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**Chapter 10, François Breuer, Playing in the narrative space.
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Abstract

Breuer addresses the active substance of simulation games from a narrative perspective, which sees people as playing a role in a string of stories woven around their actions in an environment, and evoking a range of interpretations and meanings. In this chapter Breuer discerns several active substances, including the use of different points of view, maintaining suspense, and the role of the game facilitator. Except for *tableaux vivants*, the creation of a narrative space is an important condition in all these active substances. The storyteller and listener get together in the narrative space and exchange ideas, experiences, feelings and other contents of consciousness. The author underpins his arguments by describing several examples.

Playing in the narrative space

François Breuer

Introduction

The narrative perspective introduces playful designs for learning that challenge participants to act and at the same time observe from different points of view how they can proceed in a meaningful way on the journey of their life. First, I present a short introduction to this perspective and a link to gaming. I then give several examples: a simulation, clinics, shift of punctuation and a systemic play in search of a clarifying metaphor. In all these examples, I elaborate on the questions of what makes them work and what can be transferred to the real-life situation. A small excursion to the game of *tableaux vivants* emphasizes the importance of the 'narrative space' as a condition for discovering and reinforcing new meaning. I end with some conclusions.

Acting in a narrative perspective

From a narrative perspective, we can be seen as playing a role in a string of stories that are woven around our actions in an environment, evoking a range of interpretations and meanings. Even before we come into being, speculations have already been made in our environment as to how we will act and be. The story of our life has already started. As we grow up, and throughout our life time, we are confronted with the stories that others fabricate around us, but at the same time we create our own stories about our role in life.

All people have a fundamental need to make sense of the events in their life by making up stories about what has happened in the past, what is happening now and what may happen in the future. These (re)constructions are based on fragments of actual memories, but also on

what others as bystanders have conveyed as their experience and, more importantly, on what people have transferred from any source available to their imagination as fact and fiction. At any given point in time, the way that we see our role is like a reconstruction by an actor attempting to make sense of the story in which he or she plays a role. Thanks to its narrative form, the story creates a structure that provides meaning.

The following structural elements are found in a narrative:

- a time frame for the sequence of actions
- specific actors with purpose and intention
- environmental factors that seem to influence the sequence of events
- a captivating plot like a field of tension between what could be and what actually happens.

At the same time, every story has several layers of meaning, depending on:

- punctuation (from what point of view is a person telling or interpreting the story?)
- context (what is the setting?)
- focus of the storyline (what is the puzzle?)
- association (what images are being recalled?)
- archetypal reference (what underlying metaphor speaks to you?).

The concept of ‘punctuation’ needs clarification. It is the break in a storyline where a change occurs in the point of view from which the story is told. In systems theory it is the shift to a different point of view from where the interaction with other variables is studied in a complex system of interdependent relationships. The underlying idea is that there is no such thing as the objective truth, but that there are different points of view from which we can try to describe what we see.

Last but not least, a story is not only about the past, but also the here and now and the future: ‘I develop a vision about myself and my environment in the future by fantasizing about how my story is likely to continue.’

Creating a setting for experimentation and discovery

In gaming, a learning situation is created by acting out stories about an imaginable future in a condensed way. This means that:

- the time frame is often manipulated in such a way that consequences of events and actions become observable in a shorter time than they would be in the actual situation
- the number of possible actions is also often restricted by the given context
- as a consequence, the design of a game makes it possible to observe the effects of external factors more directly
- we are confronted more directly with the consequences of our actions
- at the same time the reality of the situation is imitated as well as possible.

It is most important that the game represents a learning situation. The participants are being seduced to act in an ‘as if’ situation, while the setting provides an opportunity for experimenting, experiencing and learning.

Example: simulation of making contact with a client

In a five-day workshop on consulting skills, consultants are trained in social skills with respect to gaining entry to clients, intervening in conversations with clients in order to work towards results, discussing underlying problems and feelings, trying to get acceptance for a proposal and initiating meta-communication on the process. In several exercises, role playing is used as a method to try out new behaviour or to improve existing skills. However, the event which often has the greatest impact, and which even years later may remain in the memory of

former participants as a referential experience, is a whole day of simulation during which small teams of participants have meetings with 'clients' played by mystery guests.

Features

This game has the following features:

- there is a story in the form of a case study of a management team from a fictional organization that has a problem
- the participants in the workshop are invited to become part of this story in the role of consultant
- they try to make sense of the situation by listening to the different versions of the story told by the members of the client system, i.e. the management team.

The consultants take part by having conversations with the client (restricted in time and in a predefined order) and by trying to gain consent on a proposal for working towards a solution to the problem as discussed in these conversations. During the meetings with the members of the management team, all kinds of 'disruptive' events can happen, just as they do in a living organization. These are significant for the interpretation of the situation.

Each meeting with one or more people from the client system is short (15 minutes). The main objectives for the participants are:

- to achieve proper contact with the client
- to do this in a way that matches the participant's learning objectives
- to engage in a conversation that leads to a common understanding of the problem and the path towards its solution.

Before each meeting, every member of the client system is aware of the specific learning objectives of the consultants and they adjust their behaviour according to the learning needs of the participants. The participants work in small teams of consultants and at each meeting one person does not join the conversation but observes and gives feedback to his colleagues after the meeting. After every meeting, the team discusses progress but also prepares for the difficult moments of the meetings through role play or reconstructs them by trying out alternatives.

The trainers act as go-betweens, coaching both the clients in exhibiting behaviour that challenges the learning objectives of the participants, and the participants' teams in order to let them try out specific behaviour during and between the meetings. At the end of the day, the clients give the participants feedback about how they experienced the contact with the consultants. The clients stay in their roles until then. In a *démasqué* at the end, the true identity of the clients behind the roles is revealed.

Active ingredients

Several active ingredients can be distilled from this example. The puzzle in the clients' story is captivating; the participants are seduced to act on the situation as if there were a real challenge to find a proper solution. In actual fact, the content of this puzzle is merely a vehicle to support the learning process, which is directed at improving the communication skills of the consultants in contact with clients. The participants are kept in suspense because the clients never depart from their role (e.g. to give feedback between times, or to make small talk with the participants outside the meeting setting, or in their observable behaviour outside the meeting rooms). At the same time, participants are encouraged to use different points of view to observe their own behaviour as they work with the client towards an acceptable solution. Learning takes place in the 'here and now'. Participants are invited not to discuss their strategy much or the meaning of what is happening, but instead to use the time available as

effectively as possible by replaying the difficult moments of the contact after the meeting and by preparing for the next meeting by already demonstrating the behaviour that they will be experimenting with. After each meeting, there is direct and very specific feedback from the observer on the basis of clear and explicit learning objectives for this particular meeting. This feedback offers enough possibilities for trying out specific behaviour and is easily recognizable because it follows directly after the meeting with the client. The feedback at the end of the day only confirms what people have already discovered during the day and its main function is to reinforce what was successful.

The role of the trainers is also crucial: this simulation takes place after several days of intensive work with the participants on their skills. They have precise knowledge of the difficulties of each participant and are able to coach by demonstrating alternative behaviours.

Another example: changing positions

In a variety of learning situations, people are invited to present a case study taken from their own practice and to reflect on their actions in order to learn how to behave in a certain role. This could be in the setting of a consultation among colleagues ('peer group consultations') or in a training session or workshop like the one described above. The presenter describes a narrative of what happened, followed by a question (e.g. 'Did I act correctly?' or 'What am I missing?' or 'How can I proceed?'). In most of these consultation groups, reflective questions are then asked in order to raise awareness of the complexity of the issues involved and especially of the relationship of the case presenters to the case: how did they allow this case to develop into a question? What are their underlying assumptions? To what extent is the way in which they present the case and respond to questions from the others a means of defence to protect their already existing judgements and preconceived ideas? There is always tension between the need to talk about possible solutions and the aim of the consultation, i.e. to reflect on behaviour and underlying assumptions.

Clinics

In our practice we have developed a different approach, called 'clinics'. Case presenters are invited to sit on a chair opposite their former position and to identify with the opponent in their case. The others try out different interventions by taking on the former position of the case presenter who, as the opponent, responds as in a conversation. The case presenters now experience the possible effect of the alternative approaches in their current role of opponent. After each intervention, there is a brief reflection on what can be observed in this instance. After several interventions, the case presenters reassume their own role (in their original chairs) and try out the most promising intervention or combination of interventions. The underlying model is that we enrich the narrative by exploring different punctuations and by having the presenter shift from a telling to a listening and responding role. We explore several storylines and – in the position of the opponent – let presenters experience how a particular line could continue, until they find the best way for their own position. Using this method, case presenters are often shocked when they realize how much they have underestimated the reactions of the other person. The ability to take the perspective of the other into account is one of the basic conditions for social interaction (see Holtgraves, 2002). As a learning situation for consultation among colleagues, the game of changing perspectives fulfils the need of the participants to discover new solutions, or directions for solutions. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for reflection by discovering the different underlying dynamics that are acted out in the different storylines. And in the end, case presenters, although placed in a dependent role during the experimentation (they are available as objects for experimental interventions), retain control of their own experiences and what they wish to draw from them for the real-life situation.

We have discovered that this method can be applied in many situations, either in preparations with one or more colleagues before a difficult meeting or to evaluate what could have been done differently after a meeting. During the simulation described above, we have also taught the participants in our workshop to work with this method for the progress evaluations in between the meetings with the client.

Coping with resistance

We have discovered the power of changing punctuation; we invite people to explore different points of view and especially to place themselves in the position of the other, for example in the role of an opponent. We developed this basic idea in training programmes where people were willing to learn more about resistance on the part of opponents and how to deal with this. Simply by physically moving from one chair to another while at the same time taking up the role of the other and then moving back to your initial position proved to be a powerful way of dissociating yourself from your fixed point of view.

In these exercises we tried to split up the two positions: the first being the original one of the teller who presents a case where he or she experiences resistance from an opponent, the second being that of the opponent (the other) who will respond to the proposals, suggestions or interventions of the first party. When the case presenter shifts to the second position, he or she identifies with the opponent and experiences the effect of the interventions of those who take turns in assuming the first position.

The first part of the learning process is that participants begin to realize that it is difficult to decide whether the origin of resistance lies in the first or second position. Resistance appears to be more a mechanism of interaction. The second part is that by using punctuation to shift to another point of view, i.e. by temporarily identifying with the second position, we discover more creative ways to handle the situation from the point of view of the first position.

Nevertheless, for some people the temporary shift to the second position does not seem to work; it only serves to confirm their view that the other person was stubborn, inflexible and unwilling to comply with their 'reasonable' approach.

Benevolent other

We then invented a third position, that of 'benevolent, significant other'. We told case presenters that everybody has a friend who is sympathetic to their cause and understands their motivation. This is also true for their opponent, even if we do not know who that friend might be. We placed a third chair at a slightly oblique angle behind the chair for the second position and invited case presenters to sit there after they had shifted from the first to the second position. In the first two positions, they were asked to demonstrate the interaction between the two parties, but in the third chair they were asked 'as a friend' to explain how those in the second chair felt, what their motivation was, their positive intentions, the values they endorsed, and what was important for them to uphold in this conversation.

After this elaboration, 'the friend' was asked to give advice to the presenter on how to deal with the opponent. Then the presenters went back to their original position and were asked first to repeat what they had understood as advice from the 'friend' and then to decide what they were going to do with it. Finally, they were asked to demonstrate how they would do that.

It is interesting to see that this specific technique works very well, even for difficult cases. The narrative is pursued by the same person, the original teller who presented the case. But the punctuation is changed because the presenter takes a different point of view by going successively from position 1 to position 2, and to helping position 3, and then back to position 1.

There is an important role for the person asking questions. We presented this exercise as a coaching exercise. The coach prompts the teller to change positions and asks him or her to demonstrate or to explain. Furthermore, the coach keeps the case presenter in the narrative, drawing the presenter's attention to speaking in the 'I' form from the specific perspective of each position. If necessary the coach may correct the presenter.

It is very helpful to follow the tellers physically during their story by staying just one step behind them wherever they are at that moment in the room, and by repeating from time to time a phrase or keyword that they have just uttered. The aim here is to keep the teller in an almost trancelike state of both creative and 'realistic' imagination. It is important that the coach does not interfere by suggesting his or her own projections of ideas. Questions are formulated to keep the stream of thoughts flowing.

A systemic discovery

An important factor in the procedure of role changing described above is the attempt to break the loop of self-righteousness which is taken for granted. The change of position alters the point of view, bringing something new to the interaction pattern. In the 'clinics' example, interventions by others also contribute to new insights. In the 'significant benevolent other' example, this imaginary third person with specific qualifications playfully provokes a paradigm shift. In terms of Chris Argyris' theory, we shift from model 1 to model 2 thinking (Argyris, 1985). In all the examples presented, the presenter ultimately determines the outcome of the story. As a consequence, the case presenter retains control at the level of content.

We have stretched this methodology even further by expanding the system under consideration and by tapping even further into subconscious knowledge. The immediate reason for carrying out this exercise is a question from a client about his or her situation in the work environment. This client could be a participant in a workshop, or in a training course, a person being coached or someone in a consultation relationship.

The client is first asked to formulate the question and then to explain who else is involved in this question. All parties under consideration are mapped onto the surface of the room by placing name cards; the exact place of each party in this topography is the outcome of the distances perceived from the starting point where the presenter's card is placed (the first position). The presenter then takes up position beside the card of each party in turn, describing him or herself as that party and how – being identified with this party – he or she views the other parties on the map.

In the next step, the presenter chooses some crucial relationships in the network and takes up position equidistant from two of the parties, from where he or she describes (from the third position) the dynamics observed in the relationship between these two parties. This is repeated for another pair until the presenter is satisfied that the most crucial relationships have been described.

Until this point, the person guiding the presenter has only asked questions to help the presenter to formulate his or her description of some aspects of the dynamics in the system from the different points of view. But now the presenter is invited to look at the system as a whole.

The presenter is invited to establish some distance – literally – from the network on the floor and to look at the whole and give the observed dynamics a name, using a play, or a game or another metaphor. We call this the fourth position. The preceding steps can be seen as a process of induction which leads inevitably to the creative leap of formulating this metaphor. The next step is more difficult: the presenter is invited to take a position in the middle of the network on the ground and to identify with the metaphor: 'Suppose you were that play, what

would be your impulse or direction and what are your needs or desires?' We call this the fifth position.

We are always curious to see what answers the presenter comes up with at this stage in the exercise. Immediately after this, the presenter is asked to take a step outside the network (back to the fourth position) and to repeat what he or she has understood to be the answer from the fifth position and then to give advice first to the system as a whole and then to the presenter (in the light of the advice given to the whole). The last step implies that the presenter goes back to the starting position and repeats what he or she has understood as the advice received. The presenters are then asked whether they now know what to do and whether they can really see themselves taking the necessary steps in that direction. If presenters show any signs of doubt, the guide asks them to go back to the step where they gave advice to themselves and to respond from there to hesitations shown in the first position. This is repeated until the presenters have confirmed that they really have taken a decision.

Active ingredients

In the previous exercise, case presenters still do all the work on their own. They actually have at their disposal all the information needed, yet they take on an adventure that triggers their creativity and imagination. By identifying and dissociating with different perspectives, they not only change the punctuation of the story (see Choy, 2005), but also the aggregation level of the system under consideration, going from a small, single action to interaction and the system as a whole.

This continuous movement on the part of the storyteller, who at the same time is the observer, creates a state of mind where it is easy to find an image or metaphor that describes the whole. An important condition is that the coach who is guiding the teller in the process gives no suggestions whatsoever about the content of the story. The coach does not even have to fully understand what the tellers are talking about, as long as their inner process continues and they keep on the right path.

The fifth position in this procedure is the most interesting one. At that point, the teller knows what is needed for the whole. It is almost a magical moment. Here again, it is important that the coach does not interfere by using his or her own images, which are naturally triggered in the process. What follows is called 'chunking down', going back from the more complex to the simple situation of the teller – What will the teller do?

The coach's contribution here is to watch the tellers attentively – are they hesitant? Do they trust their intuition when an image (e.g. the metaphor) comes up? Do they really accept the advice that they formulated earlier from the position of outsider? If the coach does not entirely trust the process, he or she will ask the tellers to retrace some steps in their story until the coach is satisfied.

Transfer from the learning situation to real life

In all the examples above, some help is given by a trainer, a guide or a coach. Their role is to oversee the procedures and to stimulate the participant(s) to try out new behaviour, to discover new solutions and to find meaning in or understand a situation. Also important is the suggestion that participants can find their own answers that best suits their understanding or objectives as they see them.

At the same time, the learning situation more or less represents a real situation where the learned skills, attitudes, insights and plans may be applied in the future. In the case of the simulation game described above, the client system does not represent an actual organization, but has many of the properties that participants could encounter in an actual client system. In the other examples, the procedures are designed for participants to reflect on actual cases and situations. There is an opportunity for them to take the insights away and use them in the real

situation or a comparable one. The solutions found can be seen as a metaphor for what is still to come.

We may ask whether there is any guarantee that the learned insights and the skills exercised will be used in practice. What is the chance of transfer to a future situation? Here we have to make a distinction between the simulation and other exercises. The exercises are directed at acquiring new insights, discovering new meaning and gaining a new understanding. Learning is on the level of attitude, cognitions and vision. Insofar as these guide someone's behaviour, a change or redirection of behaviour (patterns) can be expected.

The simulation contains a drill (or training) of behaviour. It has the following ingredients: experimentation with alternatives, feedback and reinforcement of learned behaviour.

Nevertheless, our experience of working for more than 20 years with this specific game has shown that after some time, participants particularly remember the moments when they were emotionally shocked to realize that their habitual approach did not work out well, or had different effects than anticipated. The change of attitude resulting from this discovery was what stayed in their minds, more so than the specific skills they acquired. We believe strongly that integrating the 'clinics' described above into the simulation contributed greatly to this change of attitude.

A contrast: acting out difficult moments (as in a still)

As a contrast we would like to discuss a different approach, in which the aspect of 'training' is absent – in other words, where the trainer or consultant has no active role other than giving instructions for the exercise and perhaps facilitating the discussions afterwards.

When working with teams from an organization at conference meetings, a lot of ground can be covered by talking about their mission, strategy and plans for the future. However, we have discovered a playful but nevertheless very impressive way to make people more aware of their situation and the part that should be changed. We invited a group of participants to act out some significant moments taken from real-life situations or events in their organization. A group is given the task of designing a scene that represents a meaningful moment in the life of the organization and to present it to the others. The audience is asked afterwards to guess what the representation was about and to give some comments on the performance. A variation is to have a group first act out a significant situation as it is now and then as it will be in the future – the desirable state. Alternatively, a group is asked to represent in a still life (as in a photo or series of photos) a significant theme or value that represents an underlying theme in an organizational change process. No words are used in any of these scenes, as in a silent movie.

As an introduction to this type of play acting, I have excellent experience of first telling a short anecdote about what used to be called *tableaux vivants* or 'living pictures'. Before the era of television, families spent time together and sometimes gave performances for one another as a form of amusement. One of the forms that I remember well was to impersonate – without speaking – a scene from history or to display a virtue in a symbolic way and have the audience guess what the scene represented. In addition, setting up a stage is usually enough to get the participants started.

The narrative space

In the *tableau vivant* the active ingredient has less to do with the creation of a learning situation and more with acting out in a symbolic or practical way what people consider significant in an actual or ideal situation. The scene has the value of a metaphor; it represents in a condensed way what is valued by the participants. The audience has the important function of a mirror that reflects the performance. The interaction between the performers

themselves takes place in a space that creates meaning for the situational object. The interaction with the audience expands this space to the group as a whole. Elsewhere I have called this the narrative space, where the worlds of the storyteller and the listener meet and where ideas, experiences, feelings and other content of consciousness are exchanged (Breuer, 2007). This space is characterized by a willingness to tell and to listen to one another, an eagerness to search for meaning, attention being directed both inwards and outwards, interest in and respect for one another's differences in experience and feelings of safety and intimacy.

Conclusions

In hindsight, we can conclude that in all the instances discussed above the creation of a narrative space is an important condition for experimental learning, with the exception of *tableaux vivants*, where it has a different function: the transfer of meaning. We discussed some examples of acting in your own story, while observing, reflecting and learning at the same time:

- confronting the difficulty of applying newly learned behaviour and to demonstrate a newly acquired attitude in a simulated assignment by a client system with complex demands on different levels of understanding
- exploring alternative points of view by identifying with the other
- shifting punctuation in a discourse with an opponent and even recognizing his ~~your~~ friend's advice as something known internally
- being able to find the answer to a complex situation in a metaphor for the system as a whole.

All these internal movements while acting externally demand from the participant a versatility that is embedded in the story shared with the other actors in the games described. The setting of a narrative space opens up this possibility of experimenting, shifting positions, experiencing different points of view and finding meaning in an embracing metaphor.

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