

Focus: Creativity

Frauke Nees & Petra Daiber

A creative expedition

Parallels of creativity training and methods in clown and improv theater regarding a person-centered approach

Frauke Nees
www.frauke-nees.de
nees-daiber@web.de

Graduated psychologist, GT, Psychodynamic Imaginative Trauma Therapy according to Reddemann, dancer, counselor and psychotherapist in private practice and psychological counseling services, trainer, individual and corporate coach for companies, docent amongst others at the Karlsruhe University

Petra Daiber
www.petra-daiber.de
nees-daiber@web.de.

Graduated psychologist, occupational therapist, clown, trainer, moderator, individual and corporate coach for companies like Siemens, docent at the Karlsruhe University

How did we get the idea of developing the creativity training?

Frauke Nees:

Now it's about six years ago that I went to Argentina to live my dream: to spend one year abroad. I wanted to turn my back on everything, desired to experience really deeply and live a completely different culture, including all related circumstances. In Buenos Aires I continued my formation in dance, mainly Tango Argentino, and theater. The South Americans taught me to enjoy life and to develop my own creativity. A major contributor to this was the world of the theater and of the clowns which helped and set me free as well as the Argentinean life, which can be really chaotic, so it's absolutely necessary to improvise and to be creative.

Compared to Germany in Buenos Aires this kind of attitude is desirable and also gets challenged. There are bulletins all over many places for all kinds of lessons, mainly theater, dance and music but also for psychotherapy. Together with New York there is the highest percentage of psychotherapists in the world. The Argentineans admire Germany for their composers, poets and philosophers. Many of them are extremely creative but do not claim to be perfect, as it often is in Germany. It is possible to say: „I am an artist“, also if you're still in the development. In Germany there would automatically be lots of questions like: „In which theater?“, „In which movie?“. In Germany it is "permitted" to appear as an artist only if you are at least extremely good in your area. That is practically impossible if you could learn only by doing – and initially this is obviously „feol“ (ugly) and full of errors. I could have this attitude in Argentina – from the beginning! To find and to develop this new form of living first of all I had to leave my previous life behind.

Petra Daiber: „Die dumme Augustine“, a novel by the German children's book writer Otfried Preußler was my favorite book when I was a child. It was clear that I wanted to go to the circus when I grew up. But as it is in intellectual families I actually took a rather straight road through life and became occupational therapist and, afterwards, psychologist. But already at the beginning of my university studies I realized that I didn't want to work in the classical areas of psychology or psychotherapy. It was about 30 years after my childhood dream that I got back to it. So for some years I went to a school for clowns, to some clown workshops, I got engaged in improv and mask theater.

In Buenos Aires I met Miss Nees and I realized that we had very similar beliefs and desires regarding our lives and our work: we wanted to leave the worn-out paths of life, wanted to get fascinated by other worlds, look at the own life and culture from a completely different angle. We wanted a kind of liberty of mind and in life that isn't achievable due to our socialization and psychological formation. Maybe that was the reason for our encounter in the town, in which anything seems to be possible. Through the years we developed new ideas, how to integrate our experiences from the dance, theater and the life in a foreign culture with psychology. The parallels between acting training and psychology were obvious for us, and the clown provided us a completely different perspective in a heartily way. It should be possible to unite all these components!

To accept oneself completely

The goals in psychology (personality development, coaching, counseling, psychotherapy) and theater are very similar. In the broadest sense both areas are about changes. As children we develop through our child's play. As adults it is easier to implement such changes also by playing. In so doing it is necessary to learn to play again. An essential part is to be able to laugh about oneself and about the own errors. You have to accept yourself with all weaknesses and everything you like about yourself as well as the things you do not like. The attitude towards acceptance is essential and concerns accepting the own inner impulses as well as the impulses and ideas of others and also the challenges of life. In the areas of dance and theater it is particularly important to open up on a completely different level than that we are acquainted to by our socialization: there you usually work with the body and less with the mind. The approach is not theoretical and guided by intellect but holistic and active, open for impulses and intuition. The mind mostly is in the way during this processes. It's all about experience, direct experience. In the first instance this could be intimidating. We are used to act mainly in a cognitive manner, thus reassuring us because we are simply used to it and because we are always in control. Unfortunately in this way we are depriving ourselves of a variety of experiences. Therefore we have to learn to risk losing. Already Nietzsche raised the question what would be more dangerous in life: to risk something or to live never risking anything.

So we develop the training of creativity, the capacity of improvisation and to change with elements from the theater (improv, clowns, masks, Lecoq ...)

What are our principles?

1. If you want to change something, you have to change your behavior, that means to act in another way. Afterwards these actions need to be repeated, in order to get used to the new actions. In the beginning it does not work. That is normal. But no one needs to doubt his talent. Mostly it is just about to have the will to hang in there and to continue – one step at a time, like a child that is learning to walk: it falls, stands up, falls again and stands up again and again. Every individual has its own rhythm, some learn to walk earlier, others later.
2. The prerequisite for a change is to break free from old behavior and thinking schemes. It surely is one thing to analyze a situation or a problem and to comprehend it but this does not mean that there will also be a real change. This takes some time and you have to hang in there. The first step to escape from old schemes is a small one: a slight variation. These variations could be minuscule: e.g. to try another baker, even though you think that the bread is best at your "own" baker. I will be able to discover new things only if I am doing things that I have never done before! I will remain flexible when I continue adjusting to and engaging in new situations.
3. Change is only possible if you do not fear errors because: It is impossible to learn without making errors.
4. It is just as well impossible to be creative in a spontaneous way if you are afraid of a judgment. It means in return that you have to free yourself from the judgment and opinion of others. The more one has tried acting and also has acted in an "ugly" way on the stage, the more freely one will act in everyday life. All this leads to a greater self-confidence and composure.
5. If we look at life as a game, as it is in the theater or for children playing, changes become much easier. A hands-on attitude implicates ease. I do not take life that serious any more. I express something playing, show certain feelings, play a certain role. Maybe something seems similar from what I already lived through. Now I relive it but the context is completely new: with ease, joy, humor. Others are applauding and I could be proud of my accomplishment. Playing means also to have a certain liberty, to rely on the intuition, flexibility.
6. Adults, as well as children, need to show themselves and to be noticed. In Germany this attitude has a rather negative connotation and is connected to the claim for perfection. Nevertheless it is important to try out things, to provoke reactions, to put yourself in someone else's shoes. My counterpart will mirror me, also in the play. The encounter with the other reveals more about myself. A child forms its identity using reactions of and mirroring their attachment figure. Self definition results from the encounter with others. And that is why you need to show yourself.
7. Different sides can be tested in the play. Expressing all the different variations of one's own inner appearances leads to their integration and finally to the satisfying feeling of wholeness and authenticity. First we just do "as if" – as we did as children. We slip into a role and take over the attitude of pretending to being able to live a certain behavioral pattern. In this way we are able to discover new sides in us and to live them.

For us creativity means to do things by oneself, think by oneself, explore by oneself. Here we experience liveliness instead of taking over all predetermined, spoon-fed, normed attitudes that lead to a standstill. Everything remains in flow. As you see, our definition is a broad one. For us creativity is a certain kind of lifestyle: to be on the road, searching, exploring new things, and also to re-experience known things over and over again, let variations happen, collect experiences, experiment. It is about leaving the so well acquainted paths. But this also means to be more vulnerable – but in the meantime also more alive.

Where is the connection to the person-centered approach?

In his actualizing tendency Rogers assumes that all life trends to develop. Every human being is provided with a force to set change processes in motion. The central aspect would not be the problem but the person.

There is a citation from Goethe which wonderfully describes this attitude, that forms our work's foundation: „*Our wishes are anticipations of the skills which lie in us, heralds of that which we will be able to achieve.*“ We elicit the participant's potential in a rather clinical and „athletic“, but simultaneously empathic and respectfully way, supporting them and with a twinkle in our eyes: „Just do it! Without thinking at long, otherwise it doesn't work.“ „I was able to show myself that way, because there was someone who indeed noticed me and there was an adequate space“, stated one of the participants after the training. Instead of evaluating we are supporting and encouraging everyone to take heart to prove oneself in each and every variety and thus giving all inner parts that were suppressed until now enough space.

Caring challenge

But how do we create the conditions so that every participant is able to set those powers free? The training is characterized by an attitude enabling everyone not to take oneself too serious and rather to get the inner critic to laugh about oneself. The participants are challenged in a caring, loving way. So a victim's attitude or passiveness are prevented. It is about the character of the individual. These strengths will be activated and supported. The participants will observe instantaneous feelings of success and be proud having trusted themselves, and having achieved something they did not dare to think of. „In the beginning I thought that I wouldn't manage the exercise with the translation of the fantasy language. But the outcome was so wonderful!“, told us a participant after an improv exercise. Or you are doing something which always embarrassed you in the past, but that you are enjoying right now. „I used to prevent situations in which people would laugh at me. And now it was so much fun getting the others to laugh.“

The base for our work is the trust in the participant's development processes and their striving for development as it is the person-centered approach. For us it is important to provide means of expression for all participants, to make them realize their own value and to offer them the possibility to free themselves from assessments. They should be given more possibilities to choose by experiencing themselves in different roles and to expand their freedom of action. Many different facets of their personalities could emerge and experience that they will be accepted. They are an important part of the whole thing. The participants will experience increasing joy in showing themselves. They want to be noticed and will be mirrored by us as well as by the other participants, reflecting their various facets. This is the reason why we are working with a stage: In the beginning it costs quite an effort but afterwards the joy prevails.

For Rogers all theoretical explanations take the back seat. The subjective experience is essential instead. In our approach we mainly renounce – particularly at the beginning of the training – theoretical explanations. In this way we are making clear that different rules apply in this frame. Simultaneously we create a completely different mood and working attitude, thus achieving an approach of the participants not on an intellectual basis but on the basis of the level of experience. We explain the single exercises and plays, state why we conduct them and in cooperation with the participants we show how they are applied to the everyday life, in order to develop an expanded awareness. The goal is to adopt a rather unfamiliar attitude in our everyday life: not „Ah, I know,“ or „I understand“, but „I don't know“ and therefore it is possible to explore consciously, to be open and to re-experience. We do not state what is wrong or what is right, but with our exercises and by our attitude we care for appropriate possibilities to experience. In this way we create the conditions for an exploration process and to find answers of your own.

Taking off social masks

Most exercises are accomplished together with the other participants in the group. Rogers stresses the power of relations and that changes take place within relations. While playing together you get to know each other very fast in an extremely positive and constructive way. The joint play creates a common „language“ and a bond. The participants learn the meaning of cooperativeness by means of exercises from the improv theater. Especially in the improv theater it is absolutely important to form a relation with the acting partner. Knowing that all is just „a play“ facilitates getting in contact and the participants will meet eye to eye – the manager will be on the same level as the housewife and the student. Many of them experience this as something completely new, due to the fact that they have the opportunity to take off their social masks and will be accepted as what they are.

Expand the self-concept

This journey is affected by a deep involvement in the image of oneself. Assuming a role I confront myself automatically with different aspects of my own, which maybe I do not like or which are unfamiliar. Rogers refers to this state as incongruent. It is essential that the self-concept could be expanded: during the experiments and plays, the self-exploration, more and more self-experience is allowed. This implies psychic growth.

The clown's perspective is very useful in the process. A clown is characterized particularly by all these imperfections that we prefer to suppress in ourselves. The clown does not assess, he takes whatever is there and plays with it.

Sometimes the problem will solve itself just by playing: than the clown actually is in trouble, because a clown without any problem is in trouble. We offer the participants various theater exercises that make it possible to try out several different roles. Often they will be given "aids" like character lists, masks or guidelines for a status (high/low). In the beginning we sometimes are confronted with statements like: „But don't think that I am really like that!“ After some rounds and various roles these concerns do not bother anymore. The participants realize very soon that it does not matter what the others are thinking but that they are encouraged to explore - just as children do: with the same joy and regardless of the thoughts and judgment of others towards their playing. In this way the participants are able to assume unknown roles or experiment with behaviors by doing as if they already master it. On the other hand we tie up to facets of the personality, which could not or must not be shown until that moment. They are given space, they are noticed and will be lived, thus developing hidden abilities and integrating suppressed elements.

According to Rogers our self-concept never reflects all aspects of our experience, due to our subordination to social rules and judgments. In the course of our education these lead to an alienation from our experiences. The goal of our training is to enable the participants to think and act autonomously, to trust their intuition and to free themselves from rules.

It is in the nature of humans to be creative. Rogers describes the ideal of a fully functioning person as follows: „Away from the facades, away from ‚I should‘, away from the compliance with cultural expectations, away from the attitude to always wanting to please everyone, towards a development of self-determination, towards the process-being, towards complexity, towards the openness for experiences, towards accepting others and self-confidence“ (Rogers, 1973, S. 167-176). We assume that all people are creative by nature. But our socialization often causes blockages which have to be solved. Keith Johnstone thereto describes an experiment, where businessmen which proved to be extremely unimaginative in association tests were asked to present themselves as untroubled hippies. They were tested again and showed much more fantasy. So these people actually were creative, but cloaked it. When rules and values can be put into question and when we dare to show ourselves, because we do not fear to be analyzed, there is the possibility to grow.

The clown- and improv theater offers this kind of freedom without judgment, which can be used as experimental ground. The participants learn to remain in a good mood even in situations in which they lose. Due to this attitude the participants find it easy to risk something and to betake oneself to new places, thus experiencing that they can open up, free themselves, show who they are and that they not only will be accepted how they are but that they also get applause for it and that they will have a great time performing on a stage and in front of an audience.

Rogers postulates this kind of experience: „While exposing these hidden and ‚dreading‘ aspects of their self, they feel that the accepting attitude of their counterpart does not alter. Slowly the patients begin to accept this kind of accepting positions towards themselves and start to finally accept themselves as they are, which is the prerequisite for their further development.“ (see Rogers, 1977, S. 33)

The participants experience the empathic understanding, which is an important aspect in the person-centered approach not only from us but they are practicing it by adequate theater plays. Predetermined postures, mood and voice imitations, masks, character lists and switching roles support them in empathizing with others. Observing the other one closely, to feel responsible for the good and inspiring personal mood and of the partner is an essential precondition for a good interaction on stage. Contemporaneously it increases relational skills in everyday life. The participants learn how to assume roles, to switch between them and also to leave them. In this way they expand their perceptive and communicative abilities, their behavior pattern and their ability to resonate empathically.

How does the journey continue?

Actually we conceived the creativity training as corporate training and as open training for personality development. But in the occasion of several psychotherapy congresses from the islands Langeoog to Lindau we noticed that also psychotherapists were very much interested in our approach. We offer the training with the focus on burnout prevention and psychohygiene for psychotherapists. Our sincere wish is to continue exploring how this approach can be used with patients, e.g. group therapy solution in a psychosomatic clinic. Is it possible for therapists to use these principles in single settings? We will continue to be curious and to explore these possibilities.

Advert

Skill enhancement of the GwG-Akademie
Frauke Nees and Petra Daiber

Training in creativity, improvisation capacity and for changes with methods derived from the clown and improv theater

The workshop serves for psychohygiene and burnout prevention. The resource oriented approach allows for the development of creativity and joy of playing leading to calmness and an inner distance in straining and difficult situations with patients. A creative intercourse with the inner critic will be experienced and practiced. This action serves as a personal strengthening and simultaneously supports in the dialogue with patients. Creativity, innovative thinking and the joy to explore new places will be trained using simple, concluded exercises, that are

also used by actors and clowns. These are the preconditions for the exploration of new paths on a professional and personal level. Strengthening the creative potential and the capability of improvisation but also leaving worn-out thinking and acting patterns are the training objectives. Due to the clown's perspective errors can be taken as chances and the energy that is set free in this occasion can be transformed into new thinking patterns to master unknown situations in a flexible and determined manner.

The inevitable humor allows for serenity and sovereignty. Self-confidence, motivation and cooperation are supported. The training is based on psychological and neurobiological findings.

Date: October 7 - 8, 2011
Location: Mainz
Extent: 16 Unterrichtsstunden
Fee: 225,00 Euro (GwG members 200,00 Euro)

Application: GwG-Akademie
Melatengürtel 125a • D-50825 Köln
Phone: 0221 925908-50
E-Mail: akademie@gwg-ev.org

*„Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.“
André Gide*

*„To learn is to experience. Everything else is just information.“
Einstein*

*„If You Want Something You Never Had, Then Do Something You Never Did.“
Nossrat Peseschkian*

*„Art is a daughter of liberty.“
Friedrich Schiller*