

**Art As Activism and Education:
Creating Venues for Student Involvement and Social Justice
Education Utilizing Augusto Boal's
Theater of the Oppressed**

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This article demonstrates the use of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed as a way to actively engage college students in a dialogue about social justice, privilege, and equity. Art as a form of activism, acting as a form of self-expression, and role-playing as a method of self-exploration all become a transforming experience for the actor and the audience. This discourse delves into the topic of contemporary activism's learning outcomes and manifestation on university and college campuses, and speaks to how performance can become a method of both personal and social liberation. The journey of the author in a newly-founded, student-led theater troupe at the University of Arizona is the basis for the study.

Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* embodies a philosophy of change. Students in the *Moving Voices Social Justice Theater Troupe* at the University of Arizona did not walk into the room the first day as expert actors, and did not leave as expert actors either. These students left feeling more in tune with themselves as a result of their year as "spectactors," empowered audience members who jumped on stage looking to explore oppressive burdens, privileges, and the systems that limit and subjugate humanity. Twelve students came out of the experience with the deeply held belief that theater is one of the most visceral forms of human expression and that art, driven by a communal democratic body, is one of the most effective means of social justice education and of student activism. Utilizing critical pedagogy and research, this article creates a foundational framework for student affairs professionals looking to actively engage students in counter-narrative storytelling, improvisational risk-taking, and self-exploration. In addition to student curriculum development, these theater techniques are applicable

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to the profession itself; in fact, this article later discusses several cases of *Theater of the Oppressed's* use in professional staff training and therapy. Through talking about critical theory, social justice education, and performance, this article attempts to reframe student activism in the form of artistic expression and impart the enriching learning outcomes of civic engagement and self-awareness.

Methodology

Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* is an effective method to empower students to take an autonomous hand in their own social justice education, and the author of this article hopes to persuade student affairs professionals to adopt some of Boal's techniques in trainings and programs. Analysis of elements of various pedagogical theories, specifically based on multicultural education, is paired with existing evidence of artistic expression as an interactive means for activism. Documented uses of Boal's methods in higher education settings by both student affairs staff and faculty are also integrated. Informal research and examples of Boal's praxis observed by the author and student groups also provide a backdrop to ground student development and theatrical theory with practice.

Multicultural Education and Critical Pedagogy

Despite earnest attempts at enacting progress, the contemporary post-secondary institution still struggles with providing a venue for student involvement in social justice education and in unseating and analyzing dominant messages, ideologies, and canons of history and knowledge. Though significant progress has occurred on the part of faculty, staff, and administration, student demand for thorough, substantial, and interactive multicultural education grows every day. According to Harper and Quayle (2007), students are increasingly dissatisfied with the divide between the rhetoric surrounding diversity and social justice education and its practice. Universities are falling far behind their mission statements in ensuring a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for incoming students of historically underrepresented populations, and in turn are not adequately challenging students' dominant identities and educating about privilege.

The very structure of the academy continues to support a hierarchy of knowledge-transfer that does not grant student autonomy and equitable student access. The majority of classrooms still uphold the structural authority of the teacher, rather than creating an environment for student knowledge exchange and democratic discourse of ideas and personal accounts (Goldstein, 2007). The way the curriculum is structured relies on the student to access the material in certain proscribed ways, rather than provide multiple entry points for knowledge acquisition. This lack of Universal Design limits students with and without disabilities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Methods that bridge the gap between the classroom and

the learning spaces outside the domain of faculty come up against walls set in place by systems of campus culture and institutional tradition. Student affairs professionals themselves are often disheartened by the number of institutional barriers in place preventing tangible pedagogical change for the benefit and empowerment of their students. As the academy begins to operate more like a business that values efficiency, public space turns private. Messages of dominant culture from a monopoly of voices become the standard (Giroux, 2006). Ultimately, while growing opportunities exist for students to get involved and while student affairs professionals provide niches of space for public dialogue and conversation, the primacy of dominant discourse still obscures much of this resistance.

The need for a more interactive, compelling social justice curriculum is paramount. Critical academic multiculturalism becomes more successful when more voices are heard (Trifonas, 2003). As critical theorist Henry Giroux (2006) advocated, one of the best ways to supplant dominant discourse is through the deconstruction, exploration, and recreation of dominant texts, including film, literature, and theater. The framework of *Theater of the Oppressed* allows this kind of post-modern activism.

Art as Activism

Boal believes that art, without its political and social underpinnings, is devoid of purpose and that theater and the arts have been converted from a “vehicle of natural expression of society into one of elitist expression” (Flores, 2003, p. 42). Art and other texts are some of the primary modes of message delivery and much as Paulo Freire argues that there is no “neutral education,” Boal believed that there is no neutral art or theater because both are means of education (Flores). Art has substantial power because of its didactic qualities. Many artistic texts carry such authority because there is little to no ability to interact with or contest the messages carried. However, it is this fact, combined with art’s complete and utter ability to encapsulate the human condition, that gives it such efficacy as a form of protest. The use of art in education for therapy, reflection, and liberation is what gives it such power as a means for change. The artist and the performer can interrupt the messages carried in existing pieces of visual culture to deconstruct the dominant cultural discourse of the co-curricular learning environment. Students, in essence, can take an authoritative text and subvert it to create their own meaning out of it. It is meaning-making meets multicultural education.

Recent research reveals that students who have the opportunity to interact in the arts have a higher likelihood of completing their schooling and of becoming involved in other activities on campus (Bains & Mesa-Bains, 2002). Use of art as a radical response by students and others creates a community of locals who may

come from a diverse series of backgrounds, but all comment on the state of their current surroundings and create a dialogic interchange (Fuguet, 2009). A performance ethnography, for instance, goes beyond a traditional lecture and gives students the ability to link art and content areas, share their cultural foundations, and engage in a theatrical rendition of what they are studying (Fierros, 2009). While this is not one of Boal's methods, this use of performance demonstrates how bringing art into the classroom can disrupt the overbearing discourse of the traditional teacher-student dichotomy to create a rich tapestry of knowledge.

According to Boal, theater allows people to participate in the organization and renovation of daily life. The audience members create a horizontal structure of decision-making, which affirms the inherent political nature of art and of life as mirrors to one another (Picher, 2007). Ultimately, when brought into the student affairs profession, *Theater of the Oppressed* not only grants students the ability to express themselves artistically, but also empowers them to overcome collusion and openly comment on the oppressive institutions leading them to anxiety, stress, and disenfranchisement. Theater and performance are fundamental human activities. By providing a space for students to synthesize their multiple identities and roles, students gain the agency to comment on and create change at their universities, in their communities, and on a personal level.

Student Activism and Student Development

Student activism has taken on a new face in today's population of students, and many student affairs professionals are beginning to realize the opportunity student activism presents for community and individual learning experiences. Students today no longer unify singularly around one or two big issues, as the issues and the students have diversified (National On Campus Report, 2005). Arising out of the sea of issues around identity politics in the 1990s, current twenty-first century activism focuses on a wide variety of experiences, backgrounds, and causes (Rhoads, 1998). Students find entry at numerous access points and contribute at various levels. New technologies and wider access to computers and the internet have moved much of the activist battlefield to cyberspace (Carty & Onyett, 2006). With the increasing influence of globalization, students have become more focused not just on issues close to home, but on topics and injustices happening thousands of miles removed (National On Campus Report). Contemporary collective action has come to incorporate the same tactics of global communication as the corporations, multinationals, and organizations that students are advocating against, and students are using forms of alternative media and mass communication as mobilizing tools (Carty & Onyett). An example out of the student sphere, for instance, involves labor unions of long shore workers across the world, from Spain to California, refusing to unload the ships of a Danish shipping line, following a violent clash between labor and law enforcement

in the local Charleston, SC community (Erem & Durrenberger, 2008). While this example does not involve students, it does show the great interconnectivity activists today have at their disposal and demonstrates how students across campuses are working together virtually to create change. These new communities of online student activists demonstrate a growing understanding of mutual interdependence and expose students to a range of people, beliefs, and backgrounds (Carty & Onyett).

Some student affairs professionals have recently recognized the use of activism as a method for learning and community building, and professionals are now trying to define what role they should play in their students' on-campus activism. In the past, antagonism between the administration and students was standard. However, today growing numbers of student see administrators and professionals as resources, supporters, and gatekeepers to granting student movements more legitimacy, more publicity, and in some cases more funding (Roper-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). Student affairs professionals and faculty have begun to work together at some institutions to guide and model good collective organizing techniques (Roper-Huilman et al.). For instance, when the Arizona state government threatened to cut 40% of the three public universities' funding, many faculty members excused students from class to attend a protest at the state capital, and student affairs professionals were the ones organizing students boarding buses. Faculty and staff attended the protest to support the students and their institution.

According to a study conducted by Biddix, Somers, and Polman (2009), opportunities for activism serve as an amazing building block for student civic engagement development. Biddix et al. believed that through activism students form a "commitment to public service," "a greater sense of individual responsibility," "a foundation in communities of practice," "engagement in principled dissent" and democracy, and engage in "reflective leadership" (p. 143). They base these beliefs on Chamber's and Phelps's theory of leadership development and point directly to the personal values, the sense of agency, and the creation of community on campus as the primary positive results of student activism.

The basis for the student affairs staff member or administrator's involvement in encouraging some level of activism, then, is significantly well established. However, this is a challenging task. Student affairs professionals must ask themselves how to best empower students to create change without becoming integrally wrapped up in a movement that could reflect poorly on the institution. This is where alternative forms of activism can take precedent. Utilizing students' dedication to self-expression and using art and viral marketing as a method of delivery could have an immense impact on the educational experience. For instance, flash mobs on the University of Vermont campus in the fall of 2009,

which were organized and talked about in a virtual space, translated to visible action on a variety of issues. One such flash mob, organized by a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program, encouraged students to join together to dance to “Thriller” on the green outside of the student center in a salute to Michael Jackson. Another, organized by a different graduate student, encouraged students to shop in slow motion on Church Street to comment on the lethargic speed of global climate-change legislation. These happenings have their foundations in many of Augusto Boal’s techniques for social change, particularly invisible theater, and demonstrate both how online activism unifies with physical artistic and expressive action, and how staff can be involved in the process of organization.

New forms of activism unite easily with Boal’s techniques because these online communities and communications are, in a sense, their own theater. Furthermore, *Theater of the Oppressed* is a tool for creating almost all of the learning outcomes associated with student activism and student civic engagement by Biddix, Somers, and Polman. It is the formation of community that is perhaps *Theater of the Oppressed’s* greatest strength. The whole basis of this form of theater is to empower communities of people to act out their angst, their feelings of disenfranchisement, and to reclaim a sense of their lost power. The theater troupe members themselves form a deep sense of connection to one another, and this connection exponentially expands to others in certain forms, like Forum Theater, which encourages the audience to actively engage in forming the scene and the action on stage. Boal’s techniques cannot exist without a community of people willing to experiment, but through the process individuals are asked to take a deep and penetrating look at their own beliefs, values, and selves. By exploring the roles that students play in their individual lives through games and reflective exercises, students become immersed in a sea of self discovery and definition, and their actions are held accountable by the community of spectators surrounding them. Ultimately, *Theater of the Oppressed* provides a foundation for student affairs professionals to engage students in conversations about identity, community, and leadership. The need for a progressive and gripping technique for multicultural education and advocacy is significant, and Boal’s format for artistic expression can fill the gap and encourage student development.

The Methods of *Theater of the Oppressed*: Boal’s Praxis

Theater of the Oppressed utilizes improvisational theater games and performances to create a democracy of voices that can lobby for political and individual change. *Theater of the Oppressed* originated in Brazil around 1971 when the regime in power brutally censored the arts (Boal, 1997). Boal and his theater troupe were put under new restrictions and forced to perform only plays sanctioned by this regime. As a result Boal and his troupe began to go into public space to perform

street theater. Audience members and people in these communities began to get involved in the theatrical experience, and this inspired Boal's use of *Theater of the Oppressed* to empower the spectator from passive observer into actor. His term for these individuals is "spectator."

To do this, Boal (1979) created a series of games and steps that rely on four key stages, all of which are vital to create an environment where students explore their own identities and the systems that affect them and others in their communities. Stage one is "knowing the body" (p. 126). Boal developed a series of exercises that encourage the spectator to get in tune with the movement, function, and power of their bodies. Body parts are used in conjunction with other people, and trust in members of the community grows. Stage two is "making the body expressive" (p. 126). The student spectator explores the power of the body to express emotion, power, and self through a variety of games. Spectators examine the roles they take on in their daily lives. Stage three is "theater as language" (p. 126). The spectator begins to view theater as something that is transformative and evolving, as opposed to being static and didactic. The audience member takes control of the stage and imprints their own language and message on an existing text, or explores a problem that exists through their own use of theater as communication. This stage utilizes Image Theater and Forum Theater, which will be expounded on later. Stage four is "theater as discourse" (p. 126). Theater becomes political, and the actors use the theater to convey their own messages to discuss certain themes to an unwitting audience. Invisible Theater is a part of this stage.

Boal's stages use a variety of techniques, from traditional theater and improvisational games, to more formal performance-based theater. Ultimately, the techniques Boal uses are in an effort to propel the spectator and the audience member through his stages of theatrical development.

The following three techniques are the foundation of *Theater of the Oppressed*. Suggestions for their use in an educational setting also accompany their definition.

1. Invisible Theater, one of the first pieces of Boal's method, is a scripted piece of theater performed in a public space where the audience does not know the action is a performance and comes away thinking the ramifications of the action are real. The lines between reality and performance blur and the spectator walks away unsettled, processing what they have just witnessed. These theatric pieces are also called "happenings" and have been used for revolutionary and educational purposes from communities in the developing world to high schools. From staging an invisible theater piece on body image to imitating an act of violence, these pieces can be as radical or as subtle as needed. However, invisible theater

is problematic in many ways because of this. There is no real way of assessing the outcome of the action, and follow-up with students affected by invisible theater is limited as a result of the secrecy of the action. In some cases, invisible theater happenings could be construed as staged bi-as-related incidents. While the troupe itself does not suffer any ill effects, it is hard to determine what the audience members' internal reactions are to witnessing these situations and how they may trigger student witnesses. For instance, an on-campus resident participated in a happening with her high school Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) where they staged a hate-crime against a student who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) to get a reaction from the administration (J. Gariepy, personal communication, October 2008). This, however, created more of a harsh climate for LGBTQ students at the private school due to the administration's negative reaction to the event. As a result, invisible theater should be used with caution. Despite the hazards, however, invisible theater can be extremely successful at creating a dialogue about topics traditionally kept silent in a wider forum. It has the power to engage students who might traditionally not be willing to engage.

2. Image Theater also came out of Boal's time in Brazil. Image Theater requires students to express their opinions or views on a certain theme, chosen by the audience or by the troupe itself. Image Theater uses the body to encapsulate the ideas surrounding these themes by creating a tableau, or image, of the theme at hand, and then having the audience change this theme to better suit what they would like to see as the outcome to their theme. To start, the group uses paper to brainstorm the ideas, feelings, and views surrounding a theme. A bubble is placed around the main theme in the middle of the page, and then subsequent and related ideas surround it and connect to it and each other. For instance, if one was talking about the theme of immigration and the U.S. Mexico Border, one might yell out words such as "undocumented" or "border patrol." These individual suggestions, thoughts, or feelings are then broken up by general umbrella themes under the bigger theme. In this case, perhaps the themes would turn into (a) racial prejudice; (b) the physical representations of the border; and (c) issues of legality. Members of the troupe or the audience then collaborate to come up with physical ways to represent these themes with the human body. For instance, for the sub-theme of physical representations of the border, the group might have three people link arms to represent a border wall, separating one group of people from another. These bodily representations then are combined together into one tableau onstage, and the audience is asked to make suggestions to change the current image into one they would like to see. A new tableau is formed utilizing these suggestions. This is typically an ideal version or resolution to the

theme or problem, agreed upon by a consensus of the audience. The audience is then asked for real, tangible suggestions on how to move from the current construction of the theme to this ideal. The audience discusses the issue and the factors impacting the theme, and ultimately engages in a dialogue that promotes the expression of all people's views and encourages compromise and negotiation. The audience controls the action. These theatrical pieces have been used to help students process not only topics happening outside of their own sphere, but also to therapeutically process the stress of living up to expectations of being a good student, interacting in a constrictive campus environment, social pressures of alcohol and other drugs, and similar topics affecting collective and individual student life.

3. Forum Theater is perhaps the form of theater that utilizes the audience the most and looks the most like theater. It was also developed by Boal later than the other forms aforementioned. In Forum Theater, the theater troupe acts out a pre-written scene that involves a conflict in need of resolution. The troupe or the audience can choose this topic. A joker, or a mediator of the action, asks the audience to provide suggestions to resolve the conflict; the scene is then repeated with the new suggestions put in play. The results of these changes are discussed and more suggestions are made. These suggestions are then acted out. If any of the suggestions seem implausible or unrealistic, an audience member can yell, "Magic," and then explain why they believe the solution is too simple or why things would not play out in real life the way they are on stage. The joker encourages people in the audience to come up and take on the role of the characters on stage to implement a new idea. Through this method, the audience becomes involved in the action and in finding the solution to the oppressive action taking place. In these scenes, there must be a clear protagonist and a clear antagonist, and only the methods of the protagonist can change. A violent action can never be the solution. Utilizing these techniques, students can explore what ways are most beneficial to create change and can engage in dialogue surrounding the topic at hand. Group dialogue about how to solve these issues and what other issues might be wrapped up in them, can lead students to a better appreciation of the different voices and views people have, and how their backgrounds affect these views. The joker serves as a moderator not only of the action, but also of these conversations.

These foundational methods of Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* provide a basic introduction to the type of work students can engage in, and how a troupe of spectators can form. No real knowledge of theater is needed. Rather, all one needs is enthusiasm, a wish to be a part of communal action, and a willingness for self-

exploration. Examining what goal the use of these techniques aspires to will help guide the level of practice. If student identity development is the goal, then small workshops may prove the most beneficial. If the goal is to make a statement or advocate around an issue, a large performance may be a better venue. The next section explores the application of Boal's techniques within higher education.

Applications in Student Affairs

Theater is complex, at times abstract, and always challenging. So is social justice education and so is student affairs. The unification of all these topics and their collaboration to create a positive outcome is difficult to measure. However, I stumbled upon several examples of how college and university campuses have used *Theater of the Oppressed* to analyze the efficacy of using Boal's techniques on a college campus and determine in what realms it makes the most impact. Many people, including myself, often use games developed by Boal as alternatives to icebreakers or team builders; they often allow for conversation following them about power and privilege. Outside of this more simple application, *Theater of the Oppressed* has been used for training staff and administrators at universities. In particular, it has been used as a way to allow administrators, faculty, and staff to analyze the university structure and comment on the politics and barriers of working within an institution that sometimes does not always allow staff to work in students' best interests (Brown & Gillespie, 1999). Staff engaging in institutional dissent through theater may sound radical, but according to Brown and Gillespie, the process of allowing the collective airing of oppressive individuals and overpowering organizational structure actually allows professionals a greater sense of empowerment, which leads to better satisfaction in their work at the university. It allows staff to collectively sort through ethical dilemmas and problems that others are facing, and come together in a manner that facilitates cross-office dialogue. This use of *Theater of the Oppressed* is quite beneficial in that it focuses on the individual finding agency through community. The individual acts out an experience they have already had and have gained experiential knowledge about, potentially gaining additional staff allies in the process.

One large caveat exists to the use of *Theater of the Oppressed* in trainings. Since *Theater of the Oppressed* uses collective knowledge and experience to determine where the conversation goes, it cannot be used to synthesize new knowledge outside of the audience's existing areas of experience. Boal's form is limited to using the knowledge presented in the room to come up with a solution. For example, a study on the use of *Theater of the Oppressed's* Forum Theater as a means of training teachers and educators on social justice topics had very mixed results (Burgoyne, Placier, Thomas, Welch, Ruffin, Flores, & Miller, 2007). For those educators who had already engaged in dialogue about social justice topics and explored the systemic oppressions and institutions contributing to injustice

and inequity, *Theater of the Oppressed* served as a marvelous tool to enhance their knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy. These teachers came out the other end feeling more confident about engaging students in conversations about social justice and using some of the techniques they learned through theater to do so. However, teachers and educators who self-identified as having no social justice background stated that they felt less confident to talk about these issues following the use of interactive theater (Burgoyne et al.). This example demonstrates a need for a parallel program highlighting some foundational knowledge on systems of oppression before using *Theater of the Oppressed* as a tool. Theater ultimately carries the risk of merely perpetuating the normative structure of society, since it itself emulates life (Boal, 1979). There is an inherent danger when separating one piece of Boal's stages from another, in that the exploratory first stages are really the time when the troupe itself works to analyze what playing roles entail, as well as how to avoid falling into the trap of playing stereotypes rather than real people. Without an accompanying conversation about hierarchy, authority, and power, Boal's techniques alone cannot address all of these topics. *Theater of the Oppressed* can only provide a conduit for participants to explore their own narratives of oppression and subordination. Boal's techniques become dangerous when a dominant identity attempts to comment on an experience they do not have.

Boal's techniques find their greatest strength in their ability to be therapeutic, but not in the contrived way most theater finds resolution. The therapy in Boal's techniques is in the power of the individual and community to express topics of conversation that may be seen as taboo. Confronting a boss or teacher on the stage may not accomplish much tangible change, but it can leave one feeling emboldened with promise. For this reason, Boal's techniques have begun to make an appearance in relationship and family therapists' offices (Proctor, Perlesz, Moloney, Mcilwaine, & O'Neill, 2008). Members of the family can explore the power dynamics within their house using *Theater of the Oppressed*, and this ultimately deconstructs the therapist's authority and allows the spectator clients to question oppressive acts and structures in their own lives. The application of this in a school counseling office or surrounding alcohol and other drug counseling may allow students to examine the pressures that pushed them into making decisions around substance use. It may allow students struggling with mental illness to comment through action and words not only on their experience, but also on the oppressive structures in place that limit their ability to thrive at the university. These opportunities provided by *Theater of the Oppressed* demonstrate potential applications outside of a traditional student theater troupe, and show that art is not only activism, but it is an integral way that people process their world and their experiences.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Theater of the Oppressed* serves as a method of activism and art. It provides a framework for discussing multiculturalism, but grounds this discourse in the experience and narrative of the individual. Through my experience on a troupe of student activists, I came to a much deeper understanding of myself and felt empowered to continue to make change. I hope that others can use these same techniques to find their own voice and to find a way, outside of traditional activism, to actively engage the students, community members, faculty, and staff of their university or college. *Theater of the Oppressed* has the potential to provide higher education with a method of pedagogy both inside and outside of the classroom, based not on authority and canonized texts, but on self-expression and individual narrative. The connection of student affairs with critical educational theory and practice, particularly in Boal's work, could serve to create a new unique discourse that empowers educators and students to have a greater hand in their own education.

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Note to Those Hoping to Learn More:

To gain a greater foundation in Augusto Boal's theory, please read Theater of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal. For a reference to how to put this theory into practice, as well as excellent ideas for games and icebreakers incorporating social justice, Boal's Games for Actors and Non-actors is an excellent resource.