

Activating Material

Hope is Vital Training Manual: Theatre for Conflict, Community and Dialogue

Author: Michael Rohd

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Not a Role Play, Not Role Modeling, Not a Skit

An activating scene grabs everyone in the room. It is a scene that you create with your group. People need to care about it, recognize it, and be pulled into the drama of it. Most important, people must want to effect change in what they see. They need to see a clear opportunity to get involved and to explore options. An activating scene does not show *what to do*. It does not have a message. It asks *what can be done*.

The Uniqueness of Activating Theatre

In order to clearly lay out the uniqueness of activating theatre, let's generalize the experience most modern theatre (plays) offers an audience. You, the audience, follow a main character through the story. You get involved with a protagonist. You care about him or her. You go on a journey and watch the protagonist deal with trials, tribulations, and triumphs. If it's a good play, as the conflict(s) build(s) around the protagonist, you are pulled forward in your seat, actually pulled toward the stage, as you wait for a resolution you hope will be satisfying. You watch. You wait. You care . . . and choices are made. Action is taken, or not, and the play comes to

its conclusion. You are released. You know the ritual. The curtain falls, literally or figuratively, and you share your appreciation for the event with polite applause, and you leave. The story is over, and most of the time (great theatre and good Brecht plays aside) your need to think and to take action has been soothed. The experience ends passively and you leave having witnessed others take action for you. Whether it touched you and your desires or not, the course human life took on stage was predetermined. You go on.

In the type of interactive theatre that Hope Is Vital creates, activating scenes are shorter than full-length plays. They are compressed scenarios that relate specifically—either realistically or metaphorically—to the lives of the participants in the room. The scenes pull the audience (of participants) into the story. They bring you forward to the edge of your seat, and they freeze. They end, or stop, unsatisfactorily. You, the audience, are left with a strong desire—a *need*—to change what is happening, and you get that chance. As soon as the scene stops, the facilitator, who was responsible for stopping the scene by calling “freeze” (this role will be expanded on later), turns to you and says “Is this real?” Through the process of questioning, the facilitator quickly gets some of you up into the story. They give you an opportunity to explore what is going on and an opportunity to effect change. You are given an opportunity to *replace* the protagonist and discover options.

But the focus of replacement in this scene is clearly on one character, because you and your group have created a scene with a protagonist who is clearly trying to accomplish something and failing. It is the protagonist’s believable failure and the audience’s desire for him or her to succeed that inspires the dialogue within this activation and facilitation process. I’ll use the following activating scene to relate the mechanics of activating material.

An Activating Scene

This scene was created in a town of 15,000 in Oregon and done for the first time at an open community forum held for youths and adults in that community. Sixty people came, and I facilitated. The

youths in the group identified sexual harassment as an issue with which they wanted to deal. They posed two questions they wanted the scene to address. As you read the description of the scene see if you can pinpoint what those two questions were.

Note: I’ve compressed the scene and dialogue here, because it was almost 8–10 minutes long.

The scene starts with a sixteen-year-old girl standing alone in the space, bouncing an imaginary volleyball. It turns out she’s in the school gym. She has recently moved to this town from a smaller, more rural town where she was a volleyball star. She’s arrived at school in October, when the school year has already started. The volleyball team has started practices, so she’s here after school at 5:00 P.M. on a Monday to meet with the volleyball coach, a thirty-five-year-old man. He’s agreed to see her play and decide if she can join the squad or if she has to play junior varsity. Being new in town, we soon realize making varsity is important to her because it will help her enter her new environment with a certain level of status that she wouldn’t have otherwise. We discover this early in the scene in the conversation between the two, not from a pre-scene narration.

The coach enters and asks her to serve a couple of balls. She does and he moves around her, watching her intently. He asks her to take her initial position as she is preparing to serve. She does, and he comes over to her, correcting her position with a hand on her knee and the other hand on her lower back. She serves some more and then he asks her to show him some sets. She does and he shouts “freeze” as she’s in an outstretched position. She freezes and he comes over to her, correcting her position again, one hand a little above the knee and the other a little lower on her back than before. She appears a tiny bit uncomfortable. She sets some more and then he tells her to stop. He says that she’s got definite potential and that he’s willing to work with her.

She says, “So, I’m on the team?”

He says, “No, but I think you can be. You need to work some

more with me first. You and I will work out after practice every day from five to 6.30 P.M. for the next two weeks, and if I think you've made enough progress, you'll join the squad after that."

She's confused. "You mean we'll work alone?"

"That's right. I'll give you extra instruction and we'll see how you do."

There is a pause.

"Couldn't I just join the team and you could work with me there?"

He starts to get frustrated. "Do you understand the opportunity I'm offering you? Do you know how many players here would like extra attention, extra time with me? You said you were a varsity-level player."

"I am."

"So where is your commitment? Where's your dedication? Let me see you serve again."

She does. He calls out "freeze." He goes to her and, as he corrects her positioning, says, "You show promise. You've got to be willing to work."

She says, "All right. I'll talk to my parents about it and I'll come find you tomorrow."

"We start now."

"Today?"

"Yes, today."

"But, my parents are expecting me home soon. I've got homework to do. I can't stay today."

He blows up in a coach, locker-room-talk kind of way. "Why are you wasting my time. Why are you even here? I have a championship-level team. I am offering you the opportunity to play for that kind of team, and all you do is give me excuses. Where is your dedication? Show me some dedication. If you want to play for this team you will go to the phone right now, call your parents, and tell them that practice is going late today. You'll be home for a late supper. If you don't want to do that, fine. You can play junior varsity. I have more important things to do with my time than wait for a new student to figure out her priorities."

There is a pause.

He says, "Now, what's it going to be?"

Another pause.

She says, "I'll, um, I'll go call my folks, and, uh, I guess I'll be right back. I'll be right back."

She walks off and he stands alone bouncing the ball.

I, as the facilitator, shout "freeze." The audience is all leaning forward, intensely involved, frustrated, mad, upset, and not satisfied with the turn of events.

I ask them if the scene was realistic. An overwhelming "yes" is the response. After a couple other questions about what went on, including diverse opinions on whether or not "harassment" took place, I ask what the girl wanted. There are a variety of responses, mostly along the lines of "to be treated respectfully"; "to not be harassed"; "to have an honest shot at being on the team"; "to have him recognize the inappropriateness of his behavior." I ask if she got what she wanted, and get an overwhelming response of "no." I ask if there were other things she could have done to try and get what she wanted. "Yes" responses ripple through the group. I ask "like what?" Hands go up. We're off. I begin to bring people up and replace the protagonist to explore the options available to her in the minds and gut of this community, here represented by sixty young people and adults. But, it is more complex than replacing her over and over again, so I'm going to leave off how this process developed here for a time. I want to briefly look at why this scene is a successful activating scene; then, in the next section on facilitation, I'm going to come back to this instant in the process and continue to examine facilitation using this example.

The Difference Between an Activating Scene and a Message Scene

The scene above offers an opportunity to delineate between a modeling scene and an activating scene and shows how much more actual education takes place through the facilitation process.

If this scene were done in the standard style of message plays, here is what would occur: As the coach began to be inappropriate

(in the eyes of whoever created the scene), the girl, deciding she was uncomfortable, would confront him and perhaps say, "Hey! You can't treat me like that, that's inappropriate, and I'm going right now to talk to the principal, the school board, and my parents. You're done here, mister!"

The audience would cheer, and there would be a good feeling all around. The message would be clear: young women do not have to put up with that type of treatment and have every right to respond as the young woman in the scene did. Thank you and good luck. Like in the previous example of "theatre," the audience's need to take action, to consider and to problem solve, is gone. *The solution has been presented, and dialogue is not only absent, it's unnecessary.*

No one would argue that the message is a good one. It's important to let young women know that they should not tolerate being treated in that manner. But in terms of prevention, education, and dialogue, the message scene is completely ineffective. However, the activating scene, rather than soothe the audience with a satisfying resolution, *demand*s the audience's help in figuring out WHAT TO DO! Because the power of theatre has involved them emotionally in the situation, they care about the outcome, and they are left with a need to struggle with possibilities.

Checklist for an Activating Scene

These are the specific things that made this scene activating:

- ☐ A believable and realistic situation
- ☐ A previously structured but not scripted scene (it was reimprovised to feel spontaneous and real, and strong improv skills allowed this to happen successfully)
- ☐ The scene revolved around a moment of decision—Would she stay or go?—and her decision left us *wanting something different*
- ☐ It has a clear relationship, intentions, circumstance, location, activity, high stakes, and two people listening to each other and connecting in the pretend moment
- ☐ A conflict that is clear
- ☐ A protagonist that the audience cared about and with whom they could identify
- ☐ An antagonist(s) or "villain(s)" that wasn't evil and cartoony

but was credible, strong, and had certain ambiguities around his actions that made him human (he was not groping her like crazy and he never spoke of sex at all; he was subtle)

- ☐ A clear idea of what the protagonist wanted and didn't want
- ☐ The protagonist's failure to get what she wanted
- ☐ The reason for failure clearly being the strong actions, attitudes, and choices of the antagonist(s)
- ☐ A clear sense that the protagonist had inner voices, or desires, that reinforced her inability to succeed (this sixteen-year-old was new at school, wanted varsity status socially, and being from a small town, felt she had to prove herself)

This checklist can help you put together activating scenes. Every piece is important. A *clear protagonist in a moment of decision failing to get what they want* forces you to focus ahead of time on who you want to replace and what the decision you're exploring is. The idea is not to manipulate the group into saying what is right and wrong but to look at the issue at hand from the perspective of characters who want to make certain choices but are unable to carry them out. This then allows you to investigate the reality, the wisdom, and the potential of those choices within real-life circumstances, and actively analyze strategies and possibilities with everyone in the room through the replacement process. In the facilitation section, I look in more detail at how facilitating opens up a scene and a dialogue to carry out this exploration.

Activating Scenes Pose Questions

Before I described the scene, I asked you to try to figure out what two questions it was trying to address. This work is about posing questions, not providing but *exploring answers or options*. Questions are often a better place to start when creating activating scenes than just general topics. Questions give you a focus and direction. The scene here is about sexual harassment, but more specifically, it asks:

What is sexual harassment?
and

What can someone do when they feel they are
being sexually harassed?

Both questions are asked. The second is clearly dealt with when people replace the girl and try to deal with the situation. The first is dealt with through the dialogue the facilitator leads as (s)he prods the audience into a discussion about what they feel is going on here. The facilitator deals with the strong emotional response to support the protagonist but also with the issue as it exists in the scene. Would different people define harassment differently and how would that impact the protagonist's options? Again, this is part of the facilitation process looked at in the next section.

Methods to Develop Activating Scenes

Creating an activating scene essentially involves creating a story, fleshing it out, and making the scene work using the checklist as a guide. I mentioned that questions help you hone in on the decisions and moments you want to explore. You can also use general topics. It just means more work to get to the heart of the issue at hand. That process, however, can be useful as the variety of meanings a topic holds for different individuals becomes a part of the exploration itself. Here are four ways to work with groups to develop material. I will not elaborate in great detail here because the bottom line is that *you can only truly learn about activation (and facilitation) by doing it*. Here are some starting points.

Monologues

These are described in Bridge Activities (page 68), which you should go back to and read.

After the participant has told their story and the group has interviewed them in character, you could ask the group what possibilities for activating scenes they see in this character. This exercise is a great way to get a group thinking about the dynamics necessary for activating scenes to exist. For instance, say the list was from the question "Why do teens choose to be or to not be sexually active?" and one of the reasons on the Yes list was "partner pressure." A young woman chooses that one and creates a character who had sex for the first time with her boyfriend because he pressured her. Her story is about that first time. So, the first obvious choice is to create an activating scene about that event when he pressured her

into it. With the group, you quickly figure out (through asking them) details about the relationship as well as about where they are, what they both want, and other specifics. Then you work on the scene with the intention of replacing her after she gives in. If their relationship is important to both of them, and he is not a nasty, cartoony guy but still pressures hard, and we can tell that she doesn't want to give in but she does because she doesn't see any other choice, we will be activated to want to look for other options for her. The same scene could be tweaked a little and become a scene where he pressures her to have sex without him using a condom. If she had mentioned in her interview that her friends were pressuring her to lose her virginity and that had contributed to her giving in, the group might decide to create a scene about peer pressure.

The key here is once you move into using a monologue to create an activating scene, you can loosen up the specifics from the story and see where ideas lead you. In other words, just because this story wasn't about condoms and sex, if someone has that idea and the group agrees that it could realistically happen that way, go with it. These characters and stories carry the weight of real life because of the process, even though they are fiction. You can shift things around as you search for material and ideas. Similarly, if the story had been told by the guy (if the guy who did the pressuring was the one who took "partner pressure" from the list and he told this story from his point of view), you could still work the scene with the girl as the protagonist. You could also try a scene where he was pressured by his male friends to have sex with her, and so you make him the protagonist in a scene where he is peer pressured and he gives in. The possibilities are endless. The monologues allow you as a group to meet characters, search for moments of decision in their stories, and imaginatively rummage through the periphery of their story (the rest of their life) while looking for other related ideas for scenes.

Sculpting

Sculpting is described in Bridge Activities on page 62. Feel free to go back and read it.

There are a number of ways you can use sculpting to find activating scenes. Here are some ideas.

- You could split into groups of three or four and do group sculpting (Phase 3 of Sculpting) from a single word like "discrimination." Then have each group pick another group's image and give them one minute alone to talk about what they see in that image. Then tell each group they have to create an activating scene dealing with discrimination using that other group's image as a starting point. Even if the image they saw looked nonrealistic or abstract, they must take the feeling it gave them and develop a scene.
- Again, you could split into groups of three or four. Each participant tells a two- to three-minute true story about a topic such as family and miscommunication. After each story has been told, each group has one minute to create only one image

with all members of their group in it that unites the sense of all the threads or themes from their stories and feels complete and representative. They are all clay and they are all sculptors. They can't talk and they must do it in one minute. Then everyone gets to see the other groups' images. Each group, using their own image as a starting point, has to develop an activating

scene around the idea of family and miscommunication. It must be fictional, but the image and all the stories inform the topic, the conflict, and the relationships.

- Form a circle and Circle Sculpt (Phase 4 of Sculpting). Use a topic that the group wants to explore, such as violence. Let the group sculpt for a little while to find a rhythm and go deep with it. When you see an image that strikes you as strong and specific, say "freeze." Then, with the whole group, use that image to quickly develop an activating scene. Ask who the main character is. Ask what is going on. Ask what the relationship is. Ask what each person wants. Perhaps it's an image of two people taunting or threatening a third. Your group may decide that the third person is the protagonist and they are about to be provoked into a fight. The scene is activating because they give in and fight. Your group wants to explore other options for that person in that situation. You

The challenge is sorting through all the ideas your group tosses out and making decisions on your feet. If you spend too much time negotiating which direction the scene should take, the process will lose its forward momentum.

mental checklist of the specifics you need to get from your group to move it to activation. Some peer education groups use this with participants when they go out instead of preparing activating scenes ahead of time. The advantage is you are guaranteed a scene that means something to the people in the room. They created it. The disadvantage is that it's hard to work in this manner at first. It takes practice on the part of the facilitator and on the part of the players who will jump in and improvise the scene immediately, ideally making it activating the first time through. It's a great way to discover what activation really takes, and it's a wonderful way to connect image work directly to the issues.

Machine

Machine is first described in Bridge Activities on page 66 if you'd like to go back and read it through again.

Phase 2 of the Machine description is a human theme machine. The example given there was "alcohol." Let's stick with that. You pick some of the voices the group is drawn to and you can either develop an activating scene all together from one voice or one character, or you can split into small groups and have each group develop an activating scene from different voices. If a voice said "That's enough, OK?" and the person's movement is moving forward, almost reaching out for someone, perhaps the group decides it's a scene about two friends. One is trying to get the other to deal with a drinking problem and the other not only denies the issue completely, but makes the friend feel lousy for even broaching the subject. The protagonist becomes the friend trying to offer support and being rejected. The question is "How do you try to help a friend you think has a substance problem?" Your group then replaces the protagonist and explores options. Like Sculpting, Machine is a great way into the issues through imagination and physicality. Theatre allows entry in ways that straight discussion may not.

Small Groups

Finally, you can simply start with a topic or question and have small groups work on developing activating scenes.

There are a couple of good things that usually happen. It's fas-

you get a sense of how clearly the participants have grasped the concept of activation. If all the groups come back with unclear, tepid scenes, you'll know you have more clarifying work to do, not to mention going back to improv work and looking at specifics again.

If the topic is, for example, "disclosure," you can walk around and encourage groups to deal with different facets of that topic. For instance:

- Someone disclosing that they're gay to a person they care about and getting a negative response. Perhaps they become the protagonist as the group looks for ways they can deal with that response and demand respect.
- Someone disclosing to a lover that they've tested positive for HIV and then being abandoned. Perhaps they become the protagonist as the group looks for ways they can get support, not to mention deal with the implications of the partner needing to get tested.
- Someone disclosing to a parent that they're pregnant and getting tossed out of the house. Perhaps they become the protagonist and the group looks for ways they can ask for help and understanding from the parent.

Don't Settle for Role Plays

Out of these different methods for generating activating scenes you will arrive at pieces that sometimes are ready to facilitate and sometimes need more work before they can become activating. It is worth it to put the work and time in to develop these scenes. Although you could facilitate based on the intellectual awareness of what should happen in the scene, if it doesn't actually activate your group, then it's only an exercise in thinking. It's not theatre and it doesn't engage the whole person. The dialogue can go no deeper than a quiet "What if?" or a phony shrillness. Don't settle for role plays. This process has brought you to a place where you can work with your group to find truth and emotion in the situations you have agreed to explore. Therein lies the opportunity to problem solve and have an honest and soulful dialogue.

Troubleshooting to Make Scenes More Activating

Here are some reasons that scenes may not be activating and thoughts and questions to ask yourself on how to work toward that goal after the initial setup.

- Use the checklist shown earlier around the sexual harassment scene and determine if all the necessary pieces are known and in place. This can be very helpful.
- Remember the feedback questions from the improv work. These scenes are improv, so those questions can help you zero in on skills or problems that might be holding you back in regard to a specific scene.
- Is the situation one where the stakes are high for both characters, particularly the protagonist? If not, what can you add or change in the history of the characters, their relationship, or the current circumstance to raise the stakes (for example, a couple that's been together a month versus a couple that's been together six months)? If the stakes are not high, we won't be pulled in.
- Is the scene not working because the rest of the group simply doesn't buy it? Is it unrealistic in some important aspect (for example, friends blatantly peer pressuring with no clear reason versus friends peer pressuring subtly because their reputations are at stake)? Always ask if it's realistic.
- Is the protagonist unwilling to give in, or do they keep forgetting to give in? This is important and common when you first start working. The actor will not want to appear weak; caught in the emotion of the moment, they will fight back with all their strength. If they say everything there is to say, there will be no need for audience members to come up. Remind them they are sacrificing their strength in the scene for the sake of the dialogue with the audience. They must give in.
- Is the antagonist afraid to pressure too hard or be too mean?

A wonderful, simple way to determine if a scene is activating on the most basic level is to look at the bodies of everyone in the room. If they're not literally pulled toward the scene, if they're relaxed or casual, the scene still needs work.

Sometimes, out of a fear of being mean or an uncertainty of how far they can go, the antagonist will not be strong enough for the protagonist to believably give in. Work with the group and the antagonist on realizing that in these fictional worlds it's got to be OK for them to go to extremes. It's necessary for the conflict to build. Much of that conflict is dependent on the credibility of the antagonist's pressure and motivation.

- The scene shouldn't start with the conflict. Like any good improv exercise, it starts with the relationship becoming clear and the details of the story coming out, and then the conflict and the moment of decision begin to appear and build. If the

The loud and emotional scene probably felt great to everyone because it was cathartic—it gave everyone in the room an emotional release. Remind them that activating material shouldn't leave them soothed, or released—it should leave them wanting to effect change.

scene is too quick, it's a role play around a topic. If it creates believable characters, relationships, and situations we will care and get involved. Work to allow the scenes to build over some time.

- Shouting and crying are not the same as high stakes and building conflict. Many of the scenes get loud and emotional, but that isn't the goal. The goal is playing the pretend moments honestly. You'll know when

it's being done to pump up energy and when the scene is honestly at that pitch. Whispering and soft intensity can be very activating.

- One of the biggest challenges comes when a group presents a dramatic scene that deals with a topic that is very emotional, involves everyone, and there is applause—but it's not activating. It would be great in a play but serves no purpose in an interactive workshop. You have to call that as you see it. You can say, "That was a great scene but it's not activating. There is no opportunity for replacement and no room or need to explore options." It's important that you point out the difference. Just because it made half the room cry and illustrated the issue, it didn't necessarily open it up for dialogue. This will cause some confusion, even consternation at first. You can help by going over what an activating scene is again and possibly taking one of the characters from the scene just done and trying to create an activating scene.

Keeping Your Group Work Safe and Productive

As you work on making scenes more activating with your group, here are two things that will help your working environment feel safe and productive.

1. Do this work all together. Work on the scenes by asking questions and reshaping them through the collective responses filtered through your growing understanding of what it takes to activate a scene. Don't stand up front, go down a checklist, and say what you saw wrong. Work the list together and firmly guide the process. Ask them what worked and what didn't.
2. Make it clear that the feedback on scenes, the critique, and the new directions for performers are not judgment on acting capabilities or on "wrong" ideas. They are to improve character choices and strengthen group work. The whole process is to move the group forward so everyone contributes, gives sometimes, and leads others. Creators don't compete, they collaborate. The collaboration is absolutely part of the dialogue the whole process encompasses.

One last thought before moving on to facilitation: If you are working with a peer education group that will be conducting performance workshops, your practice time is partly about crystallizing these scenes so they're activating and ready. If you are a classroom teacher or working in an ongoing group setting, you may feel that facilitation is the part you truly want to get to. Take some time with setting up the activating scenes so they're strong. As I said above, that time is also a valuable part of the process. It's not wasted. You'll feel the payoff.