

IMPROPTU DRAMA:

A MEANS OF RURAL EXTENSION

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INTRODUCTION

Development workers throughout the world are often faced with the problem of finding better ways to communicate ideas and exchange information in order to help bring about change and development. Too often communication links between those promoting change and those who are to benefit from it are weak, or break down altogether.

From rural Zambia comes the story of one method which has been successfully used to overcome this problem. The method is impromptu drama.

In 1978, W.E. Rau reported his experiences in Zambia with impromptu drama involving public health workers, medical and health assistants and agricultural extension workers. Impromptu drama was used to encourage these groups to use drama as a means of meeting and communicating with people - the initial stage in promoting change.

Impromptu drama does not require a full-scale script for actors to learn and rehearse. Impromptu drama only requires a written outline of the action. The words and actions are added as the story moves along. The players are selected from available people (villagers) and are given enough time (e.g. thirty minutes) to review the outline, discuss it among themselves and gain some confidence to proceed. From there the play goes on, following the outline generally, but with constant improvisation. A narrator (story teller) is usually involved to smooth the changes between scenes.

The play can be outlined in simple English but it is better performed in the local language. This way it is far more expressive and culturally suitable both for actors and audience, who are members of the village. Between scenes, music, singing, dancing and even discussion by the audience can take place.

The play is best performed outdoors and in the round (audience surrounding players, not just on one side). This allows closer contact between the audience and the players and helps the natural development of the play. Props are usually not needed. The narrator and actors can describe the setting; the audience's imagination fills in the details.

Impromptu drama has two important characteristics that are vital to the successful introduction of any desired change:-

- (i) it provides a basis for bringing people (workers, civil servants, children) into closer contact by creating a common ground of shared experiences;

(ii) it can (and usually will) contain a message about the desirable change.

Impromptu drama can be a useful communication technique in itself, but it loses much of its initial impact if it is not followed up with other methods as well. Discussions within the village community about the play's message should be encouraged. It is the educator's responsibility to encourage community discussion; and to build upon the sense of involvement and dialogue in the village community is a challenge.

In his report, W.E. Rau concludes, "to finish a play and dismiss the audience would be totally anti-climactic and counter-productive. The initial effort to create an environment for dialogue will be seen by the people as just another isolated and token offering of the elite. For the educator to fall back into the familiar and secure role of "lecturer" will only frustrate and alienate people. But if educators can maintain the dialogue stimulated by impromptu drama, they will have taken an important step in creating a basis for deeper and more responsible change than has been evident in many areas to date".

IMPROPTU DRAMA IN PNG

So far, there has been little experience of impromptu drama in Papua New Guinea. However, there is considerable use of radio and stage drama.

One example of the effective use of impromptu drama in Papua New Guinea, is the case of the Gogol timber rights in the Madang Province when villagers acted out their explanation of the timber royalties paid to them by the government. There was no prior rehearsal and the villagers acted naturally and were filmed by an audio-visual crew. There are probably other examples of which I am not aware.

As in Zambia, impromptu drama can be used in PNG as an extension method to promote rural development. One does not have to be an experienced playwright to write a short play. In fact, any extension worker with a little imagination can become a dramatist. It is best to outline a play with a single theme so that the audience know what it is all about and the message is understood clearly. The range of topics which extension workers could write about is unlimited, but it is best to keep to topics relevant to the area. Examples of topics which could be the subject of an impromptu drama are:- coffee pruning and weeding, cocoa fermentation, weaning of calves, advantages of branding calves and malnutrition.

PLAY OUTLINE

The following will serve as an example of the type of play outline required.

Purpose: To demonstrate the need for legumes on cattle projects and to motivate farmers to grow improved pastures.

Setting: Village community with cattle projects.

ACT I

1. Two cattle farmers are cutting and burning weeds on their projects which are next to each other. They stop for a rest and come together to talk. They discuss a visit two days earlier of the didiman from district headquarters. The didiman had explained that the Provincial Livestock Officer would be visiting the projects the following week to see if the cattle farmers had planted legumes.
2. The first man has not planted any legumes on his project and gives a lot of excuses, eg. too much work burning kunai and planting seeds, birds eat up all the seeds, his cattle got sick eating legumes once, etc., etc. The second farmer tries to persuade the first. After more talk they return to work.
3. It is afternoon. The men finish work and return home. The wife of the first farmer asks if his cattle are growing well. He replies that the cattle are not growing but that he is still not going to plant legumes on his project and they argue.

The narrator sums up the situation for the audience. The action moves to the following day in the village. A DPI truck has arrived to pick up steers and weaners for the abattoir.

ACT II

1. It is morning. The villagers gather around the DPI truck and the Rural Development Assistant (RDA), who arrived in the truck, checks off the names of cattle farmers who have steers and weaners ready for sale. After the names are checked off, the truck makes its way to the cattle projects.

The narrator reminds the audience that none of the cattle taken to the abattoir that day by the truck belonged to the man who refused to plant legumes on his project. He then moves the scene to the following day, again at the cattle projects.

2. The same two farmers meet again. The first one asks the second if he has sent any of his steers to the abattoir. The second farmer says he sent 3 of his steers to the abattoir and that some other farmers sent 6 or more steers. The first farmer says that the second farmer is foolish for sending his steers to the abattoir. Now he will have to find replacements for them.

Narrator: "Our friend here thinks he is smart because he still has his steers to sell. He won't have to replace them". He reminds the audience that the farmers who sent their steers to the abattoir will be paid and moves the action to the following week.

ACT III

1. The next week, the Provincial Livestock Officer visits the village to check the farmers' cattle projects and advise them on management. He meets the wife of the first farmer. She tells him that other farmers have sent their steers to the

abattoir for sale but that none of her husband's steers have gone.

2. The first farmer then comes up and asks the PLO what his wife has been saying. The PLO explains and asks the first farmer if he could have a look at his project and his cattle. The first farmer says that there is nothing wrong with his project and cattle but agrees to let the PLO inspect them.
3. The RDA who came to collect the steers says that none of the first farmer's steers were ready for sale. He says that there are weeds all over the first farmer's project and that his cattle are thin from not eating good grass. The villagers agree and argue with the first farmer who says that his project is just like the other projects. They continue to argue and the first farmer gets angry and nearly hits the RDA who then leaves. The villagers leave the first farmer standing in front of his house.

The narrator explains that the PLO went on to inspect all the projects including that belonging to the first farmer who had refused to plant legumes and found that the first farmer's project was in the state described by the RDA. The action moves to the following week in the village.

ACT IV

1. A week has passed. The RDA enters the village and finds people gathered in the village square. He learns that one of the steers belonging to the first farmer has died.
2. The first farmer comes up to the RDA and accuses him of killing his steer. The RDA denies it and says that the man himself killed the steer by not providing enough feed. The other villagers agree with the RDA and the other farmers say that none of their cattle are sick because they provide plenty of feed including legumes.
3. The RDA calls out the names of the farmers who sent their steers to the abattoir. He gives each farmer an envelope containing a cheque for his steers.
4. The first farmer realises that what the other villagers said is true. He bows his head in shame and starts walking away from the crowd towards his house. The crowd begins to leave as the farmers open their envelopes to see how much they got for their steers. As the RDA prepares to go, the first farmer walks towards him and apologises for what he said. He tells the RDA that he'll plant legumes in his project.

As explained above, some follow-up is required after the play is over to keep it and its message in the people's minds. As soon after the play as he can, the RDA should visit the project to look over the pastures and discuss their improvement within the context of the play. He should use jokes and important lines from the play as much as possible in the following weeks to help stimulate discussion and questions on the role of legumes in pastures. In this way, the play and its message will stand more chance of becoming impressed on the minds of the people and legume planting will be more likely to become an established practice.

FURTHER READING

PREPARATION OF RATTAN OIL

Rau, W.E. (1978). Impromptu drama for development: An experience from Zambia. *Ideas and Action* 125:17-19.

Soni, D.C. (1977). The spoken and unspoken word in rural communication. *Ideas and Action* 115:8-10.