

## **ART-BASED LEARNING: CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN CORPORATE CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper describes a participatory observation conducted over a period of three months regarding the impact of using improvisational theatre formats in an organization seeking to change its corporate culture. The relatively new concept of “art-based learning” (Jackson, 2007; Needlands, 2004; Nicholson, 2006) is a management training technique in which various issues are “acted out” in theatrical fashion. Since theatre creates a type of “meta-language” that allows and/or reinforces the generation of dialogue (Asikainen, 2003) by “making thought visible” (Boal, 1995, p.137), it can trigger in the participants a sense of ownership and interest in the targeted organisational structure, management, or customer oriented culture change and can be used as a catalyst for transformation. Six non-homogeneous groups, containing a maximum of twelve participants each, were observed in a theatre-based learning setting using three experiential and transformative theatrical arts-based processes/techniques. A formal evaluation of the programme’s efficiency showed that the number of proposals of innovative practices / tools generated by the “newly empowered” employees was substantial. In more than eighty percent of the cases, the participants’ capacity to reflect and gain new insights into non-traditional solutions and possibilities had increased, thus resulting in more innovative behaviour and practice.

**Key words:** Art-based learning, participant observation, corporate culture

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### **Introduction**

Let’s start with a quote from Polanyi (1967, p.4) that illustrates very well the notion of tacit knowledge that is important in practice-based organizational innovative processes (further “PBOIP”: *“I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that we can know more than we can tell. This fact seems obvious enough; but it is not easy to say exactly what it means. Take an example. We know a person’s face, and can recognize it among a thousand, indeed among a million. Yet we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know. So most*

*of this knowledge cannot be put into words.*” PBOIP are therefore focused on developing new thinking and acting frameworks in a creative and reflective manner in which the main stakeholders become actors of the change (Melkas & Harmaakorpi, 2012). Both public institutions and private companies have adopted the customers’ perspective as one of the most important aspects of organizational culture development. However, especially in times of a major organizational change, this “listening to the customer mantra” can create frustration in complex situations. According to Dewey (1993/1998, p.140), “*There is a troubled, perplexed, trying situation, where the difficulty is spread throughout the entire situation, infecting it as a whole.*” In this study, conducted in a company that rapidly changed its status from a public service provider to a private company, we strove to build upon Dewey’s philosophical approach to organizational learning through use of art by using Boal’s principle of facilitating learning within an organization through applied drama and theatre. Boal (1995) claimed that theatre is a way of forming knowledge through the creation of dialogue between a conceptual organizational framework and everyday practices and experiences. We consider ADT and Boalian theatre as a catalyst for clear articulation of experiences, relationships and performances within a given organizational structure. We also connected Dewey’s work to that of Boal (1979/2000) and Freire (1998). Theatre-based learning offers an innovative and genuine path to make institutionalized practices visible and reflect upon them or raise questions leading to their change in a consensual way.

## **1 The Organizational Challenge**

The market for electricity in Europe has been wholly deregulated since July 1, 2007. As a result, companies and households are free to choose their electrical supplier. As a way to spur competition, the generation of electricity and the distribution of electricity were broken into 2 distinct and separate activities in France. EDF (‘Electricité de France’) kept the activities linked to the generation of electricity, while ERDF (‘Electricité Réseau de France’) was created in 2008 to manage the electrical distribution network. This new entity, shortly after its establishment, faced a major management challenge. It was realized that the “ethos” of the new enterprise had to be different from that of its nominal parent company. EDF, being the dominant national electric company, and determined to maintain that dominant position, has a more commercial and competitive corporate culture. ERDF, on the other hand, has got a mandate to provide a level playing field to all new comers who wish to sell electricity in

France. As a result, its employees had to acquire new skills and competences that would allow them to serve all of their “customers” in a professional manner.

The management of ERDF was aware of the harsh difference between the official strategy of ERDF and the reality in the field of change management. ERDF felt that it needed to train its technicians and managers in order to instil in them a deep understanding of what exactly customer satisfaction and customer service was. Also, it was important to allow the employees to learn how to effectively listen to the customer and be able to understand and, where possible, anticipate their needs and provide additional services and increase the value that their activities provided and further develop employees’ skills and competences regarding effective customer service and customer relationship management.

## **2 Research Setting**

The company accepted the researchers’ team proposal to experiment with interactive and innovative teaching tools and methods, combined with current best practices in the field of customer relationship building, based on ADT. It was accepted to conduct a participatory observatory study resulting in the present paper.

Participants were invited to reflect and gain new insights into non-traditional solutions and possibilities that they might not have otherwise developed on their own; questions such as what is occurring in this particular scene, why is it happening, what should be done differently in the participant’s opinion, what were the thoughts hidden behind the words or gestures, etc. were asked in an open forum through art-based elicitation methods. The latter allowed for multiple-channel and multi-voiced interactions enhancing the quality of participants’ learning.

## **3 Research Design, Methodology and Process**

The research design of the present study is qualitative. From the methodological viewpoint, the chosen set of tools combines action and arts-based research and allows to address organizational issues in an holistic and engaging manner through intertwined general theories and specific practices (Leavy, 2009).

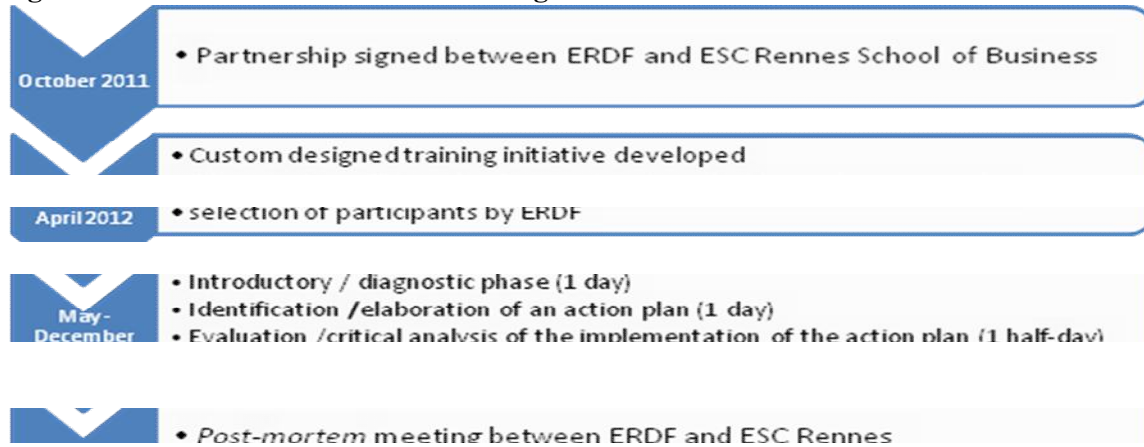
Seventy ERDF employees were selected and were divided into groups of eight to twelve people each. The groups were deliberately comprised of both blue collar in-field technicians and white collar business development specialists and engineers. This diversity was deemed as being useful, for it would act as a catalyst towards creating inter-personal dialogue, aided by theatre techniques which would allow for both the expressing and

challenging of individual views, attitudes and effective behaviour. Group dynamics were further enhanced by the fact that some of the employees were former workers from the parent company EDF and therefore had a “legacy” or “institutional” outlook. Other employees were former technicians who had been promoted to business engineers, while others were new recruits from outside the company.

Two ADT formats were chosen by the facilitators; “improvisational wrestling” and “improvisational cabaret”. As the name implies, in improvisational wrestling two actors “fight” verbally and artistically in a “ring” based on topics suggested by the “spectators” (the participants of the training initiative). The length of improvisation varies from between 3 to 10 minutes and there is a “referee” (the participant who suggested the performed topic). Improvisational cabaret is an alternative, and calmer, form of improvisational wrestling. It is much simpler and easier to organize and run (no “ring” or “referees”). The group participants are the ones who determine the topics and the way the improvisation should be performed (in the format of a musical, drama, comedy, etc.). Here, the actors invited participants to take part in the improvisational exercises and sketches. The logic behind using the above two methods was to provide the non-homogeneous groups with the following experiential and transformative theatrical arts-based processes/techniques: (i) Projective techniques: revealing tacit and embodied collective knowledge as well as individual inner feelings and hidden unconscious processes. (ii) Critical reflection: identifying and raising awareness of social / inter-professional structures inside the organisation in order to discover various process and structural overlaps. (iii) Generative questioning: exploration and understanding of how individuals inside the organisation experience various aspects of issues or *phenomena*.

The training and participatory research was carried over a period of three months. Based on these pre-planning interviews, structured brainstorming sessions and workshops, we proposed an action-based learning initiative consisting of six two-and-half-day training sessions. Figure 1 provides a complete timeline of the current research based on the ADT based experimentation.

**Fig. 1: Timeline of the ADT based learning initiative**



#### 4 Results and Findings

The present experiment “broke” the classical linear analytical approach in current management processes at ERDF and introduced an innovative and holistic process based on collective interpretation and ADT based learning (see table 1).

**Table 1: A comparison of the classical “Linear Analytical” approach to problem solving vs. a “Holistic Interpretative Approach”**

	<b>Linear Analytical Approach (Classical Method)</b>	<b>Holistic Interpretative Approach (Theatre-based learning Method)</b>
<b>Focus</b>	On a project with precisely defined timeline	On a process which is open-ended
<b>Thrust</b>	To solve problems defined for the project	To troubleshoot process malfunctions and develop corrective actions, share best practices
<b>Goals</b>	Set by line managers	Are ambiguous, evolve during the process
<b>Managers</b>	“Command and Control” issuing of orders in order to resolve CRM problems	Line managers are “invited” to share the subordinates’ problems encountered and to explore ambiguity in CRM
<b>Communication</b>	Is based on precise, technical exchange of information	Is context-dependent, using metaphors and semi-determined.

Especially in the first stage the theatrical formats were deemed as being essential for the creation of a group dynamic through a sort of shared “meta-language” (Asikainen, 2003; Heikkinen, 2002) that allowed and reinforced the generation of dialogue within the group and between the group and the researchers by “making thought visible” (Boal, 1995, p.137). It also triggered in the participants a sense of ownership and interest in the targeted ERDF

organisational structure, management, and customer oriented culture. The function of improvisational theatre was fulfilled as it acted as a catalyst for change and positively engaged the participants. Furthermore, some issues that the participants were not willing to address spontaneously were revealed and brought into the ‘daylight’ by the professional actors on the facilitator team. As such, they allowed participants facing difficult customer relationship issues with phantom customers to disengage themselves from the context and the specific elements of the problem at hand. They were then able to focus on the underlying “inter-textual” hidden agenda issues and progressively channel an intuitive yet logical and emotionally sound understanding of the current way customer relationships are managed at ERDF.

After the introductory / diagnostic phase composed of art-based exercises the participants were comfortable and had entered what the facilitators referred to as a “reflection zone.” This opened up new perspectives based on their own experiences, reframe them through art, allowing for critical observation, the expression of unconventional ideas and the generation of innovative solutions without fear of reproach. The conceptual framework of this stage is presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Conceptual framework for setting critical reflection organizational dynamic**

Characteristics	Focus	Goal	Key elements to pursue
To identify and question the established and taken-for-granted beliefs and processes	To question and challenge existing practices	1. To critically evaluate and transform processes through improved competences linked to productivity and customer satisfaction 2. To generate work and learning frameworks that would lead to improved work satisfaction, quality, and a better overall professional life	1. Increased autonomy and employee empowerment 2. Pride in providing excellent quality of customer service through professional and clear procedures 3. Transformation of organisational procedures linked to the delivery of customer service and customer satisfaction

An action plan was elaborated conjointly by the participants with active support of the facilitators based on current customer relationship theories and the latest best practices related it to in-house ERDF practices. The participants were invited to contribute to the creation of a “tool box” composed of: (i) A New Paradigm: envision what an ideal and genuine ERDF customer relationship managerial culture would consist of. (ii) A Road Map: prioritizing goals, actions, and best practices in order to reach the above customer relationship managerial culture. (iii) Knowledge creation related to the collective corporate memory of past EDF practices, but at the same time trying to be future oriented in order to build a genuine

customer relationship culture that all stakeholders would be proud of. (iv) Evaluation of the means to reach the prioritized goals.

A formal document containing both the collective knowledge co-built as well as a customized individual action plan for each participant was provided by the facilitators to the management of ERDF.

An “After session”, held two months after the completion of the training, allowed participants to amend and adjust the initial “tool box” and provide feedback on both the individual and collective progress that was made. The participants were eager and proud to provide testimonials about their improvements and willingness to take part in all of these steps, as well as to prepare theatrical sketches that showed the evolution of their customer relationship managerial structures/processes/practices.

## Conclusion

The present study explored and described a transformational process in a complex organization enhanced through ADT.

ERDF management highlighted the fact that this training initiative allowed the participants to understand ERDF’s goals and contributed to creating an *esprit de corps*. The company felt that there was a substantial amount of progress made with regards to making the transition from a traditional public service oriented organization to a more team-based customer service oriented one (see table 3).

**Table 3: Evolution of corporate culture and organizational behaviour at ERDF**

<b>Traditional Organization (Public Service Oriented)</b>	<b>Team-based Organization (Team-based Customer Oriented)</b>
Management driven and controlled	Customer Driven and team regulated
Information flow is top-down and limited	Information abundant and shared
Many levels of management	Limited levels of management
Linear incremental organizational changes	Continuous organizational improvements
Seemingly organized	Seemingly chaotic
High management commitment through the use of authority	High employee commitment through empowerment

It was estimated that 20 per cent of participants were what could be described as “early adopters” and jumped eagerly at the offered opportunity for empowerment. 75 per cent of participants, according to ERDF management, accepted empowerment and were able to thrive under it. Only 5 per cent were deemed as being “left out,” unable to move past their “nostalgia

for the good old days.” As one of the participants stated, it was “*something I have been waiting to be able to do for a long time.*”

## **Acknowledgment**

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