

Action Methods & Insight

Rollo Browne

Abstract

Insight through action methods occurs through the use of basic techniques such as concretisation, role reversal and mirroring. But it is not guaranteed. Drawing on research into the neuroscience of insight, the facilitator can explicitly focus on simple steps to maximize the possibility of insight: setting out the dilemma, shifting to a resting state and then bringing this state of being into contact with the presenting dilemma.

Key words: insight, intuition, spontaneity, creativity, brain wave, catharsis, warming up.

Introduction:

One of the particular strengths of action methods is that it assists people to get a fresh perspective on themselves and the situations they are in. That is, a realisation, or an overlooked truth becomes powerfully apparent to the protagonist during an enactment. It might be about what they must do or what they need to pay more attention to. It could be that the protagonist begins to see something for the first time or perhaps that the enactment leads them to a new decision about the presenting issue. In other words they get some insight.

Insight matters because as practitioners we are vitally interested in healing and change. Although we learn from others' insights or comments, their effect is nowhere near as powerful or as lasting as our own insights. Hence, any processes that specifically assist a person to gain their own insights are extremely valuable. This is as true in leadership and decision-making as it is in counselling, supervision or therapy.

Insight is not the same as intuition. Facilitators of action methods are trained to pay attention to intuitive responses in themselves and in their protagonists. Where an insight is "*a new idea, or sudden understanding of a complicated situation*" (Jung-Beeman et al, 2008:1), intuition, in contrast, usually has "*no insight into the logical relations, but simply an impetus, judgment, hunch, or behavioral response*" (Liebermann 2000:111). The difference is between an 'aha' and a gut feeling.

It makes sense that intuition is experienced in the body, coming to awareness through older, more survival-oriented parts of the brain (basal ganglia and limbic structures). Once it is brought into awareness, an intuition can be tested. If the director acts on her gut feeling then she can learn from the result. In this way intuition can be seen as a prelude to insight, that is, to realising something new, an 'aha'.

The question is, how can a producer maximize the possibility of insight emerging? Let us first turn to an example of insight arising from an enactment in a personal development group.

The Knot in her Stomach

Susan wants to focus on her relationship to her work, to her clients. She sets a scene in a client's house where the father and teenagers begin to argue and swear at each other. As the argument develops a 'knot' forms in her stomach and she knows that something is wrong. The following is an excerpt from the enactment.

- Dir: *"Choose someone to be Susan and become the Knot in her Stomach. ... Yes, place yourself as the Knot showing with your whole body how you affect Susan.*
- The Knot: *fiercely: "I'm all around you, holding you tight. This is not right. You have to get out of here. I'm not letting you push me away again.*
- Susan: *reasonably: "No, no, it's OK, I'm here to do a job ... I have to do it, I'm a professional! ... They need my help. You're just thinking about your own needs and getting in my way."*
- The Knot *"That's what you always say. You never notice me. I'll start screaming if you don't listen. I'll hold you even tighter."*
- Susan drops to the floor wrapped up by the Knot in her Stomach.

- Dir: *"Choose someone to be you there and come over and have a look at this moment.*

I later ask Susan what part of the enactment was most meaningful to her. *"Me on the ground, with my Knot wrapped around me – holding me tight and not letting go – whilst my clients fought in the background. That moment was the first time that I saw my Knot as something real, as something that was a part of me and as something that needed as much love as the rest of me."*

Susan's first insight came from being physically held by her Knot, and taking up the role of her Knot through role reversal. A second insight came from seeing the scene from the mirror position, watching it from afar as her inner experience is mirrored back to her. Susan described the new perspective she came to. *"I saw the Knot as protection. Warning. My body's own red flag. Since then, I have made a conscious effort to think of my Knot as a something to be noticed. As a part of me that I shouldn't run from or feel threatened by."*

While Susan identified the concretisation of the Knot, role reversal and mirroring as assisting her to gain insight, there are many other factors that also contribute. These include the use of a stage, maximising expression, and the use of auxiliary egos. Behind these action methods are fundamental concepts in psychodrama:

- the use of surplus reality to make real something that is an internal physical experience and to give it a voice
- the warm up of the protagonist to enter deeply into the drama and live in the moment with what emerges
- a belief in the creative genius of the protagonist
- the quality of relationship between the protagonist, the director and the group.

In addition, through the use of action the protagonist has warmed up to the physical sensations and feelings that had previously been set aside in order to do her work. In this way she is reconnecting to more of her whole being.

So many aspects of psychodrama contribute to the process of gaining insight that it is not really possible to say how insight is actually achieved. The closest psychodramatic description is from Moreno's Canon of Creativity where *"the operational manifestation of the interacting spontaneity-creativity is the warming up process"* (Moreno 1993:17). The individual warms up to a stimulus. When the warm up deepens sufficiently at some critical point spontaneity emerges as a spark that is the catalyst for a creative act such as an insight. But how does the spark for insight emerge? When a protagonist warms up to their spontaneity, creative expression emerges, although it is not always insight. Many other forms of creativity are possible, such as a song, a stillness or perhaps a gesture of forgiveness.

In psychodrama insight also occurs in the catharsis of integration. The dramatic enactment is essentially a process of continually deepening the warm up, and as a consequence of this spontaneity increases and is expressed. At some point there is either a full expression of feeling followed by a catharsis of abreaction, a sense of calm after emptying out the emotion and physical charge held in that scene, or a catharsis of integration, where a sense of insight into what has been happening and what might be a way to progress the situation. In Moreno's words, the protagonist's *"own self has an opportunity to find and reorganize itself, to put the elements together which may have been kept apart by insidious forces, to integrate them and to attain a sense of power and relief, 'a catharsis of integration'"* (Moreno 1993:57).

Again, this does not describe how insight is achieved, just that it happens and its healing effects. Let us now turn to what research into the brain is suggesting.

What can we learn from neuroscience?

Jung-Beeman et al (2008) conducted an experiment using fMRI scans (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and EEGs (electroencephalography) to measure what was happening in their subjects' brains during moments of insight.

They gave each subject a number of compound word problems that could be solved either analytically or by insight. Here is an example.

What one word would complete a compound phrase for the following 3 words:

Heart Potato Tooth?

The answer is *Sweet*, creating the words 'sweetheart', 'sweet potato', 'sweet tooth'.

In this experiment people generally solved half of these problems within 30 seconds.

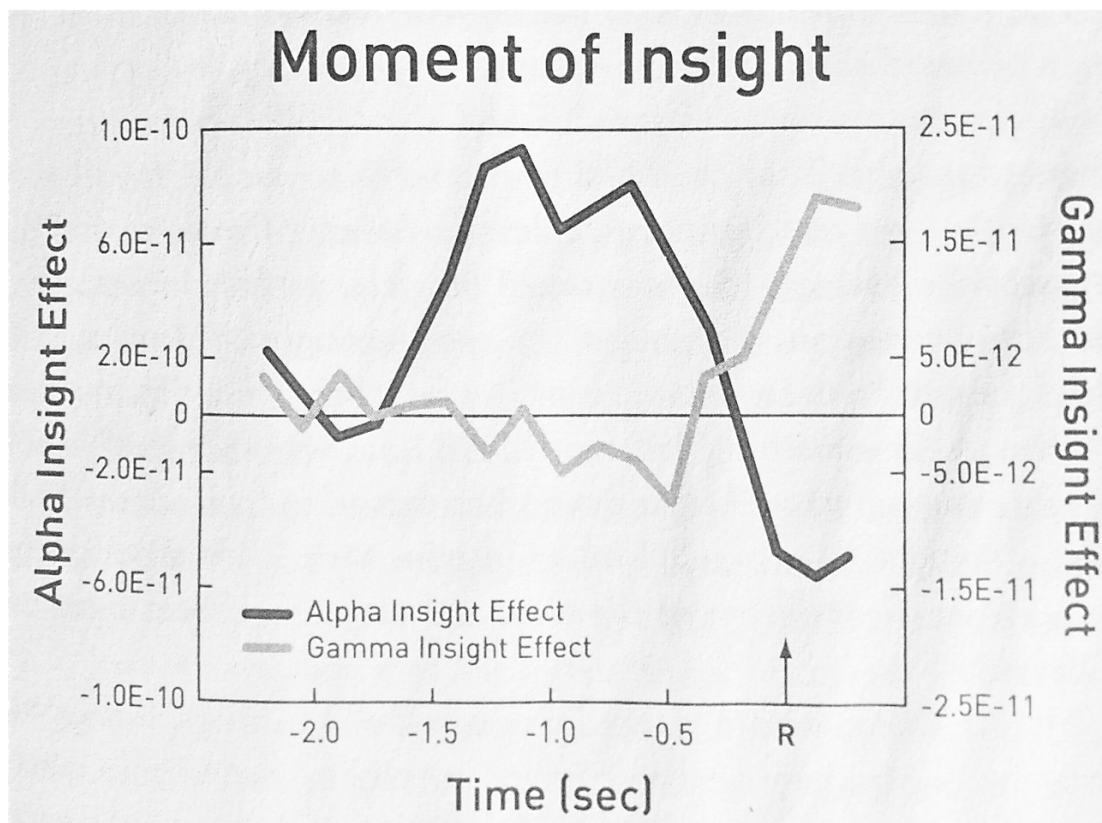
Each three-word set was projected onto a screen while the subject was inside the fMRI scanner. If they solved the problem, the subjects identified whether they had worked it out by trial and error (analytically) or they just knew the answer (insight). The

researchers eliminated the data from analytically-solved problems and looked for patterns in the insight-related data. The fMRI results showed that while there is no insight area of the brain, the anterior temporal lobe of the right hemisphere, where semantic information is integrated, was involved. In other words, making new connections between distantly related items. One conclusion is that the process of insight is strongly driven by the right hemisphere (not the logic oriented left brain).

They also conducted interviews on the state of mind or mood of their subjects going into the experiment. They found that mood is very important for insight. Subjects higher in anxiety solved fewer problems with insight, while those in a positive mood solved more problems and used insight more often. This accords with the psychodramatic axiom that spontaneity and anxiety are inversely related (Franklin 1988).

Most interestingly the EEG data showed distinct patterns in brain wave activity. Beeman et al found that 1 second prior to the moment of insight, there was a spike in the Alpha wave (relaxed undistracted state) followed by a spike in the Gamma wave¹ at the moment of insight, see graph below.

Fig 1: Brain wave activity leading up to R - the Moment of Insight (Jung-Beeman et al, in Rock 2009:83)



¹ Brain waves are grouped as follows: Delta (0-4Hz) deep sleep; Theta (4-7HZ) drowsiness; Alpha (8-13Hz) relaxation; Beta (13-30Hz) alert; Gamma (30-100Hz). While there is no agreement on the specific function of gamma waves, they are thought to be able to link information from all parts of the brain and hence make new neural connections.

Jung-Beeman and his colleagues hypothesised that the Alpha wave spike meant that the brain becomes very calm and eliminates the normal visual input from the problem words (the technical term is 'sensory gating'). Hence distractions are eliminated, allowing the more distant and less obvious possibilities to emerge from regions of the brain other than the analytic part known as the prefrontal cortex. When the connection is made the Gamma wave spikes, a new neural link is made, and the insight arrives fully formed.

In the unconscious process leading to insight, the brain appears to get out of its own way, this allows looser connections to be made and in this context, the 'aha' emerges. This requires a quiet mind. For insight, it is important to let the brain idle, reducing activation of habitual thinking patterns. When the brain starts on a train of thought and follows its own logic, it becomes very hard to pay attention to the less obvious possibilities (Rock 2009).

What might this imply for practitioners?

The simplified sequence appears to be:

- 1 Ask the client to concretise the problem situation or dilemma. This is likely to engage their conscious analytic brain.
- 2 Shift to a resting state, whereby the client lets go of the dominant train of thought. Existing stimuli (especially visual) are excluded so that attention can be paid to distant loose associations
- 3 See what emerges.

The critical part is the shift away from the habit of existing thinking to allow room for insight or, at the least, intuition. Many protagonists have thought about the issues they present before seeking help. As they present their dilemma to the facilitator or coach, they are outlining their analysis.

Paddling On The Harbour

In my coaching practice I ask my client, Tony, to set out a dilemma as a desktop sculpture using an array of everyday objects to represent different elements of the situation, including an object for himself. He wants to resolve a stuck situation where the family is in turmoil about repeated moments of tension and conflict with his 15 year old son.

Tony creates a sculpture of the dynamic around his adolescent third son pushing to find his place, on the edge of the group, while he, his wife and older sons occupy the central space, busy in their separate lives. The connections are displayed through the use of closeness/distance, the sizes and orientations of the objects used. He nods when he is done, satisfied with what he has set out.

I take Tony to another part of the room and ask him to warm up to a time when he feels most in his being, at one with himself. He creates a scene paddling his kayak on the harbour, smelling the early morning air, the wind in his face, riding the shifts and currents as he paddles surely and confidently. He breathes deeply, experiences the delight.

Director *“Keep paddling, feeling yourself there. In a moment I’m going to ask you to do something and I want you to immediately respond without thinking ... The morning sun is warm on your face ... You can hear the seagulls. Now go and put your hand on the part of the sculpture where you feel the most hope”*

Tony immediately stands next to the keys that represent his youngest son.

Director *“Express yourself.”*

Tony feeling strongly: *“He’s alone. I’ve assumed he was doing fine but he’s isolated, struggling to be seen for who he is. I get excited by my own creative projects and where the others are up to in theirs. Everyone else has worked out what they need and is getting on with their lives. But not him.”*

Director *“What are you hopeful about?”*

Tony lovingly, tears in his eyes: *“He’s the one who will create the path. It’s just that we’re fighting him by being over-involved with ourselves. Especially me.”*

Clearly Tony is struck by the clarity of his knowing where to start. He values this. His insight is not yet a plan. It needs more work to be put into practice but he will remember the moment when he simply knew the answer.

The second scene on the harbour evokes a time and place where he feels free and can access his spontaneity. He is turned away from the sculpture, has no immediate visual reminder. His attention is taken up with his direct sensory (bodily) experience of being at one with himself. This sense of life and potency is then brought into the first scene where he is stuck. He places himself where he feels hope. The language of hope calls on his feeling, a different part of his being than that typically engaged with problem solving. Something new emerges.

I am consciously activating a different state of being, involving his senses, engaging his right brain. The setting out of the sculpture is still with him of course. He has seen it as a whole picture with its strong and weak connections. He quietens his mind in the experience of paddling on the harbour. The call to move swiftly asks him to act from his whole being on a feeling criteria, rather than a thought. Once he is in position we can explore what is behind his decision. At this point it might only be a gut feeling, an intuition, or it might be an insight complete with logic. Once the starting point is there we can take the next step in creating a workable plan.

Conclusions

It is clearly possible to maximize the likelihood of insight. Directing an enactment where the protagonist warms up to their spontaneity is likely to do this. But the director can be much more specific. As in the example given with Tony, the director can set a scene for each of two systems, one with the presenting dilemma where there is little spontaneity, and a second where the protagonist is in their being, potent with spontaneity. Insight is most likely to emerge when the spontaneity of the second system is brought to bear on the stuck situation. Rather than waiting to see what happens, the coach or facilitator actively directs attention back to the presenting dilemma. The work continues from there.

It is interesting how Moreno's image of a spark of spontaneity catalysing a creative act appears to be showing up in neuroscience. Insight is a creative act of the unconscious as the brain shifts its state, getting out of its own way, and two or more ideas become linked in an insight. Jung-Beeman hypothesised that the Gamma wave spike showed a new neural connection being created, an electrical spark that catalyses the insight.

As a practitioner, I love the focus on the protagonist reclaiming and releasing their spontaneity. It makes perfect sense that we each value our own insights more than others' insights into our situation. Our insights are keyed into an exhilarating felt experience, and become linked to that feeling in our memories. Hence we are much more likely to remember them and to act on them.

Susan later wrote a reflection, *"Now that a few weeks have passed since my drama, I have had the time to reflect on what new awareness I may have developed since. A few things strike me as potential learnings – however the most important, and the one that I would like to have typed (and immortalised!) in black and white – is that I am now far kinder to myself when I am sitting with a client. Or trying to be kinder. I no longer sit, mind solely focused on being all that I can be for my client – I leave a section focused on me. I almost sit, listening out for my 'knot', knowing that if it does appear with its clenching and anxiety-provoking grasp that I will be able to take care of it. And that will be okay."*

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For the puzzle lovers, here are a few additional compound word problems. Find the single word that completes each trio. Notice if you are analytic or if the answer just arrives complete in your mind.

1. Child, Bird, Scan
2. Playing, Credit, Report
3. Barrel, Root, Belly
4. Sore, Shoulder, Sweat

Rollo is a consultant, coach and sociodramatist in Sydney applying these methods in his work. He started studying neuroscience to see what other language could be used to describe what action methods and psychodrama are and how they work. He is currently Director of Training at Sydney Campus of Psychodrama Australia.

e: rollo@brownwright.com.au m: +61 417 682 085 w: www.brownwright.com.au