

Secret Meetings in Cyber Space

Bibliodrama on the Internet

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Is it possible to do bibliodrama on the internet? The question has stayed with me for many years. Therefore, it was with great excitement that I carried through a pilot project at the end of 2013. Behind the pilot project were the Bibliodrama Society in Sweden and the study-organization Bilda (Swedish for “Educate”.) The aim was to find out if it was possible to adapt the methods and find exercises that would work on the internet. In the pilot project, Bilda Online was used, which is Bilda’s platform for study-groups and learning on the internet.

Preparations and planning

A concrete invitation with enticing headings was made up: *“Fill yourself with Christmas spirit! Allow yourself to be touched by the message of Christmas! Have a go at exercises on the internet inspired by bibliodrama, together with a group. We will use texts relating to Christmas and explore their depths together.”* The invitation was sent to the members of the Bibliodrama Society in Sweden and was directed to people who had already tried bibliodrama. Seven participants rose to the challenge. Four of them I hadn’t met before. Most of them had completed the basic bibliodrama training and were all well acquainted with bibliodrama.

The structure of the net-based study-group

During three weeks, the net-based study-group would work with three texts and I wanted to try creative exercises, writing and role-play. The structure was tight, and the participants were expected to set aside at least two hours and fifteen minutes per week.

In the instruction, the participants were informed about the text that had been chosen for the exercise. The aim was to create an instruction for every exercise, which the participants could follow step by step. I wanted to facilitate by creating a feeling of simplicity and playfulness. I also wanted to give the participants the freedom to do the exercises in their own manner, where each of them was responsible to do whatever she needed to do or felt comfortable doing.

In this form of bibliodrama, where the participants carry out the exercises on their own, it is especially important that the warm-up inspires and helps them to get started. I chose exercises which encouraged focusing and becoming present in body, thought and feeling in order to facilitate for the work with the text. I also tried the whole exercise myself, step by step, before letting the participants take part in it.

The structures for the reflections after each exercise were the same during all three weeks, in order to make it as simple and well-known as possible. No opportunity was given to comment on reflections from other group members. This rule was set so that the participants should feel free to share from their own needs, without having to explain afterwards so that others could understand. What had been shared, should be regarded as gifts to the other participants, something to be careful with.

The first week – Isaiah

The group started the week by getting acquainted with Bilda Online, making themselves at home and participating in opening rounds: introduction, expectations and agreements. All three weeks, two more spaces for conversation were available: a “coffee room” for free inputs and a space for questions about technical matters etcetera.

The week continued with the first bibliodrama exercise from Isaiah 9:2-7. Working with the text, the participants were asked to choose a word that made them curious or a word that “stood out”. Out of this word they were supposed to create a word collage and finally to “take the word into the body”, letting the impulses from the word become a movement. On the basis of the feeling in their bodies, they were asked to find a symbol in the room. After that they were invited to write down their reflections and then share them, in writing, in a round on Bilda Online. An important stage was to read the reflections of the other group members. I closed the round by thanking all for what they had shared.

The second week – the Christmas Gospel

During the second week, the net-based study-group worked with the Christmas Gospel from Luke 2:1-20. Working with the text, they were asked to choose a person in the text who interested them or made them curious and to reflect on what they might know about this person from the text. The next assignment was to write a letter to this person and ask the questions that might have arisen and after that to become that person and reply to the letter. Then the participants were asked to de-role, become themselves again, read the two letters and finally to start to reflect as themselves. The reflections shared in the whole group followed the same structure as the week before.

The third week – the astrologers from the East

The third week was about the astrologers from the East in Matthew 2:1-12. Working with the text, the participants were invited to imagine the different environments that might be distinguished in the text, then to build a few simple settings in the room representing these environments, using whatever things that were available. The next assignment was to take on the role as an astrologer from the East and start to explore the environments. A “play” started. The astrologer then returned back home, and in the autumn of his life he remembered and wrote down what had happened during the journey. After that followed an individual reflection and a reflection in the group.

The conclusion of the net-based study-group

The study-group was concluded with a round, which gave the participants the opportunity to make a summary on the following issues: “What will you keep from the texts and the exercises in the situation that you are now in? What has become important?” As the last stage,

the participants were invited to an evaluation round: “What are the advantages of working in this way on the internet? What are the disadvantages? What has worked well? What has been difficult?” A more detailed evaluation was sent by email to the participants after a few days.

Turn-out

It took the whole first week before all the participants had started the process. By email, I reminded the people who were late to begin their inputs in the different rounds. The word collage was done in several ways. In the written reflection the participants generously shared the thoughts that had come to them and how the chosen word related to themselves, their way of thinking and their lives.

In fact, the exercises during the first and the second week overlapped. In the reflections, there was great involvement and identification with the chosen persons. For some of the participants, the reflections from the week before lingered on and were woven into the thoughts of this week.

During the third week the group was more or less gathered, warmed up och had found a common rhythm. The group shared generously and in a personal way from the “astrologer’s diary”. Also this time, each of them had made the exercise in their own fashion. In the concluding summary, it was mentioned that the texts had been revived, the words had affected the participants and given them new energy and new perspectives.

The evaluation of the participants

With regard to the question if it is possible to do bibliodrama on the internet, all participants gave positive answers and most of them expressed a spontaneous interest in trying it again. Regarding the emotional experiences in the exercises, different opinions were forwarded. Some meant that the emotional experience is more profound when interacting with others in the physical room, while others felt that working on the internet becomes more meditative, it goes deeper and becomes an experience that is just as profound. Several of the participants emphasized that it is necessary to have experienced bibliodrama in the physical room, before you do it on the internet.

Advantages that several mentioned were that you don’t have to travel anywhere, which saves time and money. It opens up possibilities to participate in bibliodrama that wouldn’t otherwise have existed. Most of the participants also mentioned the positive aspect of controlling your own time – when to do the exercise and in what pace. To write down your own reflections and to read the reflections of the others in your own pace many pointed out as advantages. The writing in itself also became important. “Something happens when you are writing,” one participant said. One person felt that the text becomes part of everyday life in another way in this form of bibliodrama. Some meant that it worked well as a preparation for a sermon. All participants mentioned that shortage of time had affected their participation and different reasons were pointed out: this is a busy time of the year, for example with preparations for Christmas, bad self-discipline and difficulties to find your own rhythm.

The single factor that the participants missed most was the relation to the group: the encounter, to be able to see each other, the interaction in the exercises and response from

others in the form of eye contact, body language etcetera. Compared to a bibliodrama in the physical room a participant said: “The biggest difference is that the participants can’t rest in the presence of the leader.” Some thought that a group process had developed, while others were hesitant. A need was expressed to be able to interact more around the written reflections.

The leader’s evaluation

For me as a leader it was exciting and stimulating to be able to try this method – it was a real adventure! Since I had chosen an ambitious and tight structure, I had to mobilize my energy to make it work and to find equilibrium between giving clear directions and yet create a feeling of freedom. I was proactive in the beginning to help the group to gather and supported the participants via email and telephone. One difficulty in the co-ordination was that some wanted to participate in the study-group during work-days and some during the weekends. In retrospect, I have drawn the conclusion that it would have been better to have had fewer exercises.

As a leader, I could follow the reflections of the participants in the pace and time that suited myself. Then I could focus fully on them. This became a particular form of contact with the participants – strong and at the same time reserved. It became reserved since comments were not allowed, except for a ‘thank you’ at the end of the group’s reflection rounds. Since I had tried the exercises fully myself, the experiences and reflections of the participants strongly affected my own interpretation of the text. I didn’t participate in the reflection rounds with my own experiences and thoughts, since this was not agreed from the beginning.

Bibliodrama on the internet – a form of its own

“Bibliodrama on the internet cannot be compared with bibliodrama in the physical room,” one of the participants commented. This is really true. The working methods are different, it has its own form and its own qualities, but just like bibliodrama in the physical room it can bring unexpected surprise. The possibilities and challenges remind me of experiences with other net-based study-groups that I have conducted.

The role of the participant

To participate in bibliodrama on the internet requires a certain amount of self-discipline in order to be able to shut out everything else, find stillness, become present and open on your own. The participant him/herself is responsible for setting aside time, carrying out the exercises and taking part in the reflections of the group. To a large extent, the benefit by participating in the net-based study-group becomes what the participant makes of it and it is partly related to how much time he or she will dedicate to it. The participant can totally tend to his or her needs and becomes his or her own chairperson in the exercise.

The role of the leader

Bibliodrama on the internet also requires much time from the leader. The leader needs to think in another fashion compared with bibliodrama in the physical room. The contact with the participants needs to be established also outside the net-based platform. As the study-group moves on the leader must be ready to support the participants via email or telephone.

Instructions become very important and need to be clear and appropriate. They are supposed to give inspiration and guidance so that the participant can carry out the exercises. They function as the leader's "voice" in relation to the participant.

In the beginning of the net-based study-group, the leader needs to give a little extra attention to technical matters. Start slowly and allow plenty of time for the introductory work.

In the described structure it is, as a matter of fact, possible for the leader to participate fully in the exercises. This is a fundamental attitude in the specific kind of adult education practised within the Swedish study-organizations, even if it is not usually implemented in bibliodrama.

Advantage of not being visible

With net-based Bibliodrama, there is the advantage both for the leader and the participants that they don't have to "be visible" all the time in what they are doing. As a participant you can do everything in your own way, which can become more authentic, and you don't have to adapt to others. As a leader you can concentrate on one thing at a time, and in this way you can become well focused and present.

The text becomes present in everyday life

One advantage with this form of bibliodrama is that the participants live with the exercises and the reflections for a longer time. The reflections of the other group members drop in successively and give a reminder of the ongoing bibliodrama process. Both the work with the text and the reflections can become a longer and deeper process than on a single bibliodrama occasion. The freedom to be in control of the time opens up possibilities for participants to adapt the pace at all stages to what is most suitable at the time. If you want to stop and deepen an experience you can do that, and also you can return to an exercise if you want to.

Challenges for the future

According to my opinion, bibliodrama on the internet has a definite future. Many persons who have experienced bibliodrama in the physical room are interested to participate more, but geographical distances, costs and difficulties to set aside several days make this difficult. People who have attended bibliodrama training and conduct bibliodramas themselves have a need now and then to participate themselves, be inspired and maintain their competence. Bibliodrama on the internet can be an alternative when other options are scarce.

One of the challenges in net-based bibliodrama is to create good conditions for increasing the fellowship and the interaction between the participants and to find different forms for the group reflections and in this way bring about a deeper group-process.

Another challenge is to motivate the participants to prioritize their own time in order to participate within the deadlines and to follow what is happening in the study-group – mostly for their own sake, but also for the sake of the involvement in the group. When people are allowed to choose freely, it is easy to postpone assignments.

Possibilities for development

There are many possibilities for bibliodrama on the internet. There is a large development

potential on different net-based platforms, for example Skype which is cost-free. In a Skype conversation, a small group can talk to each other and in this way conduct a bibliodrama in real time, where the leader actively and with the presence of his or her voice can lead the process. The communication form allows the participants to hear each other and write to each other at the same time.

Other possibilities are to combine bibliodrama in the physical room with exercises on the internet, for example, after a bibliodrama, to continue the group discussion on the internet with written reflections. It would be interesting to have a group who meet physically once a month during one semester and has exercises on the internet between group meetings.

With net-based study-groups it will be possible to reach new target groups, for example pastors and ministers preparing for sermons, where the participants carry out exercises related to the text of the coming Sunday. People who otherwise would have no possibility to do bibliodrama together, now have a chance to do so.

If we open our eyes towards Europe, there are also new possibilities arising. The challenge will then be to have a common language, which all the participants of the group can master.

In order for a development to take place, there will be a need for more bibliodrama leaders who are interested in conducting bibliodrama on the internet.

Conclusion

Is it possible to do bibliodrama on the internet? If bibliodrama is a method to discover, explore and deepen a Biblical text and create a profound encounter with the text, then my conclusion after the pilot project is that it is possible to do bibliodrama on the internet. Besides it is very inspiring to lead such a process. It is almost like a “secret club”, where the immediate surrounding is not aware of the “hidden” bibliodrama workshop that is going on.

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