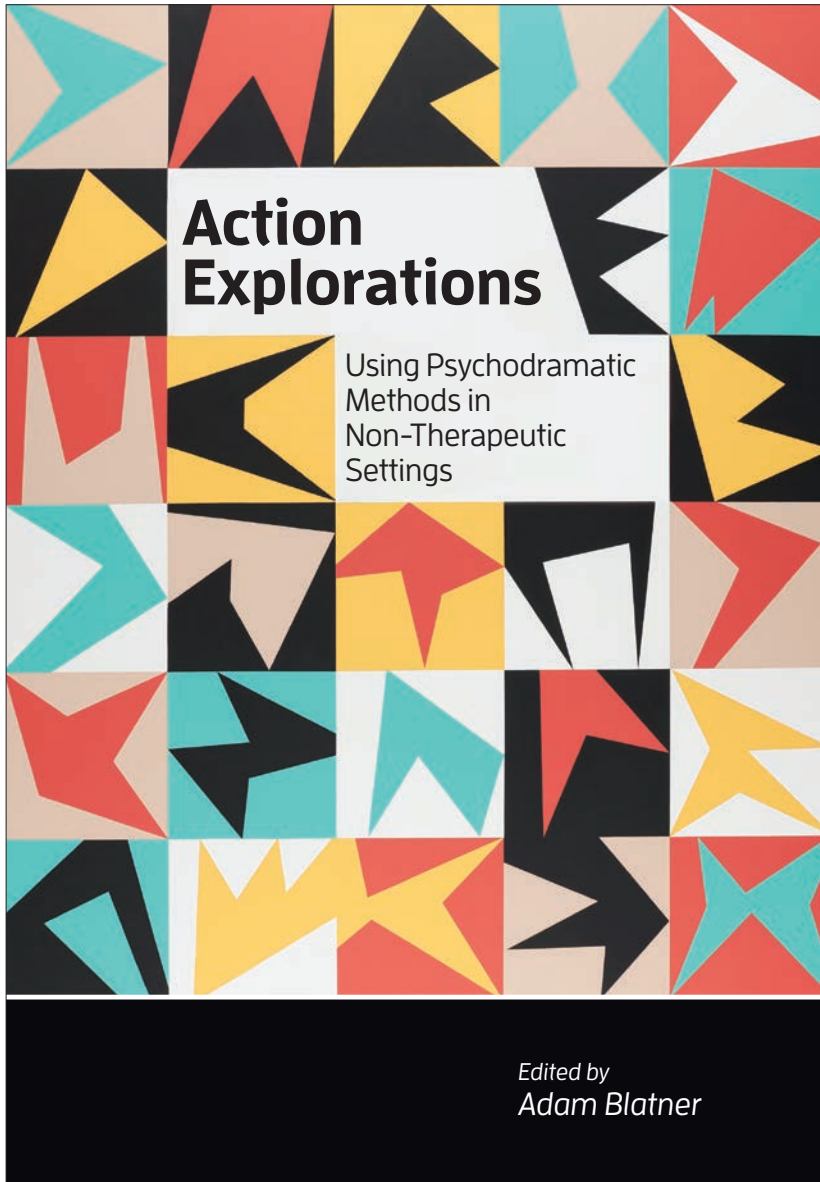


Using Action Methods to Facilitate Collective Intelligence

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Using Action Methods to Facilitate Collective Intelligence

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English translation by Kathleen Llanwarne

Because they provide a means of enabling groups to consider a single situation from a different angle, action methods can be a way of accessing new ideas, resources, and solutions. As such, they foster creativity, agility, and the development of collective intelligence within groups.

Over and above a description of the requisite techniques and tools, the general approach adopted by our book is steeped in a deep awareness of, and sensitivity to, human relations, thereby providing answers to the important question of just what it is that can enable a group to become more alive. This overall approach will enable a wide range of practitioners—trainers, consultants, supervisors, facilitators, coaches, academics, teachers, managers, coordinators, presenters, politicians, mediators, or facilitators—to gain, regardless of personal background and style, inspiration for their own particular form of professional practice.

Placing trust in the strength of the group

In the 1930s Jacob Levy Moreno revealed his genius by introducing into the world of psychology the notions of ‘setting in movement’, ‘experiencing the here and now’, and ‘role-playing’. These innovations stemmed from the strength inherently present in groups and from the way in which individuals find themselves able, by taking on and playing roles, to develop new facets of themselves.

Today once again, a younger generation of visionaries such as the Belgian writer Frédéric Laloux,¹ are stressing the importance of the group which they designate using the term ‘collective intelligence’. They are referring to a form of osmosis, to the emergence of a moment at which the group develops its own momentum, identity, and intelligence: something ‘gels’, and the whole thereby becomes something more than the sum of its parts. This is what happens in an orchestra, or within a sports team, when the group takes on a form of autonomy from which there emanates a new quality of harmony.

Collective Intelligence refers to a context in which group interaction gives rise to something more than the sum of the individual persons constituting it. The group becomes, in and of itself, an entity endowed with its own intelligence.

Professionals in the workplace are constantly seeking answers to significant questions. How can we create a context for innovation? How can we welcome and adapt to change? How can we be clearer about who should do what? What ways can we find of improving communication? Or of becoming more efficient? Or more creative?

The action methods devised by Jacob Levy Moreno are a set of levers designed to stimulate creativity, co-construction, and the ability of teams of professionals to view a situation from different angles. It soon becomes apparent that it is through looking ‘in new directions’ and thinking ‘out of the box’ that such teams can tune into their collective intelligence, thereby gaining access to new resources, ideas, ways forward and action strategies.

It is a question of putting in place contexts in which collective intelligence can flourish, something which we set out to illustrate in this article by means of two examples taken ‘from the field’ in which facilitators instil momentum and action into professionals’ efforts to carry forward their own tasks, responsibilities and ambitions. It is a question, in other words, of creating contexts that will enable professionals to find their own answers to their own questions and to carry their efforts forward in a spirit of collective intelligence.

The ‘empty chair’ technique

Here a facilitator is meeting, for the first time, two senior representatives of an organisation. For the first half hour the two professionals have been explaining that the reason they need help is that the level of motivation among their staff is dwindling. Colleagues are manifestly less committed to their work, and conflict

¹ Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing Organisations—A guide to Creating Organisations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Nelson Parke.

is on the increase. After listening to the two leaders, the facilitator proposes the following course of action:

Facilitator: would you agree that we take this chair standing here at the table and use it to represent your organization? I would propose, if you would agree, to come to stand behind this chair and to ‘repeat back’ to you what I have understood of the problem you are experiencing. I shall do this using a special approach that consists of speaking ‘on behalf’ of the organization.

The facilitator then gets up, comes to stand behind the empty chair representing the organization, and begins to speak ‘on behalf’ of the organization:

Facilitator: (*standing behind the chair representing the organization*) I, the organization, have been in existence for more than 40 years and I was first set up by a group of very committed individuals. At the present time I am aware that my staff are running out of steam and am wondering what I can do to regain their motivation and commitment to my project. I’m very aware that the atmosphere is conflict-ridden and would so much like to see things running smoothly once more. So what I’m wondering is just what can be done to get people to work together in a more cooperative fashion.

The facilitator, returning now to her own seat, questions the two senior representatives:

Facilitator: Does what you have just heard make any sense to you? Do you feel that these comments are in line with the questions you are asking? What do you have to say in response?

The two senior representatives are now able to express their position more clearly:

Jack (senior representative): Yes, that’s exactly how it is! What I would add is that our staff need guidance if they are to find more cooperative ways of working. So what we need from you is that you give them some space in which to express themselves and to practice co-construction, as well as offering us some advice in management terms.

The fact that the facilitator chose to play the role of the organization and that, to do this, she stood up and went to speak behind an empty chair, had created a surprise effect. What we see here is a form of meta-communication: by ‘bringing into play’ the organization, the facilitator ‘brings to life’ something

that, until then, had been merely ‘reported’ by the senior representatives. The role-playing stance adopted by the facilitator was an enlivening experience for the two leaders. Their attention was sparked by what was going on. And it was in this live setting that the senior representatives of the organization were able to state more clearly exactly what it was that they wanted and needed.

The facilitator, for her part, in deciding to play a role in this way, was choosing to ‘jump in at the deep end’. She was taking a risk in creatively ‘repeating back’ what she had understood.

When there is sufficient trust within a group or team of workers, the empty chair technique can be used, for example, in a meeting situation. The mere presence of this empty chair, because of what it is being used to represent, alters people’s habitual modes of thinking, thereby creating new information.

Facilitator: I would propose that anyone who so wishes should come to stand behind the empty chair that I am placing here and that represents our company. From this vantage point, you can say ‘something’ on behalf of the company.

An empty chair is brought in to represent, for example, a person, a group, an organization, and is invited to speak. This is a way of fostering spontaneity and creativity.

Frédéric Laloux,² in his highly successful book *Reinventing organizations*, illustrates in what way the empty chair technique can be used in a workplace meeting to represent a third party, in this case the company, in order to spark communication. This ‘staging’ procedure brings in a playful element that is devoid of judgment. Rather than representing the company, the empty chair can represent a project, a product, the client, the claimant, *etc.* When this type of technique is used in a meeting, it is essential to first request the group’s consent, as a means of checking up on and ensuring participants’ commitment to and involvement in the process. It is also important that there should be a person present to facilitate this action technique by encouraging role-playing and sometimes actually inviting people to get up and come to speak from behind the empty chair.

Participants will then get up and play the role of whatever the chair is representing, thereby opening up the field of communication by means of ‘out of the box’ enactment.

² Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing Organisations—A guide to Creating Organisations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Nelson Parke.

The facilitator may also choose to accompany the role-taking by coming to stand next to the empty chair:

Facilitator (standing next to the empty chair): What is the direction in which I, the company, wish to move? And at what speed?

Manager (standing behind the empty chair): I would like to broaden my field of action and gain access to new clients, but I want to take the necessary time for a proper market analysis.

Facilitator (standing next to the empty chair): What is my dream as a company?

Manager (standing behind the empty chair): my dream is to travel to other countries.

Facilitator (standing next to the empty chair): What do I, the company, think about what people are saying here around this table? What are my feelings about it all?

Manager (standing behind the empty chair): I've noticed that there are some here who have remained silent; I'd be interested to hear what they have to say.

Facilitator (standing next to the empty chair): Do I, the company, believe that we are being excessively bold? Or perhaps not bold enough?

Manager (standing behind the empty chair): We could allow ourselves to be much bolder than we are. We're too afraid of catching cold! An injection of folly would do us no harm! (laughing)

The facilitator can launch other types of cue:

Facilitator (standing next to the empty chair): Are there some other topics that I, the company, would like to discuss? Do I, the company, consider that the decisions taken are likely to prove beneficial? What is my stance now at the end of this meeting?

It is to be noted that the empty chair technique can be used in two different ways:

- 'Spontaneous' version: an empty chair represents, for example, the company and anyone who so wishes is at any time free to get up and come to speak from behind the empty chair, playing the role of the company.

- ‘Sequential’ version: a quarter of an hour is set aside during which participants who so wish can stand up and come to speak on behalf of the chair that represents, in this case, the company, after which a debriefing period is allowed to discuss what has been happening.

Representation

A facilitator is giving an aggressiveness management course in a local authority department. He proposes that, for the last part of the training, the director should also attend, to enable an exchange to take place on the work of the preceding two days. The director, before agreeing, has asked to speak alone with the facilitator to whom he explains his concern:

Director: I’m prepared to attend the closing session of the training but I am adamant that this meeting must not turn into a trade union confrontation. I am quite ready to listen to feedback on the training, but not to institutional demands.

The facilitator has understood the director’s point. He knows too that the staff have plenty to say, in particular about their dissatisfaction with the way the local authority operates.

This situation could well prove impossible, because to ask a person or group to abstain from ‘making demands’ will inevitably strengthen their inclination to do so.

As a means of working with the presence of the director together with his staff, the facilitator has chosen to use a ‘representation’: he positions two empty chairs in the work area and then addresses the group as a whole (staff plus director) as follows:

Facilitator: I’ve placed two empty chairs here in our midst and I would like to tell you, if you agree, what I have understood about what matters most to you during this time for exchange while you are all together. To assist us, I have positioned one chair to represent the staff and one to represent the director. I am going to speak ‘on behalf’ of each of the two chairs, and you will tell me whether I have understood things correctly.

The facilitator goes to stand first of all behind the chair representing the staff and thus takes on the role of the local authority employees:

Facilitator (behind the staff chair): we, the staff, have a strong need for dialogue with our hierarchical superiors and a large number of things to say. We appreciate the fact that our director has agreed to attend, and we would like to take this

opportunity to describe our experience and make a number of points concerning the way our offices are run.

The facilitator then moves on to speak from behind the chair representing the director:

Facilitator (behind the director's chair): I, the director, am here for just one hour and I need to be absolutely sure that our time here together will be well spent. As such, I need each one of you to come up with some constructive proposals.

The facilitator, returning to his own seat, then addresses the group as a whole:

Facilitator: would you say that the points I made while taking on your roles coincide with the way you feel? Is there something that struck you particularly? Do you have anything to add? Or to object to or comment upon?

The 'representation' places both the staff and the director in the same situation of adopting a position in relation to what is taking place. And it is an experience that will serve to connect them rather than oppose them to each other.

Following the facilitator's intervention, participants comment as follows:

Director: yes, that's exactly right.

Participant (to director): It's true that it's important for you that we should have places where we are able to express ourselves.

Director (to staff): yes, it is important for me too. That's why I came into your offices quite recently, to be close to you and gain a better understanding of the reality of your working conditions. But there are some among you who thought that I had come to exercise control, and so I stopped coming in the way I had previously.

Participant (to director): personally, I appreciated the fact that you came into our offices because it showed that you were paying attention to our work.

Participant (to director): in our department, everything is a mess. We can't cope with the work load and we fail to communicate well among ourselves. The claimants are becoming increasingly

aggressive and one reason for this is that they have to queue for too long before being seen.

Director: yes, I am very well aware that this department is not performing well. And arrangements are underway for a thorough reorganisation.

The staff and the director continue their exchange and develop their arguments. To conclude the proceedings, the facilitator takes the floor:

Facilitator: we've just spent nearly an hour talking to one another. And what I have been listening to is an exchange of a high standard. You have said what you had to say and you have listened to each other. I can only encourage this type of constructive exchange in your working environment.

After the training course, the director wrote an email to the facilitator as follows:

Dear Sir,

I would like to thank you for your facilitation which enabled me to experience some moments of constructive communication with my staff.

Continuation of this form of exchange is an excellent path to be developed and practised on a regular basis.

As a result of this experience, I am feeling much less discouraged.

Thank you for your inspiring work and commitment to training.

Kind regards,

A. J.

As we have seen, the facilitator spoke on behalf of both the director and the staff, each represented by a chair. This experience enabled all parties to gain some distance from their situation and to view it differently. What was said will open up new space because all parties expressed themselves non-judgmentally. Both staff and director were able to feel that their respective concerns had been understood, and so would be able to continue their exchange, supplying more details of their job-related concerns. In this way, a new level of communication was achieved.

Generally speaking, the 'representation' offers a means of reframing a tense situation, contributing a 'new gaze', a different way of considering each person's situation and role. People thus come to see one other in terms of their concerns and skills rather than seeking to place spokes in the wheels or engage in conflict.

The thinker and practitioner Ivan Böszörményi-Nagy³ developed, along these lines, the notion of ‘relational ethic’, inviting each person to focus on issues of responsibility and sensitivity to give and take. Borrowing from this author’s terms of reference, the facilitator is able to pay attention to ensuring that what is ‘given’ to individuals actually suits them and that they experience it as ‘fair’. Should this not be the case, they will be offered the opportunity to express their needs.

In the above example, the ‘representation’ enabled the emotions experienced by both parties—director and staff—to be named. As the parties feel recognized, they no longer need to be in conflict and can take up a position in communication, giving and taking recognition to and from one another.

Some of the facilitator’s interventions in the above case lend support to this notion of give and take, and of being attentive to the need for fairness and trust among persons to be restored and consolidated.

- What is the message you want to give to your director?
- How do you receive this message?
- How do you see things now that your staff have responded to your concerns?
- Do you feel that what you have been offered is suitable for you? Do you feel it be to fair?

This manner of stimulating give and take will help the group to become a fully-fledged entity, a collective intelligence representing more than the sum of its parts.

Some Hints for Using Action Methods

Work based on spontaneity, on offering contexts in which action methods can be used, entails the creation of a working space in which participants will sometimes reveal their true faces without recourse to a mask. Spontaneity frequently coincides with the expression of vulnerability. Hence the importance, as we have seen, of putting in place a safety frame that can enable participants to experience trust.

It is equally important for facilitators to develop inner attitudes that facilitate communication, to provide appropriate accompaniment for the group process, and to have already experienced on and for themselves the methodologies that are being put in place.

3 Böszörményi-Nagy, I & Krasner, BR; (2014) *Between Give and Take*, New York, Brunner Mazel, Routledge

In our book *Faciliter l'intelligence collective*,⁴ published in 2018, we offer guidance for the use, in professional situations, of action methods that are designed to regulate group dynamics, project development, creativity, and so forth. (It will be published in English soon.) The focus of the book is precisely to support group facilitators and psychodrama directors with an existing practice, as well as team leaders, academics, trainers, and coaches who may have no prior knowledge of psychodrama.

The book is divided into 4 parts:

9 Inner Attitudes that will Facilitate Communication

Part 1 of the book presents Nine Inner Attitudes that will fuel and nourish open and flexible forms of communication within groups. It is important for facilitators—whether director, team leader, academic, trainer, or coach—to pay attention to and continue to work on their own inner attitudes. For a group to function fruitfully qua group requires an emotionally and physically inviting facilitator.

Seven Key Questions to Activate Collective Intelligence

Part 2 of the book offers Seven Key Questions to stimulate Collective Intelligence. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint precisely what it is that makes a group come alive, there are a number of key issues that it is essential to address:

1. How to work with the here and now?
2. How to create a safe frame and context?
3. How to stimulate cohesion?
4. How to strengthen a sense of personal competence?
5. How to take account of what remains unspoken?
6. How to see a single situation from different angles?
7. How to remain on a searching path?

Five Action Techniques for Broadening the Field of Possibilities

Part 3 of the book presents Five Action Techniques drawn from psychodrama. It begins with a brief presentation of Moreno's Methods, after which five techniques are described and illustrated in some detail and, in each case, according to a six-step process. This six-step process is particularly useful in working sessions that rely on intensive use of action techniques. As indicated in relation to the two examples described above, action methods can also be used in 'homeopathic' mode, *i.e.* in small doses by means of periodic or irregular insertion within a process (*e.g.* the empty chair). The initial setting up of a safety frame is, however, indispensable in all cases, as this is the prerequisite

⁴ Crespel, A., & Neve Hanquet, C (2018) *C. Faciliter l'intelligence collective: 35 fiches memo pour innover, co-construire, mettre en action, et accompagner le changement*. France: Eyrolles

for the creation of trust within the group. Each facilitator can develop his or her own style in creating a safety frame. The six guidelines given below, inspired by the work of Moreno and enriched by a Jungian approach, can provide a source of inspiration for facilitating the experience of ‘holding’, or the ability of the facilitator to ‘carry a group’ and ensure that its work is performed in a safe setting.

In the absence of a safety framework, without connection having been established between group members, and where a sense of confidence and empowerment has not been instilled into the group, it may be difficult to use action methods in a constructive way.

1. In creating the *safety frame*, it will be helpful to refer to the rules of psychodrama which include attention to confidentiality, openness to spontaneity, the freedom to accept or reject a proposal, and respect for time as a ‘container’ for the action. Another rule used in psychodrama is that of ‘restitution’. This refers to permission for comments or behaviour arising outside the official work procedures (*e.g.* during breaks, *etc.*) to be brought back into the meeting insofar as such elements are liable to contribute to the ongoing work.
2. *Warming-up* within the group refers to the process of preparing mind, heart and body by provision of a structure whereby people can connect up with themselves and each other. In some work sessions using action methods, empowerment experiments and movements are offered by way of preparation for the group to develop in various directions.
3. *Identification of the question* on which work will take place is a stage during which various significant questions can be formulated, after which the group selects the topic on which it wishes to work.
4. The *action* is the time during which action techniques will be used in a climate of experimentation. This step represents a kind of ‘detour’ insofar as it departs from the immediate search for solutions and strategies. Such a detour offers the opportunity to create new information and to think ‘out of the box’.
5. The *sharing stage* is when participants communicate about what was important during the action and what has been learned.
6. A collective *search for solutions and strategies* follows on from the sharing stage, with a return to the initial question. This search is enriched by all the information created during the previous stages, and elements of solutions emerge from the whole process.

In the knowledge that openness is connected to a process that is deeper and more complex than mere will, techniques from psychodrama are presented as a possible answer to the challenging question: *how* can people be helped to see the same situation from different angles?

In this process, areas of both the left and right brain are stimulated, activated and interconnected because of the alternation between time for thought, time for movement, time for feelings, and time for expression.

As approaches to achieving this holistic outcome, the book contains detailed descriptions of the following five action techniques: Doubling, the Empty Chair, the Empathy Circle, Revealing Chairs and Analogical Detours.

- The technique of ‘Doubling’ is described and illustrated as a means of giving sustenance to the presence, feeling or idea carried by one person in the group. The same technique can be used also to help a member of the group to specify a professional objective or strategy, assisting the colleague in the effort to achieve greater precision concerning the goal of a project.
- The ‘Empty Chair’ is presented as a technique which can be introduced, during a meeting, to represent a significant person or entity. For example, representing the founder of an organization, or the organization itself, by means of an empty chair, will alter the perspective. A facilitator can invite a group member to stand behind an empty chair and to speak from the standpoint of whatever that chair has been placed there to represent. Through this process, information is generated; and through the use of the empty chair, people can develop a new mode of involvement whereby implicit thoughts are able to be made explicit.
- The ‘Empathy Circle’, a technique created by Chantal Nève Hanquet, allows a group to help one person to enter into the role of another significant person who is not present in the room. This deep form of role-play can be valuable because, entailing very little movement, it puts in place a powerful ‘circular container’ that can generate sufficient empathy to explore a question stemming from a relationship that is experienced as in some way difficult or problematic.
- The ‘Revealing Chairs’ is a technique that enables participants to represent a specific context worthy of the group’s interest. The facilitator first helps participants to identify the persons, groups, organizations and entities that are of significance in the context of its project or mission. Participants are then asked to represent these situational components using chairs. The chairs are positioned within

the working area to indicate how participants perceive the relationship between each named person/entity and the others. This action is 'informative', in that it invites people to make explicit the way in which they see things, thereby making subjective impressions more externally vivid. The facilitator invites participants to come to stand behind the chair of their choice, and to 'give voice' to whatever it is that this chair represents. More than one person can come forward at a time, allowing multiple and simultaneous role-playing in which role-players respond to one another.

- The 'Analogical Detours' are a set of creative techniques designed to represent a situation and its context by the use of metaphors, shapes and colors, use of symbolic objects, and metaphorical uses of textual composition.

35 Tools for use in group facilitation

In part 4 of the book, all the tools presented in this section link up with the Inner Attitudes, Keys to Stimulate Collective Intelligence and Action Techniques described and illustrated in the three earlier parts of the book. Here they are presented in alphabetical order, each on a separate page, and identified by specific titles such as Attitude, Empathy Circle, Cohesion, and so on. Each description contains similar sections covering 'goals', 'guidelines' and 'putting it into words', the latter offering suggestions as to how a facilitator might introduce a topic to a group. The index and the glossary provide additional navigational tools for readers, enabling individual facilitators to extend their practice in accordance with personal background and interests, style and signature.

Conclusion

Action methods offer a way of stimulating — simultaneously — word and action, body and mind, emotion and reason. Accordingly, they help us to experience and understand collective intelligence in an all-embracing, or holistic, manner.

The neurosciences have indeed shown that we generally make use of no more than a small portion of our potential capacities, and also that input from the body can be important for stimulating different areas of the brain. What is more, the relatively recent discovery of mirror neurons makes it clear that empathy is a skill that can be learned, insofar as there exist neurological processes that enable us to 'capture' sensory, emotional and conceptual information, thereby allowing us to enter into the intentions and emotions of another person. It is thus that the mirror neurons enable a person to put him- or herself in the place of another and, for this reason, they are known also as 'empathy neurons'. This quality of finely tuned cognitive and emotional awareness is vitally important in situations requiring cooperation within a

team. Experiments such as the ‘empty chair’ and ‘representation’ are ways of practising and developing our ability to ‘put ourselves in another person’s shoes’.

The French psychodramatist, Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, who died in March 2018, referred — in one of her last books entitled *Le Plaisir de vivre* — to ‘serendipity’ as being the capacity to allow oneself to be surprised by something that one was not expecting, to regard seemingly chance events as welcome opportunities. In some cases, like those referred to in this article, action methods possess this capacity to reframe or overturn specific situations, to bring into being a novel point of view, to create an element of unexpected pleasure, play, or surprise. Groups frequently refer to the way in which movement can generate energy. Something is happening; attention is all of a sudden aroused and focused. Under such circumstances, fortunate coincidences are prone to arise, casting in a completely new light some of those tense or ‘dead-end’ situations that had previously seemed desperately inextricable.

Chantal Nève Hanquet

Chantal Nève Hanquet’s career in psychology has encompassed psychodrama, Jungian analysis and family therapy. She is a founding member, as well as treasurer, of the Federation of European Psychodrama Training Organisations (FEPTO) and a member of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy (IAGP) and the European Family Therapy Association (EFTA). She developed with Jacques Pluymaekers (trainer in family therapy), a psychodramatic method called “landscape genogram,” as transgenerational approach which integrates metaphor with the play of psychodrama. In the course of 50 years’ spent working with groups, Chantal has contributed actively to the spread of psychodrama and is now keen to pass on the fruits of her experience in this and related areas as inspiration to younger practitioners, through Belgium, France, Bulgaria, Italy, Switzerland and Greece.

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Agathe Crespel

Agathe Crespel, also a psychologist, has for the past fifteen years facilitated groups in professional settings in the fields of education, social services, business, culture and health care. She has made extensive use of the Moreno action methods as a tool for supervision, brainstorming and the enhancement of creativity.

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The authors, both members of the Centre for psychosociological training and intervention (CFIP), Belgium, have, through numerous congresses

and workshops, extended their practice to Italy, France, Bulgaria, Greece, Switzerland, Sweden and California. They are the authors of the book *Faciliter l'intelligence collective* (Eyrolles 2018), offering action methods for coaches, consultants, trainers and leaders, and which is going to be published soon in english. Website: www.arc-facilitation.com

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