

ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION DRAMA: HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM  
ENTERTAINMENT DRAMA?

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“When forced to work within a strict framework,  
the imagination is taxed to its utmost—  
and will produce its richest ideas.

Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl”—TS Eliot.

**Introduction:**

In recent years, there has been growing attention paid to "health communication" which might be loosely translated to mean the imparting of knowledge about health and healthy behaviors to the general public. The intention of health communication is to give people the power to keep themselves healthy rather than relying almost entirely on medical practitioners. Health communication, therefore, covers a wide field that includes understanding what keeps the body healthy; knowing how to prevent illness and harm; recognizing symptoms of common diseases and knowing exactly when to seek help and what help to seek. The challenge is to find the most effective way of communicating health-related issues to the general public.

The reality tends to be that people take a serious interest in their health only when that health is threatened by disease or damage. The concept of prevention is all too often overwhelmed by the belief in "that cannot happen to me." Evidence of this reluctance to prevent is clearly seen in such common behaviors as smoking, failing to wear seat belts and motor cycle helmets, over-exposure to the sun, eating of high cholesterol foods, etc. to say nothing of indulging in dangerous and addictive drugs. In so-called highly developed countries, information on health maintenance is widely and freely available to everyone. Yet, even in these countries, the majority of people would rather "take a pill" on a regular basis than indulge in uncomfortable or inconvenient behavior such as regular exercise or dietary restrictions. In developing countries where access to health knowledge is restricted and often negatively affected by traditional customs, the question of how to communicate and encourage appropriate behavior change becomes increasingly challenging.

Inevitably the question arises, "How can the media help to communicate essential and important health messages to the general audience?" After all, all forms of media are increasingly available to people throughout the world. Where higher technological advances like the Internet and television are not freely available, there is still radio, which is still the most universally available form of media communication. With people in Europe and America spending as much as 7 hours a day watching television or accessing the Internet, it should be easy to provide people with the knowledge they need to stay healthy. Yet, even in these countries, the reality is that most people would rather spend their time being entertained than being educated. They are not drawn to health matters which have not affected their personal lives; they are drawn to entertainment that removes them from the pressures and stresses of everyday life and offers them the vicarious opportunity to release emotions.

The question thus becomes, not "how can the media help?" but "can entertainment (perhaps delivered through the media) help to encourage positive health behavior change?" This question led to the development of the Entertainment-Education format. Entertainment-Education is a combination of the words "entertainment" and "education" and was coined by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication programs. It describes "any communication presentation that delivers a pro-social educational message in an entertainment format". (Coleman 1988).

The Entertainment-Education concept is not new. Stories, in the form of fables, legends, and parables, have been used throughout history to demonstrate or reinforce important truths, such as Aesop's charming story of The Gnat and The Bull that reminds the listener with complete simplicity that "the smaller the mind, the greater the vanity." (Aesop's Fables, p.162 Aesop's Fables, Colorgravure Publications.) It would seem, therefore, that using entertaining stories to engage the attention and the emotions of the public might be an effective pipeline through which to communicate about health.

Story-telling is inherent in every culture in the world. Whether that story-telling existed in narrative form, in acted drama, in dance, or in painting or music, it has always had the ability to engage an audience. Why? Perhaps, it is because stories are about people (or animal representations of people behavior) and, as Isaac Bashevis Singer has said, "It seems that the analysis of character is the highest human entertainment. And literature does it, unlike gossip, without mentioning real names." (Isaac Bashevis Singer: Isaac Bashevis Singer Talks...About Everything, interview with Richard Burgin in the New York Times magazine (November 28 1978). Or perhaps it is simply that a story allows its audience the opportunity to vicariously feel and freely express emotions that everyday life does not always offer the opportunity to express, even when they are strongly felt. (For example, there are times in every person's life when feelings of extreme anger must be curbed). Is it possible, then, to use stories in the form of narratives, TV films, stage or community theater, or radio drama to communicate about health to a general or even a specific audience? The answer appears to be quite firmly positive.

As far back as 1949, The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) experimented with the idea of using a radio drama to educate the farmers of the young, but enormous country. With the assistance of a gifted writer, Gwen Meredith, they created a serial drama titled "The Lawsons". The serial had the specific intent of telling a gripping story about the lives of a farming family, and, at the same time, encouraging farmers to adopt new farming methods that would greatly improve their own and the nation's agricultural output. "The Lawsons" (with a change of name to "Blue Hills") was on the air for 27 years, five days a week.

One of the ABC's Rural Department's earliest trainees, Harry Greaves, said farmers were considered very conservative in the 1940s and 1950s and therefore needed to be cajoled into embracing the new technology that was coming along at an increasing rate. 'A radio soapie set in the country, with an injection of agricultural technology advice, worked very well. Incidentally, it was a technique used later in many developing countries to encourage people to embrace agricultural technology,' he said. (add Quotation citation).

Today, this type of Entertainment-Education drama serial is being used worldwide, on television as well as radio, to promote and encourage appropriate health behavior.

It is by now a well-known fact that some twenty years after the ABC success, Miguel Sabido introduced the use of the Entertainment-Education format into Mexican television soap operas with extraordinary success. Since then, the Entertainment-Education drama format has been used widely in developing countries, including Asian countries such as India, Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam, and many African countries, among them Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Namibia and South Africa, where "Soul City" has been a success for several years now.

The question remains, "Can this Entertainment-Education format be equally successful in the "developed world" where the plethora of entertainment venues encourages the audience to "flip the switch" the moment they know or believe they are being told to do something. It would seem that the Entertainment-Education approach should be successful if certain vital basic steps are followed and if adjustment is made to allow for cultural differences.

First, it must be clearly understood that Entertainment-Education drama is an art form markedly different from drama designed purely for entertainment (entertainment drama). The mission of an Entertainment-Education drama falls into one of two categories. A) **Entertainment-Education information dramas** that include in the drama information that a general audience can use (if they so choose) to improve their lives. B) **Entertainment-Education behavior change dramas** that use the drama as a tool through which to provide knowledge and motivate a specific audience to adopt particular behavior changes that will significantly improve the quality of their lives. The creation of Entertainment-Education drama (particularly Entertainment-Education behavior change drama) is an especially demanding task, markedly different in several ways from the creation of entertainment drama. Entertainment-Education scriptwriters, while creating quality drama, must maintain disciplined devotion to the mission of providing accurate knowledge or encouraging behavior change or both. In either case, they must be willing and able to blend into the drama, subtly but clearly, prescribed educational content; a task necessitating self-discipline and flexibility together with imagination and creativity.

**Differences:** The basic difference between entertainment drama and Entertainment-Education drama, therefore, is the primary aim of each. The primary aim of any drama affects its structure, production and presentation. Stated briefly, the primary aim of entertainment drama is to involve the audience in a story (plot) as it affects, or is affected by the lives of the characters. Entertainment-Education drama, on the other hand, uses the entertaining story as a tool or a gateway through which to deliver knowledge and motivate behavior change.

**Entertainment Drama:** An entertainment drama can and sometimes does affect attitudes or behavior, but that is not its primary aim. Consider Shakespeare's drama *Othello*. Its underlying universal theme is jealousy and the terrible consequences that jealousy can cause. Certainly, *Othello* might lead some audience members to consider

possible problems of jealousy in their own lives. It is not, however, Shakespeare's intention to motivate the audiences of his drama to remove jealousy from their lives. All the characters in the drama exist to contribute to the theme of jealousy and its devastating effects on the lives of Othello and Desdemona. There are no characters in the drama who demonstrate how to avoid or overcome jealousy because that is not the intention of the drama.

**Entertainment-Education Drama:** An Entertainment-Education drama attracts and involves the audience with its story while naturally, gradually and subtly providing knowledge and encouraging behavior change. A successful example is the Nepalese radio serial drama *Cut Your Coat According to Your Cloth*. The entertaining story is based on the underlying universal theme of harmony: harmony within one's own life; one's family and one's community. The main plot revolves around the conflict between two members of the community of Salghari—two strong men, each of whom inadvertently destroys harmony by striving to prove his superiority over the other. The struggle between these two dominant characters creates an exciting story and subtly establishes the question of harmony: its importance and how it can be created and maintained in all areas of life.

One sub-plot of the serial carries the theme of harmony into individual family life. This sub-plot shows, through two markedly different married couples, how discord can be reduced and greater harmony achieved when the couple works together on all aspects of their life. This extension of the harmony theme into the individual family allows a perfectly natural gateway for the introduction of messages and motivations about family planning and spacing. Another sub-plot investigates the establishment and importance of social norms, as the community tries to work together to overcome barriers between those who wish to continue traditional behaviors and those who want to move forward into a modern world. Again, the harmony theme, this time within the community, allows for the perfectly natural introduction of question of girl-child equality, as the members of the community struggle with the question of whether or not to allow girls to go to school.

**Characters:** The choice of characters for a drama is, obviously, of great importance. In an entertainment drama, the characters are designed to contribute to and be involved in the plot, and reflect the story's universal theme. While the characters might express feelings and emotions that all human beings can experience, they are not necessarily characters with whose life style the audience can identify personally, or about whom the audience could say "these people are just like us". Very few people, for example, live a life identical with Othello's. In an entertainment drama, moreover, it is not necessary that even one of the characters learns something new or undergoes a behavior change in the course of events. Othello, for example, does not change his jealous behavior and nobody in the drama learns of the advantages of psychological counseling to reduce marital stress.

The choice of characters in an Entertainment-Education drama designed to motivate behavior change is of special importance. There are two essentials for character presentation in behavior change Entertainment-Education drama: 1) Audience members must be able to recognize themselves or people they know in some of the characters; "they must be recognizable and familiar to the audience" (Pamela Brooke, pg. 65). 2)

The recognizable characters must model current behavior as well as the behavior change the drama wishes to encourage. The recognizable characters, therefore, generally fall into three categories: those who strongly resist the change; those who are interested in but somewhat dubious of the change, yet eventually make the change; and those who are making (or have already made) the change willingly and benefit from it. Through the inclusion of these three categories, it is possible to reach and hopefully influence change in the knowledge and behavior of a range of audience members.

**Specificity of character.** The need for an Entertainment-Education drama to influence a specific audience means that the characters in the drama, while reflecting universal human emotions, must be representative of that specific audience for whom the behavior change is recommended. Audience members must be able to recognize and appreciate how changes made by certain characters could benefit their own lives. If the behavior change is desired for more than one audience (for example single adolescents and married couples), then the drama must include realistic characters from each of the intended audiences and show how each audience can change.

**Series Drama and Serial Drama:** Entertainment-Education programs that aim only to deliver information can be presented in a drama series. Entertainment-Education programs that have a specific behavior change objective are much more likely to be successful if presented as serial drama (soap opera).

**The series format** completes one story in one program. A series has a limited number of main characters (seldom more than half a dozen) who appear in all or almost all programs. While the same characters appear in each program, however, the plot or story in which they are engaged changes every time. It is possible, therefore, to include a specific piece of information in each program, depending on the story being told. For example, one story might show the main characters in a restaurant celebrating the birthday of one of them. A stranger at another table collapses from a heart attack. This allows the story to bring in, quite naturally, information on what to do when a person is struck down by a heart attack. There is no specific behavior change aim here. The aim is to provide information that the audience can use or not as they choose.

**The main characters** in a series do not change; rather they remain very much the same throughout all programs. Audience members expect this. They come to know the personalities of the main characters and therefore enjoy anticipating how these characters will react to the different incidents in which they find themselves in each program. This requirement mandates that behavior change cannot be demonstrated naturally or easily by the main characters who appear regularly in the series. Similarly, since a series requires that each 30 or 60-minute presentation is a complete story, it is difficult, if not impossible to show even ancillary characters (who appear occasionally or in one program only) going through gradual and believable behavior change.

**A drama serial** is an ongoing story presented in individual episodes (perhaps once a week, perhaps five times a week). The story and therefore the characters in a serial can be continuous over a period of weeks, months, years, even decades. The serial format, by its very nature allows for sub-plots as well as a main plot. This means that several stories

can be devised that appeal to diverse segments of the audience. A serial can include, for example, an action adventure plot that appeals to men, a tragedy plot that appeals to women, and a love story plot that attracts the attention of adolescents. A serial also has the advantage that the story continues for weeks, months or even years. This allows time for individual characters to move up the steps of behavior change gradually and naturally from their first knowledge of the suggested behavior to their eventual acceptance, practice and advocacy of it. "The strategy is most effective when applied in a repetitious form of entertainment. "( Heidi Noel Nariman, *Soap Operas for Social Change*" pg. 113) The drama serial, therefore, is an ideal instrument through which to provide demonstrate and motivate behavior change. "Albert Bandura says in his social learning theories that most of what we learn in life comes to us through either conscious or unconscious identification with strong role models." and "these sequential steps in decision making and behaviour need to be demonstrated for us by these role models if we're to learn them. And, when we see them being rewarded or punished for their actions, our vicarious experience of what happens to them has the effect of either motivating or inhibiting our own behavior." (Pam Brooke *Communicating through Story Characters. P.27*)

**The Audience:** Entertainment dramas usually are created for a general audience. A really good story, whether in narrative or dramatic form, can appeal to almost anyone. An Entertainment-Education drama certainly can and should appeal to a wide audience. At the same time, however, it must pay very particular attention to and clearly acknowledge the specific audience whose behavior it is trying to influence. If, for example, the mission of an Entertainment-Education drama is to encourage average Vietnamese people to wear helmets while riding motor cycles, it is unlikely that a drama about a motor cycle racer in Northern Canada would inspire the desired behavior change. Much more likely to be effective is a story set in Vietnam about typical Vietnamese people. While the Northern Canadian racer might have an exciting and dramatic story that would appeal to people around the world (including Vietnam), Vietnamese people cannot be expected to see him as representative of their own lives.

**Knowing the Audience:** To bring about sustainable behavior change in a specific audience, it is essential that the program creators (writers and directors) know that audience very well. They need to understand the CAUSES of the current behavior that the project hopes to change, and what impediments might stand in the way of the desired change. The program creators must have also a clear understanding of the CHANGE AGENTS that are likely to encourage and sustain behavior change in the audience. Possible change agents include emotions and attitudes, role models, authority figures, and clear and cogent benefits. The Entertainment-Education drama must reflect the causes and impediments and demonstrate, through appropriate change agents, how these can be overcome.

Program creators also need to have an understanding of the type of story that will appeal to the chosen audience. Sometimes this means creating characters and situations that might not be recognizable or understandable to a worldwide audience. The underlying emotion, however, should reflect a universal emotional theme. Every good story is based on a universal emotional theme. The setting and characters of the Nepalese drama *Cut*

*Your Coat According to Your Cloth* are not those with which an American audience would identify, but the underlying universal theme of harmony is understandable worldwide.

“Of the total creative effort in a finished work, 75 percent or more of a writer’s labor goes into designing the story. Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences? Finding the answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story is our overwhelming creative task.” (*Story*, pg.19. Robert McKee, Regan Books, 1997)

**Evaluation.** Evaluation of an Entertainment-Education drama means more than determining its popularity or the number of fans who flock to meet the stars. Certainly, it is important that the drama is popular. Success, however, is measured ultimately in the amount of sustainable behavior change achieved by the drama. End-of-episode quizzes can measure immediate knowledge gain, but knowledge alone does not always lead to behavior change. The ultimate measure of the success of an Entertainment-Education drama is the sustained effect it has on the behavior of the specified audience.

**Writing the drama.** Because of its very specific needs, Entertainment-Education drama writing is different in many ways from entertainment drama writing. Entertainment-Education drama writing requires that the writers are dedicated to three aims at the same time: 1) creating a strongly entertaining story, 2) blending in naturally and gradually and subtly the necessary educational messages and 3) providing strong behavior change motivation for the chosen audience(s). It is often also true that having some understanding of or experience with teaching is beneficial to the Entertainment-Education drama writer. Some writers see these requirements as an imposition on their individual creativity. Perhaps they are, and perhaps therefore, Entertainment-Education drama writing is not appropriate for all drama writers. The truth is that Entertainment-Education writers need to employ what might be called “directed creativity”. Entertainment-Education writing is a challenging art form requiring writers to be committed and dedicated to adjusting their personal creative desires into stories that are motivational and educational as well as entertaining. Writers who feel compelled to say “I can’t put a message in that episode, it will spoil MY story,” probably should not take up Entertainment-Education drama writing. In Entertainment-Education writing, “my” story has to be the story the writer willingly designs with the needs of the message and the audience in the creative forefront.

**Entertainment-Education drama partnership.** “Entertainment and education objectives should be taken into equal consideration when planning an entertainment-education campaign.” (Heidi Noel Nariman. Pg. 118) Entertainment-Education dramas require that some degree of educational or “technical” knowledge be passed to the audience. Even in those dramas that are aiming to change behavior, there is a need to provide specific knowledge that will help make behavior change possible for the audience. The content and extent of this knowledge is determined not by the writer, but by specialists who have studied what the audience needs to know in order to appreciate and make the behavior change. This knowledge need means that there are two essential

partners in the Entertainment-Education drama process: the “entertainment” creators and the “education” providers. It is absolutely essential that the partners work together from the very outset of the project, and that each partner understands and appreciates the contribution of the other. In chapter 9 of her excellent book *The Turtle and the Dove*, Martine Bouman outlines the difficulties that can arise when this cooperation is not established at the very beginning of the project. She states “the making of a television programme is the result of a negotiated agreement in which all partners have to give and take, and have to be willing to cross boundaries in order to create win-win options. Crossing boundaries and entering a new professional field, however, may cause imbalances in collaboration. One may interfere too much in the daily routine of the other, or misinterpret the cues of the other’s professional field. Both professionals have to figure out, often by trial and error, how much influence and interpretation is permitted and effective. Too much or too little interference may become counter-productive or even disastrous for the final outcome.” (page 177) What is important, therefore, is to find the right balance from the outset.

**Design Team and Design Workshop.** A successful partnership can be forged, initially, at the Design Workshop. The initiation of any Entertainment-Education drama project should begin with a Design Workshop in which the specific messages to be included in the drama are determined by a Design Team. The writer(s) and producer/director of the drama are essential members of the Design Team and they must be present throughout the entire Design Workshop so that they can understand and help determine all vital elements of the drama. Others on the Design Team will be specialists in the areas of the knowledge and behavior change required by the audience, and researchers who understand audience behavior, causes and change agents and can help determine the most appropriate behavior change theory to adopt for the project. Experience has shown that total involvement of both partners (the creative team and the technical team) in the Design Workshop is the best—perhaps the only—way to ensure harmonious and successful initiation, development and presentation of an Entertainment-Education drama.

**Training.** Entertainment-Education drama writing is still a comparatively new art form. Stories and dramas have been used throughout history to deliver morals, messages and important pieces of knowledge. However, the use of drama actually to motivate and demonstrate immediate change in behavior is something relatively new. Writers and directors experienced in entertainment writing usually need to be trained in (or at least to study) the principles of successful Entertainment-Education drama writing and directing before undertaking it. As they study and perhaps try out the principles, entertainment drama practitioners need to be sure, in their hearts, that they want to adapt their creativity to this challenging and disciplined art form before undertaking a project. Entertainment-Education drama creation is not for every writer, just as making exotically decorated birthday cakes is not for everyone who likes to cook. For those willingly to accept its challenges and limitations, however, Entertainment-Education drama writing is an exciting and rewarding undertaking.