



Reflections

Transformational Power of Theatre of the Oppressed with Marginalized Students

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We all must all do theatre, to find out who we are, and to discover who we could become.
Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed

Growing up outside of Detroit, MI., performing theatre and dance was my refuge as home life was an unfortunate place of instability. Theatre taught me composure, self-discovery, worthiness and valuing difference (empathy for people who didn't look or act like me), and creating theatre taught me essential skills such as collaboration, creativity, adaptability, empathy and the need for unity. Through this unique combination, I experienced how theatre propels us into an artistic expression that magnifies our true selves, our souls. This collaborative theatre is a type of social justice in and of itself; it offers a way to radicalize and liberate ourselves from oppressive systems which most of us are constantly boxed into. The man who gave my first lesson in this liberation, was founder and creator of Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal.

My first experience with Boal's theories and practices was in the late 90's, as an undergraduate theatre major studying acting at Western Michigan University (WMU). For a class assignment, I read parts of Theatre of the Oppressed (commonly known as T.O.) by Augusto Boal (1931-2009) (1985). Inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2000), T.O. was developed out of Boal's revolutionary work with worker populations in Latin America. Theatre of the Oppressed was a practice of community-based theatre designed to invite the audience not to be passive spectators but active "spect-actors," to physically take action towards the injustices, staged as oppressive scenarios. It is now used all over the world for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building, therapy, and government legislation. Understanding Boal's social justice tool, felt like a calling and a place for real change in society, a calling because it enabled me to understand that theatre is not only entertainment; it also communicates personal stories to make an impact and lead to social change. I remember being awestruck by the twentieth century avant garde and political theatre practices and how this was radicalizing oppressive systems, worldwide. The fact that Boal was exiled to Argentina for five years by the Brazilian government meant he was a threat, a threat because he was making an impact.

COMBINING BOAL'S WORK IN CLASSROOMS AND ON STAGE

Years later, as I was pursuing my MFA in Directing Theatre at The University of Portland, I learned how Boal's practice and theories can be used in combination with other practices. Working with Michael Rohd, Artistic Director of Sojourn Theatre in Portland Oregon, on a play called *Witnessing our Schools*, a documentary theater project/play based on almost 500 interviews, we asked, "What is the mission of public education in our communities today?" Rohd's applied technique activates discussion with audiences around social justice themes similar to Boal. As Telesco and Soloman explain, "Boal works to create discussions in which participants can "practice for real life" and take action, exploring the consequences in a safe space" (2011, p. 55-6).

Similarly, I learned from my colleague and theatre professor, Richard Piatt, who worked with The Augustinian Youth Encounter Experiment using both Liberation Theology and Theatre of the Oppressed in a workshop entitled, "I Call You Friends." Liberation Theology uses a practice known as, "see, judge, act." "See" starts with discussing the understandings of oppression; "judge" asks questions brought forth by the images of oppression and "act" sets the stage to move forward. I learned that Liberation Theology articulated the same ideas of Boal's "spect-actors" which engages participation with audiences in oppressive scenarios.

Both systems understand that the oppressor's point of view has been repeatedly articulated and has frequently been enshrined as the status quo. T.O. and Liberation Theology rely strongly on the notion that in the scenario of human oppression, both the oppressor(s) and the oppressed can be easily identified. By applying the "see, judge, act" methodology [of Liberation Theology] more expertly, the nuances of the oppressed/oppressor dialectic are easier to envision, making it more possible to loosen the stranglehold that the Manichean either/or thinking has on Theatre of the Oppressed practice. (Piatt, 2011, p. 210)

By understanding how Rohd and Piatt used Boal as a foundation in their own practice, I could envision how I could do the same with my students.

Incorporating Boal at LaGuardia Community College

LaGuardia Community College (LGCC) situated in Queens, NY, serves a demographic of students from over 150 different countries, speaking over 100 different languages. For 73% of our students, the average annual family income is less than \$30,000. LGCC students have little or no voice in the existing dominant capitalistic society and if we view the education system as a caste system, as marginalized community college students, they are at the bottom. It took me some time to discover how I could use Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in my classroom teachings. As a white woman, I was very aware my skin may feel threatening to some students, and, in order for me to teach acting effectively, students need to see a certain vulnerability in order to open themselves up.

Additionally, since I am from Detroit, I have learned the necessity of guarding yourself in NYC. Just getting on the subway and managing the busy city life requires a certain defense mechanism. At first, I tried to replicate traditional teaching methods I knew, but fell short. As I started to get to know the students and allow them to know me, I experimented using T.O. exercises on de-mechanization which resulted in reciprocal trust. These exercises gave students who do not have agency in educational spaces, an opportunity to trust their own vulnerability, essential to growth as an actor. Boal reinforces the transformation in the classroom by stating:

Theatre of the Oppressed emphasizes theatre as a language that must be spoken, not a discourse that must be listened to. It also stresses theatre as a process that must be developed, rather than a finished product that must be consumed. The theatre of the oppressed goes beyond the ordinary boundaries of theatre because it

asserts the oppressed are the subjects rather than the objects of theatrical activity. (Boal & Epstein, 1990, p. 35)

Simultaneously, as my classroom was evolving, I worked with Mauricio Salgado (T.O. trained practitioner) from Artists Strive to End Poverty (ASTEP) on a community-based play called Unpacking Home looking at the homeless institution in NYC, to ask, “what does home mean to you?” Students from LaGuardia and Kingsborough Community Colleges partnered with homeless shelters in NYC as volunteers. This resulted in a new play. To create the ensemble of actors, we used Boal’s exercises of de-mechanization, yoga and other theatre games. With time and repetition, these exercises allowed students to share their own experiences with homelessness and shelters at different stages of their lives. The production also incorporated both Piatt’s version of Liberation Theology through “see”, “judge”, “act” and T.O. (spect-actor) by activating the audience in engagement through conversations and activities during the production, asking thematic questions. This process proved to me that students needed an outlet to discuss how they felt oppressed and to find a way to take action against their oppression and oppressors. This gave the students agency and purpose in ways that a traditional theatre experience could not offer.

These foundational experiences helped me develop my own pedagogy and a way to change the hierarchy in the classroom by de-centering myself and re-centering the collective, the students and their lived experiences. Unpacking Home ignited a series of other community-based theatre productions devised by students focusing on themes of Muslim identity, Black Lives Matter and immigration. Utilizing not only Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed but also documentary and verbatim theatre exercises (listening exercises using interview questions), I started to see how students were becoming change makers in their own lives and in their communities.

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED PRACTICES AND TECHNIQUES

Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice unites groups through confronting oppression (Boal, 1985). My students started behaving as a community by socializing outside of class, coming up with ideas to expand the work and inviting others into the group, even non-theatre majors. They became more and more invested and committed to the projects even as some of the theatre performances were not even tied to a class or a grade. They learned how to be in the driver’s seat of collective creation and started to discuss their own life purpose. They could articulate and come to validate where they had been, their current experience and where they could see themselves in the future. They were collaborating and utilizing a process of re-thinking first gut instincts to include second thoughts of their own and with others. They were adapting and creating “out of the box” ideas. They were thriving in process and prioritizing care for others and the creation, instead of approaching theatre from a singular perspective.

Here is a list of some traditional Theatre of the Oppressed practices I used with my students. These definitions give a brief overview of the practice to help further understand how I implemented them.

Image Theatre

A sequence of games asking participants to create physical images, using their bodies as still sculptures. These images demonstrate experiences of society, culture, politics, etc. Students express their feelings, oppressions, past experiences and goals for the future. I have seen students utilize Image Theatre to explore self-worth as these games allow students to realize these themes in a physical way. Seeing the images in human form encourages discussions around oppression.

Rainbow of Desire

Building on Image Theatre where status may enter relationships such as employer/employee, parent/child, friend, lovers. By exploring physical images, each individual is given the opportunity to voice themselves. The next step includes asking the group to voice the images in an effort to explore multiple perspectives and understandings. This next step allows discussions to be facilitated.

Forum Theatre

A problem-solving tool which plays out a scenario that does not have a resolvable outcome. As scenarios of oppression play out, the audience is asked to stand in for the character who is being oppressed to try to solve the problem. Considered a “rehearsal for life”, this style of theatre is impactful in developing audience interaction as “spect-actors” and discussions around the theme. I have seen students find their power and reclaim their past as these scenarios are challenging and not easily solvable. Using this tool, bystanders witnessing oppression can learn how to make change.

Cops-in-the-Head

Games used to express and explore our own internalized oppressions. These games, used more in classroom and workshop settings, allow students to reflect on how they can change their own mindsets.

OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION—STORIES

If I were to look at data to demonstrate outcomes, I’d say that this type of work shows considerable change in propelling a student from a marginalized community towards self-empowerment and success. Utilizing some of the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, paired with other devised models, the number of LGCC Theatre majors grew from 11 to 150 in just a few years; transfer and graduation rates doubled the college's (Spring 2020 we graduated approximately 52% of our 2nd year students while the college’s rate was around 27%) and we won national awards. Our students are transferring and graduating from competitive BA and BFA programs such as Pace University, NYU, Boston University, Marymount of Manhattan, Western Connecticut State University, Dean College and CUNY and SUNY senior colleges.

But this data doesn’t tell the stories of individual students. I watched a student paralyzed by shyness come out of his shell, write a scene and perform in front of hundreds, or a student who never thought he’d escape his neighborhood of violence, graduate from LGCC transfer to a BA program and create films about his experiences, and a student debilitated when COVID hit, create her own theatre/film company which currently produces her work. Therefore, I prefer to assess outcomes looking through a different lens. Below is a list of “essential skills” I have re-defined for assessment of student growth in my classes.

Self-Love-Worth/Vulnerability

Modern life requires students to guard themselves in ways we have never imagined. T.O.’s de-mechanization exercises provide space for understanding each other, therefore allowing vulnerability and space for self-expression.

Collaboration

As a result of increasing isolation (even before COVID), we are learning that to work as an ensemble is essential in life. T.O.'s Image and Forum Theatre provides teaching listening, re-thinking, revising and ensemble building skills.

Adaptability

T.O. practices require improvisation which teaches thinking and adapting in the moment. Learning how to use improvisation provides perseverance and adapting to change.

Creativity

In T.O.'s Forum Theatre, oppressive situations are creatively played out to promote action. Students' oppressive experiences are used as the scenarios under the creative lens of self-script writing in theatre.

Empathy

In order to build empathy, listening and understanding others' experiences guides students to understand diverse perspectives. By utilizing empathy in this way, students consider how audiences can be changed by this work.

Unity

As this process creates a new play, most students question the outcome and how audiences will receive it. By working through this natural fear, most students bump up against one another and disagree on what the audience should or shouldn't see. By working through these disagreements, students create strong bonds and sense of belonging. "We got through that hard work together!" Deeper than "teamwork", this is family. This practice teaches and promotes trust and relational relationships instead of transactional ones.

QUANDARY OF PRODUCT LEARNING VS. PROCESS LEARNING

Nowadays in the classroom, I ask the students Boal's question: "should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure?" (Boal, 1985, p. xiv). These questions turn into discussions around the purpose of art/ theatre and their careers. It can be triggering for students, as I must clarify the realities of the mainstream industry (producing product) at the same time build on the importance of the essential skills the students are learning through theatre which are life skills to be used in any career (process learning). I think this work with Theatre of the Oppressed makes the students reflect on the purpose of theatre and where they fit into the industry.

The industry is anything but a safe haven, and I am torn in choosing which production experience the program offers. Theatre is taught by doing. Do I teach "devised" (creative collection/ self-script writing) and community-based theatre or mainstream theatre like Broadway? The mainstream entertainment profession (Theatre, TV and Film) has been built on a history of white supremacy in terms of casting practices, centering white stories and providing the most access for those privileged enough to afford the status of "poor starving artists." Students at LGCC are the global majority, and if they enter the field professionally, they will inevitably experience more stereotypes in casting than if they were white. I am sensitive to students' dreams of wanting to be a "Netflix star" (as they call it). I do not want to diminish or tell them what is best for them, but it is a challenging discussion. Is it equitable and ethical to produce

mainstream theatre, which was never designed to promote global majority artists or should I practice and teach devised and community based theatre which is absolutely for them as its made by them?

Although I am torn, I try to provide as accurate a picture as I can regarding the realities of the profession, while simultaneously, helping them to lean into, appreciate, and amplify outcomes such as self-worth/love, vulnerability, adaptability, collaboration, creativity, empathy, and unity as essential skills, ones that provide a solid platform for any field they choose, especially in creating their own work. Each community of learners is different, and I've learned to not hold on tightly to what I think should be done for transformation in the classroom. I've learned to incorporate theories, practices and ideas as a foundation in my classes but allow the relationships with the students to help us pivot to where we go next in order for students to be transformed.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT BY STEW: A RADICAL ARTIST

After building this program for a decade, I had one of the most unique collaborations at LGCC with musician and Tony Award winner, Stew (from the band, Stew & The Negro Problem), on a new musical centering on the history of immigration, slavery, lynching, and women's rights by using chapters from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* called "Columbus is Happening" (2018). I used the pedagogy I developed, influenced by Boal, Rohd and student interviews, to create this work. Stew's final words in working together capture my hope for students' transformation. He said,

LaGuardia Community College is broader than Broadway. The professional entertainment world places us in a dance of producer/consumer exchange, but rarely does it provide a sense of self-worth, a sense of discovery, a sense of possibility, a sense of resistance, nor, of course, revolution. The classroom has more revolutionary potential than the entertainment industry. What Stefanie Sertich is doing here at LAGCC is profound, transformative and a testament to the power and necessity of arts education. (Stew, 2018)

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