

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

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## Engaging the Whole Student: Interactive Theatre in the Classroom

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Augusto Boal's interactive Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) provides embodied learning experiences that engage the senses, emotions, and imagination as well as the intellect. Doing theatre is a form of active learning (Gressler, 2002), and research shows that active learning helps develop critical thinking (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Using TO techniques, faculty can guide students in exploring ideas through images and enactment, rendering the subject matter memorable and meaningful.

Brazilian theatre director, writer, and politician Augusto Boal drew upon the work of Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in developing TO. As an engaged artist struggling against the Brazilian dictatorship in the sixties, Boal was arrested, tortured, and exiled. An inveterate storyteller, Boal recounts the experience that inspired him to move from traditional political theatre to interactive theatre, in which the spectator becomes "spect-actor," actively engaging in theatrical explorations of social problems. Boal's company was performing in a peasant village, and the play ended with actors holding rifles over their heads and vowing, "We will go and shed our blood and take back our land!" Afterwards, one of the villagers invited the actors to lunch, adding, "Bring your guns. After lunch, we'll go attack the landlords and start taking back our land."

Embarrassed, Boal explained that the rifles weren't real, just stage props. "That's okay," the villager replied, "we have enough guns for you, too." "But—we're actors," Boal protested. "So what you're really saying," the peasant mused, "is, 'You go and shed your blood and take back the land.'" Boal realized that he and his actors were hypocrites, exhorting others to actions they themselves weren't willing to take. He developed the TO approach, in which groups use theatre techniques to explore their own social issues and find their own solutions. TO can be employed in the classroom to guide students in investigating topics, especially those related to uses and abuses of power.

## **Theatre Games**

Boal has adapted a variety of theatre games to help TO participants warm up their bodies, enhance their sensory awareness, and promote group cohesiveness. Many of these techniques also serve as physical metaphors for exploring ideas.

For instance, a key TO game is "Columbian Hypnosis." Participants divide into pairs. The leader holds out his/her hand, palm forward, eight inches from the follower's face, with the fingertips even with the follower's forehead and the heel of the hand even with the chin. The follower must try to maintain the same spatial relationship, as the leader guides the follower through a variety of movements and positions. After a few minutes, leader and follower change roles (Boal, 1992, p. 63). Variants include having one leader use both hands to lead two followers and developing a web of leader/followers, in which everyone in the room is connected.

In discussing the game, participants invariably recognize that it deals with issues of power. "Who preferred leading? Why? Who preferred following? Why?" the teacher asks. Common answers: "I liked leading because I prefer being in control"; "I liked following because it's less responsibility." Processing the experience of the web of leader/followers can lead to consideration of power problems in organizations, including the difficulty of leading while concentrating on following, and how small movements at the center can cause whiplash effects for those on the fringe. In games like "Columbian Hypnosis," ideas take on deeper meaning because students have

experienced them with their own bodies and senses.

## **Main Techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed**

After warming up with theatre games, the group explores selected issues through one of the main TO techniques: Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, or Rainbow of Desire. Image Theatre is particularly adaptable to classroom use.

In Image Theatre, students create living statues with the bodies of their classmates. One student "sculpts" the human clay into an image of a situation relevant to the topic at hand, a situation in which power is being misused. Other students can change the image or create a new image, until the class finds an image that embodies the essence of the negative situation. In a similar fashion, the class creates an image of their vision of the "ideal" situation. Then, through sculpting transitional steps, they explore possibilities for positive change: how to move from the negative to the ideal image.

In making images, students draw upon their own experiences and values, as well as what they're learning in the course. For example, in a class for pre-service teachers, students divided into groups, each sculpting its image of the "oppressive" and the "ideal" classroom. Although the images varied, all of the negative images depicted a "teacher-centered" classroom, with power and authority vested in the instructor. All of the positive images depicted a "learner-centered" classroom, in which power was shared, and teachers and students worked together.

Images can provide vivid metaphors for ideas, metaphors likely to remain in students' memories. For instance, shortly prior to the U.S. attack on Iraq, a class used Image Theatre to explore the current relationship between the American government and its citizens. One negative image depicted three citizens sitting on the floor, alternately with hands over eyes, ears, and mouth. Behind the citizens stood three soldiers pointing guns. For another example, a group investigating leadership created as their ideal image a flock of geese, graceful in V-shaped flight. This image depicted leadership as a shared responsibility as, in slow-motion, the lead goose retreated and another goose assumed the lead position, then another, in ongoing

rotation. Ideas generated through Image Theatre are also memorable for students because they've created the images and thus have ownership of them.

In Forum Theatre, a short scene is performed in which the main character ("protagonist") is unable to solve a problem. The actors repeat the scene, inviting spect-actors to enter into the play, replace the protagonist, and try out their ideas for solutions. When Forum Theatre is used for class work, the problems selected relate to course topics. For example, the pre-service teachers mentioned above developed scenes on cultural oppression in the classroom, including plays on the biases of standardized testing and censorship of literature. After presenting their plays, the students noted in their class journals the advantages of Forum Theatre over traditional case studies. They not only had the opportunity to share a variety of solutions but to try them out to see if proposed solutions actually worked.

Boal developed Rainbow of Desire (1995) after working in countries where he found oppression to be more internalized than overt. In the basic Rainbow exercise, a spect-actor who has volunteered to be the protagonist re-enacts a real-life conflict and identifies a variety of different "desires" he/she experienced during the conflict. These desires are then embodied by other members of the group. (For example, one "desire" might stand shaking his fist at the antagonist, while another cowers, pleading for understanding). The protagonist dialogues with his/her own desires and negotiates what role he/she wishes each desire to play in the conflict. This complex form of TO may be particularly useful in courses that deal with some aspect of human relations, such as classes in conflict resolution.

## **How to get started**

You don't have to be a theatre expert to use TO in your classes. (Timpson & Burgoyne, 2001) Boal's books provide specific instructions for TO games and techniques. You may also find someone from your campus or community who has interactive theatre experience and would be willing to lead a session for your class, so you can see how it's done. The Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed organization (<http://www.unomaha.edu/~pto>) hosts an

annual conference and workshops on TO; they may help you locate a TO practitioner in your area. It may take some time and effort to integrate interactive theatre into your teaching, but the pay-off is worth it in terms of increased student engagement—and learning.

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