Embodied Risk-Taking: Embracing Discomfort through Image Theatre

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Abstract: Taking risks does not come easily to many honors students. Often their success is based on carefully following directions and working hard to meet established expectations. Although the Minnesota State University, Mankato Honors Program's competency-based model encourages students to focus on personal growth rather than course completion, our students still struggle with the open-ended nature of reflection-based learning. This essay explains how incorporating Augusto Boal's Image Theatre techniques in an honors seminar, Performance for Social Change, helped encourage students to become more comfortable with taking academic and ideological risks. Boal's methods depend heavily on embodied experience as a companion to reflection. Incorporating the body into the learning process requires students to relinquish some control and open themselves to taking chances.

Keywords: reflection, embodied experience, risk-taking, Boal, image theatre

Many honors students, as Wintrol and Jerinic (2013) affirm, are obsessively organized, conscientious rule-followers who have thrived in the United States educational context. With high control comes an aversion to risk-taking, which works out well in a system based on following directions and meeting clearly defined standards but presents obstacles in a learning environment that requires trial and error. My students are good at doing school but not always comfortable with learning. In the lead essay for this forum, Cognard-Black discusses risk-taking as the act of allowing for the potential loss of status within a social space. The social space for honors students is one in which they hold high status, and many fear losing that status. Cognard-Black challenges honors educators to "seek strategies that allow us to ameliorate the tension that talented, creative, and conscientious students experience in balancing risk and reputation." We need to help our students learn, not just achieve.

One way we try to address this tension in the Minnesota State University, Mankato Honors Program is focusing the curriculum on personal growth through competency development rather than successful completion of courses. Our competency development model depends heavily on self-awareness gained through reflection, yet our students struggle to understand how mindful reflection differs from the formulaic critical thinking patterns they have been taught to value. Good honors students know they must embrace critical thinking to grow, but too often they go into the process of reflection believing they are expected to discover the right answer rather than their own answer. As Cunningham (2009) reminds us, "Reflection is not just a skill; it's a disposition that develops over time and through experience" (p. 122). Therefore, we continue developing strategies to support our students as they become more comfortable with the process of reflection.

One of the ways I encourage my students to engage in meaningful risky reflection is to get them out of their heads by using their bodies in a series of theatre exercises. I incorporate Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methods into many of my courses and especially in my upper-level honors seminar, Performance of Social Change. The goal of this seminar is to help students identify instances of injustice and promote social change through theoretical analysis and performance techniques. Students discuss theories of oppression, power, and privilege, specifically as they appear in the social categories of race, class, and gender.

Throughout the course, students engage in multiple TO methods as they work together to construct a performance that confronts a social injustice they have identified in our local community. They then present the performance in a community, rather than only campus, venue where they are more likely to interact with community members. For example, one semester students chose to address the problem of bullying and performed for seventh- and eighth-grade assemblies at a local middle school. For many students, this course is their first opportunity to openly discuss oppression and privilege, and almost none of them have any performance background. The class does not just push students out of their comfort zones, it shoves them. Boal's methods, however, are designed to build a cooperative and supportive community among practitioners where all share the risks of the process. The result is often students "thinking creatively, making inductive links, or expressing ideas that they consider too unorthodox, too revolutionary, or too doubtful of professorial authority" (Cognard-Black).

Boal's methods depend heavily on an embodied experience as a companion to reflection. He writes, "In our culture we are used to expressing everything

through words, leaving the enormous expressive capabilities of the body in an underdeveloped state" (p. 130). His method of image theatre requires participants to use their bodies, alone or in combination, to construct frozen images that represent emotions and experiences. For example, when I first begin to introduce Boal's methods in my classes, I might ask students to show me, using their bodies, how they feel about the start of a new semester. One student might create an image using wide open arms and a broad smile illustrating excitement. Another may sit hunched on the floor, knees pulled to chest, curled into a ball of apprehension and stress. I usually have students face away from each other the first time they form an image. We then turn back toward each other and form the image again so that we see what others have done.

Although my students could have discussed their feelings about the new semester in small groups, asking them to use their bodies to show their feelings introduces a new level of nuance. As the semester progresses, we begin to build images exploring more difficult ideas such as how power, oppression, and privilege influence their lives and the lives of others. Students learn from each other by first observing each other's images and then sharing what they see in those images and how the images make them feel. For example, when asked to show what it feels like to be powerless, some students created images of having their bodies constrained in some way whereas others constructed images where they were unable to speak. Discussing how these images differ allowed students to understand how silencing renders one powerless in ways as harmful as being physically constrained. Howard (2004) explains that this "coauthorship leads to discovery" because through using Boal's methods, "people in communities can work together in a synergistic way to solve problems, share joys, learn about themselves, and take charge" (p. 221). Theatre becomes a common language through which students can begin taking risks with new concepts and ideas.

Boal explains that image theater has "an extraordinary capacity for making thought *visible*" (p. 137). His methods are concerned with the ways we can use our bodies to heighten our understanding of abstract concepts and emotions. As Auslander (1994) explains, "Augusto Boal's theatre is intensely physical in nature: everything begins with the image, and the image is made up of human bodies. . . . The body also becomes the primary locus of the ideological inscriptions and oppressions Boal wishes to address through theatre" (p. 124). By embodying their ideas in an image, students need not worry whether they are wording an answer correctly; they can simply express their thought or feeling from an immediate impulse. Students eventually learn that there is no one correct way to create an image. There is no rubric they can follow to

get the image right. The image is theirs alone. Once they have had a chance to experience what an image feels like on their body, they can begin to reflect on the experience and shift to processing the exercise through language. Describing the value of using TO methods to experiment with transformative learning practices in the classroom, Bhukhanwala, Dean, and Troyer (2017) state that "Embodied reflections through theater activities enable us to integrate the experiments and then act on this new learning" (p. 615). Although some students may initially feel self-conscious using these methods, those who take the risk and fully embrace the experience are often the ones who demonstrate the greatest depth in their understanding of the topics.

Students experience initial self-consciousness because incorporating Image Theater into a classroom acknowledges the presence of bodies in an academic context, which is typically discouraged. hooks (1994) explains that we come into classroom settings "determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind" (p. 192). Honors students are especially vulnerable to this impulse, often ignoring the needs of the body (i.e., sleep) for fear of failing to achieve goals. Giesler's (2017) work using TO methods with social work students confirms that creating an academic space where students can be aware of their bodies as companions to, rather than distractions from, their academic development can be liberating. Perry (2012) supports the growth potential provided through image theatre, arguing that it "may provide a way of creating an aesthetic space where dialogue and self-actualisation are affected through the body" (p. 111). Providing students space to be physically present in their learning, not just intellectually engaged, can welcome risk-taking into our classrooms.

Although my experience in creating spaces for actualization is grounded in a knowledge of how to use TO methods, there are numerous ways to adjust and adapt teaching methods and administrative practices to encourage embodied risk-taking. Wintrol and Jerinic (2013) challenged honors educators to be willing to take risks in our own approaches to teaching if we wish to model such behavior for our students. Whittenburg Ozment (2018) argues that "there are no truly safe spaces in or outside of the classroom, nor ought that be the ultimate goal" (p. 138). Therefore, we must prepare our students to be comfortable with the inevitable risks that will be required of them in the future, and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methods are one effective way to accomplish that goal.

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