

Urban Odyssey: Theatre of the Oppressed and Talented Minority Youth

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This research study describes a community-based pedagogical and theatrical project that centered on the use of creative writing, drama, and music as tools to unearth and cope with social problems. The class was grounded in the work of Brazilian teacher, actor, and activist Augusto Boal and philosopher Paulo Freire. The activities at a free summer school for gifted and talented adolescents called the Urban Odyssey were designed to provide inner-city youth with the opportunity to dialogue and act around issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and other social problems that they face as part of their everyday existence. Descriptions of the school and activities; instructions on how to use the forum theater concept; and reactions of students, teachers, and community members are included. Implications for school and community work are explored.

The Theatre of the Oppressed granted us permission to stand up and make a difference. When we are allowed to use the classroom as our stage, with enough practice, the world will eventually become our stage.

—Urban Odyssey teacher

Introduction

It has been suggested that a transformational approach to a curriculum for gifted and talented students would not be a fun-and-games type of curriculum. It would, instead, be a strictly business approach without the frills and enticements of a mainstream gifted and talented curriculum. The fun-and-games approach would be seen as a waste of time and a way to prohibit minority youth and women from mastering useful knowledge and skills that would enable them to have an opportunity for a productive place in society (Coleman, Sanders, & Cross, 1997). From this perspective, curricula should focus on transmission of information to students

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with an end goal of providing them with knowledge and tools to help them acquire cultural capital, the awareness and behaviors that ensure success within a dominant culture (hooks, 1994). While enrichment activities might be a part of this type of curriculum, in the main, students would be continually engaged in the serious business of learning how to survive, in spite of academic and cultural shortcomings, through serious down-to-earth types of learning activities.

However, it has been shown that gifted and talented students (in fact, all students) benefit from a curriculum that includes discussion of social change that is diverse and fosters creativity. Delisle (1992) suggested that it is important to discuss with students the world's problems and possible solutions. Delisle quoted Whaley's (1992) suggestions for involving youth in global awareness, including "Discussions and simulations that expose students to the various violent and nonviolent ways that individuals and governments resolve conflict and gain power" (Delisle, p. 170). Gifted students' accelerated moral development and acute awareness of their environment may leave them with a sense of helplessness in light of what they understand about power relations in the world (Radford, 1990). However, students may also benefit from activities that they consider challenging, engaging, and fun.

The purpose of this participatory action research study was to see whether the activities developed by Brazilian teacher, actor, and activist Augusto Boal may be an effective technology in helping gifted adolescents think and act critically and write creatively regarding social issues or political errors by using a fun-and-games theatrical approach (Boal, 1992).

In the practice of *The Theater of the Oppressed*, dialogue is promoted at all levels of exchange in the group. All games and techniques are designed to develop the social skills of cooperation and consensus building along with those of observation and analysis. Games are also generated as interactive structures that allow spect-actors to physically intervene in open-ended dramatic action. The goal is not necessarily to find the correct solution to particular problems of oppression, but rather to explore and rehearse a multiplicity of possible solutions. (*Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratory*, n.d.)

The generalizations that arise through the process allow us to see our past experiences in a new light by the examination of the present through history (Eisner, 1998).

The teachers of a summer school class about creative writing and I believed that potentially talented inner-city minority youth needed a special program that addressed their immediate needs in our capitalist and racist society. We attempted, through the use of critical pedagogy, to increase students' academic skills, open their eyes to the world, and provide them with knowledge and skills to change their lives and their communities. We created a creative writing class designed to encourage students to address issues of racism, classism, sexism, and so forth within the context of the Urban Odyssey summer school. As we examined ways to reach our goals for the students, we thought that pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO) might be one tool to help us. We also wanted to evaluate whether the introduction of PTO had helped us reach our intended outcomes.

The School, the Class, and the Research

The school was a nonresidential summer (3 weeks in July) commuter program that is part of the Ohio Department of Education Summer Honors Institutes, which is responsible for funding the school through a competitive grant process. We called our class the Urban Odyssey. Our stated purpose was to utilize the resources of an urban environment to provide students with experiences that we have reason to believe would not have been a part of their public (or private) schools' curricula.

There was no charge to the students for any part of the 3 weeks of schooling. The grant provided funds for faculty and staff salaries, transportation to and from the university, food for students and staff, honoraria for visiting faculty (lecturers, professional actors, storytellers, musicians, musicologists, scientists), admission to such public attractions as museums, bus and rail passes, art supplies, books, recorded music, and so forth. For example, the musicology teacher utilized the African American Museum; a trip to the street named for 88-year-old Delta blues legend Robert Lockwood, who still performs in the city; a workshop presented by a Latin percussionist; a group of six professional storytellers; a radio station that aired the students' public service announcements and call-in talk show; a hip-hop workshop; and so forth.

The classes were held from 9:00 a.m. till 2:00 p.m. Monday through Friday for 3 consecutive weeks. Students were not paid to attend classes, and they received no credit from their schools or the university. Most students attended every class meeting, even though they had other concerns and responsibilities.

We believed that they were there simply because they wanted to be there. They created and participated in activities as they evolved within the context of the class. It is important in critical participatory inquiry that participants choose what they want to do, rather than having their choice of experience prescribed by others (Reason, 1998).

All but one of the students attending the school lived within the broader urban environment of the city. The city of Cleveland, Ohio, is relatively small. There is no broad municipal government linking the city to other cities that are directly proximate to it. The city is ringed with what were once suburbs (built between 1890 and 1940), but they are now part of the broader urban environment and called inner-ring suburbs. Over 90 distinct ethnic groups are represented within these "cities within a city." The environment of these cities is decidedly urban, but by strict definition they are separate cities clustered around an inner-city core. The city and its inner-ring experience the ebb and flow of many immigrants, so the social context changes rapidly and often as new waves of immigrants find here the means of survival. The majority of our students lived in direct proximity to or within the inner city. They came from a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious groups and from a broad spectrum of social classes, though many may be called lower middle class. As conflicts arise among groups, racism (ethnocentrism) becomes a part of the fabric of their daily lives.

For the activity described in the research, we utilized a large classroom at the university. The floor of the room was carpeted. There was a chalkboard covering most of one wall, and another wall consisted of windows from about 3 feet from the floor to the ceiling. Bluish fluorescent lighting was available in abundance, though we did not always use it. The furniture consisted of a banquet-type table with a few chairs and some desks that were constantly reconfigured to serve the needs of the class at any given moment.

We believed that, given sufficient purpose and interaction, people will learn from one another. We consciously blurred the line between student and teacher in an attempt to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and attention. Thus, we had reason to believe that the utilization of the technologies inherent in the process of the Theatre of the Oppressed would provide us, teachers and students, with pedagogical activities that would encourage critical participatory engagement with learning both within and outside the classroom. Boal (1998) stated the proposition in this way:

Paulo Freire talks about the transitivity of true teaching: the teacher is not a person who unloads knowledge, like you unload a lorry, and heaps it up in the head of another person—

the bank vault where the money-knowledge is kept: the teacher is a person who has a particular area of knowledge, transmits it to the pupil and, at the same time, receives other knowledge in return, since the pupil also has his or her own area of knowledge. The *least* [italics added] a teacher has to learn from his pupil is how his pupil learns. Pupils are different from one another; they learn differently. Teaching is transitivity. Democracy. Dialogue. (p. 19)

One reason the technology of participatory action research was chosen was because I was the only one of the three teachers who had had the opportunity to develop more than a cursory awareness of Boalian-Freirian pedagogical ideas. I had attended conferences of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed in 2002 in Toledo, Ohio, and in 2003 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at which community activists, theatrical companies, academics, and students of all ages dialoged around their theories and experiences using the technologies of the Theatre of the Oppressed. I had also attended workshops led by Boal to learn how to apply principles of interactive community-based theatrical presentations to issues and problems chosen by community members as those most pertinent to their epistemologically derived rules of discourse within their communities and relations within and creation of social organizations. We had met before the class began and decided to try this technology, believing that we, both teachers and students, would learn from its use.

Methodology

This descriptive qualitative study utilizing critical participatory action inquiry (Reason, 1998) of gifted adolescents (ages 14–17) concerns their thoughts, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs toward such social issues as racism. The decision to use critical action research was, in part, based on the nature of the class itself. Critical action research tends to take a broad view of the relationship between what is taught in the classroom and social awareness and change: “For action researchers, social inquiry aims to generate knowledge and action in support of liberating social change” (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p. 94). Another reason for our choice of methodology was to demonstrate interest in the future history of the participants. Since the research was partly ethnographic, we wanted to share the sense of cooperation, the *gemeinschaftsgefühl* (Hammersley, 1992).

As teachers in the school, we believed that talented inner-city youth needed a program that not only addressed their potential tal-

ent area of creative writing, but also addressed their immediate needs in a capitalist and racist society. We utilized critical pedagogy to open students' eyes and provide them with the knowledge and skills to change their lives. We began this work in a creative-writing-around-racism class. During the 2nd year that we offered the class, we introduced the activity of forum theater.

We expected that some successful outcomes of the class would be that, by encouraging participants to describe forms of social reality and oppression in their own words as they related to their experiences and thoughts of oppression in relation to issues of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, heteronormativity, social class, and so forth, we (a) would realize our experiences more fully by acting them out in a forum theater; (b) explore ways that resistance could be addressed through writing and through public forum; and (c) improve the students' creative writing skills as they wrote for the forum theater, radio public service announcements, a radio call-in talk show, and a public reading of their work. Young-Minor (2003) said,

When we yield to the performative in our classrooms, we generate excitement and energy. We also give students a model of how a person can perform multiple knowledges. In doing so, we map a way for students to explore their own connections to ideas, bodies, and the larger world. (p. 26)

Among the participants in the study were students and teachers who chose to work in a free summer program for gifted and talented adolescents on the campus of Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio. The students chose (from a menu of eight) creative writing in relation to "the isms." A creative writing teacher (a Caucasian female) taught the writing portion of the class. She wrote of herself,

I received a B.A. in psychology and an M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction. I have taught students of varying abilities seventh-grade English for 6 years at W. Middle School. For the past two summers, I have had the opportunity to teach creative writing to "gifted and talented" high school students in the summer program at the university. The creative writing class is implemented around the topics of oppression, prejudice, and hatred. In other words, I teach the students about the "isms" and how they affect our lives. I have experience working with adolescents in my own classroom teaching creative writing.

Due to the exigencies of recruitment and enrollment, the creative writing class was merged with a class on the history and evolution

of African music. The teacher for that portion of the class was an African American male. He worked as a middle school teacher, professional musician, and program director for the university radio station.

As a researcher-participant-teacher of the class, I am a Caucasian male (often perceived as Hispanic) university educator with experience in teaching social issues and their relation to education, as well as working with gifted and talented students and their teachers. I have also had experience working directly with students identified as gifted, talented, or both; students identified as "normal"; and students with a variety of educational needs.

All members of the class, including both teachers and students, were considered to be participants in the research (Reason, 1998). The students included one Puerto Rican American female (age 15), one Asian American male (17), two African American males (15 and 17) and five African American females (14 to 17).

Data collected included a preactivity questionnaire regarding students' feelings and thoughts about and their experiences with racism. The questionnaire was used to help the students and teachers get to know each other as quickly as possible, given our 3-week time constraint. Teachers helped students think about how oppressions affected their lives and the role popular media play in perpetuating stereotypes and the objectification and commodification of human beings. Later, they were exposed to ideas on using theater to help them think and act critically around an issue. The students composed and performed short scenarios about social conflict. They were asked to show how such a conflict could be constructively resolved. Students discussed both the conflicts and possible resolutions. They were debriefed after the activity by answering informal questions about their cognitive and affective states. Students were asked to write a critique of the activity. I kept notes about students' actions and reactions and audiotaped descriptions of the in-class performances.

The research was conducted on 2 days during the beginning of the 2nd week of classes. So, while students were asked questions about racism, they were already aware of the interstices of racism with other isms. Students' classroom instruction had already included activities around privilege, classism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and so forth. The teacher had worked with the students for a week before the activity was introduced. She noted,

Together, we defined classism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, anti-Semitism, and sexism. Then, we gave examples of each type of oppression and discussed their effects. Students begin

to understand that more than one "ism" can exist at the same time. Next, we introduced the media, and we analyzed the different ways media permeate our society, perpetuating the "isms." Finally, we discussed our role. Students were encouraged to think of ways they could create change in their daily lives, while processing our thoughts through short stories, poetry, and song.

Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, and Forum Theater

Augusto Boal is an actor, activist, and teacher:

He was raised in Rio de Janeiro. He was formally trained in chemical engineering and attended Columbia University in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although his interest and participation in theatre began at an early age, it was just after he finished his doctorate at Columbia that he was asked to return to Brazil to work with the Arena Theatre in São Paulo. His work at the Arena Theatre led to his experimentation with new forms of theatre that would have an extraordinary impact on traditional practice.

Prior to his experimentation, and following tradition, audiences were invited to discuss a play at the end of the performance. In so doing, according to Boal, they remained viewers and "reactors" to the action before them. In the 1960s, Boal developed a process whereby audience members could stop a performance and suggest different actions for the actors, who would then carry out the audience suggestions. But in a now legendary development, a woman in the audience once was so outraged the actor could not understand her suggestion that she came onto the stage and showed what she meant. For Boal this was the birth of the spect-actor (not spectator) and his theatre was transformed. He began inviting audience members with suggestions for change onto the stage to demonstrate their ideas. In so doing, he discovered that through this participation the audience members became empowered not only to imagine change but to actually practice that change, reflect collectively on the suggestion, and thereby become empowered to generate social action. Theatre became a practical vehicle for grass-roots activism. (Patterson, 1999, p. 1)

We chose to use the Boalian invention of forum theater to give our students an opportunity to deal with problems as social issues through the media of theater and creative writing:

Forum theater relies upon the presentation of short scenes that represent problems of a given community, such as gender for a conference on U.S. third world feminism or racial stereotyping for a class on racism. Audience members interact by replacing characters in scenes and by improvising new solutions to the problems being presented. Image theater uses individuals to sculpt events and relationships sometimes to the accompaniment of a narrative. (Patterson, 1999, p. 1)

By using this technique, we asked participants to grapple with the way in which sociocultural and socioeconomic forms of oppression had influenced their lives and ways in which they might effect social change to address them. It was not our intention to propagate the idea that racism is bad and tolerance is good. It was, rather, to bring to the forefront of our consciousnesses the idea that transitivity, changing our communities in relation to intolerance, is preferable to intransitivity or no action.

Forum theater is a game that, like all games, has rules to follow. The rules fall into three categories: dramaturgy, staging, and performance. Each category contains specific subrules that allow the activities to work well. Students were instructed to create a text, a play, in which characters were clearly defined and one or more clear political errors occurred and to take the parts of the characters and memorize the play so it could be played in exactly the same way over and over. Students were asked to choose the political errors in the plays in relation to experiences within the groups of playwrights. They were to play the characters as realistically as possible and were given hints on successful staging, movement, and characterization. Audience members (students not involved in a particular play) were asked to intervene with solutions for the political errors advanced by the protagonist or antagonist in the play. Audience members (what Boal termed *spect-actors*) were instructed to identify political errors and intervene in the dramatic action to show this imaginary as it should be. In short, we chose to utilize most of Boal's rules from the list in the appendix.

Another Boalian technique, the Rainbow of Desire, deals with personal psychosocial issues and may be seen as similar to the psychodrama of Moreno (Sacks, 2002) insofar as it deals more with psychotherapeutic aspects of drama. However, forum theater does not require a trained psychodramatist: It is utilized primarily to address community issues that are presented to a community of people outside the troupe of principal players. It is blind casted, not intentionally therapeutic, and designed to induce, rather than reduce, conflict. Students may present a performance at their school or

other social venue with the understanding that there is no clearly defined audience. Instead, there is a group of spect-actors comprised of both the creators of the drama and those people normally seen as the audience who interact within the structure of the theater to address issues of community concern in an interactive manner. The initial questionnaire was used to help students focus on the issues at hand and to facilitate discussion. In addition, the questionnaires served as pre- and postinformation from students as part of the evaluation and as a way to inform the other teachers and me.

Initial Questionnaire

The initial questionnaire was concerned with students' experiences of racism. However, students included other isms in their performances and in their final critiques of the activity. The questionnaire included seven questions. The questions and responses are summarized as follows:

Question 1: What is racism?

Responses varied, but seemed to overlap in the ways students conceptualized and defined racism. A primary difference was between those responses that defined racism as a belief and those that defined racism as an action. One student said, "Racism is believing that one race is better than another and/or all other races are inferior." Another defined racism as an action: "when a person (or group of people) discriminates against a certain person (or group) because of the color of their skin." Most students related racism to skin color and tended to dichotomize the issue: "Racism is when someone of the opposite race may hate or discriminate against you because of the color of your skin." Another student used the word *hate* in the definition of racism: "Racism is one of the isms. It rhymes with sexism, ageism, and ableism. They all spell hate."

Question 2: How might we know who is a racist?

Students' answers to this question centered on other peoples' actions and often expressed feelings of uncertainty. One student answered, "We can't go around saying he or she is a racist because we can't tell by looks alone." Another said, "You have to listen to what people say and watch how a person might act around someone who is a different race." As for how a racist might act, several students answered in similar ways: "If someone acts superior to someone because of their skin color or if someone degrades someone else because of their skin color, then you know they are racist."

Question 3: Where does racism occur?

All the students agreed that racism could happen just about anywhere. "Racism occurs everywhere—in school, in the mall, at the store, on the street, just about any place you can think of." Another rejected geographical stereotypes of the occurrences of racism by saying, "Racism occurs all over the world. Not just in the deep dirty South, even in Africa. Yes, it occurs all over."

Question 4: When does racism occur?

Students tended to believe that racism can occur at anytime, but cited certain conditions conducive to racist behavior and gave examples from life to illustrate when racism can happen. One wrote, "Racism occurs when people around you convince you or give 'proof' showing that you as a race are better than someone else, giving you a false sense of superiority." Two students gave specific examples:

People aren't as prejudiced now as they were 70 years ago, but some things are still the same. Or if that doesn't answer the question, racism occurs when a White woman hides her purse when she sees a Black man coming, when someone is denied a job because of their race, and when a Black person says all White people are trailer-trash.

Racism occurs whenever people allow it to happen, whenever a good person stands by and lets it happen.

Question 5: Why are people racists?

All of the students said that people are racist because they learn to be racist. "I think people are racist because that's what they were taught to believe when they were younger and they know nothing else." Another student brought the issue of classism into why people might be racist: "People are racists because they see themselves as superior and are threatened by other races. They want to be at the top of the pyramid and don't want those below to climb any higher."

Question 6: How might we recognize racism when it occurs?

Most students cited words and actions as signs that racism had occurred: "We recognize it when people are mean, unfair, and judgmental about some other people." "We see it when hate lurks around the corner. We see it when labels are made to order."

Question 7: What is your personal experience with racism?

Five of the seven students present that day recalled personal experiences with racism:

My friend told me a store at the mall was hiring. So, when I got home, I gave them a call and they were indeed accepting applications. When I got up there I asked to speak to the manager and I recognized her voice from our little conversation. I asked for an application but, all of a sudden, she said that she wouldn't be hiring until Christmas. This happened in April.

The boy walked past the corner and saw a fellow boy sitting on the porch. But, walking boy was Asian and the sitting boy was Black. The Asian boy waved, but the Black boy gave him a finger and made fun of his language. The Asian boy ran home with fury and rage.

Students read their answers to the questions aloud to the group of participants. The responses dealing with the question of personal experience elicited the most discussion. All students agreed that one African American male's experience of applying for work and being rejected because of his race was a clear instance of racism. However, several of the African American students did not believe that the Asian boy's experience of being confronted with cruel rejection when he spoke to an African American boy was racism. They seemed unwilling to think that an African American person would act in a racist manner toward an Asian person. One student suggested that the African American boy might have thought that the Asian boy was a homosexual who was making sexual advances toward him.

The Activities

After the discussion of the questions, the students participated in an activity called *image theater* (Boal, 1992). Image theater is a series of physical exercises and games designed to uncover essential truths about society, culture, self, and so forth. Using their own and others' bodies as "clay," participants "sculpt" statues—still images representing their experiences, feelings, ideas, oppressions, and dreams. The resulting images are tableaux vivant, or living sculpture. Students were shown an example of image theater by the teacher participants. I had seen an image created by some PTO practitioners in Toledo, Ohio. The image used had a female Caucasian teacher posing as the statue of liberty. An African American man crouched at her feet, looking up toward her face. A male Caucasian teacher hid behind the statue and reached around her to point an imaginary gun at the head of the crouching man. The original intent was to convey the tacit message given to immigrants by U.S. Citizenship

and Immigration Services regulations. Student and teacher participants discussed the possible meanings inherent in the image. Students were then asked to create images from their own experiences of racism. Discussions followed the creation of each image as students voiced their opinions and feelings about the images. By the end of the discussions, the students expressed a desire to move beyond still images to moving theater, since most of their experiences involved action and movement.

On the 2nd day of the activity, the participants were divided into two groups. Since one student of the original nine was absent that day, they created two groups of four students each. One group consisted of two African American females, one Asian American male, and one African American male. The other had two African American females, one Puerto Rican American female, and one African American male. Each group was to create a script for a skit they would later act out for the other group. Each group knew that the participants would be asked to play the role of spect-actors in their own skit and the role of spect-actors in the other group's skit. There was no time limit set on the creation of the skits. The teachers were to perform as what Boal called *jokers* or *difficultators* for both groups, but only if the students needed help in clarifying the elements of the situation or to point out levels of complexity in a given set of circumstances.

The Skits

The first skit was set in an imaginary classroom. The actors were an African American female "teacher" and three "students" (one African American female, one Asian American male, and one African American male). The teacher was teaching a math class and asking students simple arithmetical questions. All three students raised their hands to answer the question, but the teacher called only on the Asian American male for answers. The teacher then asked the class to work on individual projects and left the room. The African American male (a "rude boy") moved to sit beside the African American female. He began to ask her to go out with him and give him her phone number and made what seemed to be sexual innuendos toward her. She told him to go away and leave her alone, but he persisted. The Asian American student stood up and began to defend the female's choice for privacy: "Look, why don't you just leave her alone?" The African American male began to hurl racial slurs toward the Asian American male and said, "Why don't you just sit your skinny Asian ass down?" The skit ended.

The actors began to play the skit again in an abbreviated form. The students who were not actors began to play out their roles as spect-actors. The first student to stop the action decided to take the place of the teacher in the skit. She changed the skit so that the teacher called on all of the students in the class, not just one person. At the second stop, a student took the place of the Asian American boy. He stood up to the rude boy and said, "I don't appreciate you bothering her." Once again the rude boy says, "Why don't you just sit your skinny Asian ass down?" The student says, "I really don't appreciate you calling me names like that."

The students then opened the floor for discussion of the skit. Several students said that the teacher was clearly racist and sexist in her actions toward the class. Further, they said that the actions of the rude boy toward the Asian American were both racist and ableist (in reference to the slur of "skinny," which was interpreted to mean the student was weak because of his size). The students said that it often happens in classrooms that, if someone stands up to another student, it is an action perceived to be confrontational, "calling someone out to fight." They also said that the situation could be particularly bad if a substitute teacher were present because substitute teachers do not enforce any of the classroom or school rules. Finally, someone pointed out that the girl could have stood up for herself and firmly asked the rude boy to move away from her so that she wouldn't be bothered.

The second skit was set in an office location. The room had two doors directly across from one another. In the room was a chair and the desk of the manager of a record store. The actors were a Caucasian female worker played by a Puerto Rican American female, two African American female workers played by African American females, and an African American boss of the store played by an African American male. He sat at his desk and represented himself as a manager for the record company. A provocatively dressed Puerto Rican American female worker passed through his office. Her name is Desiree. He greeted her by saying, "Good morning, Desiree." He made complimentary and sexually suggestive comments to her as she passed through and made a wolf whistle toward her.

The boss seemed to have an idea and called the two African American female workers into his office. They were dressed in jeans and blouses. He said that to increase business in the store they needed to start dressing in a more appealing way, such as the way the Caucasian female worker was dressed (e.g., more make-up, short skirts, and high-heeled shoes). He said there was a dress code at the

business requiring female employees to dress in a sexually provocative manner. They listened politely till he finished and left the office. The two began to complain about the boss's order. "Please! The boss wants us to dress like her? I ain't no honky." Desiree walked back through the room as the other responded, "She looks like po' white trash to me. Who does he think he is?" They continued maligning their coworker regarding her social class as defined by the manner in which she dressed and her appeal to the boss's sexist attitudes. The skit ended.

Once again the actors began the scene and signaled that it was time for the spect-actors to do their job. An African American boy called the first stop. He took the place of the store manager. He changed the dialog simply saying, "Good morning, Desiree. You're looking nice today." The actress playing Desiree called the second stop. She took the place of the two young women in the office. When the boss told her that she had to dress in a sexually provocative way, she said, "You can just forget that. I'm not going to do it." As she walked out of his office, the boss said, "Well then, you're fired."

In the discussion, the students talked about the possibilities for changing the situation. They mentioned that the two female workers could have asked to speak to a higher authority when they were told that they had to dress provocatively. There was also the suggestion that the two female workers could have had a discussion with Desiree about how she dressed and what they had been told by the boss about the dress code. The hope was that this tactic would help create a sense of solidarity among the female workers regarding genderism and heterosexism. Another student suggested writing a letter to the local newspaper to inform the public about ways people were being discriminated against on the basis of gender. There was also discussion about the "color class" racism in the skit. The Puerto Rican American student was very "White," while the African American students were very "Black." While all represented cultural groups that are routinely marginalized, the skit gave the impression that "whiter" was better than "blacker."

Postactivity Questionnaire and Responses

At the end of the performances and discussions, participants were asked to respond to five questions to give student and teacher participants a venue for discussion of the activities. The following is a record of student words as they wrote their answers:

1. *Did this experience affect your thoughts and feelings about racism and other isms?*

Students' responses tended to show recognition that racism occurs in day-to-day life among all types of people. "It shows that Black people can be just as racist as Whites, sometimes more." Students also recognized the importance of transitivity in relation to racism: "I also realized that it's important to recognize racism and do something to make a change."

2. *Were you able to use your creative writing skills in this activity?*

Students sensed that writing about personal experiences tended to strengthen their writing: "We were able to apply our writing skills to real-life experiences and make decisions about how they can be changed for the better."

3. *Did the skits that you produced help you see and think about the isms in a different way?*

Most students thought that writing and acting the scripts gave them insights into the nature of isms: "The skits made me understand that there are many ways to discriminate and that you can oppress with more than one ism at a time."

4. *Did the skits facilitate your understanding of how social change can take place?*

Several students commented on the power of acting out words, rather than simply speaking them, and the power inherent in groups of individuals. One commented, "The skits helped me realize that, by sitting by and doing nothing, you can achieve or accomplish nothing. But, by doing something little, you can make a big difference." Another noticed, "I think the skits made it clear that even the slightest action can have a ripple effect and start a change."

5. *Please make any comments you wish about this activity.*

Students were thoughtful and, for the most part, positive about their experience with PTO. "I think it is an eye-opener. I've always heard about what goes on, but I've never really seen it in action." "I think it shows you an outlet, that a simple action can have a big effect." "I think this is also one of the best ways to understand today's society." Another student voiced a more cautious thoughtfulness regarding the situation:

I think that, although the activity may have been enlightening, there will always be some sort of ism to deal with. We may be able to create the road, but the road will be neverending and will never be finished.

Having Fun and the Transformation of Collective Identity

While the written representation of this activity is quite serious and the students seemed to be sincere and thoughtful in their writing, acting, and discussion, there were many moments of pure fun. Students argued freely during the planning and discussion phase of the process. They poked fun at one another, laughed at missed lines and acting during the skits, and generally acted like adolescents. Students treated one another in a respectful manner, but were open in their discussions when they disagreed. Both the students and the teachers were relaxed and had a good time.

In the discussions among students and teachers, it became clear that a major difference the skits made in the way we thought about the impact of isms on our lives was that we discussed ways social situations could be changed. Students also recognized that more than one ism could be displayed through a single act (e.g., the teacher acted as both a racist and a sexist, and the store workers acted as both racists and classists toward their fellow worker). Another point raised in discussion was that we began to see that a change in one person (like the spect-actors in the skit) might not be sufficient to effect widespread change. The students began to think of ways that social action could change social circumstances. We believe that this represented a transformation toward a collective consciousness for many of the students. Formerly, their belief was that acceptance accompanied by anger or rage was the only action of resistance they had to counter widely held attitudes toward privilege and prejudice. This belief was transformed though the activity into one where social action and solidarity were seen as viable and more rewarding forms of response. The transformation moved the students from an intransitive form of social consciousness to a transitive one (Freire, 2000). While they might still harbor feelings of anger or rage when confronted with prejudice, they learned that they need not simply accept the way things are; rather, they could plan to change the future. In this case, it would seem that having fun works.

While the students learned from the activity and began to see how they might effect social change, they were also realistic in their expectations of the effectiveness of their actions. As one student put it, "We may be able to create the road, but the road will be never ending and will never be finished." Lorde (1984) said it this way:

Give name to the nameless so it can be thought. . . . When a people share a common oppression, certain kinds of skills and defenses are developed. And if you survive you survive because those skills and defenses have worked. . . . There was a whole powerful world of . . . communication and contact between

people that was absolutely essential and that was what you had to learn to decipher and use. . . . You have to get it for yourself. . . . It is a very difficult way to live, but it also has served me. (p. 83)

Students' Performances and Public Reactions

It is the tradition of the school to host a celebration on the final day of class. The celebration is held in a theater building on the fringe of the urban campus of Cleveland State University. Announcements for the celebration are disseminated to students and their family members (including fictive kin, neighbors, etc.), inviting them to come celebrate from 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. Each class in the school is represented through display, presentation, or both. Food and drink are provided for the celebration. People have an opportunity to interact with family members, teachers, and students. The people mingle about for about a half hour and look at the displays of artwork set up in the theater lobby and then file in for the performance segment of the presentations.

Summative Statement

Critical participatory action research is designed to exist as a part of an educational experience. It neither predicts nor controls. All involved have the opportunity to learn from one another. The forum theater allowed us to explore possibilities of social relations by posturing before the backdrop of historical reality.

Careful examination of students' statements, comments of teachers and community members, and my observations revealed a development of differential oppositional ideologies within the creative writing class that included, yet moved beyond, their original purpose. One or another is taken up and must then fade as it is superseded by another. For example, the Asian American student, who was thought not to have been a victim of racist behavior, became recognized as a perpetrator of perceived sexual transgression. Exploration of the intersections of those threads and the spaces created by them allowed us to see more clearly the nature of ideological expressions. As Sandoval (2000) said,

This is because the enactment of differential social movement—of the methodology of the oppressed—necessarily creates new modes of resistance, new questions and answers that supersede those that went before; for it is above all, a theory

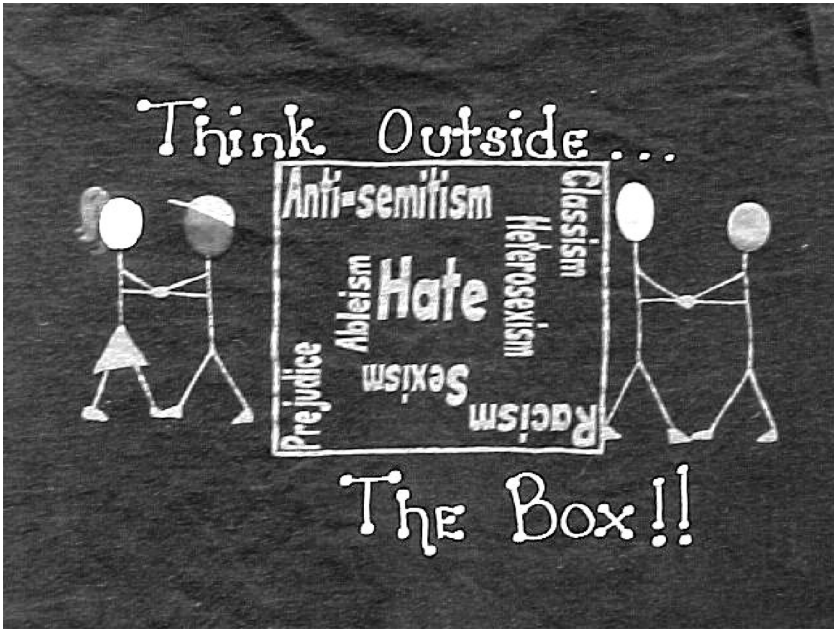


Figure 1. T-shirt design from the creative writing class. The design was reproduced, and a shirt was given to each student in the class.

and a method of oppositional consciousness that belongs to no single population, no race, gender, sex, or class except for the subordinated who seek empowerment. (p. 152.3)

Looking at the image created by the students for their class T-shirt (see Figure 1), the area outside the box logically stands in binary opposition to the images within. Within the box is hatred; outside of the box are all possibilities of love. The limitation of this image is that it stands frozen in time. It contains other forms only through activities of consciousness. A frozen image contains one form, but an image in constant motion contains all possible forms. As the students developed their ideas for image theater, they felt the need to move quickly to the forum theater (the theater of motion).

Within the context of the forum theater, they were able to develop the means to display creatively not only individual instances of subordination, but more powerful and complex interstices, both interdependent and independent. Much like a spider's web, their methodological threads resonated or vibrated alone. Using the theater as a creative method, they began to embody a variety of marginalized or oppressed realities that were not so much autobiographical as visions of worlds with which their lives had

obliquely or semidirectly intersected. Their visions spoke to a world constantly politicized in which every tactic can be mobilized and transformed—a differential political motion.

We can never know whether the activities we undertook on a microlevel will ever be manifested on a macrolevel. It was not our intention to “give empowerment” to our students. We see them on the street or at the grocery store or not at all. Coming together is as much a part of the journeying of postmodern existence as coming apart. The school disintegrates. The funding for the school is on a year-to-year basis. Each year, teachers and students may find more lucrative or otherwise rewarding ways to spend 3 weeks of their summer. The shards of the broken community are perhaps carried a little way. Like ripples in a pool, we send something out into the world that encourages human beings to risk the step on a road to change.

I concluded from my observations and from the reactions of teachers, students, and community members that the forum theater can be a powerful tool for encouraging the creative use of language and a methodology to examine oppression in its multifarious forms. Further, it allowed us to act out and act upon oppressions across tropes. Sandoval (2000), quoting Lorde, said,

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy that needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: Ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. (p. 117.7)

The use of forum theater provided us with the methodology to relate across our differences as equals to respond to human differences in new and powerful ways.

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Appendix

Dramaturgy

1. The text (created by the spect-actors) must clearly delineate the nature of each character; it must identify them precisely so that the spect-actors can easily recognize each one's ideology.

2. The original solutions proposed by the protagonist must contain at the very least one political or social error, which will be analyzed during the forum session. These errors must be clearly expressed and carefully rehearsed in well-defined situations. This is because Forum Theatre is not propaganda theatre; it is not the old didactic theatre. It is pedagogical in the sense that we all learn together, actors and audience. The play—or “model”—must present a mistake, a failure, so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing ways of confronting oppression. We pose good questions, but the audience must supply good answers.

3. The piece can be of any style (realism, symbolism, expressionism, etc.) except surrealism or the irrational; the style doesn't matter, as long as the objective is to discuss concrete situations (through the medium of theatre).

Staging

1. The actors must have physical styles of playing that successfully articulate their characters' ideology, work, social function, profession, etc. It is important that there is a logic to the characters' evolution and that they do things, or else the audience will be inclined to take their seats and do the “forum” without the theatre—by speech alone (without action) like a radio forum.

2. Every show must find the most suitable means of “expression” for its particular subject matter; preferably this should be found by common consent with the public, either in the course of the presentation or by prior research.

3. Each character must be presented “visually,” in such a way as to be recognizable independently of his or her spoken script; also, the costumes must be easy for the spect-actors to get in and out of, with the minimum of fuss.

Performance: An Intellectual and Artistic Game Played Between Actor and Spect-Actor

1. To start off with, the show is performed as if it were a conventional play. A certain image of the world is presented.

2. The spect-actors are asked if they agree with the solutions advanced by the protagonist; they will probably say “no.” The audience is then told that the play is going to be done a second time exactly as it was done the first time. The actors will try to bring the piece to the same end as before, and the spect-actors are to try to change it, showing that new solutions are possible and valid. In

other words, the actors stand for a particular vision of the world and consequently will try to maintain that world as it is and ensure that things go exactly the same way . . . at least until a spect-actor intervenes and changes the vision of the world as it is into a world as it could be. It is vital to generate a degree of tension among the spect-actors—if no one changes the world, it will stay as it is; if no one changes the play, it will come to the same end as before.

3. The audience is informed that the first step is to take the protagonist's place whenever he or she is making a mistake in order to try to bring about a better solution. All they have to do is approach the playing area and shout "Stop!" Then, immediately, the actors must stop where they are without changing position. With the minimum delay, the spect-actor must say where he or she wants the scene taken from, indicating the relevant phrase, moment, or movement (whichever is easiest). The actors then start the scene again from the prescribed point, with the spect-actor as protagonist.

4. The actor who has been replaced doesn't immediately retire from the game; he or she stays on the sidelines as a sort of coach or supporter, to encourage the spect-actors and correct them if they start to go wrong. For example, in Portugal a peasant who was replacing the actor playing the part of the boss started shouting "Long live socialism!" The replaced actor had to explain to her that, generally speaking, bosses aren't great fans of socialism.

5. From the moment at which the spect-actor replaces the protagonist and begins to put forward a new solution, all the other actors transform themselves into agents of oppression, or, if they already were agents of oppression, they intensify their oppression to show the spect-actor how difficult it is to change reality. The game is spect-actors—trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world—against actors—trying to hold them back, to force them to accept the world as it is. But, of course, the aim of the forum is not to win, but to learn and to train. The spect-actors, by acting out their ideas, train for "real-life" action; and actors and audience alike, by playing, learn the possible consequences of their actions. They learn the arsenal of the oppressors and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed.

6. At some point the spect-actor may eventually manage to break the oppression imposed by the actors. The actors must give in—one after another or all together. From this moment on, the spect-actors are invited to replace anyone they like, to show new forms of oppression that perhaps the actors are unaware of. This then becomes the game of spect-actor/protagonist against spect-actor/oppressor. Thus, the oppression is subjected to the scrutiny of

the spect-actors, who discuss (through their actions) ways of fighting it.

7. One of the actors must also exercise the auxiliary function of joker, the wild card, leader of the game. It is up to him or her to explain the rules of the game, to correct errors made, and to encourage both parties not to stop playing. Indeed, the effect of the forum is all the more powerful if it is made entirely clear to the audience that, if they don't change the world, no one will change it for them, and everything will inevitably turn out exactly the same—which is the last thing we would want to happen.

8. The knowledge that results from this investigation will, of necessity, be the best that that particular human social group can attain at that particular moment in time. The joker is not the president of a conference nor the custodian of the truth; the joker's job is simply to try to ensure that those who know a little more get the chance to explain it and that those who dare a little dare a little more and show what they are capable of.

9. When the forum is over, it is proposed that a "model of action for the future" be constructed. This model is first to be played out by the spect-actors. (Boal, 1992, pp. 19–21)