



DRAMAIDE AND LIVE DRAMA

Raising young people's awareness about HIV/AIDS in a creative,
interactive and engaging way

Fredrick Mugira



African forefathers used the performing arts in different ways to communicate, and not for entertainment only. Colonialists too used the performing arts to stamp out paganism from the African continent –a successful strategy. Today, when HIV/AIDS is a major problem worldwide, several organizations are using them to sensitize people about the pandemic. DramAidE, based in KwaZulu Natal, province of South Africa, is an example.

When members of the DramAidE Club from the Sisebenzile Secondary School in KwaZulu Natal, province of South Africa, went on stage to sing before a crowd of about 300 students from the neighbouring communities at Ndwendwe Community hall in November 2006, little did they know that the audience would stand up, dance and sing with them. By the end of their traditional song, which contained information about safer sex, condom use and prevention of HIV/AIDS in general, even those who had not stood up to dance were swinging their heads to the tunes of the song as they keenly glued their eyes on the performers. The more the audience cheered, the more the performers were invigorated to perform.

This scene is not fictional. I actually witnessed it as I undertook the exploratory study on which this article is based.

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THE RATIONALE OF DRAMAIDE

Drama AIDS Education, **DramAidE**, uses participatory drama and other interactive educational methodologies to tackle the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is a project based in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), which has the highest HIV prevalence rate in South Africa. It endeavours to equip young people with increased knowledge about HIV/AIDS and the skills to inform and communicate with others about sexual health.

DramAidE was initiated in 1992 at the University of Zululand, as a project

within the Department of Drama. It has since then grown into a unit in the Department of Drama and a unit in the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As part of its methodologies, DramAidE uses drama to engage young people to communicate effectively about issues related to sex, sexuality and HIV/AIDS and thus facilitates critical awareness and provides information.

It does this through a range of cultural activities such as the performance of songs, dance, poetry and plays, educational theatre, forum theatre and arts workshops. Such activities engage young people, and their involvement in the programme allows them to personalize the risk of AIDS in their communities and to develop skills to be able to cope with the epidemic.

DramAidE has also created a network of peer educators organized in clubs, who practice safer sex and other positive behaviours. The clubs are meant to provide avenues for peer educators to undertake health-promoting communication campaigns through action media that involves plays, posters, songs and dances created by young people through a participatory process. DramAidE works within all educational levels in KZN: primary, secondary and tertiary.

AIDS COMMUNICATION

Many developing countries have been devastated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic for over 24 years now. Several countries in sub Saharan Africa, where two thirds of all people who have HIV in the world live, have suffered for even longer, with generations of citizens who do not know what it is like to live in an HIV/AIDS free society. Such countries include South Africa, where my exploratory study of the impact of DramAidE was carried out.

The problem of HIV/AIDS manifests itself in subtle ways as an increased inability to participate in social activities and to unearth potentials, ill health, domestic violence, and orphanage -all of them connected to persistent poverty.

Ever since the HIV/AIDS pandemic broke out worldwide, several communication initiatives have been used to address it. Radio, television and print have been used to attempt at creating awareness about HIV/AIDS. However, the HIV prevalence rates have remained high in several countries or are even rising, a situation that is threatening the realization of the Millennium Development Goal aimed at halting and

reversing of the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015.

Messages seem to be getting through at a slow pace: people might listen, but they take no action. Indisputably, there is a need to rethink the communication initiatives being used to address this problem. As Panos (2003) has observed, there is real fear that if the current mobilization against HIV/AIDS fails, then humanity will turn its back on one of the gravest public health crises in humanity history.

Despite this situation, there have been certain success stories in terms of communications strategies used by some organizations to tackle the pandemic. Such strategies hold important lessons for the current and future responses to HIV/AIDS. One of these strategies is the use of live drama to raise awareness.

Considering the theoretical approaches that maintain that emotional messages in drama, music, and humour used in Entertainment-Education approaches to communication are more readily accepted by audiences and more likely to lead to behaviour change than messages with low emotional content, it is reasonable to assume that live drama is useful in raising young people's awareness about HIV/AIDS.

In my exploratory study of DramAidE, I aimed at better understanding how live drama is perceived and experienced by youth audiences and their teachers. This case study was informed by in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, e-mail interviews, direct observations and a desktop review of literature¹. Work focused on five secondary schools of Sisebenzile, Mabayana, Hloniphani, Lihlihemba and Sondoda. Particularly, it concentrated on the young people between the ages of 15 and 22.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS LIVE DRAMA

My exploratory study suggested that the young people who watch live drama but also take part in it like it. It attracts their attention. Therefore, it is likely that as they develop an interest in it, the chances of getting the messages embedded in it also increase. If those messages were put into practice, a positive way of thinking and behaviour would be achieved.

Students who participated in the focus group discussions led as part of my exploratory study² used the following six positive qualities to describe live drama: "enjoyable", "good", "exciting", "interesting", "creative" and "interactive." It is important to mention there that by communicating to

the young people through live drama, DramAidE organization hooks them because drama itself is seen as, interesting, fun, informative, educative, good, and exciting. This would suggest that DramAidE's messages embedded in live drama reach the intended audiences, since the audiences seem to like the channel.

IMPACT OF DRAMAIDE'S LIVE DRAMA ON YOUNG PEOPLE

My exploratory study suggested that DramAidE's live drama had influenced behaviour change amongst the students and other members of the schools and neighbouring communities who watched it. Teachers in particular said that students had acquired knowledge on how HIV/AIDS is transmitted and prevented, and were now able to take informed decisions as far as sex is concerned. They also stated that reported cases of sexual harassment, especially of girls by boys, had diminished in their schools. In their view, through live drama girls had acquired assertiveness skills and could now say "no" to demanding boys. Moreover, teachers also mentioned that some members of DramAidE who are seen as role models in their schools have greatly improved their school performance, since they want to be seen as role models in every field.

Students in turn expressed that through watching DramAidE's live drama, they have acquired knowledge about pregnancy, their rights, and the dangers of HIV/AIDS, how it is spread, how it could be prevented and controlled, and how to take responsible choices, avoid being aggressive, respect other people, abstain and use condoms.

My exploratory research suggested that the young people interviewed had been empowered by the DramAidE's live drama by gaining knowledge about different issues on HIV/AIDS. In in-depth interviews, two trainers of DramAidE said that, as years went by, they had observed that the behaviours of the learners who watch and of those who take part in performing the drama pieces had changed. They stressed that the drama pieces had showed the learners the problem of HIV/AIDS and other related harms, helping them explore the causes and find solutions. Trainers also said that pregnancy rates among female learners have decreased over the years. They talked of how students now live responsible lives, and know where to get counselling services, where to buy condoms and how to use them, and the advantages of abstaining.

It is important to note, however, that young people access messages on HIV/AIDS through several channels. It is not DramAidE's live drama alone that led the youths to change, but rather a combination of information through other channels.

PARTICIPATION

Besides being entertaining, according to my exploratory research live drama is also participatory, in combining entertainment to educate and inform the young members of the audience, which helps them participate in finding solutions to the HIV/AIDS problem.

In live drama, members of the audience can be part of the plot. Live drama transforms the audience into actors and enhances personal interaction between individuals.

DramAidE's manager also stressed that live drama "gives space for dialogue." In the same way, several scholars have strongly argued that drama, especially when live, is participatory because it brings the audience and the communicators together at the same time and in the same place, and therefore involves and engages the community as a whole (Tufte, 2005; Barman, 1998; Singhal and Rogers, 1999; Kincaid, 2001; Mwansa et al, 2003; Kamlongera, 2005).

This corresponds to information provided by students, who contended that they are able to take part in what is presented to them and spoke of how they are able to ask if they do not understand, how they are able to correct information they think is wrong, and how they include what they want in the plays.

Live drama is participatory in that it involves members of the audience in the communication process. However, it is important to note that some other communication channels do offer this kind of advantage, e.g. radios, television programmes where one is able to call in and become part of the programme.

USING ENTERTAINMENT TO EDUCATE AND COMMUNICATE HIGHLY SENSITIVE INFORMATION

My exploratory study suggested that with live drama, DramAidE was able to put across messages that are about serious matters in an entertaining and more acceptable way. Live drama can combine entertainment to educate and pass on highly sensitive information such as that concerning sex and sexuality onto the audience. When it comes to HIV/AIDS, live drama shows sensitivity and relates to the lives of young people in an easy way.

The students I interviewed were interested in live drama because it entertains them. They talked of how they are able to “dance”, “sing”. Some male students talked of how they are able to “copy dancing strokes” from the performers and “shout at the performers”. However, the shortcoming here is that some members of the audience might concentrate on entertaining themselves and relegate the highly sensitive information embedded in the drama.

UNICEF’ Angola Communication Officer said in an interview that messages in live drama have high emotional content because what is happening is live. He stressed that members of the audience are able to relate to what is happening easily because it is live and they can see the cast being like them, which makes them feel that what happens to the cast could happen to them too.

DramAidE’s live drama offers to the young people entertainment that they like. Moreover, as the young people enjoy themselves, communicators are able to pass on to them serious and sensitive information. DramAidE’s live drama is for and by the young people. Young people perform to fellow young people and share with them their own experiences. They are therefore agents of their own change, a change facilitated by the highly emotional live drama.

INTEGRATING LIVE DRAMA IN HIV/AIDS COMMUNICATION

My exploratory suggested that if live drama were integrated into HIV/AIDS communication, it would help in the following ways:

- Reflecting on sensitive topics like HIV, sex, condom, discrimination and homosexuality in a form of story telling and triggering the audience to comment, to discuss and to think.
- Distributing information through lively performance, demonstrating the process and illustrating the consequences in a visual way, which helps the young people to understand the difficult medical terms and remember the knowledge.
- Including the young people in the script development, the performance and the promotion gives them ownership and at the same time develops their talents and a passion for educating on HIV/AIDS issues.
- Making both the communicators and the members of the audience part of

the solution to the problem. Communicators and members of the audience are all part of finding solutions to the problems at hand - HIV/AIDS and its related ills.

- Building stronger relationships between performers, who see themselves as sisters and brothers with a common cause: telling others about HIV/AIDS.
- Communicating the dangers of HIV/AIDS in a different, entertaining and uncommon way.

However, on the other side, my exploratory research suggested that the impact of live drama might be limited due to several factors.

- Its development and the preparation of performances require a budget to cover expenses such as e.g. costumes. They also take a lot of student's time to train and rehearse plays, songs and dances.
- The audience is not constant –i.e., it is subject to a one-time influence, and members of the audience might forget what they saw quite quickly.
- The audience might put into practice the bad ideas they watch in drama to find out for themselves if things said in the play are real. Drama has a greater impact on members of the audience when they identify with one of the characters in the play. However, if such a character is a negative one, then harm rather than good could be caused.

LESSONS LEARNT

My exploratory study suggested that young people do not get information about HIV/AIDS from the media only, but also through the social networks in which they interact. This signals the importance of interpersonal communication for health promotion. Despite the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies, young people still rely more on social channels of communication (with their families, neighbours and friends) as a source. My exploratory research led me to consider that communication strategies meant to raise young people's awareness about HIV/AIDS (aimed at helping them adopt protective behaviours such as using condoms, abstaining or going for counselling) should never use a single communication channel but rather a variety of them. Radio, television, theatre, printed media, training opportunities and hospitals as well as family members, counsellors and teachers, neighbours and friends are part of such a variety.

However, radio was the most used source of information on HIV/AIDS in the case of those young people approached in the study.

Live drama can be a better communication tool than radio, television and print in disseminating crucial information targeted towards changing young people's attitude to appreciate the dangers of HIV/AIDS pandemic to protect themselves against it. With such characteristics, certainly live drama hooks the audience and as the audience listens, interacts with the communicators and as all these go on the message is absorbed. It is also important to note that most of these characteristics of live drama such as participatory and fun are minimal in print, radio and television.

Sensitive concepts like sex, abstinence, condoms and their use and HIV test can be explained best through live drama than other communication channels.

Live drama can be more participatory and interactive than print, radio, and television. HIV/AIDS is more pronounced amongst the youth across sub-Saharan African and mobilization is a feasible tool to tackle the effects of the pandemic, which has no cure yet. Mobilization is more effective when communication makes the audience participate and interact physically. In live drama, the audience owns up the message through emotional attachment.

Participation takes place inasmuch live drama moves from merely informing and persuading the young people to change their behaviours and attitudes towards facilitating an exchange between different stakeholders to address particular problems.

As my exploratory study suggested, participation ensures the effective circulation of information amongst participants. It facilitates dialogue and the exchange of ideas among the cast and the members of the audience, and supports the identification and realization of concrete action and of the solutions to the problems faced.

Live drama has an edge compared to printed media, television and radio in that it employs entertainment to educate and persuade the young people to adjust their conducts and attitudes, with the potential for a more immediate effect. Indeed, the young people I interviewed liked entertainment. They enjoyed dancing, singing, rapping.... They showed a favourable attitude and appreciated the use of live drama in making them aware of HIV/AIDS.

The main advantage of live drama as suggested by my exploratory study is that it offers a participatory environment, where both the entertainers and those being entertained engage in the action together. This is impossible with recorded radio and television. Live drama provides a high degree of emotion and brings the members of the audience close to the cast.

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1. I carried out 3 in-depth interviews with members of DramAidE Organization. Two Focus Group Discussions were held. They involved students from the 5 schools which this study concentrated on. Twenty students from 5 schools were engaged in these discussion groups. Out of 7 Health Communication experts whom I requested to have email interviews with, only 4 accepted. Two students and 5 teachers who are the focal persons for the DramAidE organization in their particular schools gave oral testimonies (recorded on tape and later analyzed).

2. Twenty students from 5 schools were engaged in Focus Groups Discussions, both boys and girls, aged 15 to 22.

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