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Taking Theatre Games Seriously

by Jessica Del Vecchio

As a “theatre person,” I have engaged in lots of “games” over the course of my career. While some of these games are [theatre-specific](#), many can be effectively employed in a variety of contexts. Theatre classes almost always involve [ice breakers](#), which can be used to cultivate community in any classroom. [Acting warm-ups](#) like shaking out different parts of the body, stretching the tongue, or performing vocalized sighs might be adapted to help students prepare for in-class presentations. Many theatre games rely on group work and are therefore useful in [team-building](#). [Improvisation](#) can develop students’ imagination and adaptability. An instructor might try an energy-generating exercise like [Zip Zap Zop](#) to get students engaged before diving into course work. [Role-playing activities](#) can be an effective way for students to practice various real-world scenarios (though they also can have some [major pitfalls](#)). An example of a formal approach to role-playing specifically designed for college classrooms is [Reacting to the Past](#), which teaches students history while also strengthening their skills of collaboration and communication.

One theatre “game” I have used in my classes is an example of what Brazilian director, theorist, and activist [Augusto Boal](#) calls [Image Theatre](#) in his groundbreaking book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In developing his theories, Boal was inspired by [Paulo Freire’s](#) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (see [Joshua Streater’s Toolbox on Freire here](#)), in which Freire critiques what he terms the “banking model of education”—an approach that asks students to be the passive recipients of information provided by the teacher. Similarly, Boal critiques the notion of theatre’s passive spectator, wanting audiences to become participatory “spect-actors” in, rather than mere spectators of, performance. Boal believed in the power of such theatre to enact real social change, famously calling it “a rehearsal of revolution.” His [Games for Actors and Non-Actors](#) details dozens of exercises, including many examples of Image Theatre. One important note: when using theatre games in the classroom, it is essential to resist reifying ableist assumptions and to make room for students to participate in whatever ways they can. [This article](#) offers reminders about incorporating disability into the planning of all classroom activities—especially embodied exercises.

Image Theatre is often used to explore oppression and brainstorm ways of fighting it. Last year, my colleague, [Dr. Rachel Rhoades](#), an expert in [theatre for social change](#), led a workshop on [Anti-Oppression Pedagogy](#), in which she tasked groups of School of Theatre and Dance faculty with creating two tableaux—one that embodied an oppressive classroom environment and one in which the oppression was removed—and asked that we come up with a phrase to accompany them.

[Tableaux](#) are silent, static images that represent particular scenes. They have been used in various contexts in theatre (they were an important part of [19th century melodrama](#), for example) and in other types of performance events (like early 20th century [historical pageants](#)). My group was asked to explore the idea of "[privilege](#)." Our first image featured two members standing on acting cubes, their linked arms preventing a third from getting through the cubes to the other side, where a fourth person was standing with their arms crossed. In the second image, the two "gatekeepers" were on the ground, welcoming the third person through the cubes, as the fourth extended a hand to them. We moved through our tableaux, speaking in unison the words "fighting oppression requires ceding privilege." After the activity, a discussion ensued about what ceding privilege in our classrooms might require and what the consequences of doing so might be. Our group would not have arrived at that elegant phrase (and important reminder) had it not been for the embodied activity we performed alongside its development.

In the wake of the suicides on campus last spring, I turned to Image Theatre to help my Introduction to Theatre students think about the concept of [collective care](#). I adapted one of Boal's exercises, [The Machine](#), asking students to work together to create a Care Machine. Students were to come to the front of the classroom, one by one, each making a mechanical, rhythmic movement with their body that signaled "care," and vocalizing a sound to go with the movement. Each student was to add their body and voice to the others', so that eventually all the participants were integrated into a synchronized Care Machine.

In some ways, the exercise was a failure. My students, most of whom had no performance experience, were too embarrassed to come up to the front of the class to make the machine. Eventually some brave students did, and—though it wasn't enough for the machine to actually work—their choices were interesting and unexpected. One student knelt down and mimed shining someone's shoe. Another stirred an imaginary pot and held an invisible spoon out to offer a taste. Another moved her hand to her heart and then stretched her arm toward the audience.

When it became clear we were not going to have enough participation to complete the exercise, I quickly revised the task. I asked four volunteers to come up to embody ideas provided by the rest of the class, taking the pressure off the performers to generate their own material. "What does a *lack* of care look like?" I asked. We took suggestions and created a tableau that we all agreed embodied a "lack of care." The tableau involved a student kneeling, her head in her hands, obviously upset. Three students surrounded her, their backs toward her, each staring at their phone. Then I asked, "Now, what does an *abundance* of care look like?" I once again took suggestions and the students created an image in which the three people were facing the woman on the floor, smiling and reaching out their arms towards her. In this second tableau, her head was tilted upwards. After the spect-actors returned to their seats, I initiated a discussion about what we would need to do to get from one image to the other. (People would need to put away their phones, recognize that the person in front of them is in distress, ask her what she needs, and make an effort to reach out to

her.) Finally, I asked students to reflect on the exercises, posting their thoughts to an assignment on Canvas.

Students' reflections were insightful. In response to the failed "Care Machine," they noted how difficult it was to think of gestures that signal care. Several remarked that they were struck by how different their classmates' ideas of care were, with one astutely pointing out that the care someone tries to provide might not mean the same thing to the person receiving it. One student expressed that they had been surprised by the stirring gesture, but then realized that cooking for someone is indeed a way we so often show care to one another. Students wrote that the machine taught them that—even if each person has a different idea of what care is—all the ideas can work together. One went further to say it showed that if we all acted on our ideas for care, we could actually make real change in the world.

In response to the lack of/abundance of care tableaux, students reflected that the activity prompted them to think about the power of body language, demonstrating how it can reveal or hide emotions. Many said that the activity inspired them to show care in small gestures and interactions since you never know who might need it. One student wondered if they were being like the people in the "before" image, ignorant to others who might be hurting.

Image Theatre exercises like these can be useful in all kinds of contexts, for example, in [art and art history classes](#) (asking students to use their bodies [to recreate a piece of art](#)); in literature courses (devising [tableaux that symbolize a work's theme](#)); in politics or history courses (using tableaux to capture the dynamics of a particular historical event), or even in science courses (having students physically embody complex systems or principles). My students learned a lot from the care activities and they gave us the chance to acknowledge the difficult events of the past several weeks, even without directly discussing them. I learned several lessons that day as well. The failure of the first exercise emphasized that, as instructors, we must always [remain flexible](#); we should be ready to alter that well-planned activity in the event it doesn't work the way we hoped. The students' smart responses reminded me of the importance of taking risks in our teaching (and modeling [risk-taking](#) for our students, too); of trying new things (like using theatre games in a non-theatre course!); and of the fact that [failure often leads to learning](#). Most importantly, the class reinforced that theatre games can have a serious purpose: they can help shift our perspective and lead us to think differently about ourselves and the world around us. As one student so eloquently put it: these exercises were more than theatre exercises; they were "empathy exercises." I agree.

Jessica Del Vecchio, currently an Assistant Professor of Theatre and a Faculty Associate in the Teaching Area with the CFI, will depart JMU in January to start a new position as the Senior Associate Director for Teaching Initiatives and Programs for Faculty at the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University.

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