not use the word 'drama' to describe itself. However, for lack of a better term to describe what it is that we do, I made a pragmatic choice of words.
2. - The Voice Dialogue method was developed in the early '70s by the Californian couple Hal and Sidra Stone – both of them psychologists. It is a simple and highly elegant method for helping people become more aware of their inner motives, what drives them from within. The ultimate goal is that they learn to direct their behavior more effectively and more consciously.  
- Voicedrama is a synthesis of Psychodrama and Voice Dialogue, developed by the Dutch psychologist Lex Mulder in the early '90s. For further information, read the article on Voicedrama by Lex Mulder and Berry Collewijn included in this compilation.  
- Behavior drama is a variant of Psychodrama of which the sole purpose is to have the participant practise effective behavior.
3. For a description of all of these forms of working, read our book '*Drama in bedrijf*'.
4. For more information on Psychodrama and group dynamics, read the article by Lex Mulder included in this compilation.

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***Judith Budde***

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