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Boal in the Philippine classroom

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Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO) springs from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which is intended to establish and nurture a safe and creative space for learning through portrayal of reality and authentic dialogues (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010). In the same vein, Greene (1995) posits that TO allows students to move freely in an aesthetic space which cultivates critical thinking and involves empathy through imagination. Since TO relies heavily on the critical performative pedagogy (CPP), it actively involves students in their educational processes, which may be seen as being prone to social, political, cultural, and economic distortions. Hence, performing TO, spontaneous performances, such as the sculpting of images, become a reflection of how students perceive the world from which their views, questions, and feelings emanate.

According to Silva and Meneses (2016), working within a collaborative stage in the classroom that accommodates political topics immerses students into metaphors of how they become citizens in real life as they construct replicas of situations which are designed to be lived by their constructors (Kuttner, 2015; Cruz et al., 2019). In other words, when students learn together through performance while investigating the situations that they are in, one can say that education, creativity, and politics interplay and create cultural citizenship (Geisler, 2017). Caris and Cowell (2016) refer to this as “an explorative way of living in the world as an interlocutor” (p. 469). This means that students enter a secure zone where they can voice out their opinions, listen in solidarity, and embrace diversity.

Students today are in relentless contact with their technological devices. Prensky (2016) analyzes how digital natives are immersed in virtual media culture from birth, which automatically affects what they choose to do, how they interact, and why they behave as they do. As massive amounts of information may be Googled immediately, students find it convenient to copy the opinions of others; critical and creative thinking are replaced by effortless clicking. Consequently, many students would argue that their screen seclusion is a normal way of managing information and interacting with the world. Employing theater activities may address this by ushering students into safe spaces where they are allowed to discover collaboratively, process mistakes together, and learn creatively.

Freitag, McGeough, Huber, and Mitchell (2011) posit that using TO in the classroom involves foregrounding the body, creating dialogue in class, and creating community while
planting the seeds of systemic change across the curriculum. Students in these classes may be guided as they explore repetitive physical movements to understand how they may detach from their bodies and activate body memory. Playing Boal’s games in a public speaking or performance class, students become more aware of the strengths and limitations of their bodies; they begin to understand themselves as they become reflexive enough to examine their own embodied experiences. Moreover, if students can become more vocal about their views through the debates, collaborative discussions, and creative presentations that usually culminate from TO activities, they can also learn to become open-minded facilitators who listen to alternative viewpoints while entertaining other issues and encouraging their classmates to speak about the issues that matter most to them. Although student transformation may not be statistically measured in class, if students are engaged in creative, critical, and transformative dialogues, one can expect to see shared shifts in cultural standards and social circumstances that could eventually “reshape the human objective” (Boal, 1995, p. 14).

To develop the aforementioned skills and, in particular, improve communication skills, Eckersly (2016) employs TO among university- and college-aged learners of English as a second language (ESL). Eckersly’s students are asked to perform drama activities to introduce, scaffold, and reinforce new concepts while also developing their vocabulary and speaking abilities. Eckersly argues that these activities as well as guided use of facilitated dialogues have allowed his students to develop twenty-first-century skills such as collaboration, empathy, and critical thinking.

Saldaña (2005), in his field experiment among children, used Boal’s repertory of games to enhance their grasp of metaphors that mirror power relationships. The simple question, “How does this activity relate to real life in terms of power?” allowed students to come to terms with social issues such as gossip, bullying, and discrimination. Saldaña observed that the use of TO among fifth-grade children in a southwestern American school helped them explore how they may oppress each other physically and psychologically and how they could possibly free themselves from becoming oppressors and oppressed in these circumstances.

Calder (2016) cites the Canadian Bar Association (CBA), which was alarmed by the crisis of ethics in the legal profession in Canada. Allegedly, this crisis arose from a lack in terms of pedagogical methods in legal education. Consequently, the University of Victoria Faculty of Law provided the contextual and applied framework in the first-year curriculum of their students. Their students were exposed to Boal exercises to explore the transformative and educative potential of experiential learning. Students and professors delved into their privileges and/or difficulties, and opened up and sustained discussions on the plight of students of color, female students, queer students, students with disabilities, and indigenous students. In the process, the college paid more attention to enmeshing issues and opportunities of social diversity with its new curriculum.

As can be gleaned from the aforementioned studies, students of all backgrounds, in all classroom contexts experience power every day, and they need a language that empowers them and a creative and critical process to enable them to step into the roles of political leaders, lawmakers, and public servants. This being said, TO presents itself as a promising teaching tool for literature, as TO not only facilitates the dissection of metaphors as abstract concepts but also calls upon students’ sensory and bodily creative systems; through TO, students become more deeply informed of social issues by experience. If students are able to identify and examine metaphors creatively and critically, they will not only understand abstract concepts of power but also perceive new embodied representations of the world they live in.

Teaching literature courses in the Philippines at undergraduate level may require teachers to work with 40 or more students per class. A full-time faculty member may be assigned to
four or more teaching loads, exclusive of research and administrative responsibilities, while part-time faculty may be expected to take on teaching that is even more demanding, less secure, and financially challenging. Facing these difficulties, a course instructor would be likely to seek a pedagogical method that is straightforward and manageable. However, students cannot be restrained in a class that is supposed to encourage them to ask questions, experience catharsis, and understand the human condition. Freire’s unquiet pedagogy (Drew, 2019) proposes the use of theater activities which provoke students to question texts and interact in a deeply engaged manner as they become active learners within and outside the four walls of the classroom.

**Sculpting within, sculpting about**

My students were enrolled in Philippine literature, and we met in class twice a week for one and a half hours each meeting. This course, which allows students to understand Philippine literature and its relationship to significant issues in the Philippines, is organized into thematic modules, each focusing on a topic or issue related to the Philippines and/or its literature; each theme is explored in its own module using Philippine texts in the genres of poetry, fiction, essay, and drama.

One module of the course, titled “Power and Resistance”, specifically motivates students to examine how Philippine literature may be used to articulate, address, and challenge political and economic inequities in the country. Required texts for this module include the following:

1. Excerpts from Marcelo H. Del Pilar’s “Dasalan at Tocohan” (“Manual of Prayers and Translations”) published in 1888; Pilar’s manual is a satire on the hypocrisy, greed, and shamelessness of friars in the Philippines during the Spanish colonization. It consists of parodies of “The Sign of the Cross”, “The Act of Contrition”, “The Lord’s Prayer”, the “Hail Mary”, and “The Ten Commandments of God”. For more than 300 years, the Spanish friars used the teachings of the Catholic Church to serve their selfish desires.

2. An excerpt from Jose Rizal’s “El Filibusterismo” (“The Subversion”); first published in 1891 in Spanish, this novel is the sequel to “Noli Me Tangere” (“Touch me Not”). The novel’s dark theme sets it apart from the drama and romance of the first novel. In “El Filibusterismo”, Ibarra, the main character, has failed to change the country through peaceful means; thus, he resorts to violent means. Both of Rizal’s novels continue to have a profound effect on Philippine society in terms of its views about national identity, the Catholic faith and its influence on the Filipino’s choice, and government corruption, abuse of power, and discrimination.

3. An excerpt from Rissa Robles’ “The Boy who Fell from the Sky”. This introduction to Robles’s book, *Marcos Martial Law: Never Again*, reports about a boy whose corpse was found bloody and battered in Antipolo City in the Philippines. He had been missing for two weeks and was later identified as the son of Primitivo Mijares, a former assistant of the late President Ferdinand Marcos, who had disappeared four months earlier. Allegedly, Primitivo Mijares had been taken after having exposed the abuses of the Marcos regime in his book, *The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda*.

This chapter focuses on how TO was used in this module to help facilitate the investigation of power and resistance. Even before the employment of TO techniques, students in the class were cohesive and active during brainstorming, mind-mapping, and roleplaying activities.
On the first day of the TO module, the following eight agreements on respect for each other (Weinblatt, 2011), to be especially considered during dialogues, were presented and discussed: (1) Honor confidentiality and/or privacy; (2) Speak for yourself or your experience; (3) Listen for understanding; (4) Agree to disagree; (5) Give unconditional respect to others and yourself; (6) Take care of yourself (right to pass); (7) Step up / Step back; and (8) Get what you need and be sensitive to others. Most importantly, students were expected to have read the texts before the TO activities were conducted. They were also asked to accomplish asynchronous tasks on canvas before attending the face-to-face classes; these tasks motivated the students to express their insights and formulate questions.

Each session within the module began with warm-up activities and theater games. For Image Theatre, the students were given prompts and invited to create frozen images by molding their bodies as if they were clay (Boal, 2005). For starters, students sculpted individual images of emotions such as joy, fear, excitement, grief, and anger. Later prompts extended to general topics like college life, graduation day, oppression, revolution, and freedom. Students were very comfortable with each other because they were classmates in most of their courses. After students were observed to have been comfortable sculpting their own images, they were tasked with working in groups and sculpted family portraits. The students had fun creating images of their own concept of “family” in response to various contexts thrown to them on the spot, like “Teacher Family”, “Athlete Family”, “Firefighter Family”, “Diva Family”, “Rock-Star Family”, and “Zombie Family”. Some students even freely used props from their school bags as imaginary fire hoses, microphones, or guitars to create more vivid frozen images.

Since the texts for the module revolved around power and resistance, Columbian Hypnosis (Boal, 2005) was employed next. Each pair decided who would be Player A and Player B and checked in with each other regarding any physical needs or limitations they might have (e.g. “sitting on the floor is hard for me”). Restrictions were set in regards to where they could move in the activity to keep each other safe. Each Player A was asked to hold the palm of their hand about six inches from the face of their Player B partner. Each Player B was asked to imagine that their partner’s hand had hypnotized them and that they had to follow the hand anywhere it went, keeping the same distance between their face and Player A’s palm at all times. After this, some students shared that at some point they enjoyed being the leader more than being the follower, while others claimed that, although following is restrictive, it is easier because the leader does the thinking. This warm-up activity prepared the class physically and mentally before they were asked to repeat the activity in groups. At this point, the students were keen to relate the activity to leadership, power, and oppression during the period of martial law in the Philippines, which was declared by Ferdinand Marcos on September 21, 1972. Remarkably, students expressed their judgment of the martial law by consistently citing the law, using #NeverForget, and affirming their personal advocacies against human rights violations. It is likely that the students were able to demonstrate this strong background in history and international relations because they were enrolled in the international studies program.

Thinking inward, thinking outward

The activity used on the second day of the module was Boal’s (1992) Forum Theatre, which allowed the students to approach the performance area and take part in the action; thus, the students who were audience members stepped away from being passive spectators and became “spect-actors”. Pre-assigned students re-enacted the last scene of an assigned reading,
which recounts the discovery of the dead body of a boy who had allegedly been tortured by the military because of his father’s position against the Marcos government in the 1970s. After this, the “spect-actor” students were asked to go in their own time to the performance space and suggest alternative options for how the innocent boy’s life may have been spared. Students took turns adding their individual body images to propose alternatives to suggest how the government could have been more unbiased to journalists, open-minded to activists, and progressive toward reforms. Interestingly, students were able to connect the pressing issue of extra-judicial killings in the Philippines during martial law in the 1970s with the contemporary Philippine government’s controversial “war on drugs”. Students recreated the story of Kian Delos Santos, a 17-year-old senior high school student who was shot dead by three police officers in 2017 in connection to President Duterte’s anti-narcotics campaign. Students went beyond tying the images with what they knew to what could have been if the police were not reckless and ruthless. Groups sculpted images of Kian taking his exam in class the following day if he had not been killed or Kian going to college or taking up criminology. Moreover, students reinforced their tableaus with news reports such as that of Amnesty International UK, which found that the Philippine war on drugs resulted in 7,000 brutal deaths from July 2016 to January 2017 (www.amnesty.org.uk). There were images that depicted police operations in impoverished areas, impunity for law enforcement, and overcrowded prisons. Discussions boiled down war on drugs to be synonymous with war on poor people in the Philippine context.

As can be gleaned from the observations, students were able to explore many choices while creating a safe space for creative debate, interlocked discussion, and a sense of involvement. One student said that during the whole process of sculpting and re-sculpting or sculpting and unsculpting, it felt like the class had been transported to another dimension where people could freely deconstruct and rebuild the status quo. This was a perfect segue to an extended discussion of Boal’s (1995) “rehearsal for the revolution” (p. 155). Students asserted that taking the role of the oppressed allowed them to empathize more profoundly with a character while reflecting on the political ramifications of decisions made by the government of the Philippines which influence their personal biases. In addition, students claimed that taking fictional roles of the oppressor and the oppressed in the performance space unexpectedly motivated them to do what is just and right in the real world.

The images created during the Forum Theatre activity resonated intensely with the students. That is why, during the Rainbow of Desire activity, they wanted to focus on human rights violations caused by the war on drugs in the Philippines. Groups took turns sculpting images including those of police officers shooting minors suspected to have been selling drugs, mothers embracing dead bodies of their husbands or sons, and children witnessing their parents being taken away by the police. After all the groups had presented their images, the scenes were re-improvised for the protagonists and antagonists to reverse roles. Although the Rainbow of Desire activity may have been vivid and elusive at the same time, in this kind of activity, students are given enough room to explore a wider range of possibilities for restorative action. This corroborates Howard’s (2004) description of theater as a “common tool or language; Boal believes that people in communities can work together in a synergistic way to solve problems, share joys, learn about themselves, and take charge” (p. 221). Most students claimed that the activity had been therapeutic; it was the perfect culmination of the module, because they would like to believe that there is hope to end human rights violations in the Philippines. One student wished, “If only we could structure our lives this way”, and another immediately responded, “We could if we want to”. The class discussion ended with a deepening of why the word spoken is never the word heard (Boal, 1992).
Admittedly, some pedagogical standpoints may not adopt the TO method because of concerns associated with assessment (Desai, 2017). Despite the fact that the impact of TO on learning may be hard to measure, it was evident in my reflections, which relied heavily on the views of students as shared in class and written in learning logs, that students consistently felt that TO had engaged them in the critical issues that surround them. Students also expressed appreciation for the opportunity the TO methods had given them to personify their unconscious actions and learn by reflecting and without being told to conform to the views of others. Most importantly, students reported that, by taking the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor, they came to realize how their privileges shape their behaviors toward social and cultural expectations; thus, the performances in class helped them embody various characters in the readings, purposefully shape empathy through embodiment, and fully understand aspects of power and resistance.

When embracing potentially painful pedagogies such as TO, teachers must be cautious. The resources to be used must be previewed thoroughly, and students must be informed that what they are about to read and discuss presents upsetting realities of injustice. Students must be allowed to step back when they feel uncomfortable at any point during the class in order that a safe space for asking questions and expressing themselves, even their vulnerabilities, can be established and cultivated. Teachers who incorporate TO in their classes should be prepared to handle student emotions, including anger, sadness, and/or frustration. Journal writing can help students process their experiences, and teachers should respond to this writing promptly and consistently. Most importantly, it will help teachers using these techniques to find a way to share their struggles and successes with colleagues who are adopting TO in their syllabi. There is no better way to reflect inwardly on one’s commitment and practice than by listening to peers who share a commitment to this much larger effort for social change.

In my experience, applying Boal’s exercises to a literature class enhances students’ self-awareness and ability to empathize with others, which may lead to a better grasp of the concepts of empathy in empowerment and solidarity in diversity required for social change. Students are motivated to actively deepen insights gained from reading, understand social issues that matter to them, and empathize deeply with both fictional and real-life characters. Although TO primarily focuses on oppression, it can help a literature class create a safe, critical, and creative space in which to illustrate pressing universal social issues which may be substantiated and contextualized within specific political and cultural settings. Therefore, literature teachers who prefer the unquiet pedagogy may use it to take advantage of theatrical conversations that result in reflective thinking, collaborative building, and creative learning.

References

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