Use of the arts in occupational health and safety

Craig Jackson, Professor of Occupational Health Psychology at Birmingham City University, argues that the spoken arts can be surprisingly effective in helping an organisation achieve its occupational health and safety goals.

Introduction

The arts and culture, as both an artistic endeavour and as an industry within the UK, are often viewed as something to be used in order to secure a particular purpose. In the criminal justice system we hear of the arts being used to educate offenders in developing new skills to turn them away from future offending, or to help them develop additional skills that make prison life more productive. In education, we also see the arts as a tool to assist with the learning of other topics through creative and enjoyable activities (staging plays or writing songs). Some may argue, of course, that the arts are not there to be used, but should exist of and for their own merit — not merely to be a handmaiden of commerce or the safety industry. However, it is worth asking provocative questions if the answers help to improve safety or health.

The arts in the workplace

What constitutes “the arts” is very broad, with almost any creative endeavour being seen as having artistic merit. In addition to the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture, theatre, music, performance and writing, the digital revolution has given rise to a host of new media-related art pursuits. In essence, if it involves creative spirit and can be fashioned or crafted for a purpose, it can be considered as art, whether or not it is actually artistic. A question that has not been considered often is whether there is room within occupational health to deliberately use the various forms of artistry available to help organisations with their goals and targets.

To some extent “art” is already used in health and safety, most obviously in the form of posters and attention-grabbing material displayed to remind employees of their safety responsibilities. The poster, of course, has a long and noble history in the workplace: from Ministry of War posters urging colleagues to “Keep it a Secret” right through to the recent HSE “Shattered Lives” campaign that, quite graphically, reminded viewers of the fragility of human health and the costs of workplace accidents. In fact, the workplace safety poster as an art form has been a great success — it is cost-effective, portable, responsive, customisable and, if crafted properly, does not rely on readers’ language abilities to work. However, despite its crucial role and impact on workplace safety, the poster is now under threat from pervasive TV monitors that are almost as cheap to run as posters themselves.

Another artistic format that was used as an effective platform for promoting health and safety was the short information film, produced from a variety of government agencies and departments from the 1940s through to its heyday in the 1970s. The Ministry of Information was responsible for some of these, while the Government’s dedicated Whitehall Film Unit produced volumes of films to be shown during cinema presentations. The Rank Organisation also provided a similar form of short documentary film, which targeted large volumes of working people and often focused on how jobs were done correctly and safely. Whether they were films warning of the dangers of working with heavy machinery while drunk, the benefits of the Highway Code, or to remind workers of the added dangers of smoking in the office, the short film, screened weekly in the cinema, was a highly effective way of using the arts to educate people about their work.
The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) bravely ran a poetry competition in the early 2000s for young people to write a poem about stress. The winner was 10-year-old Andrew from Potley Hill Primary school, whose entry read:

“Stress looks like a flaming demon
Sounds like an eagle squawking
Tastes like a burnt sausage
Smells like sour milk
Feels like stroking a hedgehog”

This poem is a useful tool in lectures about stress, as not only does it encapsulate all the human senses but it allows others in the lecture to imagine the sensory experiences that stress conjures up for them; it provides artistic and individual freedom into the topic of workplace stress. It could also be used to get delegates to create their own subjective poem about stress, which may help them verbalise their situation or distress.

“Guerrilla monologue theatre”

One successful technique that has the potential for incredible impact on those within organisations who witness it is the guerrilla educational theatre piece, the presentation of which provides a case study below.

Case study: Gail

The setting is a Friday morning, around 11am, in a seminar room in a cannery factory, where a mini-lecture on safety is being delivered to a room of 20 health and safety representatives and 2 occupational health advisors. The health and safety representatives have no formal HSE training within the company, but act as local representatives who raise issues and questions to the relevant health and safety team as and when they arise.

As the speaker is approaching the end of the mini-session, the door at the rear of the room unexpectedly bursts open, interrupting the talk. In the doorway is an attractive woman wrapped only in a duvet and carrying an expensive pair of shoes. This is Gail, and as she half-drunkenly stumbles towards the front of the room she has just invaded, the speaker goes quiet and makes way for her as she begins to address the room. Gail is here, the morning after the night before, to tell a personal and emotive story of how she ended up wrapped up in someone’s duvet, and how she came to cheat on her husband, who had suffered an industrial accident some months before. It is a performance piece that makes people think, makes people feel guilty, and makes people feel, at times, awkward. Deliberately timed to have maximum impact, this 15-minute monologue provides a convincing level of human detail about the wife and victim of an industrial accident, their back-story as an ordinary couple, and how and why such a worker could possibly cut the corners that resulted in the accident. When Gail leaves the room after sometimes laughing, and sometimes crying, there often remains an awkward silence among the witnesses to this event. Not sure whether to applaud what they have just seen or to remain quiet out of respect for the tragedy of Gail’s story, the witnesses are then asked to discuss what they have just seen, and importantly, how it made them feel.

On the occasions when this technique has been used, it has never failed to make both an impact on delegates and to receive excellent evaluation feedback. Whenever delegates are faced with endless PowerPoint presentations or some other didactic mechanism, there is always a risk of tedium or fatigue entering the proceedings; but no delegates are likely to forget a high-impact and emotive
presentation with such a serious message. The monologue is a highly versatile art form that can be used to address endless workplace health and safety issues in all industries.

Motivational speeches

Another presentation form that has an artistic element is that of the motivational speaker. Like the monologue theatre, this works because it cuts through the didactic nature of a traditional health and safety presentation. The success of this approach relies on the motivational speaker being able to project themselves and their narrative so that delegates gain more than just the traditional knowledge imparted.

Case study: Jason

In a hotel conference suite hosting a health and safety conference, Jason, a wheelchair user in his late thirties, addresses delegates from the front of the room. He mentions how he was a window cleaner and how, on one single occasion, he had neglected to fasten and secure his ladder. The subsequent fall of about 12 feet resulted in him being hospitalised. Jason’s narrative continues — he lost his job and, due to his disability, became depressed. He turned to alcohol and drugs and eventually saw his marriage and family collapse around him. At points in the highly personal narrative, Jason continues to remind the delegates that it was the one-off simple mistake he made that “did all of this”. His story continues and he lets the viewer know how he turned himself and his life around, providing both an inspirational and humbling journey to sit through.

This is as powerful as the monologue, and indeed it is a monologue, but it is also true and has a redemption point that provides the inspiration. While it can be difficult for some people to hear of such a story, the impact is again not to be underestimated.

Conclusion

With new media developing all the time, and a wealth of creative artistic talent also available, there seems to be almost endless scope for using the spoken performance piece in the workplace. The live pieces outlined above could also effectively be delivered electronically via DVD or a webpage. In addition, the use of the spoken arts in occupational health would clearly need to be evaluated in terms of effectiveness in order to ensure future use. However, such evaluations would probably need to go beyond a simple quantitative analysis and be prepared to be more subjective in its scope.

The impacts made from artistic learning devices in the workplace can last much longer than those resulting from standard educational and training tools, and this resonance within the memory of workers is a positive evaluation in itself.

“Gail” is taken from the work of Emma Currie at Acting Up.