

*This article examines Forum Theater and critical literacy with immigrants in an English class and identifies the revolutionary and pedagogical possibilities of a theater where there are only spectators.*

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## Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and how to derail real-life tragedies with imagination

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THE MEANING OF THEATER in the process of transmitting knowledge has been extensively debated throughout the history of humanity. From Aristotle to Boal, theater has been discussed as art for contemplation and art for transformation. Based on several articles about drama in education, it sounds as if there is a stereotypical view that views theater as being only a performance on stage. This simplistic way to look at theater seems to be one of the reasons for the resistance in using drama in the classroom. There is an expectation that children have to perform a play for an audience instead of just benefiting from drama as a process of make-believe.<sup>1</sup>

Not all educators feel comfortable directing and staging plays, but it does not have to be like that. As Andersen said, "In a staged theater production, there is often more of a focus on rehearsal as a means to a end (that end being the performance). In drama in

education, the process is the end in itself.”<sup>2</sup> What educators need to understand is that it is not about the performance at the end, but the process of using drama, the techniques and exercises, that can open up a world of possibilities in the classroom. Of course, it can have a final product and it can be a performance, but this is not necessary to develop this work.

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### *Theater of the Oppressed*

As an artist and an educator, I always felt comfortable using drama techniques. After training with Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal, I decided to study and apply his own techniques known as Theater of the Oppressed (TO), which focuses on the process. Every human being is theater, and theater is necessarily political. This is how Boal conceived TO over thirty years ago. The extensive literature involving TO, authored by Boal and others, shows how widely practiced it is in many countries. Boal states that the TO has two fundamental principles: “1) To help the spectator become a protagonist of the dramatic action so that s/he can 2) apply those actions s/he has practiced in the theater to real life.”<sup>3</sup> One of Boal’s most translated books is *Theater of the Oppressed*, where he explores the social constructs that lie behind the traditional theater form while analyzing Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hegel, and Brecht.<sup>4</sup>

Boal created the TO in Brazil with the goal of dealing with social and political problems inside communities. He uses theater as the language to speak about all kinds of human concerns and social issues. Some of its major techniques are Image Theater, Forum Theater, Cops in the Head, and Rainbow of Desire.

### *The techniques*

In Image Theater, participants use the bodies of the other participants to sculpt their opinions and feelings. Boal believes that this form has the “extraordinary capacity for making thought *visible*.”<sup>5</sup> Images are a language like any other, with its collective denotations

and individual connotations. Boal affirmed that “oppression exists when a dialogue becomes a monologue.”<sup>6</sup> When one side tries to dominate the other, the dialogue turns into a monologue. “Images convey ideas”;<sup>7</sup> therefore Image Theater can be a powerful tool to create dialogue.

Forum Theater is identified as a problem-solving technique. A story of oppression is improvised, and the public is invited to stop the action, replace the character that is being oppressed, and improvise a new ending. For Boal, “Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, he often realizes that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests.”<sup>8</sup> Forum Theater can be used to look at past and present situations, or it can be a rehearsal for the future.

Cops in the Head is an element of a broader concept inside the structure of TO. This method is concerned with individuals’ internal voices, fears, and oppressions. “To know and to transform” is the goal of this technique that helps to bring to light the “cops” inside one’s head.<sup>9</sup> Rainbow of Desire is a more complex technique. It is a process of exploring the “rainbow” of fears and desires of each character. This technique uses Image Theater to bring to life conflicting emotions and deconstructs the character’s story of conflict.

Boal insists that the spectator must become the *spect-actor*. He or she becomes the protagonist of the story, “changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains him[her]self for the real action. In this case, perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.”<sup>10</sup> This is an important concept for TO, and it creates an opportunity for people to identify commonalities and learn about the differences between individuals.

### *The study*

For two months I conducted a pilot study involving Brazilian immigrants in a class for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The study consisted of using Forum Theater techniques

as a pedagogical tool to help these students develop critical literacy skills in English. Some of the findings of this study are that this technique improves participants' social awareness, transforms people into protagonists of their own lives, and helps develop language skills.

The setting of the study was an ESOL class for immigrants held in Everett, Massachusetts, a working-class suburb of Boston. This study was conducted with adults, but the same techniques can and have been applied with a group of young immigrants. This class was an academic year-long program for local residents, and it was considered at an intermediate/advanced level. Research was conducted over a two-month period, with seven class sessions, each extending over two and a half hours. Data were gathered and analyzed while exploring participants' reactions through interviews, group discussions, and observations.

The research intervention for this study was the application of Forum Theater to the curriculum. The Forum Theater process started by creating a safe environment with warm-ups and improvisational theater games for people to share personal stories. In the next step, participants chose one of the stories (the one that they related most with) to intervene. One of the stories was about two people disguised as police officers who threatened and robbed immigrants. The improvisation of the story followed, and spect-actors started imagining what they could do to change the outcome of the story. The spect-actor took on the role of the protagonist and improvised a new ending to the story instead of just sharing verbally what the protagonist should or could do. While advocating for themselves and for each other in the story, they all became emotional and angry.

In this study, I found that no matter why the participants were studying English, the reasons were all rooted in becoming autonomous in society. Speaking English can give immigrants confidence to communicate and interact in any social context, and it can play an important role for the adaptation process of immigrant youth. Data from this study indicate that the participants' experi-

ences speaking English are often embedded in fear. They often noted that they are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at.

Improving their language skills gave the participants confidence and self-esteem, as well as better chances of advocating for themselves. In interviews, they said that the use of theater techniques helped them feel more relaxed, and that contributed to the development of their self-esteem in their adaptation process. To speak English is more than a survival skill for immigrant families; it helps both adults and children act as protagonists of their lives. Theater of the Oppressed empowers immigrants who are learning a new language by giving them the opportunity to rehearse their language skills in situations that are going to be relevant for them.

An interesting phenomenon reported by immigrants in this study is the new relationship established between adults and youth in the new culture. Parents reported that they became much more dependent on their children, who were able to conquer the language barrier much more quickly. As children developed a new sense of responsibility in the family as communicators and translators, parents had to give up some control, reversing the role of parents and children, which can be very stressful for the family.

Adults in this study reported that among the reasons they needed to improve their English skills was to help their children with homework. Practicing English through theater was more than a possible avenue to develop this goal. It was also a way of developing confidence and self-esteem.

### *The connection with critical literacy*

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who became known worldwide for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, believed that language is culture; by learning how to use language, people recognize themselves as the subject of the history process and therefore can change their realities.<sup>11</sup> Because immigrant children learn how to use the new language faster than adults, their adaptation in the new culture is smoother than that of their parents, which does not mean that it is an easy process.

Giroux notes in the introduction of Freire and Macedo's book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* that teachers need to introduce a language of empowerment to students.<sup>12</sup> This language is critical literacy, and it allows students to think and reflect about their lives before they can take actions. This language of empowerment reconstructs people's social understanding, helping them to take risks to transform themselves and envision a new world.

Developing critical literacy and finding a voice in another language had an impact on the participants' cultural identities. The participants were transformed into what Freire called "conscious beings."<sup>13</sup> The majority of immigrants in the United States represent what Freire would call a dependent, silent society: "Its voice is not an authentic voice, but merely an echo of the voice of the metropolis—in every way, the metropolis speaks, the dependent society listens."<sup>14</sup> What is needed in this case is a "revolutionary project . . . a process in which the people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world."<sup>15</sup> Conscious beings question their cultural identities and decide what they should keep, what needs to be transformed, and what they want to acquire. They become subjects in every context.

The process of becoming a conscious being is not easy and has some costs. I realized how much I was asking of the participants in this study. I wanted them to run over their fears, take risks, and engage in improvisational theater techniques. I asked them not only to use the new language they were learning, but their bodies as well. I put them in a very vulnerable position. Even so, during a particular Forum Theater session, everybody in the class participated. One by one, they were assuming the role of protagonist and changing the outcome of the story. Some of them demonstrated a certain ease and confidence. Others were timid at the start, but they were encouraged by the rest of the group, and by the end, they were not only more self-assured but also had smiles on their faces.

In this situation, I found an important connection between improving language skills and empowerment. The connection was made when the spect-actors forgot they were in an English class

and eventually even forgot they were speaking English. They were actively engaged in their roles, and that was because the story was relevant to them.

### *Results*

I could not measure the efficacy of this technique outside the classroom. However, I discovered how the simple action of engaging in a dialogue could be empowering. Being able to communicate, share ideas, and agree or disagree is not a simple task when people do not share the same language and culture. Theater of the Oppressed can stimulate dialogue and is useful to develop critical literacy in the classroom because it has reflective and transformative possibilities. TO helps develop spoken and nonverbal dialogue through a personalization of the learning process. New ideas are constructed through students' stories. TO can also be a powerful tool to analyze the relationship between immigrant parents and children. Having both groups represented at a Forum Theater session could potentially illuminate the complexity of this relationship and help to transform it.

As a pedagogical strategy, Forum Theater demonstrated itself to be useful in developing communication skills in an ESOL environment. Participants in this course placed great value on developing their oral language skills. The fact that students became subjects and challenged the power structure in the classroom using this technique helped them develop critical literacy. Theater of the Oppressed is not a magical tool and will not solve all problems. It is a process that helps people become aware of the problems so they can analyze them and try to identify possible solutions.

As Freire stated, "There is no way to transformation, transformation is the way."<sup>16</sup> If what we are looking for is transformation, then we have to start transforming the world around us. In order to transform their realities, immigrants have to shift from being an object to becoming a subject. Although I could not measure how the participants were using their skills outside the classroom, I still believe that this work gave them the awareness of possibilities for

action. In these experiences with Forum Theater, I discovered they can become their own advocates. Participants learned that they could rely on themselves. In this study, some participants were nervous about standing up and speaking English in the Forum Theater sessions, but they did it nevertheless, and they became agents in the classroom.

During this study, I also realized that although Theater of the Oppressed is an excellent tool to develop critical consciousness, this theater in ESOL classes needs to recognize the goals of this setting—in this case, language acquisition. In the study, by becoming conscious beings, participants were also able to learn English.

I never had the audacity to think that I could empower the students myself. I could only offer them a tool and hope that they would choose to use it. And they did. Some of the participants are now becoming facilitators of Forum Theater activities in lower-level English classes in the same program, and three of them are now officially teaching English. Forum Theater helped them to figure out what to do with this new voice in this new culture. It is a new identity they created, which added to the other identities they already had.<sup>17</sup> By disseminating this technique and helping other immigrants develop their language skills, subjects from this study are now developing their own powers to transform and become agents of change.

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### *Learning and final considerations regarding youth*

This work can be applied in any context. It is a powerful tool to be used with children and parents. By using drama in education, we are giving young people and adults the opportunity to diversify their knowledge and create an atmosphere where they can free their potentialities and express feelings, emotions, and anxieties. When a student interprets a character or dramatizes a situation, he or she is revealing a part of himself or herself. By using drama, they show how they see, feel, and think in the world. Boal believed that “if the



person has changed, something has changed around. If you acquire knowledge of something, this knowledge changes you and you change people around you.”<sup>18</sup>

Theater of the Oppressed techniques can be used to show young people that they can be agents of their own lives. Through scenes and dialogues, they realize that they have their own voice and are able to change their surroundings. For immigrant youth specifically, it can help them understand their new role in the family. When working with youth, improvised role play, and conflicts, it is important to emphasize that they should not try to find a magical solution or use violence to solve the problem. Theater of the Oppressed is based on nonviolent efforts to change a situation and can be helpful with groups of youth challenged by violence in their lives.

Theater stimulates dialogue and creates critical consciousness. It is a nonviolent approach to problem solving, shows people that there is not only one frame of reference in the world, challenges traditional power roles in the classroom, stimulates imagination and creativity, and strikes people in a unique way that a lecture will likely not.

This is a powerful tool to develop critical literacy. Theater of the Oppressed and critical literacy have the same goal. So the question is, “How many classes are doing TO?” Not many. Why? What do we need to do to use more TO in this context? And how are we going to do this? My guess is that many classes do not use TO because they are not familiar with this approach or are afraid to use it. Teachers are also products of banking education and are afraid of giving up power; it is too risky for them. They often do not want to lose control and allow the unexpected to happen.

For those seeking to develop this work, I recommend flexibility and full commitment during the entire process. The teacher-facilitator must determine his or her own training. I advise becoming very familiar with TO techniques before applying them in the classroom. The more the facilitator is knowledgeable about all TO procedures, the better he or she will be at adapting the techniques

to the needs of students. I encourage teachers, facilitators, researchers, and instructors to take risks, and I invite students to take risks as well. I recommend everybody to honestly engage in a learning process with other people and be open to learning from failures and mistakes. And again, keep in mind Freire's message: "There is no way to transformation, transformation is the way."<sup>19</sup>

As a theater practitioner, I am a witness of the power of arts and the positive changes it can bring. "If you have a strong desire, if you have not given up and you still believe, things can be changed."<sup>20</sup> Even if you change only yourself, I believe this work is worth it, because when we change, people around us change as well. The awareness that drama can build up new knowledge for children is where all educators should start.

## Notes

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