

An innovative approach to training student volunteers using Forum Theatre techniques

Ali Davies and Tamsyn Richards

ASPIRE, Aim High, University of New South Wales

Abstract

This emerging initiative showcases an innovative and dynamic training method through the use of a technique known as 'Forum Theatre'. Pioneered by Brazilian radical Augusto Boal, Forum Theatre is a participatory training style that encourages improvisation and interaction amongst participants. The presentation will introduce practitioners to how this method has been used with student volunteers as an alternative, practical and engaging training strategy. ASPIRE Ambassadors are UNSW student volunteers who support widening participation outreach activities with school students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Following a rigorous recruitment and application process, ASPIRE Ambassadors are trained to facilitate and lead workshops and events in school and on campus. To prepare Ambassadors for this important and varied role, ASPIRE staff have created a training strategy that breaks down and enables participants to try out courses of action in a training environment before undertaking their role.

ASPIRE UNSW and the integral role of student volunteers

ASPIRE is a UNSW outreach program that works with school students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in schools across Sydney and regional New South Wales. Its aim is to increase educational aspirations, awareness and support access to university education. The program provides in schools workshops and on campus events, plus a range of academic enrichment activities in specific subject areas. ASPIRE relies heavily on student volunteers, known as ASPIRE Ambassadors, to facilitate and lead these activities, providing one on one connections with school students who may be unfamiliar with the university environment. This strategy has been found to have a significant positive impact on low SES students' intentions to pursue a higher education (Curtis et al, 2012) and is widely used by university widening participation programs in addressing the lack of relevant social capital; identified as the key reason for poor progression rates to higher education for students from low SES backgrounds (Reay, 2001). This approach also provides university students with an opportunity to develop their graduate capabilities in leadership, team work, and problem solving and community engagement. The ASPIRE Ambassador role is varied, but a crucial responsibility is to engage school students on the topic of higher education and to help address any concerns or barriers they might raise. To assist in finding suitable volunteers for this important role, ASPIRE has implemented a rigorous recruitment and selection process. The aim of this process is not necessarily to find the most skilled or experienced volunteer, but rather to find volunteers that 'best fit' the role. Volunteers who understand or have experienced barriers to accessing higher education themselves or have attended ASPIRE partner schools are highly regarded, and they are powerful role models to school students engaged in the ASPIRE program.

Recruitment and selection of volunteers

A variety of volunteer recruitment strategies are employed in order to reach a diverse group of potential applicants. The program aims to have volunteer representation from all faculties, an equal gender balance, diverse cultural backgrounds and a preference for students who are first in their family to attend university or who have experienced educational disadvantage. This is important as the program works with diverse school students with a range of interests. To achieve this diverse balance of volunteers, recruitment is targeted to specific faculties who may be under-represented in the existing volunteer pool, students who entered university via the Education Access Scheme as well as targeting university cultural societies. Applicants are asked to identify barriers that students from low SES backgrounds might encounter in a written application. Here applicants are encouraged to draw on their own experiences. Following the application process volunteers are shortlisted to a group interview round. This interview process gives each applicant the opportunity to participate in a group activity and demonstrate their ability to work in a team environment, to present to an audience and to demonstrate their understanding of the ASPIRE program and by articulating their awareness of the challenges for students from LSES backgrounds. This process is based on a graduate recruitment task that gives applicants an opportunity to experience this type of process.

Use of Forum Theatre in the training of ASPIRE Ambassadors

Forum Theatre is a participatory training style that encourages improvisation and interaction amongst participants. Once students have been selected as an ASPIRE Ambassador they must complete a one day training course. The aim of the training is to fully equip student volunteers with the skills and knowledge to work confidently with school students from ASPIRE partner schools and to understand the barriers that students may face when considering higher education as a post school option. A two hour period of the training day is given to the exercise of Forum Theatre.

Each Ambassador is encouraged to participate in this hands-on part of the training. The 'stage' is simply set by a large circle of chairs for all participants with a small table and four chairs set in the centre of the circle. Using staff members in all roles to begin, the opening of a Year 10 in-school workshop is re-enacted with one staff member playing the role of Ambassador while the three other staff play the roles of Year 10 students. Only the opening 4 minutes of the scenario is played – often with some comedy and light heartedness. The key facilitator establishes when the scene will begin and when it will 'freeze'. Once the scene is frozen at four minutes, participants in the wider circle are encouraged to critique the action. The staff member acting in the ASPIRE Ambassador role deliberately performs poorly, so there is scope for audience input, critique and suggestions. After receiving feedback, the key facilitator then starts the same scene again. In this scene, the ASPIRE Ambassador inputs some of the suggested actions from the audience. This time the audience members can call 'freeze' when they wish to halt the action and either make a comment or step into the scene themselves, taking the role of their choice (Ambassador or students) and changing the pathway of the action.

“By participating, audiences are enabled to make decisions, to address critically the issues presented to them and to reflect on the social life within a safe environment offered by the theatrical design. Moreover, immersing in different situations has an unequalled power to entertain.” (Immersive Forum Theatre, 2016).

Depending on the participants and their confidence to take on a role this scenario may be played a number of times. Ideally all participants will either halt the action and comment or take on one of the existing roles and continue the action, improvising with the help of the other 'actors' in the scene.

Why Forum Theatre as a training strategy for ASPIRE Ambassadors?

There are a number of reasons why the Forum Theatre technique has been implemented into ASPIRE Ambassadors training.

Firstly, it is acknowledged that many of the students selected for the ASPIRE Ambassador role are themselves from low SES backgrounds and have experienced barriers to accessing higher education. These students have an understanding of some of the circumstances that the school students they will work with face and can therefore offer ideas on how to engage with them. Boal's Forum Theatre technique draws on Paulo Freire's theory of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to Freire (1970), in traditional education, those with the 'knowledge' impart that knowledge to those without. Those with knowledge also decide what knowledge is and how and who is entitled to it. Freire likens this method to a bank account where knowledge is deposited with no opportunity to comment or contribute (cited in Mitchell and Freitag, 2011: 991). Boal's use of Forum Theatre in training gives participants the opportunity to explore solutions and engagement strategies through a collaborative and creative process in a supportive environment. In doing this students do not only get the opportunity to share some of their engagement ideas, they can also comment on why 'actors' playing the students have particular questions, concerns or behaviours.

Secondly, students are given the opportunity to experience the Ambassador role or at least observe what Ambassador/ student interactions may look like before they are placed into the role with students for the first time. This gives Ambassadors the opportunity to make mistakes or try out different strategies every time the 'scene' starts again. Often the scene will run up to 8-10 times, with all audience members encouraged to play a role throughout the Forum Theatre. Participants are encouraged to contribute and suggest courses of action for the actor playing the ASPIRE Ambassador and, ultimately, step into the Ambassador role themselves. This gives actors and participants multiple opportunities to contribute and practice their skills in a roleplay setting. This offers Ambassadors a richer learning experience than a discussion on 'how you might' engage with your students or a PowerPoint on 'how you should engage with your students.' The school students that engage in the ASPIRE program are diverse and individual and a script on what to say or how to engage would not fit the variety of the role. In this sense Forum Theatre allows students to 'train themselves' for real life action (Boal, 1984, cited in Mitchell and Freitag, 2011: 993). Ultimately ASPIRE wants its volunteers to feel confidence in their role and have an enjoyable and rewarding volunteer experience. This method provides Ambassadors with the style of workshops, how the ASPIRE team works in schools and a concrete example of the Year 10 session content. Forum Theatre enables a deeper learning of the program and expectations through creating an environment where Ambassadors are prepared, feel supported and have some understanding of what to expect and how to respond to the various circumstances and questions they may be faced with.

Finally, the Forum Theatre strategy enables new volunteers to interact in a creative and collaborative way in a safe environment. This creates an atmosphere of shared understanding and belonging that is conducive to forming networks and friendships.

Outcomes of Forum Theatre as a training strategy

Forum Theatre as a training strategy has proved successful in preparing students for their ASPIRE Ambassador role with all Ambassadors reporting that they understand their role and responsibilities after training. In response to open questions about the training, many Ambassadors identified Forum Theatre as a fun, engaging and practical element:

"Practical scenarios were really effective in understanding the role and challenges as an ambassador."

"Helped me prepare for what I would end up doing."

"The role play was realistic and made it less nerve wracking"

(ASPIRE Ambassadors)

Since the successful implementation of Forum Theatre as a training strategy for ASPIRE Ambassadors, ASPIRE staff have adapted the method for use in a workshop for the UNSW Leadership program. Although the scene for this workshop changes from a classroom to a leadership scenario (in this case the chair of a meeting for a volunteer organisation), the positive outcomes of experiencing the practice of leadership skills rather than theory have remained. In the university environment when students are engaged in the academic world, the opportunity to practice and repeat real life scenarios have been positively received, suggesting that the this training strategy has the potential to be adapted to other volunteer and co-curricular training programs.

Challenges

It is acknowledged that there are challenges to the successful delivery of Forum Theatre. It is important that comprehensive content of what you ideally would like to be addressed during the Forum Theatre is written prior to designing and acting out the 'scene'. The content you wish to cover will impact the type of scene you choose, the characters involved and how and when the facilitator freezes the scenes. For example, in ASPIRE Ambassador training the key areas that aim to be covered in Forum Theatre are; how to engage effectively with students, how to be a positive role model, how to be inclusive and how to ensure that students understand the content of the workshop. This may initially seem like a lot of content to cover, however, the facilitator can control when they freeze the scene when they see an opportunity for feedback and comments that will address this content. For example, the actor playing the 'inefficient Ambassador' may sit with their arms folded at the head of the table, playing with their mobile phone, use university jargon and ignore a quiet student actor in the initial scene. This scene only needs to play for a couple of minutes before the audience can comments on what steps the Ambassadors can take to be a more effective Ambassador, thus giving an easy entry point for Ambassadors to engage in the activity.

To successfully cover the required content, the facilitator needs to be skilled, experienced and confident with the content, but also with the process of facilitating the Forum Theatre. The key role of the facilitator in Forum Theatre is to create a safe and positive environment for participants where they feel empowered and confident to participate by offering constructive feedback and engagement ideas, but ideally by playing a role in the scene. It is integral for the facilitator to create an environment that fosters respect and inclusiveness. In order to do this, the facilitator needs to state clearly the boundaries for the scene and the rules of

engagement. Students interject by raising their hand and the facilitator then calls ‘freeze’ at a timely moment in the scene. As facilitator, it is important to gauge the students who may avoid participating – eye contact for encouragement is key! By providing roles with little vocal input also allows for all students to participate – this can be openly discussed at the beginning of the session. Recognising that not all students will enjoy being in the centre is important. It’s also important to state clearly the aim for everyone to join in. It is important to note that ASPIRE staff from a range of non-drama / teaching backgrounds have successfully facilitated Forum Theatre through observing experienced staff and familiarity and knowledge of the content.

Success is difficult to measure – both the success of the Forum theatre practice and the success that each Ambassador may feel at the conclusion of a school workshop. Forum Theatre gives voice to how we define our successes. It is a mechanism for discussing our own perception of success and how we measure it. Engagement with school students is the crucial element – Ambassadors can see how engagement is a skill that can be learned and practiced.

Finally, there are some practical elements to the successful delivery of Forum Theatre. A large space is required to set the scene and have enough room for the audience to sit around it. The Forum Theatre training component needs to be at the end of the training so that the time prior to the Forum Theatre can be used to build rapport with the Ambassadors. Also the Forum Theatre is staff intensive as ‘actors’ are required to act out the scene as well as the facilitator. ASPIRE has managed this by inviting current Ambassadors to participate in the Forum Theatre - ideally as the role of the ‘ineffective Ambassador’.

Questions for audience participation

1. How could you introduce the Forum Theatre technique into your volunteer training or area of work?
2. What scenes could be acted out, what characters could you develop and why?
3. What would be the benefits and outcomes of using Forum Theatre in your setting?

References

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