

## **The Use of Theatre in AAC research**

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### **Forum Theatre.**

Forum Theatre was developed by Augusto Boal [1] as “Theatre of the Oppressed” in Brazil. This form of theatre has been further developed by the Foxtrot Theatre [in Education] Company [2], who have used these techniques extensively within professional training for communication skills (e.g. within palliative care, and the training of medical students) and in community consultation (including with seniors). In this form of theatre, a script writer conducts detailed research in the subject area and, on the basis of this research, produces a series of short pieces which address the important issues to be discussed within a narrative style and with the emotional content and tension essential to good drama. In general these scripts have a “beginning” and “middle” but no “end”. The theatre is performed by professional actors to the audience - the “forum” - who are the experts. A trained facilitator then encourages the audience to address the issues of the characters’ different motivations and emotions, and to direct the rest of the play. The audience is asked a series of questions, such as “what is each character thinking at this point in the play?”, “what is a particular character’s motivation, what do they want to achieve?”. They are also asked “what should happen next?”. The direction of the play can then be controlled by a consensus in the audience, or by individuals who suggest how the characters can resolve the situation. Alternatively, members of the audience may volunteer to join the actors on the stage and prompt them individually as the play progresses. In all cases, however, the rest of the play is extemporary, as directed by the “forum” (i.e. the audience). The audience can thus see their suggestions acted out in front of them in a very powerful way, and observe the effects of these suggestions, in a safe environment. Other theatrical techniques are also used such as “hot seating” where an actor will stay in role and answer questions from the audience. Essentially this is a form of role play, but done by professional role players, who have been well briefed about the situations in which they find themselves. This methodology has proved to be very powerful for facilitating discussions about sensitive issues within the audience and between the audience and the actors (who stay in role).

Applied Computing has worked in collaboration with the Foxtrot Theatre Company to use this form of theatre to encourage interaction between (older) users of technology and designers. Their “Advanced Sensors for Supportive Environments for the Elderly” project, investigated the applicability and feasibility of automatic monitoring using ‘intelligent’ visual sensors. On the basis of discussions with the designers and some older people, a script writer produced a series of short scenarios containing “human interest”, humour, and dramatic tension as well as illustrating how the system may work, the errors which could occur during its use, and the impacts these errors could have on the users. Videos were then produced of various scenarios using professional actors [3]. In the style of Forum Theatre, the videos contained “stopping points” to allow audience discussion. These videos proved to be extremely effective in facilitating discussions on an otherwise novel and therefore unfamiliar technology, and the findings of these consultations were very influential in the design and development of the system. This study is significant because the use of drama, to cross boundaries of technical language and knowledge, allowed elderly potential users of a monitoring system to be involved effectively in the process of design at the pre-prototyping stage.

The UTOPIA (Usable Technology for Older People: Inclusive and Appropriate) project, focused on research into the challenges of developing technology suitable for use by older people, and on raising awareness of these issues with engineers and designers. Within this project we produced the “UTOPIA Trilogy”, a series of short video plays addressing problems older people have in using technology. The

films were dramatizations of some of the issues the researchers had encountered during the project. Based on real events, conversations and observations, they were the amalgamation of many and are intended to convey older people's experiences with technology and the situations they encounter. Our evaluations of these videos with a variety of audiences including academics, practitioners, software engineers, relevant groups of undergraduates, and older people have established that the videos provided a useful channel for communication between users of technology and designers, and changed the perceptions of both students and more mature designers of IT systems and products [4].

### **Conclusions on the use of forum theatre**

Evaluations with a wide variety of audiences have shown very positive views of both the use of live Forum Theatre, and the video version, in addressing important and sensitive issues, particularly in terms of communication skills and the design of technology. We have shown that the use of theatre (which includes humour and conflict) can be a very powerful method of encouraging dialogue between various professional groups particularly in a clinical environment, for keeping a focus for discussions, and also for providing a channel for communication between users of technology and designers. We believe the success of this approach is in large part due to the plays being narrative based rather than having a pedagogic style. That is, they illustrated the issues involved within interesting story lines, with all the characteristics of a good narrative - humor, tension, human stories, antagonists and protagonists. Secondly their success lay in the quality of the production, having been produced by theatre professionals.

### **The wider use of theatre in AAC research and clinical practice.**

On the basis of the success of this technique we are suggesting a role for Forum Theatre, both video and live, within AAC research and clinical activities. For example, Forum Theatre could be used

- To set the scene for a focus group of AAC users,
- To provide a tool for evaluating early AAC prototype systems,
- To encapsulate the results of research with users to present these results to clinicians and/or AAC designers, and
- To facilitate dialogue between real users, clinicians and AAC designers.

We believe that this form of theatre can have significant advantages. Script writers and actors are trained as professional observers of human behavior, with a focus on converting such behavior into interesting engaging stories. They are skilled both in observation and presentation of human behavior. They are taught to distil experiences into essential, typical, and sometimes stereotypical behavior, and present this in an interesting and engaging narrative. They know when to exaggerate for effect, and how to articulate feeling in such a way that it is communicated effectively to the audience. In the words of the theatre, they are expert in "suspending disbelief". They know when and how to introduce tension and humor, to keep the audience interested and as an engaging way of feeding important points into the narrative. We have found that:

- Forum Theatre encourages focused dialogue between protagonists in the audience where everyone's views are respected, and between the actor/user and the audience
- The play provides a focus for discussion and the actors form an external focus for conflict between groups. The ego of the actor/user is not involved, and the actor is not dominated by their own emotional baggage. This enables professionals to question other professions in a safe environment, and to interact with actor/users without the usual ethical constraints involved in such dialogues.
- Actors can be more independent than a single user and can present a more generic picture of the 'user', and can exaggerate as appropriate, particularly in articulating feelings.
- The narrative is very effective in keeping the group focused, and as a vehicle for bringing audiences back to main points without upsetting them, and
- The creative approach of theatre liberates users rather than simply eliciting views and opinions.

### **Conclusions**

Our research to date has successfully used theatre, both live and presented as video performances for exploring communication and technical design issues. It has been shown to be a very powerful tool for addressing such issues, and we recommend it to the AAC community.

## References

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